

**EMBRACING TEACHER QUALITY & EXCELLENCE:  
PERCEPTIONS, REALITY, & CASUALTY**

BY

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Dedicated to:

Anna Louise McKenna  
October 8, 1916 – July 24, 1986

&

Joseph R. LaGuardia  
February 12, 1916 – January 13, 2006

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## **EMBRACING TEACHER QUALITY: PERCEPTIONS, REALITY, & CASUALTY**

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Teacher quality has produced voluminous studies that line many a research library. Discussion on what it is, how it is developed, and its connection to student achievement have become the hallmark of educational jargon in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This narrative seeks to look at teacher quality in a way in which it brings the elements to life: as a means 1) to review how the terms excellence and quality are shaped by policy, specifically, the No Child Left Behind law 2) to identify how educators perceive teaching quality, and 3) to review how quality is cultivated in teachers. Within this scope, I will be reviewing ways in which the terms quality and excellence are defined. I will also review how the term *quality teaching* is created from a social construct, how this social construct interplays with the No Child Left Behind mandates, administrators' perceptions, and teachers' intrinsic motivation to aspire to be a quality teacher.

I have chosen a narrative interpretive approach as the means to share this information with the reader. In-depth interviews will constitute the data portion of the study with attention given to the literary nature of teacher quality. In looking at how educators perceive teacher quality, I have chosen two school districts that are mirror opposites of each other in minority population, socioeconomic status, and tax base. One district is located in Southwestern Pennsylvania with a Free and Reduced Lunch ratio of less than 1%. It has consistently received high ranking on the state assessment tests for the past four years. The second district is located in Southwestern Pennsylvania with a Free and Reduced Lunch ratio of more than 90%. This

district has been on the state warning list and improvement list. The social contrasts between the two schools are striking; the richness of their backgrounds is remarkable.



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## CHAPTER I

### AN INTRODUCTION TO FRAMING ISSUES

*Other people have pictures in their heads, too. But they are different because the pictures in my head are all pictures of things which really happened. But other people have pictures in their heads of things which aren't real and didn't happen.*

Christopher in *the curious incident of the dog in the night-time* (Haddon, 2002), p. 78.

#### A. Framing Quality

For those of us who are educators in the public school sector, the term quality is bandied about quite frequently. The No Child Left Behind legislation of January 2001 has created a high-stakes testing frenzy that has resulted in an overuse of the term *quality teacher* without clear definition as to its meaning. Oftentimes, the overuse of a term deflects the enormity of its meaning. Has this happened to the term teacher quality? I pondered this idea as I visited Border's Book Store and found books promising to make me a quality leader, quality teacher, quality speaker, quality supervisor, and quality cook. Actually, the "quality cookbook" was misplaced on a display table set aside for educators but I thought it was an interesting discovery as I searched the many colored book flaps for a recipe to "make" quality. According to the book flaps on this promising practice, quality teaching can be achieved if you follow the author's step-by-step procedure; success awaits those who buy and read. Yet, my mind cannot escape wondering where we are headed in this trend of striving for quality; does it appear as if once it is attained that educational issues will be resolved? Or is it merely a framing issue whereby the book editors of the world have charged their authors with the lucrative book-endorsing practice of selling quality? I would like to posit that achieving quality has more to do with perception and intrinsic motivation than in reaching a prescribed notion. The framing of high quality is a social construction of reality as is the definition of the term *teacher quality*, both of which are

determined by the person holding the power. But, how is this epistemology created in the educational arena of the postmodern era?

As I thought about this dilemma, a paradox unraveled and reminded me of the evolution of the term excellence and its political manifestation. *A Nation At Risk* (1983) defined excellence in this Department of Education's report:

Excellence characterizes a school or college that sets high expectations and goals for all learners, then tries in every way possible to help students reach them. Excellence characterizes a society that has adopted these policies, for it will then be prepared through the education and skill of its people to respond to the challenges of a rapidly changing world. Our Nation's people and its schools and colleges must be committed to achieving excellence in all these senses. (p. 5)

True to this definition, the Department of Education awarded the National School of Excellence Blue Ribbon Award to schools that outperformed all others in the United States in academic achievement, school character, teacher quality, innovative programming, and administrative leadership. In the lengthy application process, schools were asked to provide input from parents, students, community members, and teachers on why their school should be deemed a school of quality. Schools that met predetermined criteria were eligible if they could complete the twenty-one page, grueling application process and prepare for the subsequent site visitation. Those schools chosen as "committed to achieving excellence in all these senses" were awarded a plaque, a flag with the Department's insignia, and a trip to Washington D.C.; there was much prestige in winning the excellence award. Interestingly, the demographic makeup of the winning schools began to become suspect when, year after year, the schools with the higher socioeconomic status were proclaimed schools of excellence. Schools in poorer districts had more difficulty comparing with those highly technological, program-endowed suburban schools. The conundrum created by the system resulted in the discontinuance of these "excellence" awards; the advent of a change in administration dawned a new system, which *invites* schools to

apply based upon qualifying state test scores. Thus, in the educational arena, the ephemeral definition of excellence changed as did the political party in the White House. The paradox remains today as the framing landscape has altered.

Then, again, educational framing is not always created by systems and processes but often as a result of a school's environment. In the case of defining a quality teacher, I thought of the laundry list of quality "things" the district in which I work has achieved. There were national awards granted for leadership, character education, and academic achievement. Exemplary teachers and excellent administrators were identified, commended, and monetarily rewarded for their quality. Local, state, and national awards of excellence were conferred on students. We had become known as a "premier school district" for being the recipient of so many educational accolades, giving us notability and prominence in the region. Yet, this scholarly work for which we had been acknowledged has created its own contradiction in terms: has excellence been a result of the scholarly work in which we engage or are we working toward a socially constructed variant that evolves with the culture in which it is bred?

Think about this notion: what if quality and excellence are developmental processes that are not based on tangible criteria but instead are characteristics enhanced by the environment and philosophies of those who hold the power? How does a thesis such as this translate to discovering and identifying the elements of a quality teacher or, for that matter, quality teaching? In his book, *Reality Isn't What It Used To Be* (1990), Walter Truett Anderson reminded readers: "Politics is the theater of reality" (p. 122). The actors and actresses on the stage of life are creating their own reality, and, for others, selling this perception through vocally opinionated dramatizations. As Anderson noted, what we see in everyday life is not everyday life but our perception or someone's belief that they are telling us is our perception. Life is one story told

from one person's viewpoint; fiction, as Anderson noted. Thus, a social construction of reality is born.

This assumption led me on a quest to examine educators' perceptions of teacher quality and its development in school districts. Working toward excellence, toward achieving high quality is not merely a measure of certification or personal characteristics. In thinking about these ideas, I was taken back to my own educational history and reminded of my first grade teacher. Sr. Leo Claire was brought to my first grade classroom in a traditional Catholic elementary school from her job as a nurse in a local hospital. Unable to staff the growing classrooms in the parish schools with sisters from the convent, the diocese reassigned sisters who were nurses in local hospitals and retirement homes to diocesan schools in the region. I was blessed with a nurse-sister who did not want to be there, smacked my hands each day with a ruler because I failed to write only my first name on the lined cursive paper--my parents had baptized me with a two-word first name never thinking that it would be my elementary demise—and gave us dozens and dozens of tear-out math pages to complete each day. Early in my educational career I came to abhor school. No matter how I tried, I was not working to Sr. Leo Claire's perception of what a six year old's ability should be. Her medical training to nurse the elderly back to health had not prepared her for an average first grader's educational needs. In retrospect, the only redeeming quality of this sister's teaching was that she never corrected any of my work. Therefore, I was saved the embarrassment of her red-marked signature pieces in terming my progress as unsuccessful. Needless to say, the "teacher quality" this nun possessed was such that I struggled through school for five grade levels until we moved to a new district. Undaunted, I wanted to undo what she had done to me. It was because of this first grade teacher's inadequacies that I chose the career of teaching. Intrinsically motivated, I sought practices that

would exemplify teaching excellence – my own perception of teacher excellence that had already begun to be shaped by this elementary experience. My story, my historical piece, defined quality teaching as a determination to seek the best from my capabilities and apply these skills to a daily teaching performance. I wanted to be a teacher of quality.

So, as I begin this search for teacher quality and its connection with social constructs, I invite you to be a part of my review. I bring to the table many biases of my own and assumptions on my part of how quality teaching is developed. Is it enough to state that the definition of teacher quality is socially constructed and not policy driven? Why does it appear as if the resource-rich school districts demand excellence from teachers due to parental demands and community pressure? Are these demands made because the well-educated, affluent parents have the luxury of hiring only the best because of their socioeconomic status? Shall I state my presumption that the resource-poor school districts have different expectations of teachers due to a less educated, less demanding community who thus expect different qualities from their teachers? Or that these same less-affluent districts lack opulence and barely fulfill the quota of one, highly qualified teacher in every classroom? My hope is to uncover similarities and possible contradictions about teacher quality, something that is much written about and ambiguously definitive in nature. I am seeking new meaning to this term to add to my knowledge of the subject, a chance to shake up the truth and explore how reality and perception form its definition.

As I immersed myself in these questions, I began to explore various literatures on the term *teacher quality*. Having first Googled the term, I was struck with the insurmountable references located on the Internet to the term: in one Google attempt, over 20,500,000 hits were found. How would I ever approach the prospect of giving significant research its just due while exploring this topic when over twenty million references are listed? At the moment of this



thought, I realized that it is not so much how this term is defined or researched that is the issue. More importantly, how people perceive teacher quality is how the definition will be embraced.

Why would I seek to review teacher quality when twenty million references already exist? My work with first-year teachers involves induction training, supervision of teaching, and assimilation to school district policies and procedures. I have worked with hundreds of neophytes. In their pursuit and excitement to attain excellence, these new teachers frequently ask, “How do I become a quality teacher?” The answer I give them never persuades them that I am actually telling the truth: reach each student as if they were your own child. To attain this, some take my advice – observe experienced teachers, explore instructional techniques, differentiate learning for all students, ask for constant feedback, and self-reflect after each lesson – but others move through the motions and, after gaining tenure, come to work at the appointed time, go through the motions, and leave with the buses. Some members of this virgin group appear to be qualified to teach but have no aspirations to be a quality teacher. Why does this happen? How has their initial animation acquiesced to apathy? Why has their pursuit of quality been replaced with a quest for ennui? How is our neoinstitutional organization developing—or not—quality teachers? As I found with the new teachers entering the field, it is what they believe to be the truth about the discernment of quality teaching that either leads them to journey its path or finds them shrinking from the passage.

My written approach to this dissertation topic will be one of interpretive and qualitative research; hence, I will speak to the reader – you – from the first person narrative approach. Because the research methodology will be a narrative model, it implores the writing to be a call to consciousness. There is a delicate sense when studying a particular school or individual person that requires a stage, which relies on the interpersonal to make its point. Though I could

use the infamous first person plural “We can conclude,” the narrative demands a personal approach, a voice, one might say, that captures the meaning and moves the reader beyond the sentence to experience the aroma of the environment’s bouquet. Again, the impersonal and nebulous “One may determine” succinctly states facts; however, in this methodology, I am trying not to remove the reader from the observation but to make him/her part of the ongoing experience. Therefore, I ask patience on the part of the scientific community as I give honor to the method of exploring options and stating my bias up front as a part of the methodology used and explained in this very “tricky” element of thinking called analysis.

The framework for this narrative is grounded in the constructivist’s approach; i.e., I am interested in finding out the meaning policymakers and practitioners attribute to teacher quality and how that definition shapes their approach to its cultivation. As Eichelberger (1989) describes the constructivists’ methodology,

These researchers are much clearer about the fact that they are constructing the “reality” on the basis of the interpretations of data with the help of the participants who provided the data in the study. They often carry out their research much as anthropologists do in their studies of culture. They do a great deal of observation, read documents produced by members of the groups being studied, do extensive formal and informal interviewing, and develop classifications and descriptions that represent the beliefs of the various groups. (p. 9)

I will clearly state the biases up front as well as the participants’ theories about the social construction of teacher quality. After a review of both literature and the social construct of reality theory, I will begin the methodology and interweave research pointing to the effects of teacher quality on student achievement. After the study has been completed, I will turn to the analysis of the data to determine if my initial inquiry has a basis in fact. The final chapters will represent a summary of findings and a self-reflection piece that gives pause to the theory and honor to the subjects for whom this dissertation has been written.

## **B. An Exploration of Social Constructs, Quality, and Excellence**

*I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know.*  
Socrates in Plato's *Apology*

This collective backdrop of teaching included Socrates' playful defense of his reputation in Plato's *Apology*; however, according to the book's translator, G.M.A. Grube (1981), it was Plato's desire to "expose the ignorance of those who thought themselves wise and to convince fellow-citizens that every man is responsible for his own moral attitudes" (p. 3). Not one to be undone with words, Socrates used loquacious statements to perplex the listener, yet, created a coherent, irrefutable account. In other words, Socrates constructed meaning from his reality in which he perceived he knew not that which he did not know. In the No Child Left Behind law, the implication of teacher quality is simplistic, too, and formulated around the term used to define teachers as "highly qualified" or "appropriately credentialed." In order to hold this quality, a teacher must possess at least a bachelor's degree, be fully licensed or certified by the state in the subjects they teach, and demonstrate a competence in the subjects they teach (Learning First Alliance, 2003). Yet, the politicians of the world would have been wiser had they been politically incorrect and stated that not only did they not know what teacher quality was, they could not identify the characteristics of teacher quality. As in the case of my first grade teacher, Sr. Leo Claire's teaching certification did not make her a quality teacher; her credentials only made her qualified to teach. The social construction of teaching since the NCLB law was passed in 2001 has simplified what the government accepts as quality but does nothing to help educators develop the characteristics of teacher quality. Quality teaching may appear rooted in a system that does not take the term "highly qualified" seriously. Not only that, but there are some who argue that the No Child Left Behind law and its highly qualified regulations

have become a constitutional issue that the Tenth Amendment guarantees our rights against (Harvey, 2003). The ambiguous “highly qualified” definition defines the United States’s expectation of quality in education barring no further definition of its character. At the center of this definition is how the politically-created definition has been socially assimilated into education.

To look toward this assimilation, it is important, then, to first focus on how social constructs have defined not only our thinking about quality but our motivation to achieve it. In *The Handbook of Research on Teaching* (1963), W.W. Charters, Jr. discussed the concept of role and how it applied to teachers.

The concept of role stresses the influence of contemporaneous forces arising in the person’s immediate social environment to impress his behavior...The person lives in an environment in which other people around him expect him to be (and not be) a certain kind of person or expect him to behave (and not behave) in certain ways, and these expectations vary systematically from one situation to another in which he and other people are emeshed. In the sociologically oriented role theories, the expectations are regarded as culturally patterned and as attached to the statuses, or positions, a person occupies rather than immutably to the person himself. In any event, the force of expectations is transmitted to the person during interaction between himself and the significant others. The force is effective, however, only as the person perceives, or cognizes, the expectations. (p. 797)

Looking closely at Charters’s statement, the government’s definition of highly qualified lacks expectation but does stress the existence of political forces at work. The policy defines the person’s credentials but does little to attach meaning or “pattern the culture” that would achieve the status the person would recognize. There is no identification of the characteristics needed to achieve a certain echelon of teaching quality. As Charters emphasizes, if the person is responsive to only this definition, the effect is that the recognition of being a teacher of quality would result in credential attainment and nothing more. On the other hand, if the policy enumerated the attributes of quality and teachers recognized this “force,” there would be a

“culturally patterned” expectation and the policy’s accountability measures would be a moot point. Seemingly, the policy would “enforce” and require the attainment of such distinctiveness.

Exploring the notion of social constructs further, framing plays a role as well. As stated in Fairhurst and Sarr’s, *The Art of Framing* (1996), “Mixed messages occur when there are no shared entailments and the meaning evoked by the metaphors actually contradict one another” (p. 129). Evoking a definition of “highly qualified” using certification as its descriptor sets no expectation for the descriptor other than “appropriately credentialed.” There is an incongruence in what “highly qualified” means and how “highly qualified” is defined. Thus, the mixed message sent by the policy’s definition neutralizes the power of the term. As Fairhurst and Sarr recommend, however, prospects for influencing a person’s interpretation of the meaning exist when the definition is carefully framed.

What power is exerted over teachers when they are charged with the enforcement of this policy? Mark Ginsburg et al., (1999) discussed the notion of “power over” and “power with” as complementing factors existing in political relationships. “Power over” is something done to someone (policy) and frequently carries negative connotations. On the other hand, “power with” is capacity building, positive, and creates a “co-agency” of which the actors share equality (pp. 3-54). In the co-constructed realities which have been initiated by NCLB, a “power over” structure is constructing new realities in which the quality of the policymakers’ expertise—or lack thereof—begets socially constructed definitions. Case in point: Richard Elmore has been studying low-performing schools for the last number of years. In his research study, “A Plea for Strong Practice” (2003), Elmore states, “One of the most robust findings of my 25 years in policy implementation is that policymakers usually know shockingly little about the problems for which they purport to make policy. In this instance, however, the degree of separation between

the problems of failing schools and the policy prescriptions of NCLB are striking” (p. 6). Elmore continues with the idea that “developing a practice of improvement” (p. 10) is one of the missing components in the NCLB “highly qualified” definition. An added competence marker, otherwise known as teacher quality, is a state test which may or may not be rigorous (Bracey, 2003).

Supporting Elmore’s conclusion is another study by Goertz and Massell (2005) who explored high school’s responses to policy-initiated student achievement accountability. The study consisted of a review of six states encompassing 34 school districts and a review of 48 lower-performing high schools. Commonalities were revealed and the conclusions were not startling; key findings included the need for stable leadership, capacity building, and willing staff members. However, what was amassed in this high school study was that policies do have an impact on student achievement; yet, the testing results and data information gleaned by the researchers – information that could help these schools develop a practice for improvement-- were not used. How can you arrive at one conclusion without addressing all of the elements?

Which now brings me to explore the contradictory nature of policy making itself. Elmore and McLaughlin (1982) defined the term policy as “authoritative declarations of intent. They are prescriptions about what ought to be done” (p. 159). The federal government appears to be at odds with itself on how to enforce the regulation it has written. These two leading authorities on policy study groups, stated:

Our argument is that federal education policy rests upon two sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory strategies: compliance and assistance. The first entails the use of federal sanctions to direct states’ and localities’ attention to certain target groups—the disadvantaged, racial and ethnic minorities, the handicapped—and to induce behavior consistent with federal objectives...The second entails the provision of financial and technical assistance to increase the capacity of states and localities, where “capacity” means, among other things, professional competence, program innovation, and responsiveness to public expectations. (p. 159)

The notion of a power struggle, a visual tug of war between educational experts and political candidates, describes compliance: schools are regulated to comply with the law. It is a hard-core, non-negotiable contract. On the other hand, the more fulfilling and ostensibly obedient assistance policy gives leeway without sacrificing accountability. As the authors later mentioned, there is a lack of trust on the part of the government, almost as if a fear exists as in the type of behavior professionals might engage. Consider this: do policies thus search for the ugly side of what is going on in schools? Lee S. Shulman (2004) succinctly stated:

Evidence is supposed to make life easier, or at least more rational, for policymakers in education. Instead of battling over ideologies, we are urged to conduct careful research, design real experiments whenever possible, collect data, and then dispassionately draw our conclusions... We need to recognize that research evidence rarely speaks directly to the resolution of policy controversies without the necessary mediating agencies of human judgment, human values, and a community of scholars and actors prepared to deliberate and weight alternatives in a world of uncertainty (p. 2).

Policymakers have difficulty maintaining a balance between organizational structure strategies—top-down management style—and the workplace concept in which there is bottom-up management. Failure to filter the “human values” and a “world of uncertainty,” as Shulman noted, foregoes self-interest group lobbying and claims that are evidenced in only one study. As in the case of an assistance policy, the federal government says, “We will give you support” to move the project forward. When constituents deem the progress too slow, as usually occurs during a re-election year, then the monies, technical assistance, and capacity building disappear. In its place come compliance policies with rules, regulations, and accountability measures that often are created by non-education professionals using high-interest group funding as the impetus. If this occurs, the organizational structures that are adhering to these new laws form negative environments. Frederick M. Hess (2003) refers to this type of accountability as nice and mean. “Advocates of nice accountability presume that the key to school improvement is to

provide educators with more resources, expertise...Mean accountability...uses coercive measures—incentives and sanctions” (p. 22-23).

Whether nice or mean, the policy issues facing schools today are at a critical precipice. The government may be looking for problems—lack of teacher quality—but the schools are looking for answers—how to foster quality in teachers already overburdened with policy requirements. Schools are being hampered by political and economic obstacles that do not and cannot affect positive change in teacher quality (Anyon, 2005). Government officials continue to argue the meaning of “highly qualified” and how to develop it in staff development programs (Viadero, 2005). What concerns me most is that we have lost focus of education’s values: policy has replaced a single unit of value, the individual student, with imprecise percentage quotas—AYP. This contention is validated by E.D. Hirsch, Jr. (2003): “Everyone agrees with the goals of achieving equality of opportunity, competence, autonomy, learning to learn, good citizenship, and ethical responsibility. But as soon as the discussion turns to what those aims mean and how to achieve them...” (p. 20). We can easily fill in the blank to recognize Hirsch’s concerns. More alarming, yet the consequences of high-stakes accountability systems, is how easily sentiments such as these filter past teacher quality ideals and affect the leaders of the building, the principals. Of utmost concern is how the teachers and leaders of lower socioeconomic schools are handling these policies. These schools, already blessed with a high mix of English language learners, minorities, and ethnic diversity, are scrambling to avoid state improvement lists yet understand that if progress percentages of NCLB are unmet, removing teachers and principals from these schools can occur. How will teacher quality be developed in a high profile areas such as these and who will want to lead them (McGhee and Nelson, 2005)?



With all of these data on public policy and their influence on teacher quality, there is a point that needs to be made: though NCLB clarifies “highly qualified” using assessment features—state standardized tests—the unstated but overtly declared truth of the mandate is that test scores alone will ultimately determine a teacher’s quality. Think back to education’s early roots and the little red schoolhouse master. The teacher was not certified, probably knew little more than his students, but was able to get the basic three R’s across to a small but watchful community of learners. As the population grew and the geography changed, the need for teachers (quantity) surpassed the need for teacher knowledge (quality). By the 1900s, the adage, “Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach,” aptly applied. The teaching profession was perceived as a profession chosen when all else failed. The social construction of this implication made teacher quality a non-existent attribute. The 1950s brought about resurgence in teacher education with the development of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards. In the 1980s, states fashioned standards in which teaching quality became a focus (Wise and Leibbrand, 2000). By 1989, schools were marketing students that workplaces deemed illiterate. In response to this, the Carnegie Corporation of New York published *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (1989). This report, centered on the middle level education movement, made recommendations specific to the chronological age of the population it was serving. These recommendations, though calling for support and implementation from educators and government officials, prescribed a “team” approach in which the groups would work as a community of learners. There was no policy, law, regulation, or mandate and, yet, those in education listened; soon, middle schools were teamed communities that fostered the growth of the transescent academically, physically, psychologically, and mentally. Educational experts had joined forces with the researchers, presented their case to

government officials in order to gain the financial and administrative support needed, and revamped the traditional junior high into the more effective middle school concept. And it worked--without a policy mandate--and was revered because those who had worked towards its publication were practitioners and experts in the field. Their expertise gave them a level of credibility missing from the compliance of policymakers' decisions.

In *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Jackson & Davis, 2000), the philosophical recommendations of the 1989 *Turning Points* piece were taken, analyzed, and compared with the practices actually being used in the 21<sup>st</sup> century middle school classrooms. Using input from practitioners and the data findings, the authors then refined the original written design and improvements were thus made within actual schools. The movement to raise student achievement was not central to the middle school population. Around the same time that *Turning Points 2000* became famous, high schools were being researched and data collections were revealing startling information which was documented in *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform* (2004). Here again, it was not a policy mandate leading the charge to study student achievement and create school reform, "rather, it was a set of principles designed by practitioners keenly aware of the day-to-day realities of education" (p. xiii). Again, the public had been given recommendations based upon practitioners' experiences, experts' input, and collected data. There were no mandates, no policy issuances, merely a call for cooperative improvement strategies.

I end this background with a summary of the bounty of literature on policy. Its relationship to socially constructed theories is founded in the manner in which the government is demanding educational change. There does not appear to be a groundswell of public opinion against the basic philosophies of the No Child Left Behind law including its rudimentary

definition of teacher quality. What parent does not want their child to be taught by a teacher who is highly qualified? Notwithstanding, a mixed message is sent to practitioners, educators, and parents due to a lack of clarity defining teacher quality, which brings up other questions not explored in this piece:

1. Has No Child Left Behind gone beyond compliance as J. Harvey contends and does it interfere with our constitutional rights? The Tenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution states: “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people” (Jordan, 2004).
2. If “role” is highly influential on a person’s environment so as to change behavior, why have policymakers not framed “teacher quality” in a sociologically, highly expectant manner?
3. The federal government demands behaviors that are in line with federal objectives. Are these political forces at odds with public expectations of how teacher quality should be defined?

Finally, excellence and quality are terms used frequently; their definition appears to be socially constructed by whoever holds the current federal/state/local power. As Socrates eloquently stated, not knowing anything worthwhile does not make you wise; acknowledging that you lack understanding makes you astute.

### **C. Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this study was to research educators' perception of teacher quality and whether it derives meaning from a social construct of both policy—No Child Left Behind—and environmental factors. The purpose of this study is threefold: 1) to review how the terms excellence and quality are shaped by socially constructed realities 2) to identify how educators perceive teaching quality, and 3) to review how school districts develop teacher quality.

The research questions include:

1. How does the social construction of reality interplay with the terms quality/excellence?
2. How does the No Child Left Behind law shape a definition of quality teaching?
3. How is student achievement connected to teacher quality?
4. What are administrators' and teachers' perceptions of quality teaching attributes?
5. How do educators who are identified by administrators as quality teachers identify and develop attributes of teacher quality in themselves?
6. How do school districts cultivate quality?

## CHAPTER II

### THE LITERARY DIMENSIONS OF TEACHER QUALITY

*The world is a mist. And then the world is  
Minute and vast and clear.*

“Sandpiper,” Elizabeth Bishop, (1979), p. 131

#### A. From Whence We Came

Beyond the plethora of material that lines my study is a statement about the seriousness of the subject for which I am exploring. There are empirical studies, case studies, qualitative studies, and studies of studies on teacher quality. Many of these studies have been commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education; some were conducted by independent researchers, others by teaching institutions. What heightened my interest in the subject of teacher quality, however, were the many observations I have conducted. In the years I have been supervising and observing teachers, there are those who quickly rise to the top of the value-added list. Through the many formal and informal observations I have made in and out of classrooms, I have found common attributes amongst those who meet my personal standard of quality:

1. They are content certified and deemed “highly qualified” as defined by NCLB.
2. They possess degrees beyond a bachelor’s level.
3. They have been recognized for teaching excellence through outside validation awards.
4. They are involved in extracurricular activities that involve hundreds of hours in after-school activities.
5. They use differentiated instructional techniques in their daily routines.
6. They are highly organized as evidenced in the classroom management techniques employed.

7. Their classrooms are highly structured with pacing of activities a central focus.
8. They have built a reputation of excellence and are requested by parents for their children.
9. They are considered as having high content knowledge by students, parents, colleagues, and administrators.
10. They have easy-going personalities and are well liked by students, parents, colleagues, and administrators.
11. They have excellent communication skills with parents, community, and students.
12. They receive satisfactory ratings per their formal observation records.
13. They appear to be “intrinsically” motivated as evidenced in their work ethic, leadership qualities, and volunteerism.

Although this information is founded on my personal informal and unscientific scrutiny, I began wondering how these attributes tied into the research available on teacher quality and how that availability tied into the No Child Left Behind law. Ultimately, the questions will become, how do teacher quality characteristics increase student achievement, is teacher quality equally distributed in high/low socioeconomic school districts, and by whose standard is teacher quality measured? For now, however, I am anxious to discover how my observations play into the scientific research available.

As I embarked on my review of literature, one document was cited in much of the current-day research. This far-reaching contemporary piece of the 1960s was what was informally known as *The Coleman Report* (1966) commissioned by the United States Office of Education in 1964. James Coleman, a Johns Hopkins sociologist, took on the responsibility of researching 600,000 students in over 4,000 schools across the United States. Titled, *Equality of*

*Educational Opportunity*, the study looked closely at socioeconomic status and ethnic population data. Coleman and his research team questioned whether there were equal educational opportunities for all children in American schools. The analysis made it clear that social factors powerfully affected student achievement: “outside” social factors. According to Coleman’s analysis, ethnic groups such as African American students were at an extreme disadvantage when taught with African American students in lower socioeconomic school as compared with the same population taught with Caucasian students in a more affluent socioeconomic district. “Only a small part of [student achievement] is the result of school factors, in contrast to family background differences between communities” (p.297). It did not matter how much money was spent per pupil; according to the analysis of data from Coleman’s research, what clearly outlined students’ success were income and poverty level. Coming on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement, the results of this report were the impetus for desegregation of schools and the commencement of busing. Yet the report’s implications touted outside environmental factors as the main reason for students’ success not the quality of the teacher. Here was a connection with a social construct—desegregation—with a researcher’s perception—socioeconomic status—that changed the manner in which the public viewed acquisition of knowledge for years to come.

A few years later, Christopher Jencks et al., conducted another study and built on Coleman’s findings: family background was pivotal to educational success (Jencks, Smith, et al., 1972). Jencks went so far as to state, “The character of a school’s output depends largely on a single input, namely the characteristics of the entering children” (p. 256). Again, there was no mention of a link between teacher quality and student achievement. The social construction of this theory continued to be perpetrated into a reality that was well accepted. Years later, Daniel Fallon, in his report on *The Value of Focusing on Instruction* (2003), felt that as a result of these

two studies, teachers “came to believe that it was not their responsibility if the children did not learn the curriculum” (p. 2). And so, the philosophy of learning continued, a quagmire of important but incomplete research on student achievement. The important link, teacher quality, had yet to be discerned.

There was a turn in events in the early 1990s when politicians lobbied for changes in the education system. Whereas student achievement was once not meaningful enough to be explored, it soon became a campaign issue, powerful enough to ensure (re)election. What followed in this era were research pieces that began the exploration between teacher quality and student achievement, the election of “education governors,” and the creation of state-wide assessment tests (Fallon, 2003). Enter a policymaker’s dream: there is now a purpose in which to create a policy to be enforced. Coleman and Jencks had initiated interest in the acquisition of knowledge by students in schools. In fact, these two reports may have commenced a cultural and philosophical discussion on the link between student achievement and teacher quality. Be that as it may, what began as a civil rights activists’ outgrowth had become an in-depth questioning of how teachers were being prepared to address student learning.

Traveling through the historical earmark of these philosophies is the next significant report, launching a renewed interest in the education system. “Our Nation is at risk” began the April 1983 report. This time, the issue of teacher quality was hyped by policymakers and deemed a momentous point in education’s history. One claim in the document, commissioned by the Department of Education, identified a “rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future. What was once unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur – others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments” (p. 1). The report outlined how to reform the “rising tide of mediocrity” suggesting that scholars and policymakers’ combine their resourcefulness,



dissect the problems, and arrive at resolutions (p. 7). In regards to teaching quality, the report took a definitive stance:

- Dedicated, high achieving students need to be coaxed into the teaching profession.
- University teacher preparation programs need to be improved.
- The “professional working life” of a teacher is “unacceptable.”
- Some content areas are experiencing an extreme shortage of teacher candidates.

One key recommendation in the paper was that it was the federal government’s responsibility to “identify the national interest in education” (p. 6). The interpretation of this statement may have been the outreach of what we now know as No Child Left Behind.

By the time the 21<sup>st</sup> century entered, public attention and political pressure were centered on student performance. Standardized tests were being used as a means to measure achievement and technology could now chart longitudinal data. With this combination, a correlation emerged that identified which teachers had students’ performing at a higher rate than their counterparts. Teacher quality could not only be labeled as a definitive outcry of student achievement, but teacher quality could now be tracked. The goal became identification of quality teacher attributes. Researchers desperately tried to create the image of the elusive “perfect teacher” at the same time that No Child Left Behind was initiated. The pendulum had now swung from the little red schoolhouse of “one” to an assessment database of thousands; from “outside factors” determining student success to in-the-classroom teaching measuring achievement. The journey had widened.

And this journey took on a global aura as in-the-classroom teaching became the focus for new studies. *The International Math and Science Study*, known as TIMSS (1999), videotaped hundreds of classroom teaching vignettes and compared teaching quality in the United States,

Japan, and Germany. What the analyzers gleaned was a “teaching gap” that put American students at a disadvantage with their Asian and European counterparts (Stigler, et al, 1999).

The teaching gap becomes even more significant when one realizes that while other countries are continually improving their teaching approaches, the United States has no system for improving. The United States is always reforming but not always improving. The most alarming aspect of classroom teaching in the United States is not how we are teaching now but that we have no mechanism for getting better. Without such a mechanism, the teaching gap will continue to grow. (p. x-xi)

As seen from this quote, teachers were being told to “fix things” in their classrooms but not given information as to what appeared to be broken. A plethora of studies were all exclaiming the demise of student achievement in America; yet, no one identified which components needed to be fixed. Instead, policymakers were creating more ways to mandate change and chart student progress—reform; less attention was being paid to what constituted excellent teaching approaches—improvement.

Though the picture looked bleak, some states began looking closely at what their teachers knew (content knowledge) and compared it to how well they could get that information across to students (pedagogy). Was there a yet unidentified facet that could shed light on this gap? In 2004, a research study conducted by Dan Goldhaber and Emily Anthony analyzed the North Carolina National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) and explored how the standard qualities determined national board certification status. Since many states at this time were delving into the relationship between national board certification and student achievement, it was possible that teachers achieving this status possessed traits that could determine “quality.” When Goldhaber and Anthony reviewed these data, however, they found that the research had yet to provide data that quantified teacher characteristics (quality) with student achievement.

Nonetheless, the significance of the findings addressed the issues of teacher quality and socioeconomic factors:

1. Teachers who have received National Board certification are more likely to teach in the more affluent districts (p. 19).
2. Resource-poor urban schools lose teachers who have recently gained National Board Certification (p. 20).
3. There is a bias present if the above two conditions are occurring: “If teachers and teacher quality are non-randomly distributed across students and student characteristics, as the evidence strongly suggests, and statistical models do not fully account for the student characteristics affecting achievement, then the estimated effects of teacher characteristics are likely biased” (p. 21).
4. Students who attend lower socioeconomic schools are more affected by teacher quality (and the lack thereof) than students who attend higher socioeconomic schools (p. 23).
5. Policy implications from this study include indications that the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is correctly identifying teacher quality in its relationship to student achievement (p. 25).
6. The National Board Certification process cost is approximately \$8,800/teacher. More research is needed on its affects on teacher quality to determine its cost effectiveness (p. 26).
7. Research is inconclusive as to whether teacher quality remains the same or changes once a teacher has earned the status of a National Board Certified Educator.

In some ways, Goldhaber and Anthony’s report agreed with Coleman and Jencks in that socioeconomics remained a powerful factor influencing student achievement. What this study

added to Coleman and Jenck's findings is that it is the quality of the teacher that makes the effectiveness more pronounced. To support this conclusion, The Southeast Center for Teaching Quality (2005) recognized Goldhaber and Anthony's report as significantly and statistically beneficial and mentioned that the results of the study did, in fact, contradict the Department of Education's definition of a highly qualified teacher.

As *A Nation At Risk* had forecast and the 1999 TIMSS has shown, the United States continues to score amongst the lowest performers in the world. We have yet to embrace "improvement" and have instead favored "reform." However, research is now centering on how policy provisions impact teacher quality to, at the very least, verbalize the influence of this phenomenon. One such report that compared teacher quality from a global perspective is "Preparing Teachers Around the World" (Wang, Coleman, et al, 2003). Using *The International Math and Science Study* (TIMSS) as a compendium to begin their research, Wang et al., reviewed policies and identified control devices in determining the characteristics of teacher quality. Teacher education, teacher induction programs, certification issues, and national policy differences were reviewed in Australia, England, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, United States, and Singapore. These authors found that 22% of grade 7-12 students were taught by teachers who did not hold a major in the discipline they were teaching. In addition, 44% of students in middle school were taught by teachers who did not hold a minor in the subject area they taught. Interestingly, when the study ranked countries by teacher quality policy/practices, the United States held the lowest standards for this category.

It is not that we here in the United States do not value teacher quality. For example, a recent poll conducted by the National Survey of Public Opinion (2003) asked what voters wanted from elected leaders: 27% of the respondents wanted to raise teacher quality. The participants in

the survey ranked “increasing teacher quality” as the number one element of educational reform. The problem appears that we here in the United States find that our policies do not adequately define teacher quality nor do they identify the attributes that contribute to teacher excellence. Notwithstanding, there is a plethora of research studies that contributes to these definitions and qualities. Heretofore, the government has shied away from using these research identifiers as inclusions in policy-made reforms. The question remains: why?

One reason may be attributed to mixed analyses of data variables. Up to this point, teacher quality has been attributed to teacher certification and teacher certification has been correlated to teacher content knowledge. Yet, teacher certification programs vary from state to state, school to school, and teacher to teacher. “Teacher certification lacks consistent standards to classify candidates’ effectiveness” (Kaplan & Owens, 2002). Bodies of inquiries exist on teacher quality’s effect on student achievement. But, as Barnett Berry (2004) queries, “There is still not much more than ephemeral agreement on what teaching quality is and how every student might access a quality teacher” (p. 27). How do the experts define teacher quality?

**B. Teacher Quality Characteristics: Connections & Ambiguity**

*Effective leaders...ask hard questions about why and how things work or don't work, and they lead the kind of inquiry that can result in agreement on the organization's work and its purposes.*  
 Richard Elmore, (2002), in *Educational Leadership*, p. 25

Richard Elmore (2002) prophetically prescribed the difficulty faced by educators post NCLB. The inquiry into the characteristics that comprise teacher quality is astounding. Studies have been conducted on comparing teachers' intelligence (IQ) with their students' achievement (Refer to Table 1); no substantial relationship could be found (Soar, Medley, et al, 1983). The National Teacher Examinations (NTE) have also been analyzed; again, there was little evidence to connect a correlation between the subject test results of a teacher with his/her students' academic achievement (Haney, Madaus, et al, 1987).

**Table 1: The Early Years of Teacher Quality (TQ) Research 1966-1987  
 Is Teacher Quality Linked to Student Achievement (SA)?**

Researcher/Date	No Link w TQ	Some Link w TQ	Link w TQ	Strong Link w TQ
Coleman 1966	*SA is connected to outside environmental factors; e.g., income and poverty levels			
Jencks, et al. 1972	*SA is connected to family background			
Fallon 2003, (in response to Jencks & Coleman)	*Teachers internalized that they were not responsible if children did not learn			
<i>A Nation at Risk</i> 1983		*TQ may be tied to college prep * "Rising tide of mediocrity" and a need for policy mandates		
Soar, Medley 1983		*TQ may be associated with teachers' IQ and their students' achievement		
Haney, Madaus 1987		*TQ link sought between NTE scores and SA		

Some researchers have taken the stance that only through the use of voluminous longitudinal studies that approximate the effect of the teacher and teacher characteristics can analysts look reliably on teacher quality (Podgursky, 2001). Others, such as Monk (1994), have found clear evidence in their research of a direct link between a teacher’s college preparation and the pedagogical skills practiced with student achievement (Refer to Table 2). Still more studies found quite a contrast between the achievement of students who have had the “best” teachers—those whose students consistently perform at a high level—with the achievement of students who have been assigned the “worst” teachers—those teachers whose students consistently perform at a lower level (Haycock, 1998). Some research has convincingly reported that students who have had several of these “worst” teachers successively have a marked decrease in their achievement scores (Sanders & Rivers, 1996).

**Table 2: The Middle Years of Teacher Quality (TQ) Research – 1994-1999**  
**Is Teacher Quality Linked to Student Achievement (SA)?**

Researcher/Date	No Link w TQ	Some Link w TQ	Link w TQ	Strong Link w TQ
Monk 1994			*TQ link found between college prep and pedagogical skills practiced	
Danielson 1996			*TQ identified with what teachers know and what they should be able to do	
Haycock 1998			*Direct link sought between high TQ and high SA and low TQ and low SA	
Goldhaber, Brewer 1998			*TQ: Traditional certification vs emergency certification	
Stigler,Hiebert: TIMSS 1999				*TQ connected to teaching not <u>teachers</u>

Fascinatingly, there is also dissension amongst the ranks of researchers on whether the analysis purported is accurate. It appears as if for every study identifying teacher quality attributes, there is an equally opposite study refuting the same attributes (Refer to Table 3). For example, Linda Darling-Hammond, a Stanford professor considered to be an expert in the field of educational policy analysis, is a strong proponent of teacher certification. In her January 2000 report, Darling-Hammond gathered surveys of state policies, state case study analyses, the 1993-94 Schools and Staffing Surveys (SASS), and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports and analyzed these data. As she compared numerous studies, conflicting research analyses were found for almost every characteristic studied; her assessment resulted in the following appraisal:

1. A teacher's content knowledge is "loosely linked" to teacher effectiveness.
2. Teachers who have had "formal teacher preparation coursework" are more likely to have higher teacher quality.
3. A teacher's passion for learning positively affects teacher quality.
4. "Traditional content certification has been found to increase student achievement; conversely, a teacher with alternative certification has yet to be proven as a negative influence on his/her students' performance."
5. There appears to be a positive correlation between new teacher induction programs and teacher quality; however more research is needed to identify variables which would quantify the effect.
6. "Soft" teacher attributes such as personality traits and interaction styles have yet to be measured with student achievement but may have a positive affect.



7. A teacher's state licensing test scores have been identified as having "the strongest relationship on student achievement." Commenting on a report by Ferguson, Darling-Hammond notes: "The effects were so strong, and the variations in teacher expertise so great, that after controlling for socioeconomic status, the large disparities in achievement between black and white students were almost entirely accounted for by difference in the qualifications of their teachers" (p. 9). Darling-Hammond notes that because each state has different licensing requirements, a "low reliability ceiling" results.
8. In regards to policy and the assessment of teacher quality, the variety and number of variables create numerous possible explanations for predictors of students' success. However, "states interested in improving student achievement may be well-advised to attend, at least in part, to the preparation and qualifications of the teachers they hire and retain in the profession" (p. 38).

**Table 3: The Later Years of Teacher Quality Research – 2000-2001**

**What Are The Links Between Teacher Quality (TQ) and Student Achievement (SA)?**

Researcher/ Date	No Link with TQ	Some Link w TQ	Link w TQ	Strong Link w TQ
Darling-Hammond 2000	*Alternative certification has yet to be proven as influence on TQ	*Subject knowledge is loosely linked with TQ	*Induction programs for new teachers may affect TQ but how has yet to be determined *”Soft” attributes of teachers have not been quantified but are linked to TQ	*Formal college prep has strong effect on TQ *Traditional certification increases SA *Qualification of teacher as measured by state licensing scores is strongest link with TQ
Walsh & Tracy 2001	*Giving monetary rewards does not increase TQ *No evidence between # of years teaching experience and TQ *College education courses not linked with TQ		*High degree of teacher literacy tied to TQ *”Soft” attributes, though difficult to measure, have an impact on TQ	*Subject-area certification strongly linked to TQ *Attendance at “select” colleges strongly linked to TQ
Finn, Kanstoroom 2001				*TQ can be tied to “quality control” regulations
Podgursky 2001		*Longitudinal studies needed on teacher characteristics to determine link with TQ		

In an earlier review, two economists, Dan Goldhaber and Dominic Brewer (1998), concluded from their study of 2,400 math and science teachers that the students of teachers who held emergency certification did just as well on state assessments as students of teachers who held traditional certification. In the 1998 National Council of Teacher Quality summary of research studies and policy effectiveness (Walsh, Tracy, 2001), these conclusions were made:

1. Giving monetary rewards to teachers who pursue advanced degrees has insignificant effect on teacher effectiveness.
2. There is no firm pattern that can be drawn between number of years experience and teacher effectiveness.
3. College education courses have not been linked with teacher effectiveness.
4. Secondary teachers who have subject-area certification add significant effect to student achievement.
5. Teachers who have a high degree of literacy are “more likely” to have students with high achievement.
6. Teachers who have attended “more selective colleges” produce students with greater academic success.
7. Teacher attributes, such as personality, are difficult to measure though their impact on student achievement is noted.

Finally, the authors perceptively note: “Amid the political and ideological squabbling, it has become apparent that more high-quality research is needed—and that decision makers need to pay more attention to the results” (p. 11).

Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Marci Kanstoroom (2001) pursued another avenue convexly to that of Darling-Hammond. “U.S. schools are not producing satisfactory results, and this problem is not likely to be solved until classrooms are filled with excellent teachers” (p. 149). These authors identified two strategies that policymakers could use when searching for the high quality teacher of the future. One strategy was to continue with the traditional thinking of regulating and restricting who can enter the classroom. This “regulatory approach relies heavily on greater inputs, uniform practices, and more peer judgments as sources of quality control” (p. 150). The other strategy, which they term, a “commonsense approach,” was “essentially a deregulatory strategy that opens entry into classrooms and, for quality control, depends primarily on students’ learning as evidence of their teachers’ effectiveness” (p. 150).

Eric Hanushek agreed with this notion of deregulation and emphasis on de-limiting teacher credentialing. In his treatise, *Teacher Quality* (2002), Hanushek concluded:

1. In order to improve schools, you must improve teacher quality.
2. Research has yet to link teacher characteristics to teacher quality. Therefore, increasing state certification requirements does not ensure increased teacher quality.
3. “Policies aimed at student performance instead of inputs offer the only real hope for improvement. Input policies, even though frequently popular, need to be resisted. At the same time, developing good accountability system is central, and the federal government can provide leadership (without nationalizing the process).”
4. “The federal government should limit its role to concerns of equity and of knowledge and should not attempt to act like a local school board. At the same time, the federal government should require performance for funds it disperses, such as the Title I funds that aid the education of disadvantaged students.”

5. Only through the development of quality research will we be able to gather data to support improved policy mandates. (pp. 11-12)

Hanushek's contention was that certification requirements limit who schools can hire and yet these limitations have no documented influence on student performance. He believes that a teacher's ability shapes student achievement, an element that can be measured, tracked, and ultimately rewarded. Other researchers have used similar data to lay claim that teachers who lack traditional certification have a higher dropout rate from the profession, have lower grade-point averages, lower self-confidence, and ultimately lack understanding of curriculum and student ability and motivation needs (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2003).

The dilemma continued. As it did, two researchers pioneered student achievement tracking and the identification of teacher ability. June C. Rivers and her husband, William L. Sanders recorded the standardized test scores of approximately six million Tennessee students since 1992. This longitudinal study followed students from year to year and has been touted as the most comprehensive and unbiased approach to determining teacher quality yet undertaken. Called the TVAAS, Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System, findings from the project have been replicated by other studies yet many teachers, administrators, and policymakers have been hesitant to use "tracking" as a method to identify teacher quality (Rivers & Sanders, 2002). However, data analyses of the report have confirmed some emerging patterns regarding teacher quality.

1. Teacher effectiveness increases across grade levels with the most definitive effects seen in mathematics.
2. "In the extreme, fifth grade students experiencing highly ineffective teachers in grades three through five scored about 50 percentile points below their peers of

- comparable previous achievement who were fortunate enough to experience highly effective teachers for those same grades” (p. 16).
3. The effect of a teacher on a student’s academic performance can be measured at least four years after the student has left the teacher’s classroom.
  4. “Regardless of ethnicity, children of similar previous achievement levels tend to respond similarly to an individual teacher” (p. 17).
  5. Relatively ineffective teachers are ineffective with all student disaggregated groups regardless of achievement level; highly effective teachers tend to be highly effective with all student subgroups regardless of achievement level.
  6. “The effect of the teacher far outshadows classroom variables, such as previous achievement level of students, class size as it is currently operationalized, heterogeneity of students, and the ethnic and socioeconomic makeup of the classroom” (pp. 16-17).

A most important element of the TVAAS was that it quantifiably alerted a teacher as to whether or not they were effective. For some teachers, this could be an epiphany, something that licensure and classroom observation reports did not quantify.

William Sanders agreed with Linda Darling-Hammond (2004) in arguing for an increase in teacher quality in order to impact student achievement stating:

1. There is more convincing evidence on a relationship between teacher quality and student achievement than can be contributed to class size and student achievement.
2. Factors such as staff development, college preparation, support, and the teaching environment subjectively affect teacher quality and make it difficult to analyze what an effective teacher should look like.

3. Differentiation of instruction appears to be the most important characteristic of teacher quality.
4. School districts can improve teacher quality through ongoing staff development, effective hiring practices, and positive environmental changes.
5. Making positive environmental changes include the use of paraprofessionals in larger classrooms to support teachers and help retain quality teachers.

There are many facets that add to the ambiguity of teacher quality and one that may directly affect teacher quality and a school's ability or inability to work towards it: the teacher union. In the United States, there are only sixteen states that do not have collective bargaining units, demonstrating the national impact of such organizations. For most unions, working within a system that is laterally graduated often hampers what they can do to improve teacher quality reform efforts. According to Nina Bascia (2003) who analyzed the work of six teacher unions—three state unions and three district unions between the years 1998 and 2001—unions were much more involved in improving teacher quality than recruiting and retaining efforts. “This capacity to conceptualize and work to implement programs and practices to improve teacher quality by challenging, supporting, and initiating reform strategies—taking stock of current conditions and filling in or compensating for inadequacies in support for teaching quality—suggests that it is useful to think about unions’ value as contributing to a ‘tapestry’ of reform” (pp. 30-31). In some school districts, the union is perceived as a counterproductive mechanism in raising teacher quality. This perception needs to change for the teacher union remains an untapped yet viable source for improving teaching quality.

In 1996, a seminal piece of research was published that would not only reshape the quality of teaching but would give evaluators a means in which to measure it. Charlotte

Danielson published her work on *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching*. Commissioned by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), Danielson's research began as a means in which to help states/agencies make decisions about teacher licensure (p. iii). The outgrowth of that research became the "PRAXIS Series: Professional Assessments for Beginning Teachers." The *Framework* was an outgrowth of these standards and, as Danielson stated, it classified

...those aspects of a teacher's responsibilities that have been documented through empirical studies and theoretical research as promoting student learning. Although not the only possible framework, these responsibilities seek to define what teachers should know and be able to do in the exercise of their profession. (p. 1)

Danielson divided these "responsibilities" into four domains encompassing 22 components: planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities. As Danielson mentioned, "a framework for professional practice can be used for a wide range of purposes, from meeting novices' needs to enhancing veterans' skills. Because teaching is complex, it is helpful to have a road map through the territory, structured around a shared understanding of teaching" (p. 2). Although Danielson did not identify quality teacher attributes, she did identify those components that teachers of quality must possess and the level to which they must possess them (pp. 3-4). Each domain and its components have an accompanying rubric rating the level of performance into four categories: unsatisfactory, basic, proficient, and distinguished. In explaining her research on these attributes, Danielson discussed excellence: "An important step to enhancing the stature of educators in the family of professions is defining clearly what constitutes excellence in teaching" (p. 7). Her framework begins this communication piece (Refer to Table 4).



**Table 4: The Present Teacher Quality Research – 2002 – 2005**

**What Are The Links Between Teacher Quality (TQ) and Student Achievement (SA)?**

Researcher/ Date	No Link with TQ	Some Link w TQ	Link w TQ	Strong Link w TQ
Hanushek 2002	*Tighter control on certification does not produce increased TQ *Tighter policy regulations do not affect TQ	* “Soft” attributes not readily linked to TQ		*TQ directly linked to teacher ability which should be tied to traditional certification
Rivers, Sanders 1992-2002				*TQ most pronounced differences in math *TQ effects on SA measurable 4 yrs later *TQ outshadows other classroom variables (e.g., class size, ethnicity, SES)
Danielson 1996-2005				*TQ can be linked to four domains: Planning & Preparation, Classroom Environment, Instruction, Professionalism

I end this section on teacher quality characteristics not with a “list” of items that would prove a teacher’s quality, but with mention that a “list” of characteristics is not what policymakers and practitioners need. We cannot check off attributes a person possesses and knight them with the title of quality teacher. Instead, the literature shaping this definition is pointing to intrinsic improvements, self-reflection, and improvement of teaching. The culmination of the TIMSS report (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999) redefined the problem of teacher quality as this:

There are many ideas about how to turn teachers into high-status professionals: increased pay, increased certification requirements, more accountability, career ladders, peer review, training teachers as researchers, and encouraging teachers themselves to set the standards for entrance into their profession. Not all of these stratagems are proposed by teachers' advocates, but they do have one thing in common: They presume that attributing to teachers the characteristics common to professionals in other fields will bring higher status and respect. We believe, however, that attacking the problem simply by arbitrarily assigning professional characteristics to teachers mistakes the trappings for the profession. In fact, a profession is created not by certificates and censures but by the existence of a substantive body of professional knowledge, as well as a mechanism for improving it, and by the genuine desire of the profession's members to improve their practice. (p. 171)

It is not enough to ascribe definitions or labels to quality teaching attributes.

Policymakers and practitioners alike may be looking toward a solution that does not exist.

Instead, Stigler and Hiebert (1999) noted, "Solving the problem of improving teaching requires shifting the focus from *teachers* to *teaching*. Instead of worrying about professionalizing teachers, we must think about what is required to professionalize teaching" (pp. 174-75). Once we professionalize teaching, student achievement will rise to the forefront.

### **C. Cultivating The Quality Teacher**

If, as much of the research states, the key to raising student achievement and finding the nebulous “teacher quality” characteristics are found in increasing teacher ability, then how does a district cultivate this aspect? Much of the studies on teacher quality have made claim that the central focus should be centered on retention and recruitment. By choosing hirees who have a strong pedagogical background with a firm foundation in teaching preparatory experiences, school districts can promote further growth and development through carefully planned induction programs. Legislators have suggested two ways to improve teacher quality: increase salaries and increase support for new teachers (Halford, 1999). Other researches have refuted the claim that raising teacher salaries alone will retain new teachers (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

Why the attention to new teachers and not veteran staff? Because the attrition statistics are staggering: within the first two years of teaching, one fourth of new teachers leave the profession and one third leave after three years (Ingersoll, 2002). Ingersoll and Smith (2003) conducted a ten-year data study on new teacher attrition and found that approximately 50 percent of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years. This is a staggering figure and, according to these researchers, reflects the need for improved support for new hirees. Darling-Hammond (2003) mentioned: “A growing body of evidence indicates that teachers who lack adequate initial preparation are more likely to leave the profession” (p. 7). In her research of teacher recruitment and retention, she found that the number of teachers exiting the profession had exceeded the number entering the profession. Though these figures overwhelming point to policy changes, funding for new teacher induction programs is limited to sixteen states (Ansell & McCabe, 2003). Can it be that states are unsure of whose role it is to support new staff (Hankin & Nolan, 2004)? If this were true, then “Principle-based” mentoring programs that are based on

co-development and collaboration, observation and feedback, policies and systems, and encouragement and support may work best (Millinger, 2004). Other new teacher induction programs center on teacher improvement and give staff members an opportunity to share problems experienced in the classroom and to reflect on these experiences in a supportive, safe environment where commitment to success is envisioned (Carver, 2003). Whatever the support system offered to both veteran and new staff members, components need to be specific, continuing, and supportive.

Again, Charlotte Danielson's work on *The Framework for Teaching* has changed many a states' approach to teacher evaluation. Danielson listed the elements of what she calls a "well-conceived induction program" in the foreword to Susan Villani's book, *Mentoring Programs for New Teachers* (2002).

1. Induction programs cannot be merely "buddy programs" with veteran teachers who are empathetic to the new teacher's plight. The mentoring component must include ways in which the mentor can help the new teacher improve his/her instructional techniques.
2. Induction programs have to include more than the general list of school procedures and policy guidelines. It must include a "how to" of effective lesson design and delivery.
3. An induction program needs to include a mentoring component based upon improving teaching quality. The framework of the program should center on building ways in which the mentor and new teacher can share teaching experiences and learn from each other.

4. New teacher induction programs must train both the mentor and the new teacher.
5. A most important element of new teacher programs is self-reflection. The quality induction program models self-assessment in the same way that we expect our students to self-assess and reflect on their learning.
6. Most importantly, a quality induction program gives release time for mentors, provides the resources for both new teacher and mentor, and gives monetary as well as emotional support for the mentors chosen to participate. (pp. x-xi).

A type of “synergy” is created in a school system when both new teachers and veteran staff combine to focus on raising student achievement (Villani, 2002). Another expert on new teachers, Harry Wong (1998), who has written the classroom management guide, *The First Day of School*, commented on new teacher induction programs: “You don’t prepare lifelong learners – much less leaders – simply by giving them a mentor to call when they are in trouble...Teachers stay where they feel successful, supported, and part of a team working toward the achievement of common goals” (p. 52). It appears as if having a new teacher induction program with a mentoring component helps new teachers survive those first years in the profession and creates an environment in which to develop teacher quality; but, the question remains, what then? What is it that we are missing in our attempt to retain and rejuvenate teachers long in the profession, short on success, and devoid of quality?

No Child Left Behind has made “highly qualified” requirements for new teachers; these mandates are spelled out and leave no room for question. New teachers have to pass a test or major in the subjects they teach. The NCLB provisions do not demand that veteran teachers become “highly qualified” by going back to college and gaining the knowledge. These

HOUSSE requirements – high, objective, uniform state standard of evaluation – were an alternative created by politicians who were being besieged by teachers’ unions with pleas for an alternative option (Petrilli, 2005). The veterans merely need to pass a content test that certifies their quality as a teacher of that subject area. This strategy does little to (im)prove their competency as a teacher. Staff development may be the last venue to pursue.

Scott Willis (2002) discussed this issue of professional development with James Stigler, the director of TIMSS. Stigler identified three ways to improve the quality of teaching.

Succinctly stated in this discussion:

1. Improve the applicant pool.
2. Try to improve the competence of the people already in the teaching profession.
3. Try to improve the methods that teachers use. (p. 10).

As Stigler notes, the United States places much importance on hiring and retaining but little importance on improving teaching methods. In other countries, the importance is on teaching methods. “We should attach the most importance to improving our teaching methods. Most students are taught by an average teacher, implementing the average method” (p. 11). Imagine the power of a staff development program geared toward improving instruction in the classroom.

#### **D. The Dichotomy**

To summarize this treatise on the social construct of quality and excellence of teaching, the dichotomy of the subject is such that we have a reality – policy – that mandates a requirement – certification– that does nothing to suggest a higher standard of excellence. Those holding the belief system, the teacher preparation colleges and universities and policymakers, have continued to tighten regulations on licensing and schools. Yet, there is no convincing evidence that quantifies or qualifies how licensing affects teacher quality. Public schools are left with the ephemeral definitions founded in No Child Left Behind that equate quality with credential mandates. Guides issued by the Department of Education, such as the 2002 report, “A Community Action Guide to Teacher Quality,” define teacher quality as “the aptitude, skills, experience, and beliefs that a teacher brings to the classroom, and the structures, processes, resources, requirements, and public perceptions that influence who teaches, where they teach, and what happens in the classroom” (p. 3). Researchers continue to lament the problematic nature of a policy that is microscopic in clarity but colossal in flaws. As stated by Walsh and Snyder (2004), “Much of the teacher quality problem has been largely self-inflicted through flawed regulatory policy” (p. 5).

I fear that the “power over” that politicians have prescribed to practitioners as what “ought to be done” has clouded the issue to the point the research is sullied and demoralized. Yes, there is a personification to research – think of how the TVAAS has walked alongside the Tennessee teacher and examined every aspect of his/her teaching. Perhaps the metaphor that policymakers overlook is truly a hyperbolic reality minus perception. What I see here is a need to call to action the “what” that is going on in the classroom. It may be that outside factors and socioeconomic status plays a role in how well our students acquire knowledge. However, global

reports show that the United States is too focused on reform and not focused on improvement. Lower socioeconomic schools are losing nationally board certified teachers, average teachers, too many teachers. Retention issues are terrifyingly obstructing the progress of educational values.

Is it possible that our perceptions have created a feeling tone that may not be what teacher quality is all about? The research that quantifies teacher quality notes the difficulty in measuring attributes that are subjective in nature and yet we still lack a definition of the term itself. As stated in a recent Associated press article (Feller, 2005), "...In a nation of 3 million teachers, the definition of highly qualified varies widely and may not ensure quality at all – not what Bush and Congress intended. Given considerable leeway, many states are declaring their teachers to be highly qualified without making sure those teachers know their subjects..." (p. 1). Have we crossed the line of federal mandate and are we in arrears with what our forefathers set forth in the constitution?

Sr. Leo Claire taught me what teacher quality was not. Oftentimes, learning a definition requires searching for contradictions. In the case of teacher quality, excellence will never be ferreted if we forego improvements to in-the-classroom teaching. Looking closely at people's perceptions of teacher quality and the reality of what exists in schools may bring me closer to the reality of what teacher quality is all about.



## CHAPTER THREE

### THE HABIT OF EXCELLENCE

*Most of what we 'know' we have taken on the authority of others, and it is only as others continue to confirm this 'knowledge' that it continues to be plausible to us.*

Berger, (1970), in *A Rumor of Angels*, p. 6

#### A. The Shape

As I read and reread the plethora of information I had on teacher quality, I tried to define the shape that this study would take. In this study, I wanted to address the issue of teacher quality and whether it was a socially constructed theory that differed depending on a school's socioeconomic status and the cultivation of teacher quality within the school district. I have found that No Child Left Behind has mandated that all teachers be "highly qualified," a term that the Department of Education has defined by licensure. I have discovered that there lacks a verbal identification of "highly qualified" characteristics. I have decided that teacher quality is left to the nebulous grandeur of a piece of titled paper. We are left without excellence, without attainment of a valued quality. Aristotle said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." If teacher quality is equated with excellence, then, excellence in teaching must be a habit that is cultivated and rewarded.

My purpose, then, became to explore the socially constructed meaning of teacher quality and its implication in school districts. The study identifies the policy, No Child Left Behind, the subsequent mandate of "highly qualified teacher," and the lack of a definitive representation of characteristics to understand the term. Superintendents, administrators, and teachers practicing in the field of education today are under considerable pressure to raise test scores; however, in many schools there is not only a lack of teacher quality but a lack of teachers as well. What needs to occur is an exploration of the core beliefs that school district personnel hold on what

classifies a teacher of quality and how these attributes can be cultivated and sustained throughout any school district. The intent of this study is to uncover perceptions that may be (mis)guiding the schools in their search for teacher quality. It is also the intent of this study to look at whether perceptions of teacher quality and its cultivation change with the level of socioeconomic status.

## **B. The Beginning of Disorder**

“Good research begins with disorder and ends with order. Logic and certainty do not begin the process, but are an outcome of the process” (p. 51). I have found both: my own logic, which may be my own perception, and the disorder I have created that makes my certainty illogical. Yet, in researching teacher quality, I, too, agree with Molly Stock (1985) who notes the practicality and “messiness” associated with researching a problem and I state it up front in a non-refuted manner. For my purposes and the purpose of this study, I wanted to undertake an in-depth search of educators’ perceptions of teacher quality and whether it derives meaning from a social construct of external and internal factors: external as in policy mandates and environmental cultivation, and internal as in intrinsic motivation. I was prepared for messiness and probably created quite a bit of untidiness within my own thinking. The more literature I read on teacher quality and its derivatives, the more delineation I required to funnel this study into a logical conclusion. I knew I had to differentiate my thoughts into a logical sequence of framed issues before I would be able to determine its literary worth. That is where I developed the research questions to bring theory and practicality to my work. The research questions included:

1. How does the social construction of reality interplay with the terms quality/excellence?
2. How does the No Child Left Behind law shape a definition of quality teaching?
3. How is student achievement connected to teacher quality?
4. What are administrators’ and teachers’ perceptions of quality teaching attributes?
5. How do educators who are identified by administrators as quality teachers identify and develop attributes of teacher quality in themselves?
6. How do school districts cultivate quality?

As I approached the interview portion, I reviewed literature to find various ways to collect data in a qualitative but interpretive study. This naturalistic inquiry fits into what Bogdan and Biklen (1992) refer to as the most dominant form for collecting information because it uses the natural setting as the means to capture the essence of the data, it is descriptive in nature, and the process becomes the predominant means to an end (p. 29-32). The use of inductive analysis is also a catalyst of the inquiry-based approach.

Wolcott (1990) uses a classification method to outline how interviews can be categorized:

1. Key information interview
2. Questionnaire
3. Projective techniques
4. Standardized tests/measurement techniques
5. Life history interview
6. Formal interview
7. Informal interview

McCracken (1988), on the other hand, uses the interview as the focus, with less emphasis on the questions being asked and more on the interview process itself. Using this method, I have constructed the interview questions to allow for a free, storytelling experience to come from the participants. I have chosen a narrative model in which to collect, analyze, and present data; open-ended items were used to allow for flexibility so that the essence of the participant's words could be captured effectively. I wanted this to be a story about people: a story that evokes urgency and comes from the courageous work of those in the profession of reaching our children's minds.

Thus, I began to explore various approaches. The case study was one. According to Bogdan and Bilken (1992), “A case study is a detailed examination of one setting, or a single subject, a single depository of documents, or one particular event” (p. 62). By using this research method, patterns of thought could explain an interrelationship between what is known about teacher quality and what is being practiced in the field (Roscoe,1969). Though I might not be able to generalize this information beyond the study I was undertaking, I might be able to add to the epistemology surrounding these ideas. As Earl Babbie (1990) notes:

It is important to realize that the case study approach to social research differs radically from the other methods considered so far in terms of scientific objectives. Whereas most research aims directly at generalized understanding, the case study aims initially at the comprehensive understanding of a single, idiosyncratic case. Whereas most research attempts to limit the number of variables considered, the case study seeks to maximize them. (p. 33)

It was not until I began to explore the realm of the narrative that I finally found a manner in which to recount these stories, share my love of literature, and add to the ever-growing epistemology of education. A narrative is more than a recounting, it is a “representation of stories or events pictorially or sculpturally” (Webster’s Dictionary, 1999, p. 878). The narrative is as individual as the interviews themselves. Adamant that I not lose the flavor of those whose words I would transcribe, I was anxious to find the vehicle that would allow me to present their stories in an unabridged fashion (Anderson & Page, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1985). The narrative embodies the elements I wished to recount in a writing style that flowed naturally for me. It is in this vein that I chose to “sculpt” the clay.

The schools I selected for this study are from opposite ends of the socioeconomic continuum, chosen on purpose so as to add richness to the background study. Diversity was one area I looked for in one of the schools for it is this element that much of the research uses as a

high-impact factor. Another element I looked for was affluence so as to determine whether accountability came from community factors or internal factors.

Two districts were chosen. One was rich in resources and highly acclaimed for its student, teacher, and community awards. In this district, state test scores are in the upper quadrant. The superintendent has been in this school district for over ten years and has held the position of superintendent for the past eight years.

The second school I chose for the study is located in a resource-poor district and has been on the state warning list, school improvement list, and has been empowered by the state. This school has received accolades, also, and involves the business community in providing grant money to fund many of its programs. The superintendent has been employed with the district as leader for the past four years.

### **C. Collecting Butterflies**

My father used to say that the best way to collect butterflies was to plant seeds and grow flowers. Elusive and flighty, the butterfly needs the stability of the flower in order to perch on its edge and rest its wings. For me, collecting information from educators practicing in the field of education, meant listening and hearing about their experiences. I chose the interview model so that I could ask questions, elicit answers, uncover perspectives and notions, and give the subjects the opportunity in which to give meaning to their respective roles. I needed the opportunity to perch on a flower petal to stabilize my study. So, I chose the interview. One leading researcher, McCracken, guided me through the interview process using *The Long Interview* (1988) components. I found these approaches to be helpful in supporting my collection of butterflies.

1. Review of analytic categories and interview design
2. Review of cultural categories and interview design
3. Discovery of cultural categories
4. Discovery of analytic categories

Another significant impact on my study was the work of Rubin and Rubin (2005) who use another method termed Responsive Interviewing Model (R.I.M.), which allows for open-ended responses using a semi-structured interview guide. These authors capitalize on

1. Gaining subjects' interpretations of experiences
2. Finding the relationship between the subject and the interviewer
3. Being aware of biases on both the interviewers' and subjects' part
4. Clarifying information that was not part of the initial question but nonetheless is an important new point worthy of attention.

Since I had chosen subjects who were all educators and currently working in the field, my captive audience was well established in education and well versed on the issues surrounding teaching. The two superintendents I interviewed have been in place in their respective roles for at least four years. Well respected in their communities, they were able to identify teacher quality traits and name those teachers in their schools who possessed these traits. The teachers themselves had been teaching in the district for at least ten years. All are deemed “highly qualified” per the definition in No Child Left Behind.

Prior to the first interview, I made phone contact with the superintendents, explained the nature of the research study, asked permission to visit their schools, and scheduled an interview. During the interview, I asked the superintendent to designate an administrator with whom I could speak. Teachers were then interviewed who had been named as having characteristics embodied in the notion of *teacher quality*. An interview guide was used; however, since the interview was open-ended, the subjects were permitted to deviate from the questions asked and supply information that gave clearer understanding into the notion of teacher quality and how it has been cultivated in the school district. Thus, the data gathered reflected the perspective of the person being interviewed.

In all cases, I asked permission to use a tape recorder so that I could spend the interview time making visual connection with the subjects. As I began collecting and transcribing the interviews, I was reminded of Ary et al.’s work (2006):

1. You must take care not to impose your own agenda or bias.
2. You must be open to responses that are contrary to your own knowledge, beliefs, or perspectives.
3. Care should be taken not to mention specific terms or to over-cue interviewees.



4. Interviewers should direct responses to concrete, detailed accounts rather than generalizations.
5. You should watch for discrepancies between the interviewee's verbal and nonverbal behaviors and note these. (p. 481)

Using Rubin and Rubin's R.I.M. semi-structured method and watching for pervasive tendencies, such as in Ary et al., I used a framework that could be modified but gave a definitive approach to the topic and covered all of the research questions of the study. However, the naturalistic approach allowed for in-depth queries and rebuttals by both the interviewer and interviewee. I designed my interview questions from the problem statement I had constructed:

### **Background Questions**

1. What is your current position in the school district?
2. How long have you held this position?
3. What other positions in the district have you held?

### **Research Questions – Superintendent & Administrators**

1. Define the term "teacher quality."
2. Define the term "excellence."
3. How do the two terms relate to the philosophies of your school district?
4. What attributes constitute "teacher quality"?
5. Name three teachers in your school district whom you would label as a teacher of quality.
6. Which of the teacher quality attributes you have described are found in the teachers you have named? Which are not?
7. How is student achievement connected to teacher quality?
8. Describe your school district's philosophy on teacher quality.

9. In what ways does your school district cultivate teacher quality?

**Research Questions – Teachers**

1. Define the term “teacher quality.”

2. Define the term “excellence.”

3. How do the two terms relate to your philosophy of teacher quality?

4. What attributes constitute “teacher quality”?

5. You have been identified as a teacher of quality. What attributes do you possess that give you this label?

6. What have you done to develop attributes of teacher quality?

7. How is student achievement connected to teacher quality?

8. How has teacher quality been instilled in you over your professional career?

9. Describe your school district’s philosophy on teacher quality.

10. In what ways does your school district cultivate teacher quality?

#### **D. Analyzing & Critiquing**

It was with complete surprise that I realized the difficulty in interviewing. I had always prided myself on being a careful listener; one who could pick up the unstated and read carefully between the lines. However, when you are cautiously trying to separate your opinion from another's message, you begin to think on a different level. Ensuring accuracy and recording another's reality became an obsession with me. I had asked each participant before the interview if they would allow me to tape record their answers. All were in accord. I also took notes during the interview to note non-verbal behaviors, environmental observations, and nuances not likely to be picked up by a tape recorder. I transcribed the interviews the same day I conducted them. Like Donna M. Mertens (2005) mentions, my goal was to "allow at least twice as much time as you spent interviewing to go over the notes as soon as possible" (p. 202). Hence, the transcription portion took more time than the interview portion as I sought ways to conceptualize what I had just experienced. It was quite an invigorating experience.

When using an inquiry-based approach to research, the design emerges as the study unfolds (Ary, Jacobs, et al., 2006). In 1989, Yin proposed that validity and reliability could be mastered using construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability. In this study, I spent time logging my perceptions and conducting ongoing analysis as the design emerged (Ary, Jacob, et al., 2006). As I interviewed the subjects, I read and reread the material I had transcribed and reviewed the tape recordings continually. This same system was used in recording data regarding school district programming and teacher quality cultivation. By using this method, a theme did begin to emerge; however, by consciously looking for information that would refute my hypothesis, I wanted to make sure that I did not discount information counter to my own perceptions/biases (Johnson & Christensen, 2000).

Bodgen and Biklen (1998) assign categories such as: setting/context, definition of the situation, perspectives held by subjects, subjects' ways of thinking about people/objects, process, activity, event, strategy, relationship and social structure, and methods. These categories were used in helping me look at these data I had collected. I then noted that Glaser and Strauss (1967) used the constant comparative method—synchronized comparison of the total units to obtain meaning—and embedded this constant alteration into my formation of an analysis.

## **E. The Logical Conclusion**

The results of my research culminate into adding information to an already burgeoning database regarding teacher quality. Nonetheless, my initial goal was to find if perceptions were actually reality; if what educators believed to be true about teacher quality were actually practiced. I wanted to see what teachers who possessed these nebulous but named qualities thought of their own teaching performance. I was on a quest to find how a school district that identified teacher quality attributes worked toward cultivating these attributes in their programming. Finally, I hoped to discover if there was any difference in socioeconomics regarding a district's approach to teacher quality.

The interview method I used constitutes hours of transcription and thoughtful perusal, lengthy but necessary elements in uncovering a framework from which I could analyze these data. But, it is this very method—interviewing—that allows a person to give meaning to what they believe and validates their concerns in an informal but well-documented approach to the narrative, interpretive approach.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RAPTURE

*Caring is the central quality that gives human beings a purpose in life – a reason to get up in the morning – even the will to live!*

Leonard O. Pellicer, in *Caring Enough to Lead* (2003), p. 27.

#### A. Courage, Caring, and Casualty

In the early 1990s, I sat with rapt attention, as did much of the literary nation, and read Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* (1991). Angered by the audacity of our country's educational disparities in the realm of educational quality, I dreamed of a place where I would teach the unteachable in the most unreachable places. Not quite out of college with degree still more than a dream away, I was revolutionized by my personally misguided educational injustices, the forces of Sister Leo Claire's teaching quality, and the dangerous attribute of a little bit of knowledge. How could the *Wall Street Journal* article that Kozol quoted get away with such ignorant statements? I pulled the editorial and read for myself: "More experienced teachers don't mean better schooling. Hiring teachers with advanced degrees doesn't improve schooling...It's parental influence that counts" (p. 134). Here was The Coleman Report replicated in 1989; had education come no closer to excellence in those past twenty-some years? In my blossoming wealth of new-found knowledge, I felt that it was caring and experience that counted. The teacher who held the advanced degree was surely the caring, quality educator who would and could make an impact on a child's mind. Then, I read on and realized that Kozol was reminding his readers that the *WSJ* was on a quest for "the one change that will cost the least and bring the best return" (p. 136). My reminiscence to Kozol's *Inequalities* reminded me that the educational reformers had merely continued the procedure of applying what works in upper socioeconomic schools to what does not work in lower socioeconomic schools. Things have

changed relatively little in the past fifteen years. Yet, what truth is there in Coleman, Jencks, et al., and the *Journal's* words that once again discuss outside influences, sans teacher quality, as the determining factor in a child's academic success?

So, like Kozol, I went on a search for what excellence and quality could possibly be about in relation to teaching. Is it an automatic derivative of resource-poor schools that quality teachers would exist in the same way as they do in resource-rich schools?

Dull unwashed windows of eyes  
and buildings of industry. What  
industry do I practice?

How is it that Imamu Amiri Baraka's poem (1969) requires me to ask of myself what I am doing with my life, with my dream, with my knowledge to help those less fortunate, those less educated? And then I began to think of all the children who are "led" to knowledge by educators who are not well equipped to take them there. It reminded me of a story I had read in Leonard O. Pellicer's book, *Caring Enough to Lead* (2003), about trusting those in charge. While following her daughter home one day, a mother could not keep up with the weaving in and out of traffic and the continual record speed of her daughter's driving. Frustrated, the mother stopped following and went to the mall, whereby she called her daughter and reported her whereabouts. The mother chastised the daughter with a most unlikely but profound statement, "I was in a vulnerable situation...I trusted you to lead me, but you didn't care enough to maintain close contact with me...When I became convinced that you weren't concerned about me and my needs, I made a decision to stop following you" (pp. 21-22). Is this what we are doing to our administrators, our teachers, our students? Have children found us out and realized some of us have no concern for them and their needs; have they stopped following us? It is with this premise that I began my quest to find why some teachers possess qualities that make them excellent and to discover how these qualities are cultivated.

Choosing school district personnel to interview was not as difficult a task as I had thought it would be. However, I wanted to speak with people who were in opposite environmental workplaces: educators who had the most and those who had the least; students who came from affluence and those who came with the clothes on their backs; administrators who had a dream and the resources to see it through and administrators whose dreams had dissipated into financial foreclosure.



## B. Interlude

*And the truth of your experience can **only** come through in your own voice. If it is wrapped in someone else's voice, we readers will feel suspicious, as if you are dressed up in someone else's clothes. You cannot write out of someone else's big dark place; you can only write out of your own.*  
*bird by bird*, Anne Lamott, (1994), p. 199

As I read and reread the many hours of interview transcription, the most difficult part was determining how to portray it in print. How do I capture the essence of what occurred in each place with each person? I knew that the order in which I translated the words would be critical to the readers' approach and analysis. We see things before we read them. We interpret and analyze before we embrace comprehension. Our first impressions are often our only impressions. I must be careful to honor those interviewed and at the same time scientifically scrutinize the information gathered. The problem is that my English background gets in the way of my scientific scrutiny. The tendency to compare experiences with literary pieces of art becomes a compulsion. Can I mix the two? Is there symmetry in tenacity and integrity; a correlation between the beauty of the word and the love existing in the experience? "Both experiences depend upon the sense and the intellect but they both transcend the senses and the intellect. They reveal a level of experience which is central to human life and yet one which we cannot intellectually dominate" (Edwards, 1983; p. 12). The intellectual dominance of this study is not in the word, is not in the data; the intellectual dominance is found in the "emotional abyss" in which students, teachers, administrators find themselves jailed when trying to maneuver through the processes, procedures, and policies inflicted upon them by bureaucracy. And so, the story is told.

### C. The Emotional Abyss

*So will my page be colored that I write?  
Being me, it will not be white.  
But it will be  
A part of you, instructor.*

Lines from “Theme For English B,” Langston Hughes, (1951)

When I first drove into town, I was struck by the enormity of the community itself. Businesses, some closed and boarded up, others open to business, lined the streets. It was early in the morning and yet people were waiting on corners at bus stops, young children in tow. There was a bustling of activity and loud conversation. Upon reaching the school building, I was silenced by its stature. The school façade was old, the bricks worn, and the neighborhood surrounding it a clip from *West Side Story*. Old houses, once magnificent and now forlorn, stood across from the school; old cars lined the streets like homeless people waiting their next meal. Few houses had garages. Like a true Pittsburgh town, there were many steep hills and avenues framing the school’s hierarchical ascension into the clouds. And yet, there was a majesty here, a comfort in this neighborhood like returning to grandma’s house for the holidays. Two older men were working on their car that was parked in the street; there was frequent back slapping and eruptive laughter coming from these make-shift mechanics’ position. This was a neighborhood where everyone knew everyone else and all of their business. There were no secrets in this town; they lived, loved, and experienced life together, oftentimes in the street.

I walked up to a large, three-story home that appeared to be about a hundred-years old. The sign in the grass reminded me that this was the school district’s central office building; yet, it looked more like an historical landmark. The wrap-around porch reminded me of my Aunt

Dinnie's house in Indiana; her swing was a favorite place to drink iced tea in the wickedly hot summers of my youth. This porch lacked the moving apparatus and was devoid of furniture; however, there was an invitation to its splendor, something that the Amish in the movie, *Witness*, called "plain" yet was truly meant as a compliment. The superintendent met me at the side door and whisked me up the steps to the second floor where a living room and dining room had been converted into a secretarial reception room. There was no mistaking the warmth in the rooms, however, for the high ceilings and opulent woodwork deemed the pride of the architect's craft. There was laughter here and genuine caring. One could feel it in the approach, the physical presence of its occupants.

The pride extended outward as the secretary and superintendent warmly welcomed me and excitedly wanted to "show me around." These administrative offices had recently been moved out of the school building so that additional classrooms could be created. Whoever had purchased this home as the district's new location paid quite a compliment to the community's homeowners.

On the first floor of this massive structure, I was told, were the business offices; the second floor held the superintendent's office, and the third floor was reserved for the assistant superintendent. On this floor, there was a full-size kitchen and a completely tiled bathroom with an old-fashioned porcelain tub/shower that took up a good part of the spacious room. The bedrooms had been converted into office space and a conference room. I half expected my great aunt to pop her head around the massive doorframe and ask if I would be staying for tea. It was a house in which you could feel the breath of its former inhabitants. This was a home that had been much loved and well preserved. And it now became the representative of this community's district offices.

With a cup of coffee in hand and an elegantly-framed window as a backdrop, the superintendent told the story of this small community's drive for survival. With approximately 1,000 students in K-12, the school district is the main employer of the community with over one hundred teachers on staff and seven administrators. Few businesses remain in town, mostly local, family-owned stores. The school itself is housed in one academic center that contains three floors broken into elementary, middle, and high school. An all-day kindergarten was started four years ago. The diversity of the school rests between two ethnic groups: Caucasian and African Americans. Sixty percent of the students are African American and 40% are Caucasian. Interestingly, the community ethnicity is sixty-five percent Caucasian to 35% African-American population. The Free and Reduced Lunch population is approximately 90%.

Steel used to be the popular industry in this 2.4 square mile community which houses mostly blue collar workers. Some affluent areas exist today along with two major housing projects. The average family income is \$30,000; there are fourteen Ph.Ds in the community and four medical doctors.

The average cost of educating a student here is \$9,000 with most funds generated from third party monies/grants. There are fourteen gifted support students. The 273 students with special needs cost the district over \$800,000/year with a staff of fourteen special education teachers hired to address this population's special needs. Later this year, a local church will be sponsoring a large group of Bosnian refugees. The school is preparing itself to deal with a new issue: English Language Learners.

State testing results have been steadily and slowly improving but when viewing the overall performance on the Pennsylvania District Report, the state bar graph continues to be higher than this district's performance levels. The district has been empowered by the state, has

been on warning lists, and has been designated as School Improvement I and II. Some years they have met AYP for attendance and test participation; most years they have not met AYP for performance in math and reading. With most of the population in the economically disadvantaged subgroup, the paper-trail difficulties facing this district appear to be insurmountable.

Yet, with all of the disadvantages and difficulties, by far the most interesting aspect of the demographics of this community was the number of students who moved in or out of the district. Last year alone, over 347 students entered or withdrew from the school. Students moved for a variety of reasons: single moms send children to stay with fathers housed in other school districts, grandparents take on/relinquish guardianship, rent becomes overdue and in arrears, and/or parents take flight in the middle of the night to avoid police. With over one-third of its population in a constant state of transience, it is no wonder the district has a complex time projecting costs and preparing space for an otherwise unknown number of children. I wonder how “equality” justifies these elements.

As the interview progressed, the superintendent’s pride increased as well. The more the discussion turned to academics and student issues, the broader the smile became. Having been in education for over thirty years, this superintendent brought years of experience to the community as a former teacher, building principal, assistant superintendent, and special education director. What is it that John Updike says in *Flight* about hearing what we say about ourselves? “It is hard to hear, much less remember, what we ourselves say, just as it might be hard for a movie projector, given life, to see the shadows its eye of life is casting” (1962). The movie projector in this person’s life showed only the brightest highlights of a community’s work towards gaining trust and respect from its clientele. For years, students entered kindergarten with the vocabulary

of a three year old. “How can students feel success when already two years behind grade level and they are just entering kindergarten?” the superintendent remarked. This element changed when programs such as all-day kindergartens were introduced: last year alone, all kindergarten students began first grade reading on grade level. “Now, if only we can keep one third of the population from moving,” the superintendent added, “great possibilities exist.”

At first glance, it appeared as if the district were struggling to stay above water, hiring only those who applied; wanting a teacher in the room much less a highly qualified teacher for every classroom. But that was not the case. This superintendent had high ideals for the prospective candidate so desperately needed in these ever-changing classrooms: those with diversity training, some teaching experience, and a demonstration of success in culturally depressed areas. How many candidates fit that bill of sale?

Teacher quality was easily defined: for this superintendent, the elements consisted of teacher as learner and instructor; a person who was empathetic, caring, holding high expectations, supportive, willing to give of themselves, possessing high content knowledge and the skill to structure the lesson so that all students would benefit. “My teachers could teach anywhere but most others could not teach here. These students come to me with an emotional abyss: they are adults at home, then we treat them like kids at school. We need to treat them like people.”

Excellence is more elusive in its description and is based upon consensus building. “I have never seen an excellent school district. There are glimpses of excellence: cohesive staff, consistent effort, and a consensus of appropriate techniques to use in the classroom. But pure excellence does not exist.” Excellence in teaching was seen as an ability to relate to students, have a variety of skills and tools and, most importantly, possess the ability to laugh at self and

enjoy the kids. “In this school district, the culture is difficult. The elementary schools are developing consensus, the middle school is moving toward consensus but the high school is nowhere near consensus.”

I began to wonder how quality could be a part of a teacher or superintendent’s expectations here with such high demands on the emotional element. What would this superintendent look for in quality? Every teacher in this district is deemed highly qualified by NCLB’s definition; yet, is there more that is needed in credentials for this group of students to succeed? Without hesitation, the superintendent easily identified a candidate who was considered a teacher of quality. “Though she has 34 years in teaching, her years of experience alone do not equate with quality; it is her ability to understand these kids and their home life. She has high expectations and promotes ‘process’ [structure]. She is part of the community, having been born, raised, and graduated from this school. She knows the emotional needs of kids and focuses on each individual child. Her self-motivation capitulates into her ability to motivate others. She is a star.”

The second teacher identified also had more than thirty years teaching, all here in this district. “Though she was not born and raised in this school district, she is dedicated to parents and kids in the community and has formed partnerships with the community. Through grant work, she develops programs to bring the parents into the schools and get them interested in what their children are learning. She, too, understands the emotional needs of these children and focuses on each individual child. Kids come back year after year to visit and thank her for teaching them.”

It became evident that the school district and superintendent’s philosophy of teacher quality was one and the same. Cultivating that quality began with the hiring process where over

95% of the candidates are hired from the substitute list. A candidate's QPA is not a guideline for teacher quality; instead, teachers are hired who meet the needs of highly emotional children.

There is a two-year new teacher induction program with volunteer mentors who get paid \$500/year. The problem is that the mentors cannot get release time to work with the new teacher and the new teacher cannot get release time to visit other teachers or be inserviced through outsource training programs. Why? Lack of substitutes. On a daily basis, the crisis of getting substitutes in a classroom where the teacher is out sick becomes the most pressing issue.

Therefore, the five additional days of inservice at the beginning of the school year form the mode of training for new teachers. Though the district has ten additional days and Act 80 days for inservicing, the district has yet to choose an in-house training focus. "In the past, we have used the IU for training but we were not satisfied and the program became cost-prohibitive. Now, we use our own in-house induction program, but, it, too, is weak."

As the interview ended, I was reminded of Parker J. Palmer's insights: "The way we diagnose our students' condition will determine the kind of remedy we offer" (p. 41). The superintendent had a clear diagnosis of his patients' condition: emotionally, physically, mentally, and environmentally. There were no questions about what the children came to school with or without. There was not only a question of quality in meeting academic needs but quality in addressing basic needs such as food, clothing, and housing. I walked from the office to the sound of laughter and camaraderie. There stood a man in flannel shirt and slacks, relaxed and conversing with the secretary: a school board director come on a visit. "You have met a wonderful superintendent, Mary; a man who is doing good things for our kids." I walked from the building feeling as if I had been in the company of angels.



#### **D. The Accomplished Skater**

*The best thing for being sad,' replied Merlyn, beginning to puff and blow, 'is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then—to learn.*

Merlyn, advising Arthur from *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White, (1939)

In the movie, *Awakening*, comatose patients stirred from years and years of emotional silence to a world of which they were unfamiliar. Like taking a step into the future, some children suddenly became aware of life and the excitement of learning they may have missed along the way. As I drove to this community, I was awakened to new housing developments lining the streets and a silence of which I was unfamiliar. Large, brick, stucco, and stone homes filled pasture after pasture of land. You could tell that there had once been much farmland here in the way in which the land rolled in a free-flowing fashion. At one end of the town, there were many small strip malls, car dealers, and gas stations. Antique shops, clothing stores, and specialty places such as the equestrian store filled the space along the highway. A mix of fifty-year old homes was interspersed with new developments. Long, winding driveways were the norm with not one but three and four-car garages. It was early morning and yet there was no one around. Though I did pass a few signs for public transportation bus stops, riders were nowhere to be seen. Doors were closed tightly; one man was returning his garbage cans from his long driveway to his garage. It was a long walk, indeed. The town was quiet except the sound emanating from the backhoe digging a three-story home's foundation.

As I entered the parking lot, a small and unobtrusive single-floor building met my eye. Quite surprised, I was taken aback for I expected a large operating unit in a lavish building. But,

the building was plain. Merlyn would have been pleased that this district had a passion for learning – from the moment I entered the central office building to the moment I left, the environment displayed evidence of excellence in education. Visible proof of the school district’s philosophy graced the display case in the waiting room with awards from various groups for various reasons including many for teaching excellence. The receptionist “buzzed” me in and, as I walked the long hallway lined with reams of unopened stacks of paper, I noted how the staff was friendly but busy about their work. Everyone seemed to have a purpose, know the purpose, and ready to meet the deadline.

I entered a door marked, “Superintendent’s Office” and was greeted warmly by the secretary. At the same moment, the superintendent appeared from the doorway, offered me coffee, and smiled graciously. There was warmth and caring in both mannerisms and words. This superintendent spoke to me as if my interview were the most important thing and the only scheduled item of the day. It was quite a heady experience.

The office in which we met was nicely appointed and well organized. A bookshelf with crystal miniatures graced one wall. There were pictures of family surrounding the room’s cherry desk and armoire. An open laptop’s screensaver had turned to black. Classy in an understated way, this was not a room of opulence by any means. It almost appeared as if the office furniture were carefully and frugally chosen.

This superintendent was in the 9<sup>th</sup> year here in the district. Former positions included assistant superintendent, elementary principal, assistant middle school principal, head teacher, and elementary teacher. There were over 4,000 students in the K-12 school system in this community. Mostly an upper socioeconomic community, less than 1% of the students qualified for Free & Reduced Lunch. The superintendent described the district as a small, “bedroom

community,” an outgrowth of an urban area with three major working farms left in the district. Small businesses and a pocket of planned communities had erupted over the years with no real industry part of the community. In fact, the school district was the largest employer with over 285 teachers and 19 administrators as employees. The average house is priced at \$250,000 with approximately 1.5 children/house. Diversity is almost non-existent here; 99% of students are Caucasian with less than 1% classified as “other” ethnic background. There are over two hundred students identified as gifted and over four hundred students identified as in need of special education services. These include speech, occupational therapy, autism, learning disabled, physically disabled, vision, emotionally disturbed, and mentally retarded. The average cost of educating a student in this district is approximately \$6,000 at the elementary level and over \$7,000 at the secondary level. Costs for educating a student with special needs can be as high as \$43,000/student.

The community makeup consists of highly educated professionals; many are CEOs, doctors, attorneys, world travelers. Professionals move in and out of the district, coming from places such as Australia, China, and Brazil; most are American citizens but many spend their professional career abroad. There are few single moms in the district; there are many children of divorced parents who share their time equally with both parents who remain residents within the district. Building issues have complicated the district’s planning proposals for the amount of undeveloped farmland could increase the population at any time by thousands. Currently, the district buildings are divided into two primary buildings, one elementary building, one middle school, and one high school. Plans are continually underway to renovate or create new classroom space. Real estate sales are high as agents use the district’s high-performing school status as a main reason for purchasing land or building a new home in the district.

And it is this high performing status that has brought much publicity and outside validation to this district. Test scores over the past four years have been in the upper quadrant with the middle school number two in the state in a previous year. All schools have met AYP in all areas. The question is not so much how to move the small percentage of students from the below basic and basic categories but how to move the proficient students into the advanced category.

As we sat together drinking our coffee, the superintendent smiled easily and warmly and began a discussion of teacher quality. There was an excitement and high expectation set in the wording of the answer: “An individual who can take the child with skills and define them as they enter the room and then take them as far as they can go. Add to that a quality teacher has to have in my own definition a warmth, empathy, understanding of children and how they learn and be able to differentiate in that classroom and meet the learning needs of all the students all the time.” In this district, hiring is the first and most important aspect of cultivating teacher quality. Administrators look at data the teacher submits (application and portfolio) with a close review of the school from which the teacher has been credentialed. Teacher-test scores are reviewed and so are the types of classes the applicant has taken that would have prepared him/her for this position. “These types of tests indicate the capacity to learn which is extremely important as to how they will learn and grow after they are hired.” Background experiences give evidence as to whether the applicant truly wants to be with children. “It is far more beneficial to work in a child center than waitressing because it shows a willingness to be with children.”

I began to feel the thrust for academic excellence present itself: “Like ice skating, excellence is a skill and only a skill because you have become proficient at being able to go beyond the regular performance of straight skating. Now you can do the stunts, the jumps, and

take advantage of the additional opportunities you had to go through to learn those skills. That also applies in teaching: you have to go beyond general teaching and know how to perform the stunts and skills that are evaluated beyond the regular teaching performance. It means that you can deal with all levels of children in the classroom; you can reach the most needy, the most deficient, and the most accomplished learner who needs very little of your time and still meet the most emotional needy child.” The conversation took a pause as the secretary interrupted us with an important phone call. The business of the office hummed; things appeared to move here like a finely oiled machine. The interview continued.

“Excellence in teaching is knowing the content very well and being able to present it to the class so that you meet the individual differences of the children and understand how they learn best. And that is hard. In other words, to be excellent is to be an accomplished skater in the classroom. You have had years of practice, have fallen on your face a few times, have had good instructors, and understand the competition.”

How has this school district cultivated teacher quality? It was certain from these remarks that the superintendent had a clear vision of what was needed. “We hire quality and we expect them to be a good caregiver, an understanding individual, and someone who is willing to do what it takes to be an excellent teacher. Parents in this community have demanded that our board, our leadership seek out individuals with the highest credentials. The community is aware that we hire the valedictorians and when these valedictorians begin teaching their children, they expect quality on day one.” Life experience is also a valuable asset when looking to hire quality people. The district seeks candidates who have had life experiences and have come into education in a non-traditional way. Staff development is seen as a luxury and a “commodity that many districts cannot afford to do and yet cannot afford not to do. Our district has done an adequate job of

raising teacher quality. We have the luxury of sending people to places to get knowledge. We can provide the funds internally and externally. We have created an environment where we recognize excellence in teaching. Teachers of quality who want to be excellent need to be able to ask for help, be able to grow, be readers, and understand that education must be a part of who they are not just what they do. Keep in mind that changing culture means changing skills in the classroom.”

The superintendent paused for a moment and added, “When you asked about teacher quality, the soft attributes are what most parents identify with first. Parents see the caring, loving generosity of a teacher. These are ‘feel good’ attributes which are characteristics of the teacher not the teaching. It is the willingness to do whatever it takes to help these students learn—give them a sandwich, your time after school, the right book to turn on a student to learning—that identifies the teacher of quality.”

Were there accomplished skaters in this district? “I have a hundred I would name as a teacher of quality. I have a few I would name as excellent.” One was a man who “has heart and soul, the experience, and the skill set operating together in tandem.” According to the superintendent, he possessed accomplished credentials, humility, and a kindness beyond expectation. Over the years, this man has demonstrated his knowledge and love for learning by continually returning to school; he is steadfastly recognized as a master by his peers and students. “He grows in knowledge with his students and his learning capacity is constantly enriched.” A broad smile encompassed the superintendent’s face as she revealed, “This is a man with such empathy and generosity; he is willing and yet humble in talking about what he does but he does it to broaden the repertoire of younger staff members to help them learn.” Finally,

the superintendent mentioned this teacher's expertise in differentiation: he acts, role plays, does demonstration reenactments, and dresses up to get the attention of the students.

Another teacher in the district considered by this superintendent as a teacher of quality possessed these same attributes: caring, kindness, continual schooling, willingness to go above and beyond, an expert in the content area, empathetic, great communicator, and a master at differentiation. "This woman is a researcher of data; she understands the child the day the child enters her classroom for she spends hours pouring over the child's records and knows the child's academic needs from day one. This teacher understands the child who comes to school with obstacles. There are teachers who are hungry because they compete with themselves to become better. The quality teachers do that; they constantly want to get better."

Student achievement was the next subject: "My teachers of quality assume that they are going to have, at the very least, average achievement (nine months of growth over a year's time of teaching). The excellent teacher takes the child who is deficient in some way—home, intelligence, socioeconomic status—and helps that child grow more than the average achievement. If you can take that child and have him grow the same way as an average learner, you have done an exemplary job, for the growth for that child is far greater than the average child.

As we ended the interview, I remained riveted in my seat: this superintendent obviously knew the teachers in the district well. I asked for any parting comments. "They used to say teachers were born; you don't make teachers. This district is blessed with having the finances to provide for our teachers and the finances to provide for our administrative staff to grow. It would be much more challenging as a superintendent to be in a community that did not value that or could not afford that. Like your children, you want to be able to give them every

opportunity; by the luck of the draw, we have been able to do that in this district. And, again by the luck of the draw, some districts are unable to give these opportunities. And that is where the state must do something to ensure equity.”

And so the interviews with the superintendents were complete. I was quiet as I drove home and thought of the mirror opposites these two school districts represented: those that had much in the way of resources and those that did not; students who came to the table hungry to learn and those who came to the table hungry. The skater and the abyss; two very reflective and very visual images. I remember a quote by Lynne Truss: “This is an age of social autism in which people just can’t see the value of imagining their impact on others” (*Town and Country*, November 2005, p. 222). Social autism is not a part of these two superintendents’ visions; instead, they know the value of a teacher’s impact and they seek to adorn their schools with the type of person who can be the skater and fill the emotional abyss.



## E. A Pretty Grey Dress and Matching Shoes

*Before the Palmer method  
Taught me how  
To write my name,  
I'd learned to read love  
In the salesman's face.*

*And so  
Without the aid of Dick and Jane,  
By myself I've come  
Unadorned and plain  
To offer you without condition  
A life just past  
And just beginning.*

“School” in *With Love*, Rod McKuen (1969), p. 3

There is a sense of passionate yearning permeating from the schoolhouse doorway. Ushered into a very small alcove in which I was cordially given a metal folding chair to sit upon, I could feel the urgency and the kindness of the people handling the newest crisis. There were not enough teachers in the building; the secretary was in the process of securing coverage when a young male teacher entered, was given a sheet of paper, and told to report to a certain room. Smiling, he left the office but not before he said, “I was only looking for a cup of coffee. Next time I’ll go to Starbucks.” Everyone chuckled.

Mrs. A entered first and led me to a conference room down the hall from the main office. Thirty-five years in teaching, this woman was polished, professionally dressed, and smiling. She had held positions as a teacher of grades 1, 2, 3, 4, and middle school. She was a previous union president and was currently the community liaison. Middle-aged and nicely groomed, she had smiling eyes as she told me her “passion was math.” She proudly relayed a story of a grandma who had come in to visit her last week to tell Mrs. A about her grandson who had just moved to another district. When asked by his new teacher why he was doing remarkably well in math in

his new school, the grandson replied, “You should see Mrs. A. She expects you to be ready and I am!”

What did teacher quality mean to Mrs. A? “Teacher quality is not going into the classroom and getting a book and teaching. A teacher of quality uses humor to communicate to students that she is available to them; is it making one’s self available to the community, to the administration, to the parents. It is being up front with people and knowing how to communicate with everyone involved in the education of the child. Students want teachers who are fair, sincere, honest, and positive. They must have a respectful tone when speaking with students and parents.”

Excellence in teaching “brings all of the aspects of teacher quality to the table. It is a focus on the child, the individual child. Excellence has a burning desire to learn and instill a desire in children to learn so that they cannot wait to explore the subject you have just introduced.” Mrs. A continued, “Excellence is not an award; it is the respect you receive from the students you teach. Teacher quality and excellence look like a smile, look like a comfort, look like the look that says, ‘My-mother-gives-me-that-same-look-sometimes-at-home-Ok-I’ll-stop’ kind of look. It looks like picking up a phone and saying, ‘I am calling to tell you how wonderfully your child did today. You should be happy what your child accomplished today.’” Finally, “Excellence and teacher quality are when the kids know you are excellent and they know the actions associated with excellence.”

We sat in silence a moment as Mrs. A thought about being identified by the superintendent as a teacher of quality. When asked which attributes of teacher quality she possessed, Mrs. A replied, “I have all of the above but you need more. Content knowledge is a given for a teacher of quality but it is there in a broad way. Students know you possess content

knowledge; you cannot fool them. I have been awarded the Teacher of the Year several times and the one attribute the students continually tell me is that I was always fair.” On a recent visit to the high school, Mrs. A was pulled into a classroom by a former student who told her, “Come into my math class. You are the only one who can tell me how to do math in those small words that I understand.”

For Mrs. A, there is a link between student achievement and teacher quality. “The desire is heightened in students to perform well for the teacher. The desire is heightened in students to attend school on a regular basis. This school has an attendance problem so it is like saying, ‘You are important to me, come here to school so I can teach you.’ When kids go home feeling, ‘I can’t wait to come back tomorrow,’ that’s achievement!” Because of this heightened feeling of importance and nurturing, the school had 100% participation on the PSSA last year.

“Teacher quality was instilled in me at an early stage in my career. My first principal had high expectations and was very demanding. You knew you had to perform well. For me, it is innate. Some things are not teachable and work ethic is not teachable. Some teachers expect to be respected but think they can act surly with the kids. Kids know that your expectations are innate and the students give what the teacher expects. I was raised with high expectation and to give to others. When I was young, my parents owned a business. I was taught to greet customers and learned how to be cordial at a very early age; I had to wait for things and work towards gaining material items. Younger teachers do not possess this trait; they are very egocentric and expect things to be given to them immediately.”

Mrs. A continued, “In this district, personnel in key capacities have high expectations and look toward you to perform your job with high expectations for your students. The inservices do not get you through the nitty gritty, everyday needs of a classroom teacher; however, the teachers

of quality know that someone cares about the nitty gritty portions of the job. Our superintendent is open to listen and values comments. He finds the way to make your suggestions realities and supports people with the resources they need for their ideas.”

“I have noted an interesting phenomenon that I have been watching over the years. Kids warm to you by how you dress in this school district. When I was a young teacher, I dressed for one of my first days in a pretty gray dress with matching shoes and nylons. The students respected that I took the time to dress for them. When kids don’t have a lot, they want to be like people who have more than they do. They appreciate teachers who take the time to dress nicely for them. It is a compliment to the students. Today, the teachers who have the most problems in the classroom with behavior are those who dress informally or who dress sloppily.” To this teacher of quality, dressing professionally is an important communication tool and classroom management tool.

As Mrs. A prepared to leave the room, she turned to me and said, “A teacher of quality is someone trained to do something they love; it is sharing a gift they want to share. It is knowing why you went into education and choosing education for the right reasons. You can’t choose teaching simply because you like kids and it is the only job you can get. It is loving kids and loving what you do every day for years and years. Teacher quality is not about the paycheck.” There is no doubt that this teacher has an absolute belief about herself.

## **F. Letters from Jail**

*Perhaps I should not have been a fisherman, he thought.  
But that was the thing that I was born for.  
The Old Man and the Sea, Hemingway (1952), p. 50.*

“When one has been born, raised, graduated from, and now employed by the same district for thirty-four years, you know that teaching is the one profession for which you were born.” Mrs. B was a bright breath of fresh air as she came into the room bringing energy and light with her. A leader in the school, Mrs. B had high expectations of herself when she was a child. Her drive was engrained in her at an early age and coupled with her personality, it has made her embrace high expectations for every child for whom she teaches. Committed to her career and always wanting to be a part of anything academic in the building, Mrs. B was one of the planners of the empowerment grant. “It is important for me to be part of things that will affect me.” She worked with the district to bring in the Direct Instruction Program, a program of scripted lessons that works well for their population. “I didn’t think I was going to like it. It disallows teacher creativity but a quality teacher knows how to interject his/her knowledge. Though it does not give you the freedom to change the lesson, I can make my point and change it to meet the needs of my kids.”

When Mrs. B began her teaching profession, she started as an elementary teacher teaching grades K, 2, 3, 1, 3 (for eighteen years); she is now in grade 4 where she has been for the past ten years. She held a stint as acting principal but requested to return to the classroom “to do what I do best.” Her parents still live in town and her brother owns a business here.

There was a seriousness about Mrs. B’s face as she began to reflect on the change in the district over the years. “This district has changed dramatically over the years; it used to be a

privileged district years ago with many wealthy business owners living in big houses in town.” However, with the financial change in the community came a social change in the schools. Where once there was a pride and set of high expectations by parents, there now exists a lack of respect for teachers and education in general. “I am a firm believer that all kids can learn but we are fighting an element that will never go away. Kind of scary. There is little to no respect for education in this community. This is a problem that we face everyday in this community.”

The cloud left her face and her smile returned as she began to discuss what teacher quality was all about. Adjectives such as creative, flexible, devoted, compassionate, patient, time manager, and continual learner were used to describe the teacher of quality. “A teacher of quality has the ability to be a ‘stand-up--’ comedian, actor, parent, whatever. She has the ability to say the same thing ten different ways. Content knowledge is a given and is something that grows yearly and does not stop even after 34-years of teaching. The teacher of quality is a continual learner who seeks ways to continue their education either formally or informally.”

Excellence, on the other hand, is a refined and developed version of quality. “You know you have received excellence in teaching when you receive a letter from a former student who is sitting in a jail cell and writes, ‘Thanks. Unfortunately, I learned a little bit too late.’” For Mrs. B, receiving excellence awards is nothing more than a generic qualifier. “People who are not [teachers] say, ‘Oh that is teacher quality.’”

Teaching in a resource-poor school has its challenges but students remain the same. “Kids are kids not matter what the socioeconomic status is. My kids may be poor in economics, but as ten-years old, they have the same needs and wants as any ten-year old. It would not be easy for a resource-rich school teacher to teach in a resource-poor school. Where children have the home stress that learning is important, it is easier. I think that we [teachers in this school]

would have problems because our day here is spent tending to emotional needs. Planning would be difficult and we would underplan. I think the lessons just flow in another school and here you are interrupted constantly with off-task behaviors; so if you don't have a good discipline program, your whole day could be spent dealing with discipline."

The conversation became more philosophical. "All students can learn. That is a given. But, excellence and teacher quality is saying the same thing ten different ways; if the student can't learn it one way, the teacher better be prepared to show it ten other ways. Differentiation is a gift; it can be shared but you must have the gift of learning it. You must be a patient person to differentiate. Differentiation demonstrates one's tolerance level." I had never heard differentiation synonymously used with tolerance; but the analogy presented a clearer picture. "The philosophy in this district has not changed over 35 years; the economics have but the philosophy has stayed the course. We have a much deeper and firmer commitment to seeing all kids learn." The district does much in the way of cultivating teacher quality through inservice programs. "I know they try to do their best to bring in the best that is out there. Each year, they do a survey to find out where we are. They conduct a needs assessment and work with the union to bring in quality inservice. Sometimes it is meaning 'full' and sometimes it is meaning 'less.'"

Student achievement is another issue Mrs. B was passionate about. "High quality teaching is tied to high quality learning for both teacher and students. If you don't have a high quality teacher, the kids are not going to get high quality learning. They may achieve but will they achieve like the next student who has the high quality teacher?" In speaking about state testing and its link with teacher quality, Mrs. B said, "A test does not measure the quality of a teacher. Because if I haven't designed the test to meet the way I teach, how can they be relative? It is not fair that a board of people who have never been in my classroom design a test for me."

The district has continued to work on the curriculum and has yet to make every subject area match the standards. However, the school district works with teachers to cultivate teacher quality. For example, there is a great deal of mutual respect between teacher and administrators throughout the district. Since all levels are housed in one building, this teacher gets a chance to follow her students' progress by literally going up the steps, which she often does.

With a twinkle in her eye, Mrs. B stood up and said, "Teacher quality is instilled in you. The kids who come to me are definitely a product of their parents. When I was a child, my parents had high expectations of me as a child. The passion I have was given to me through my parents not through my career. I am committed to my career for to be a teacher is to be a learner. If you aren't willing to be a learner, then you are not ready to be a teacher." And with that parting comment, Mrs. B excitedly took me on a tour of the building.

I was unprepared for the emotional rush I experienced as I walked the halls with Mrs. B. The long hallways were neat; there was no litter on the floors. The brightly painted walls had handprints stenciled high at the ceiling mark. Pawprints had been imprinted on the floors. The walls were "in transition" from one seasonal decoration to another. In each classroom we entered, every single K-4<sup>th</sup> grader was busily working. Some were making maps, some were reading sight words, others making Christmas trees and decorating them with their newly learned printed names. There was no chaos, no screaming out, no behavior issues. Students were in the progress of learning – reading, writing, arithmetic – and they were actively engaged and working diligently.

I was completely taken aback by the students' emotional hunger as they came to the front of the room and hugged me upon my introduction to them. Students greeted me by name and proudly brought me their work, almost seeking my approval. In one classroom they were



making family trees; one little girl shared the names of every single sibling, aunt, cousin, and grandparent in her household. No one directed them to do this; it was almost as if this were the most natural of things to do. Mrs. B's words came back to me: kids are kids and a ten-year old's needs and desires are the same no matter how much money they have.

During my visit, I was also surprised to find the superintendent walking around the school, visiting classrooms and greeting students and teachers by name. The warmth and genuine interest in their academic and personal well being reminded me of what is lost in large school systems.

Each classroom I entered was colorful and brightly decorated. One room, which had no windows and was originally a storage room, had two self-made windows complete with colorful blinds and curtains and a fireplace with a mantel between them. The art room was alive with creations, color, and designs. Hallways that had completed their transition decorations held student-made work. There was a pride in this elementary building that transpired amongst teachers, aides, administrators, and students. Every person we met was anxious to have me visit his/her classroom or share a story.

I had expected austerity, but it was not present. I had expected apathy; instead I received sensitivity. Warmth exuded from the rooms both child-like and adult-like. Here were educators who had to meet the most basic of human needs before book learning could begin. Hunger, safety concerns, and love—not to be confused with acceptance—are the essential and primary concerns in this school. Students do not come ready to learn, they come ready to be fed.

One striking oddity that was an immediate reminder of the resource poorness of the district was the restroom situation. For nearly 350 elementary students, there was one decrepit-looking restroom that held three working commodes and two rust-colored sinks. Just thinking

about the logistics of parading a classroom of 350 little ones to the bathroom...why this could take an entire morning to accomplish. How does teaching quality interplay with this most basic need?

Finally, I was the recipient of a gift this day; one so precious that I will ever be reminded of its richness. The friendliness of the staff – from secretary to custodian to support teachers to classroom teachers to principal to superintendent – was exemplary. The cleanliness of the building was pristine; the engagement of the children was on task. Here was a school in which everyone was climbing toward excellence while maneuvering the many obstacles along the way.

## **G. Lifetime Memories**

*How true it is that words are but vague shadows of the volumes we mean. Little audible links they are, chaining together great inaudible feelings and purpose.*  
*Sister Carrie, Theodore Dreiser, (1900), p. 9*

Putting into words one's life work is never easy; using an analogy, a simile, the metaphor gives a listener tangible documentation of the speaker's feelings. When I spoke with Mr. C, his articulation and precise descriptors left me wanting to hear more. Here was a man who not only knew his craft well, just as the superintendent had pointed out, but could articulate it in such a way as to chain together "great inaudible feelings and purpose." Mr. C has been with this district all of his 28 years and all but one year serving as middle school social studies teacher. He has received numerous awards for excellence not only in his content area but also due to his pedagogical skills. In receiving one of his excellence awards, Mr. C was noted for his ability to organize, plan, and articulate so as to give students lifetime memories of his classroom. Mr. C attends countless graduation parties, has presided over former students' weddings, and traveled all over the world visiting adults he once taught as middle school students. This man had much to be proud of and much to share. Yet, he was personable, humble, and professional. Dressed in a white, starched shirt and tie, Mr. C easily made eye contact and made me feel at ease. And very quickly, the interview became a venue for Mr. C to teach me about teacher quality.

Articulation and content knowledge are the most important elements of teacher quality. Couple those with the ability to establish a positive rapport with students, parents, and staff members and you have a recipe for success. The teacher of quality knows how to plan and organize and can easily see the big picture and plan accordingly.

A teacher of excellence must make connections with students with a high content knowledge base a given. “I would feel a sense of personal disappointment and lack of satisfaction if I did not rise to the challenge and have the sense of accomplishment in the classroom.” Does that mean that it is intrinsic? “Personality plays a role. Your own personal learning style plays a role. There is something intrinsic to that. If you are a passive learner, I am not sure if you have the need to get students involved in group work or role play. Sometimes you don’t even think about group work. For me, it has been going outside the box and becoming a different person in the school than I am even in my personal life. To a large degree, teaching is acting. Not that it is fake, but it is something I have acquired over 28 years. Moving around the classroom, using my facial expressions, my hands, you learn as part of the craft that this will get students’ attention.”

“To be a teacher of quality means to be a teacher with confidence. I don’t regard myself as an outgoing person but I can get the job done in the classroom and I can get the job done well. And I have the confidence to invite people into my classroom. I get so excited when the administrators come in, when the university students come in, when schools visit. Confidence not cockiness; they are different.”

When I had spoken with the superintendent, I told Mr. C, he was the first person identified as a teacher of quality in the district. What attributes do you possess that gives you this label? “I am not as great a risk taker as other teachers. Some are willing to go out on a limb. I am much more cautious; I question whether they are faddish or whether they will really get the job done. I think, too, incorporation of technology, I don’t do that as much as the others. It is not second nature to me as it is to younger teachers.”

How does one personally cultivate teacher quality? “I am a continuing student. I believe that being a graduate student forever makes me a better teacher. It makes me better in my content area, gets me excited, energizes me, excites me, keeps the passion alive. In terms of articulation, it helps me there. I have to keep on writing. My first degree was in 1982—how could I be articulate if I don’t write? I know what students have to deal with when they have to give a presentation, do a bibliography, write a thesis statement.”

Teacher quality is reflected in how you were taught teaching. “Madeline Hunter was wonderful. I learned so much because of the structure her model provided. And Harry Wong, too. They have both made a real impact on my teaching.”

How does the school district cultivate teacher quality in you? “Being in a school district where teaching is modeled for the staff and is highly valued makes teacher quality a preciously sought commodity. From the public relations director who gets the message out about what is really going on in the classroom to the administrators who model what they want. The attitude of the school district makes such a difference. We are encouraged by our administrators through their enthusiasm; we don’t have cautious administrators. They ask, ‘How can we help?’ or ‘Did you consider this?’ Administrators don’t burst our bubble but assist with details and encourage.”

“The school’s philosophy of teacher quality is that there has to be this attitude of sound educational practice. This is a conservative school district politically; we did not jump on the bandwagon of a lot of fads such as block scheduling or open classroom. Administrators knew what was sound and what was not sound. They stayed the course in what they believed in and were willing to try things only when they had been proven effective.”

Mr. C ended the interview with his thoughts on professional growth. “Things that promote teacher quality in this school is our relationship with the university. This partnership

keeps us on our toes, keeps us asking ourselves questions about why we do what we do in the classroom. It gives us energy from the young people in the university. If you want greater teacher quality, there has to be a much better relationship between school districts and universities.”

As Mr. C left the room, I wondered: are we looking for the same definition for teacher quality in both higher and lower socioeconomic districts? Is it about how the teacher approaches the children that is more important? Or are they one and the same? As gracefully as he entered, Mr. C emerged into the hallway and was immediately slapped on the back by students laughing with him and sharing a new story. Mr. C soon had a crowd of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders around him, odd behavior for middle school students so early in the morning; a fitting tribute to a man who is well liked and well respected.

## H. The Forever Student

*When we can say 'please' because we need our students and 'thank you' because we are genuinely grateful for them, obstacles to community will begin to fall away, teachers and students will meet at new depths of mutuality and meaning, and learning will happen for everyone in surprising and life-giving ways.*

*The Courage to Teach, Parker J. Palmer (1998), p. 140*

“I am the forever student,” says Ms. D as she smiles broadly. Sitting here in her classroom, I have a sense of comfort and structure. The classroom is neatly decorated with student work hanging neatly in a manner that speaks of her *raison de etre*. “For me, school was work, friends, social. I loved every aspect about school as a younger student. I was an overachiever and driven to do well. When I was little, there was a strike in my district. I organized a classroom in my backyard and taught all of my friends.”

As she concluded this sentence, one of Ms. D’s students entered the classroom; with love shining from her eyes, she asked him to “please wait in the hallway for me.” The interview continued with me now the recipient of those smiling eyes.

This forever student discussed a litany of university schooling. She attained an elementary degree and student-taught in a neighboring district with two mentors who were master teachers. “These two educators cemented me on the path of working hard and knowing you had to put everything into it. They constantly questioned me, gave me immediate feedback, and left notes for me in my backpack. If I had been less than ambitious, I think they would have helped me turn the corner. It was their interest that could have turned anyone around. For me, it just reaffirmed what I wanted to do.” For the past 18 years, what Ms. D has wanted to do is to teach in this school district. She has taught grades 4, 5, and 3 respectively. She has a Master of Arts degree, is reading and language arts certified, and became a reading specialist. “Then,

people saw potential in me and I enrolled in the elementary principal program for certification. Being the ‘forever student’ separates those who see this as a job and those who are lifelong learners.”

Just a few months ago, Ms. D received her National Board Certification. “Of all the things I have done so far, this process had the least to do with theory and the most to do with practicality; it was the most grueling thing I have done so far. I truly believe that what sets apart your outstanding teachers from your effective teachers is they are always ‘looking.’ The outstanding teacher is always looking for something else: a better way to teach, to differentiate, to reach a child in a different way.”

What is a quality teacher? “A quality teacher is open to going to others and not threatened to ask for help. She recognizes the talents and strengths of other people and uses them to the best ability to affect the team. It is bigger than you, and the quality teacher recognizes this.” Quality teachers must possess content knowledge and have a solid understanding of what they are teaching, according to Ms. D. “You can have the best relationship with your students, but you have to know what you are teaching. You have to know where the landmines will be; you can almost predict what might give kids trouble and [you] build your instruction around that so you can sidestep the landmine.”

A teacher of quality possesses certain elements: good communication skills, interpersonal skills, and enough self-esteem to admit when they have made a mistake. A teacher of excellence adjusts what s/he does on a moment-by-moment basis and sees progress, not perfection, but progress for each and every student. “Excellence is reaching each one of them in that lesson without them knowing you are doing anything different for them as compared with



someone else. Excellence is having that rapport and that trust in them that they're going to learn and you believe they are going to learn and you get them to believe that they are going to learn."

Ms. D added, "Excellence transcends test scores; a test score does not completely measure the success a child may have in school that day. It is a measure and an accepted part of what we have to do but it is richer than that. Excellence is an attitude, a confidence."

Which attributes do you possess? "I am a collaborator, a team player; this is the heart of who I am. I involve the parents; they know what is going on and they know the expectations as do the kids. I have adaptability and flexibility and I recognized early on that I had the ability to reach students in a compassionate way. My empathy has been built on the work I do with my niece who has multiple disabilities." Because of this relative, Ms. D has been able to create a classroom in which "you would not be able to discern who has a learning disability and who does not."

How did you develop teacher quality attributes? "I was not afraid to take the challenge. When somebody said, 'You are ready to take the challenge,' I would go home and think, 'I am ready.' For me, it is innate; it starts with your family background and the values your family instills in you. Education was important to my family. My generation was the first generation to go to college."

We then began a discussion of the link between student achievement and teacher quality. "Some kids will learn in spite of you. Student achievement and teacher quality go hand in hand. In any classroom, a portion of the room will not be intrinsically motivated to succeed. You have to build on that and give support to motivate these kids. If you have a teacher who does not interact, the kids will learn something but they are going to miss something they could have gotten out of the experience. With student achievement, the kids are going to give the teacher of

quality exactly what she expects of them. And if you have no expectations of them, they are going to spit that back at you.”

How does the school district cultivate teacher quality? “I have had phenomenal mentors. My first mentor had a really good work ethic. Then, I joined organizations, read journals, and took classes. Soon, the district began asking me to be on committees. They recognized a potential and stroked it. Our district starts small and then sends people to workshops and lets them be the leader when they come back to share with the staff.” On a personal note, Ms. D confided, “Sometimes you fall into your comfort zone and things are going really well and, whether you are a teacher or a student, you need outside observers to say, ‘Yep, you are doing really well, but you need to look elsewhere.’ The first time I applied for National Board Certification, I did not make it. People said, ‘You? You didn’t make it?’ And I thought, ‘Well, I have three shots at this. Let’s try it again.’”

At a recent awards ceremony, Ms. D had a chance to be with twelve other contenders for the grand prize. There was a common denominator with all twelve of the candidates: there was a passion for teaching and a belief that they could make a difference in a child’s life. “Everyone loved their kids; the condition in which you teach the kids is irrelevant.”

Quite prophetic.

Children began arriving to the classroom in droves; Ms. D stood and turned to her students. Within a split second, she was no longer the center of attention but the one who centered attention on others. I watched as students unpacked their belongings and quickly ran to Ms. D to share a treasured artwork or a tirelessly-completed homework artifact. Reciprocal love was extended into the realism of desk and chair, pencil and paper, teacher and student. These were lucky children, indeed.

## **I. Ambiance & MVPs**

*I thought if I wrote a book that I would have to examine the quality in the human spirit that continues to rise despite the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.*  
*A Song Flung Up to Heaven, Maya Angelou (2002), p. 210*

Coming into a central office building, one never knows what to expect. In this case, I was guided to the lower floor or “basement” as this administrator fondly called it. Her office was neatly situated in a corner setting; organized, clean, and filled with books, it looked like a place where one could get lost in reading and forget the sun set.

Ms. E had been chosen to be interviewed because the superintendent mentioned her vast years of experience here in the district as an educator and here in the community as a born and bred member. Smiling broadly, she easily welcomed me in her abode; I was quickly taken off guard by her infectious laughter and sparkling eyes, wanting to drink in all she had to say about the community, the district, the learning. However, it was her earnestness that I found most endearing; the sincerity with which she approached the subject of teacher quality had me mesmerized. The interview began before I knew a question had been asked. She quickly took the helm and began a jaunt down memory lane with tales of roads not taken and those that had been deeply worn.

“Memory itself is emotional. There is a connection there that we don’t look at. You have to make a personal connection with kids. If I could pick a teacher and only could have one attribute, I always asked them, ‘Why did you pick teaching?’ ‘Cause they had to love kids for they are not all alike and they don’t all act the same. This is more important than content knowledge. Learning is efficient – how do you get them to learn it all ‘cause there is so much to learn. So, it is all about learning efficiently. I don’t really need to go to school to learn; I could

find someone that could share that learning with me. But it is the dialoguing in the class. These visions of the teaching world include the perceptions of the administrator; the person who supervises and is held accountable for the raising of student achievement. This is the person who sets the tone in the building, who builds consensus, climate, and raises expectations. This is the person who is hated, loved, looked to for solutions, and discussed in the teachers' room. The administrator of the building is where the buck stops."

For this central office administrator, learning is the heart of professional growth. Having held the title of classroom teacher in three different elementary schools, this former principal of two different schools has worked with a myriad of teachers, staffs, and teaching colleagues. "I was born and raised in this community. I graduated from this high school, taught here, and then was building principal. I grew a lot, into being a principal; I was union president and had just been elected as county education association president when I was made elementary principal. I got my Masters in Education, my principal's certification, and now am working toward technology certification." For this administrator, teacher quality is something "you feel as soon as you walk in the room. There is an ambiance in the classroom. You experience, see, and feel the ambiance in the room. The learning is genuine and alive; there is an emotional part of learning that you cannot measure. For example, there are rooms you walk in and are immediately uncomfortable; ramrod still in appearance, unbending, the teachers are too serious and their eyes are shifting and worrying about what the visitor is thinking, They are focusing on the behavior of the kids and not the engagement of the kids. They do not exhibit self-confidence of who they are."

"A quality teacher does not care who walks in or when. They demonstrate an air of confidence. You don't need to control the kids when you are confident at what you are doing. A

teacher of quality possesses respect, knows the subject matter and the basics of teaching. They are confident in their content area. They are not afraid to say, 'I don't know. Gee, what do you think? Let's look that up.' The quality teacher has a passion for what they do and will go to all ends to meet that passion. Sometimes, they will skirt the bureaucracy to get what they want. They may not want to wait for the resources the school district can or can't provide. They buy it on their own or they will nag the principal until they get what they need. Then, they will beg forgiveness!"

The vivacious smile winked at me from the corners of her eyes. This was no ordinary individual; this was an educator who had seen much and had much with which to compare quality and excellence. "A quality teacher is good at some things; a teacher of excellence can do it all. Like the MVP, the most valuable player athlete, they can run down the court, pass it, dunk it, show leadership with the team. A teacher of excellence rises above everyone else. You know, you can work your brains out and not be a teacher of excellence."

School districts cultivate teacher quality in different ways, and yet, this district works toward a fair and equitable system for everyone involved in educating a child. "When I was first hired in this district in the 70s, there was a numeric rating of satisfactory, needs improvement, and unsatisfactory. I stayed here because there was a high level of accountability. From the first superintendent I worked under—and I worked under five—they were very conscientious in who was hired and knew exactly what kind of teacher they wanted here." The administrator stopped for a moment and then added, "First there was a vision; then, they hired the best. Next, the building principal set the tone in the building for the building is only as strong as its leader. Finally, there are the community expectations. When people first moved to this district in the 50s, it was a growing community; lots of dirt roads and undeveloped lands. My parents moved

here then when there were only three houses on a dirt, gravel road. I rode to kindergarten on a bus with 12<sup>th</sup> graders. There was never even an issue.” She digressed, “Can you imagine that now? Kindergartners on a bus with 12<sup>th</sup> graders? My mother didn’t visit the school. She did not even think about it. She did not even know who the teachers were.” As Ms. E revisited her roots, she continued, “Now, the community demands teacher quality and more. The parents drive their schools to do even more. Years ago, the school district made the rules and the kids were told by their parents to go to school, do your job, and come home. Now, we have families with less people in each home but demanding high quality. Affluence plays a role in high expectations for teacher quality. The schools changed when affluence entered.”

Somehow, during the interview, a nostalgia rang through; a yearning for years past. The moment passed and a list of teacher quality attributes was mentioned: self-confidence, passion, love for kids, differentiation skills, ability to go above and beyond for all kids, and the knowledge about each and every one of their students. Ms. E felt that this was where the heart of teaching effervesced; this was where the line was drawn between good and great. In this district, it was all about possessing a child-centered knowledge base, the result of which was high achievement. Ms. E then added the piece de resistance; here was the pinnacle of perception and reality in one: “The perception is that the teachers of quality and excellence should be scoring the best, but I don’t think that is true. These are ‘people teachers’ and they will forgive the learning as long as the kids try. These types of teachers give kids a zest for learning. Teachers of quality and teachers of excellence are often willing and able to request the children who are struggling the most. Those ‘strugglers’ are often not the best test takers. Student achievement is not relegated to pencil and paper tests but are [sic] merely another measure. It is merely a gauge of what they are doing. How do you measure the student who is struggling but is so excited to

tell you about what they are doing? You can get content anywhere in today's world. You cannot get heart."

And that is where I left mine.

## **J. The Sparkle Effect**

*I myself have accomplished nothing of excellence except a remarkable and, to some of my friends, unaccountable expertness in hitting empty ginger ale bottles with small rocks at a distance of thirty paces.*

“Preface to a Life,” James Thurber in *Thurber* (1996), p. 137

Unhampered by her success at being named a teacher of quality, Ms. F had accomplished much in the road toward excellence and had a remarkable way of portraying the unencumbered expert. Dressing for outside weather as the science outside project was underway, Ms. F came into the room looking like she was ready to do battle with the next platoon. It would not surprise me if she used empty ginger ale bottles as a model experiment to measure trajectory from a distance of thirty paces. Smiling, bouncy, and earthy, her eyes gleamed with an unshared joke as her mannerisms bespoke an experience beyond what one would expect. Here was a woman who knew herself, accepted herself, and cared not how others perceived her. She was immediately charming and unwittingly honest. Twenty-seven years young in teaching, she remarked how much she still “absolutely, positively” loved what she did. She held a Master’s Degree in geosciences and had taught grades 6, 7, 8 for nineteen years. During her tenure at the middle school level, Ms. F received a grant to study with NASA under Dr. Sally Ride, sought professional development opportunities with local universities, and was currently an adjunct university professor, hosting her graduate students in her classroom upstairs in this middle school.

As a child, Ms. F developed self-confidence at an early age. “I always had a clear vision of what I wanted to do at a very young age. I was very, very fortunate that I had a great support system early in my youth. So, I took opportunities as they came. I would stand up for what I believed in even when people were uncomfortable with this. I would find like people who would



help me achieve my vision. I had an inner tenacity, inner determination. My work ethic was extremely cultivated in my family. My grandparents were immigrants; my grandma could not read and yet she was a brilliant woman and she had the ability to pull people together. Whenever I achieved something, she was the first one to encourage me. When I was in first grade, I remember, my teacher made me stand up in front of 500 people and give a speech. I didn't know any better. This same teacher challenged me in many ways and I always wanted to do more to make her pleased with me."

"The traits for a teacher of quality are simple. I look for what I call the 'sparkle quality.' When you talk to a person who absolutely loves what they do, their eyes sparkle, they get excited about what they are going to do with students. These teachers have a clear vision and believe in kids. There is an internal motivation, too. If something doesn't work, they figure out why. They are motivated not by external means but by always asking, 'What if...,' and always reflecting on what you've done and transferring that to making lessons that are meaningful to kids." Ms. F continued with a sparkle in her own eyes, "The teacher of quality has the ability to be a kid: to think like a kid, to think about what they like to do, and to basically get to their level. It is a joy. People of quality absolutely find joy in what they do and that is transferred to their students. Their students love them because they know their teacher respects them, they love them, and their teacher will take them as far as they want to go."

"A teacher of quality always strives for excellence. That looks like pursuing learning and knowledge; helping their students love learning, problem solve. I think you can be a teacher of quality and always be on a pursuit for excellence. They have a total love for what they do and a passion for their content area. These educators have the ability to bring out the best in students

by bringing out the best in themselves. A teacher of excellence denotes that you are stepping up to the bar a little more.”

Silence permeated the room as Ms. F reflected on her most recent recognition – as a state finalist for Teacher of the Year. Spending time with the other eleven candidates, Ms. F found a common denominator amongst all of these nominated “excellent” educators. “We were so very different and came from such varying backgrounds but when you got down to the core, we were all the same. We were from different content areas and educational levels but we all had the same passion and we all possessed the ‘sparkle quality.’ There was an unmatched pride and enthusiasm about what we did for a living. They truly, truly are teachers down deep at the center core.” Were there soft attributes or personality traits that were common amongst the twelve? “No, there were some of us who had senses of humor and were basically off the wall. But, each person loved what they did. That was common across the board. There was a belief that their kids could do and could achieve.”

And then Ms. F added a most important caveat to her reflection. “You know, it did not matter the socioeconomic status of the school district. Some came from schools with lots of resources and some came from schools with little. It did not matter where you worked. There were people who worked in inner cities, from rural schools. The belief was that each student could achieve and did achieve. All had a clear vision and each person reached a different child in a different way. All were extremely organized and had a very clear vision of what they wanted to do, where they wanted to go, and how they wanted to achieve it.” Very purposefully, Ms. F added, “If you would take a look at the videos that each person submitted, you could see that each person, even though the personality type was different, would reach a different child. We all reach different children in different ways. That is not to say that one personality type should

be held higher than another personality type because all children learn differently and we each have our own style of teaching and that reaches children in different ways.”

Student achievement and teacher quality have a direct link, according to Ms. F. “Content knowledge is key but the work ethic—your standards—create the feeling tone in the room. The atmosphere in the successful classroom is one in which students feel free to take risks and accept challenges.” She then spoke of a retired colleague who was known to be tough but dearly respected. Here was an example of excellence. “There was no wiggle room; she was fair, treated students equally, but held high expectations. She taught kids how to problem solve not just how to solve problems. She created a discomfort that was the challenge of the content she taught. The kids knew that content was first in her room and the kids grew to respect and love her.”

Cultivating teacher quality in this school district came from holding consistently high expectations, hiring a central office staff that pursues current research on learning theories and technology, and appointing building principals who see the vision and verbalize the school’s direction in their professional goals for the school.

As part of Ms. F’s newest challenge, she had begun working with a local university to teach courses on site at her middle school, right in her own classroom. Graduate students work with the children both in and out of her classroom. She has also had numerous student teachers, she noted, some successes and some failures. “The graduate students I have this year can be broken into three categories. One category could be in a classroom today, no question. They love what they are doing, are reflective, and willing to take a chance. Another group, they have the heart, they believe they want to be a teacher but are not quite there yet. They are missing practice; the chance to work with kids, to actually plan lessons and stand up in front of kids and present it. Maybe that is learning by doing. This second group will probably get there; maybe a

teacher of quality or of excellence but that remains to be seen. But they have the raw materials to get there. And the third group, I think they seriously need to consider whether this is for them. Either personality wise they are too shy and would be eaten alive in the classroom or because they think they get three months off in the summer and they want a nine-to-three job and then they want to go home.”

The interview quickly ended as Ms. F knew the outdoors awaited her return. She sat for a moment and remarked, “This is a great study.” As she left the room, she turned with that sparkle in her eye and smiled.

I was left with the desire to pick gingerale cans off with small rocks at thirty paces.

## K. When Silence Interrupts the Traveler

*There was a road ran past our house  
Too lovely to explore.  
I asked my mother once—she said  
That if you followed where it led  
It brought you to the milk-man's door.  
(That's why I have not traveled more.)*

“The Unexplorer,” Edna St. Vincent Millay, in Milford’s,  
*The Collected Poetry*  
of Edna St. Vincent Millay, (1920), p. 59

Easy is sometimes made difficult when the traveler, weary from the straight and narrow, deviates not from the lovely and unique. My reveries continue to catch me off guard as I wonder how to cut and paste the teacher quality stories I have heard onto the research collage I have chosen to explore. No, I cannot say that I have explored for I have only just begun to listen into the hearts and words of people whose experiences in education would stock a teacher quality library. Trying desperately to keep narcissistic voyeurism tethered, I have grouped both rich and poor, old and young, veteran and neophytes’ words together. Is it not more important to grasp the essence of teacher quality from the educators who have so richly woven this tapestry of excellence than to link them with the economic conditions from which they derive? Would it be a disservice to draw lines of resource-rich and resource-poor school educators and categorize them based upon have and have nots? I want to travel more and their words have guided me; therefore, I have decided to review the unveiling elements of teacher quality and teacher excellence not as I had originally determined but as lately unfolded. The social construct of this study has begun to take a shape I had not foreseen; the mirror opposites echo parallel representations. Thus, I have taken the luxury of creating the story as it unfolds to me with the interviews relayed to the reader in the sequence in which I interviewed. Thus, you, the reader,

have glimpsed into what I heard as it unfolded to me not as I may have chosen to present it to you.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SUMMATION

*It often happened that when we thought we were experimenting on others we were really experimenting on ourselves.*

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde (1891), p. 68

#### A. Morse Code

In the reading and analyses of these retellings, I am reminded of old movies I used to watch with my mother on rainy Saturday afternoons. Our habit was to curl up on the couch in the den with one of the many crocheted blankets she had made, turn on the television, and eat dark chocolate while watching the romantic plights of war-torn America. I specifically recall how intrigued I was with the soldiers' efforts at sending Morse Coded messages to those abroad. The clicks and pauses, either long or short, flashed sounds of understandable urgency to those receiving it. There is an urgency in the messages these educators have shared with me: their plight is real and their long and short sounds underscore the need to develop equality in education for all students. The problem has less to do with resources than it has to do with expectation. It has more to do with the internal motivation of a teacher of quality than a policy definition of highly qualified. We are no longer experimenting on others; we are now experimenting on ourselves. The question is: how do we shape a definition of characteristics that may be innate, background-driven, and encumbered by environmental factors?

I began this treatise believing that there would be a difference amongst the definitions of teacher quality and its cultivation based upon the richness or poorness of the district. I felt that the pressure – or lack of – by the community at large would determine the level of expectancy in the district, the classroom, the teacher. Yet, the information did not play out. The drama did not unfold as I had expected. The literature is selling one thing; the reality is playing another. For

example, the January 2006 *Tribune-Review* newspaper states that almost 89% of classrooms in affluent districts are taught by highly qualified teachers with 81% in poorer districts. “Educators and parents say knowing the material is only part of the equation. Instilling classroom discipline, finding different ways to engage students and offering help after class is just as – if not more – important” (King, 2006). Phrases such as “research-based teaching strategies,” “collegial improvements,” “effective classroom management,” and “use of available technology” do little to supplement the original definition of *highly qualified*. Yet, the stories of the interviewed richly describe how a teacher of quality should look, act, and impress. Their words and experiences tell of a school district that not only envisions high standards, their expectations match. Danielson believes that student achievement is broken into the cycle of what we want, what we believe, and what we know in order to cultivate what we do (Danielson, 2002). For these teachers, the circle of learning is a continual cycle as is the economic condition in which they live.

These educators have given us a tapestry of what a quality teacher looks like: someone with high content knowledge who possesses the ability to differentiate and dialogue with students. In their eyes, quality attributes include: honesty, sincerity, professionalism, compassion, devotion, flexibility, humor, and patience. There is a confidence level that knows where the landmines are, when to seek support, and how to admit defeat. Vision plays a prominent role in that the quality teacher possesses perfect foresight with a self-reflective 20/20 hindsight that improves the next visual. They are excited about learning and joyous about what they do. They have the ability to be a kid, know a kid, and predict what a kid will do. Their internal motivation acquiesces to students. They create classrooms in which taking the challenge is the norm and making errors a celebration of learning something new. One participant in the



study remarked, “Differentiation demonstrates one’s tolerance level.” Is there more to this statement regarding the personal characteristic of a quality teacher? Perhaps, surveys need to be created that measure a person’s tolerance level to guide them toward teaching or into another professional career.

The *Wall Street Journal* article mentioned that schools need to look at the “one change that will cost the least and bring the best return” (see page 59). I have had a glimpse – and I mean a minute peering—into the world of the affluent and the poor. The faces change but the dynamics of the classroom do not. If we are discussing the best approach that will cost the least money, the answer is simple. Universities need to create a highly structured teacher preparation program that involves current practitioners in the curriculum design. The program needs to include diversity and tolerance training. There needs to be the highest of expectations set forth for those who “make the cut” and are “chosen” to student teach. Gone are the days where a simple tuition payment buys a prospective student teacher’s right to practice in the classroom. Student teaching should be held in the highest esteem, the golden egg of attainment.

However, stricter rules will mean that some universities will lose students and losing students means losing tuition monies. Creating support systems and remediation for those wanting to continue is another avenue of pursuit for university funds. Think of the notoriety that will soon follow a school’s successful birthing of talented teachers of quality. These houses of higher education will become much sought after. But, it takes time to create greatness and it takes courage to take a stand in the name of greatness. In this ever-changing world of immediate gratification, I am not sure how many university presidents are willing to take that challenge and be able to validate its worth to their board of directors. Yet, we must begin somewhere.

In the article from “A Community Action Guide to Teacher Quality” (see page 44), the definition of teacher quality included the “public perceptions that influence who teaches, where they teach, and what happens in the classroom.” We have come full circle in recognizing that the social construct of “public perception” is guiding how our children are being taught and by whom. Do we need to change the public’s perception about what is happening in the classroom? This addendum reminds me of my initial question: What if quality and excellence are developmental processes that are not based on tangible criteria but instead are characteristics enhanced by the environment and philosophies of those who hold the power (see page 3)? Is it not the public who pay the taxes that salary the teacher? We appear to be working toward a socially constructed variant that evolves with the culture in which it is bred.

Nonetheless, I do not want teacher quality attributes bandied about so as to fashion a faceless, hollow definition. Like Hemingway’s thoughts in *Farewell to Arms*, “I was always embarrassed by the words, sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain...Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers...” (pp. 184-185). The characteristics of a teacher of quality become abstractions without the face of the person who possesses them. As I interviewed, I looked into their faces, I heard their heart swell with pride and joy at the passion they possessed for teaching, for their content area, for their students. Educators perceive teacher quality in the same way as those identified as teachers of quality exhibit the attributes. The obscenity exists in the fact that credentials belie the purpose of highly qualified. And, highly qualified revolves around the passing of a state standardized test with the “standardization” varying from state to state. Reflect on this: “Research on teacher thinking has identified the fact that teachers are not explicitly concerned with student learning as they manage student

participation in classroom activities” (Fischler, 1999). A statement like this would enrage the teachers above who use data to prescribe and differentiate instruction for all of their students. They are explicitly concerned with students learning and student achievement. Exploration should be done on **teaching**, as asserted by the TIMSS report, not on **teachers**.

## B. The Link

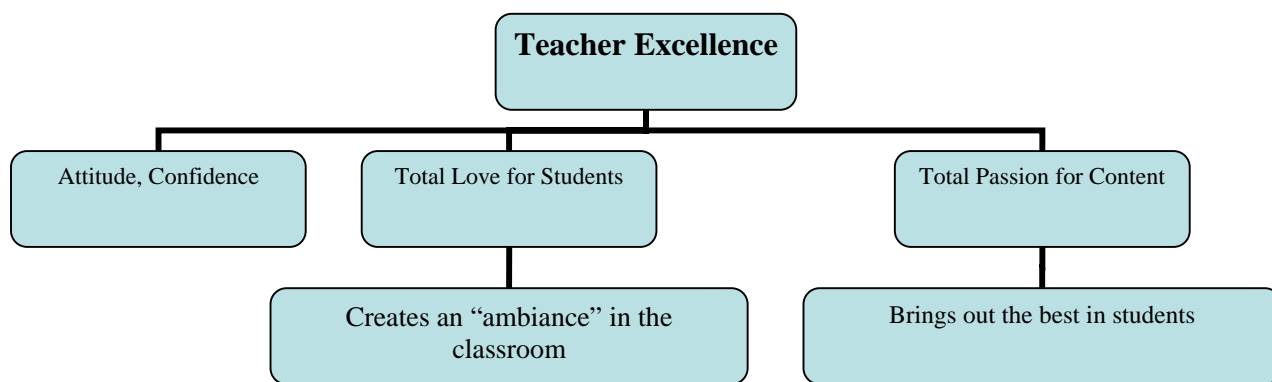
*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.*  
Lines from "Mending Wall," Robert Frost, (1949), p. 39

There is a perception about a wall that is socially constructed by 1) the people who build them, 2) those who erect them on their property, and 3) those who need to navigate around/over them. Those who build the walls do so with the intention of making them strong and long lasting. Those who erect them on their property often see them deteriorate as weather breaks down their chemical composition. Those who must navigate around/over them find them constraining, look for gaps to escape through, and are able to tell you without hesitation the plus and minuses of having the wall. They are the practitioners, the wall climbers, you might say, whose daily travels require them to scale the structure.

NCLB has created a wall that the frozen-ground-swell of opinion is beating against. The policy makers (wall builders) thought their structure was impenetrable. The individual states, whose property the wall has been erected upon, are watching as the weathering storm of praise, ridicule, and complaint is blasting the edges and deteriorating its chemical make up. The teachers, who must circumvent the wall and reach the children, are wearily trying to stay within the confines of the wall but having difficulty moving all children to its ledge. For them, "the spilling boulders in the sun" which will cut the walls height to size is the only way in which their students will overcome the wall's stature.

Yet, how does the social construction of reality interplay with the terms quality and excellence? To be sure, quality and excellence have been identified by both resource-rich and resource-poor districts as attainable and special elements. Had I exchanged the socioeconomic

factors for the superintendents’ responses on quality and excellence, you, the reader, would never have been able to tell which school was rich and which was not. The difference, however, was in the reality of the types of learners entering the school system. For the superintendent with little resources, his comments centered on the diversity training his teachers must have in order to begin the learning and then sustain it at an even rate. For him, having a teacher schooled in diversity training is more important than one who can tier lesson plans. Yet, tiering lesson plans and differentiating the lesson are more apt to increase learning but without complete knowledge of how to reach children of the resource-poor school, neither will work.



**Figure 1: Identified Teacher of Excellence Attributes**

When I spoke with the teachers, their perception of teacher quality and teacher excellence was one and the same. They all believed that the teacher of quality must be able to read children and know how to reach them. Regardless of whether they came from affluence or mediocrity, their plights were the same, for teachers are in the trenches, dealing with the human element. It is not a piece of paper, a research study, a graph, or an economic chart; these educators are

dealing with the same types of issues at different levels everyday. These teachers and administrators identified teacher excellence as a confidence, attitude, and passion for being with and reaching students. A teacher of excellence creates an ambiance in the classroom that brings out the best in all of the students (refer to Figure 1).

No Child Left Behind has shaped a definition of teacher quality by mandating that teachers pass a state licensure test in their content area. The literature vacillated on whether state-created tests were measuring the same elements, when, in effect, they were not, which leads to the conclusion that we have fifty states with teachers who have been deemed *highly qualified* and nary a commonality that can be made the expectation. The perception appears to be that NCLB's idea to ensure that all students have equal access to teaching quality is a *highly qualified* goal. The reality is that all students do not. I am haunted by the conclusions of Rivers and Sanders in the 2002 TVAAS report: The effect of the teacher far outshadows classroom variables. For each of the teachers I interviewed, they knew their effect on students and used it to promote high expectations of both students and selves. But, what of the effect of those teachers who do not possess high expectations for their students?

Student achievement links with teacher quality attributes are more easily discernable. To begin with, Sanders, Rivers, and Darling-Hammond have made a significant link between student achievement and teacher quality. Research studies, like those categorized in the literature review, document the loss of learning for students who have had inadequate teachers. For years to come, the effect of *highly unqualified* is felt. And yet, in the schools where performance is less than proficient, where diversity is the norm and attendance a struggle, meeting adequate yearly progress is as problematic as finding the human resources to teach their students. Where do we find quality teachers to teach our resource poor schools (O'Shea, 2005)?

Is there a link between the quality found in the resource-rich schools and the quality found in the research-poor schools?

Coleman and Jencks stated the link between learning and environment; learning and socioeconomics. The research-poor school of my study affirmed this claim. Kindergarten students were entering two chronological years behind in reading/vocabulary acquisition. The characteristics of the entering children where the economics is poor and the diversity great have been seen to be a powerful element in this study. On the other hand, the resource-rich students enter with global experiences that often include travel to other countries, reading before entering kindergarten, and expectations from the adult community consistent with NCLB's standards.

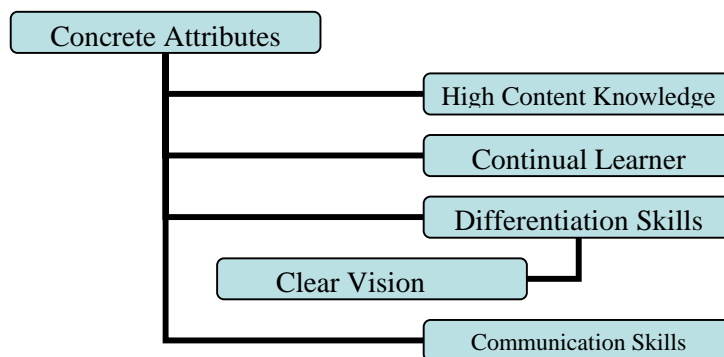
Barbara J. Kiviat (2000) discusses Coleman's controversial association of learning equality with student achievement:

Equality of opportunity, for instance, was traditionally taken to mean equality of schools' resources, such as the number and quality of textbooks. Unlike his predecessors, who focused on the equality of what was going into the school system, Coleman evaluated the equality of what was coming out. He also examined student performance, for the first time using test scores as an indicator of equality (p. 3).

Thus, the issue of economic class remains. Dr. Ruby K. Payne (1996) has assembled a table that categorizes the *Hidden Rules of Economic Class* and describes how various elements are perceived by those in poverty, middle class, or wealth. According to this chart, those in poverty view education as valued but abstract; something less attainable. This class's driving force is survival, relationships, and entertainment ([www.ahaprocess.com](http://www.ahaprocess.com)). Schools are left vying for attention from a group of people who are in the reactive, survival mode.

So, if we cannot predetermine with what types of skills a child will enter school and we cannot instill the importance of education in children whose parents' lives center on collecting the month's rent, can administrators ensure that all teachers these students will be taught by will

be teachers of quality? Those interviewed use the hiring practice as a means to sort through those who have quality attributes and those who do not. As for their perception of teacher quality, administrators perceive teacher quality to be interwoven with high content knowledge, empathy, pedagogy skills, and dedication to individual students (refer to Figure 2). Each of the superintendents interviewed expected the teacher of quality to differentiate, know the students well, and give of their time. Their expectation was that the students would achieve at a rate commensurate with their peers. Apart from economic standings, their perceptions of quality teaching attributes were the same.

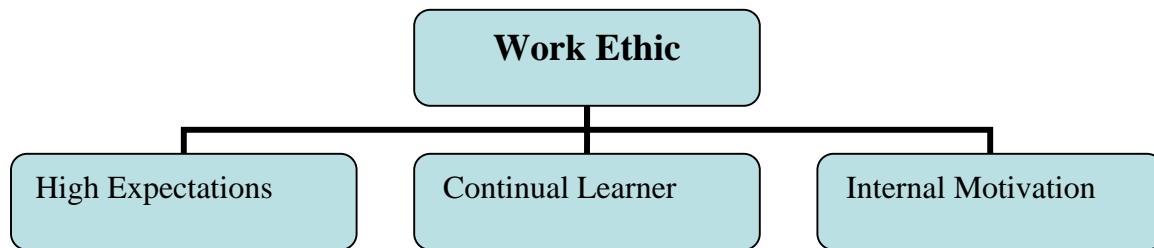


**Figure 2: Identified “Concrete” Teacher Quality Attributes**

Teachers named as quality teachers held those same expectations for themselves and others. They believed that all students could learn and each had developed a teaching style that met the needs of the population of students for whom they were held responsible. Respect and warmth were words heard often; communication and content knowledge--I was told by all--were “givens.”



Cultivating these quality teaching attributes in themselves came from an inner need to make a difference. By far the most important element I heard amongst every one of the teachers interviewed concerned work ethic (see Figure 3). Each of the teachers interviewed talked about how their desire to be successful, to work hard, to reach children regardless of the roadblocks encountered was born from a work ethic cultivated in them by their parents. There was an innate need to do well, to be self-motivated, to learn from failure, to promise themselves to do even more. Over and over I heard stories of how their parents had instilled a *drive* in them at an early age; the drive to be “someone” and to be accountable for what that “someone” did.

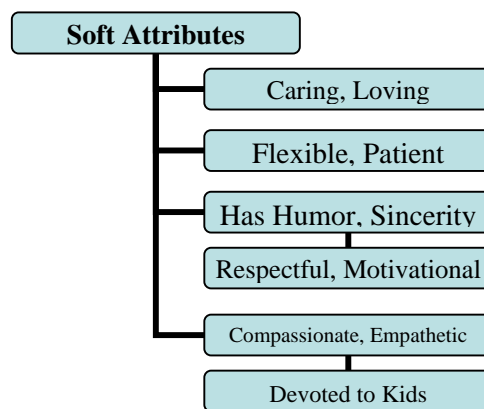


**Figure 3: Top Four Identified Teacher Quality Attributes by Administrators & Teachers**

The overarching theme with each of these self-motivated teachers was the result of this work ethic: they had nothing but high expectations for their students. And this is where the difference between a teacher and a teacher of quality exists: no matter the socioeconomic background, high expectation was the norm. As one teacher said, “I would feel a personal disappointment and lack of satisfaction if I did not rise to the challenge and have the sense of accomplishment in the classroom” (see page 90).

The so-called “soft” attributes normally associated with personality type may not be able to be measured distinctly against student achievement (refer to Figure 4). It may be true that “one personality type should not be held higher than another personality type because all children

learn differently and we each have our own style of teaching and that reaches children in different ways” (see page 104-105). We do not want to create a teacher of quality mannequin that clones personality characteristics in order to cookie cut our staff resources. However, as one superintendent mentioned how the “soft attributes are what most parents identify with first,” there is some claim that the caring, loving nature of a teacher (regardless of grade level; all students need to feel loved and accepted) extends into the “willingness to do whatever it takes to help students learn.” There is more to teaching than knowing one’s content area well. Yet, without content knowledge, there would be no learning, which takes us back to the treatise of having high expectations.



**Figure 4: Identified “Soft” Teacher Quality Attributes**

The cultivation of the teacher quality attributes by the school districts is more elusive than the superintendents were able to name (refer to Table 5). Even with resources, staff development was not at the level it should be. Without the resources, the schools were still conducting needs assessments and bringing in qualified experts using grant monies awarded to them from the “honor” of being on state warning lists. Here again, the teachers mentioned that staff development had a “full and less” meaning (refer to Table 5). Each teacher stated that it

was not in the staff development that the cultivation of quality attributes came: it was in the high expectation set forth by the district and the accountability that accompanied these beliefs.

**Table 5: Teacher Quality As Cultivated by School District/Internally**

<b>TQ Cultivated in School District</b>	<b>TQ Cultivated in Self</b>
Meaning – ful, -less inservice	High personal work ethic
High expectations	High self-expectations
High level of accountability	Strong family background: firm values
A place where TQ is highly valued	Family-instilled importance of education
A place where TQ is modeled by administrators	Passion for learning instilled by parents
A place where enthusiasm is the norm	Willingness to challenge self
A philosophy of sound, educational practices	Inner tenacity and determination
A place unhampered by educational fads	Continual learner

As I read through this synopsis, I am worried that “Horizons have torn years and people” (Michelle Heintz, 2000). We see our fate on the educational horizon. It is not a setting sun of golden color and rainbow hues. It is a dawn of frustration and inequity. The literature says, “The school culture rewards experience with the most elite assignments” (Owings & Kaplan, 2001, p. 64); these teachers tell me they request the most struggling of learners. The schools with resources have the power to choose what their goals will be. The schools without the resources have the power taken from them when their goals do not match those of the state. What is it that the one superintendent said? He is looking for teachers who have diversity training and know how to reach the unreachable on day one. His crisis is getting students to school and fed physically and emotionally; only then can learning begin. On the other hand, the affluent school district’s community expects quality from day one with little forgiveness for the learning curve. For a new teacher, this type of pressure can be daunting and inhibit professional

growth. Working towards excellence involves experimentation and failure. Both pressures appear to be unavoidable.

In a recent *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* front-page headline, “20 Schools To Close” (Smydo, 2005), Pittsburgh Public School Superintendent, Mark Roosevelt, determined a way to save decreasing revenues and increase sagging test scores by closing lower-performing schools. His decision “has not been driven by bricks and mortar. This has been driven by children’s educational needs” (*PPG*, Thursday, Nov., 10, 2005p. A-1). Concerned that the most disadvantaged students were being taught in the poorest and lowest performing schools, Mr. Roosevelt used a “school performance index” of 1-5 which rated schools based on their scholastic performance. “This was the first time student and school performance data, rather than building size, politics or other factors, have been the primary means of determining which schools to close” (p. A-8). Convincingly, Mr. Roosevelt proposed turning lowest performing schools into “accelerated learning academies” that would be run by contracted principals whose pay would be linked to performance. These schools would have longer days, rigorous curriculum, and “teaching practices proven effective in other urban school systems” (p. A-8).

There are constructive and innovative ways to deal with the inequality of the distribution of teaching quality. One way, as Mr. Roosevelt is finding, is to look at a school’s performance and increase teacher quality by using scientifically documented effective teaching practices that have been proven to work with the type of learners in the district. Hence, it is important to reiterate the opinion of Stigler and Hiebert (1999), authors of *The Teaching Gap*: “...a profession is created not by certificates and censures but by the existence of a substantive body of professional knowledge, as well as a mechanism for improving it, and by the genuine desire of

the profession's members to improve it" (p. 171). Mr. Roosevelt may have found the key to improving student achievement: increase the teacher quality.

## CHAPTER SIX

### REFLECTION

*We never know how high we are  
Till we are called to rise;  
And then, if we are true to plan,  
Our statures touch the skies.*

“Aspiration,” Emily Dickinson, (1890), p.25

#### **A. Humility & Aspiration**

We are all being asked to rise; to stand up straight and measure our worth against the stature of the sky. I am humbled by the intelligence and unadulterated generosity of the people with whom I have had the pleasure of interviewing. They are the stars shining brightly on the horizon. Their stature meets sky and tumults to the heavens. Their wings set a new child aflight each day in the classroom. For them, teaching quality is how they live their professional lives; teaching excellence is how their conscience guides them.

I began this discourse thinking that the social construction of words such as quality and excellence had more to do with how their meaning was perceived than in the reality of how they were performed. I was wrong. As Ogden Nash states, “Experience is a futile teacher” (1935). This experience has taught me that yes, we do have a socially constructed definition of quality and excellence, and, yes, it is manufactured by federal and state mandates. Nonetheless, those identified as having quality and excellence in teaching have cultivated these characteristics from a firm work ethic developed in their youth. They were each given gifts as children – an expectation to be nothing but the best – and they have fulfilled that expectation and now set it forth for each child with whom they come in contact.

Formulating a study that is based on personal reflections and perceptions can be both weakness and strength. Weakness because the perception may be the reality only of the person

interviewed; strength because it is through perception that the person interviewed creates and epitomizes the characteristic of teacher quality. In designing this study, I allowed the interview to speak for itself. In one way, the reality is what is; if the teacher identified as a teacher of quality believes that their school is highly academic when the PSSA scores identify the school as needing improvement, is it a weakness of the study or an affirmation of perception? The self-fulfilling prophecy notion could play strongly as both weakness and strength of the study.

Another point to ponder is how bias plays an integral role in interviewing. By stating my bias at the onset of the study, I had hope to, at the very least, regard them in the light in which they were held. However, I was unprepared for the number of biases that the interviewees held. They, too, had preconceived notions; first, of what I was asking; second, of what they thought I wanted to hear; and third, of how they wanted to respond. The research experience itself has taught me much about the importance of reflective listening skills; I had to remind myself of my guidance-counselor training skills. The experience continues to control my every waking moment and thought process. I think of things I want to say, ponder interviewee's responses during quiet moments, and continually analyze and rethink what has transpired. In some ways, I am working through my own perceptions and reality: I have become my own study.

Teacher quality is not a laundry list of characteristics that must be held by each recipient. However, there is a similarity of characteristics amongst each teacher of quality I interviewed. There is a strong work ethic regardless of the socioeconomic group that is being taught. All children need love, all children need to be accepted; in addition, all children need to have high expectations spelled out for them in language they can understand and with support systems they can utilize.

I mentioned earlier that it is not enough to ascribe definitions or labels to quality teaching attributes. The hiring process needs to be carefully reviewed and used as the impetus to begin cultivating quality. By letting prospective candidates know what we expect them to do in the classroom and then holding them accountable for it, our stature will grow. We must look toward the teaching and how to improve what is going on in the classroom. Sharing and modeling exemplary teaching practices does not focus on the individual teacher but focuses on the individual teaching. Resource-rich and resource-poor schools can learn from programs such as the Learning through Teaching in an After-School Pedagogical Laboratory (L-TAPL) (See *Educational Leadership* 62(6), March 2005). Our teachers must be given the opportunity to share their expertise and help improve the teaching skills of others.

It is true that achieving quality is intrinsically motivated. Having witnessed this first hand from those I encountered, I am in awe of their abilities to nurture and sustain excellence. My initial hope was to uncover similarities and contradictions about teacher quality. It remains as ambiguous in nature as first I thought but with one caveat: teacher quality can be improved if the focus is on the teaching. Teacher excellence is intrinsic and self-motivated.

The review of literature documents many studies on qualities, characteristics, and elements affecting teacher quality. Data support credentialing and content knowledge, state testing, National Board Certification effects, and the impact on student achievement. There are few studies, though, that look into the hearts and minds of identified teachers of quality. We all know who they are; you can feel the “ambiance when you walk into the classroom,” as one administrator put it. But, the studies that would help us generate information on teacher quality need to identify what these quality educators actually do in the classroom. How do they organize, plan, and prepare for instruction? What do they do when five students comprehend



and two do not? I have come to the conclusion that if we focus on teaching and look at those whose work ethic centers on high expectations, we will find more information that will unlock the key to quality education for all students.

I end with a quote from a man who was the quintessential teacher, an educator of excellence and quality bar none, Mister Rogers. In his pleading, there is knowledge of how to be excellent and how to approach the task that lies ahead. He believed in children, he knew how “to be a kid: to think like a kid, to think about what they like to do, and to basically get to their level.” As Ms. F said, “There is joy.” For Mister Rogers and all the teachers like him, there is always joy and there is always caring. If we want to create quality, we need to be reminded of our priorities:

“Please think of the children *first*. If you ever have anything to do with their entertainment, their food, their toys, their custody, their day or night care, their health care, their education – listen to the children, learn about them, learn from them. *Think of the children first.*”

*The World According to Mister Rogers*, 2003, p. 168.

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