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*University of Tennessee - Knoxville*

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Mary Kathryn Fitzgerald entitled "Teachers' Awareness of Making Decisions for their Classrooms." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Human Ecology.

Deborah W. Tegano, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Mary Jane Moran, James D. Moran, Howard R. Pollio

Accepted for the Council:
Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Howard R. Pollio

Accepted for the Council:

Anne Mayhew

Vice Chancellor and
Dean of Graduate Studies

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

# Teachers' Awareness of Making Decisions for their Classrooms

A Dissertation

Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee

Mary Kathryn Fitzgerald

August 2006

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## DEDICATION

As a teacher of young children and novice teachers, I have told many stories of my own classroom decisions – both good ones and bad ones, but the stories from this study, the voices heard in these chapters, have added new dimensions to my thinking. To say that teaching is a series of decisions making acts is to severely understate the lives lived by these individuals and the other teachers who are trying to make complex decisions "all day every day." This work is dedicated to them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have to recognize Ihler Grimmelmann for starting this research. In 1965, Ihler asked me the first question, “What makes you decide to do what you do in the classroom?” This was during my second year as a teacher of young children and I was teaching in an extremely unique program. The State of New York Department of Education and Sarah Lawrence College joined with the Yonkers Public Schools to develop a pre-kindergarten program. This program, serving low income children, was directed by Dr. Dorothy Gross, Sarah Lawrence College. Teacher reflection, child observation, collaboration among staff, and high quality in-service teacher education created an exemplary teaching and learning community for children, families and teachers. I offer thanks to my former colleagues in that program including Dorothy Gross, for her trust in hiring me as a new teacher into this learning community and providing this living model of reflective practice: Dr. Nancy Balaban, for sharing a classroom and helping me make real life connections between observing children and deciding what and how to teach; and Yvette Marrin, for challenging me through the mentoring process. Those interactions with these incredible teachers continue to influence my current work with children and university students.

My thanks and deep appreciation also go to Rosemary Murphy, my longtime friend, teaching colleague, and collaborator who greatly influenced my maturing as a person and as a teacher.

Thanks to Dr. Deborah Tegano, my advisor on this project and friend; we continue having great discussions about life and teaching.

When I began my coursework at The University of Tennessee, Deb recommended that I take a course from Dr. Howard Pollio. "He is the kind of professor you come to graduate school to meet." She was right. I soon became a regular at the Wednesday evening phenomenology lab and learned a new way of doing research and of understanding the world. Thanks to Howard and all the lab members on Wednesday nights and Tuesday afternoons for their patient and insightful help with these transcripts and themes.

Dr. Mary Jane Moran, a member of my committee and colleague, continues to bring new ideas and new ways to look at the teaching process. I appreciate her help and also those few minutes we borrow from other projects to share daughter stories.

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Thanks to my daughter, Erica, who understood when I repeatedly said, "I can't talk now. I will talk next month." We are both glad that next month is finally here.

And finally, thanks to Sandra, who thinks people with PhDs are smart and whose tenacity brought me to Tennessee and got me through this dissertation.

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to achieve an understanding of the lived experiences of teachers' awareness of making decisions for their classrooms, by using phenomenological methods involving dialogic interviews and hermeneutic analysis of the resulting texts. Eight early childhood teachers participated in open-ended interviews during which they were asked to describe specific times when they were aware of making decisions for their classrooms. The findings indicated that the teachers in this study were aware of *(1) the multiple facets of the process of deciding, (2) the self as decision-maker,* and *(3) the constraints and possibilities found in individual teaching settings.*

The first theme, *the multiple facets of the process of deciding*, revealed that teachers were aware of the complexities of making decisions even as they were involved in the very acts of decision making. The process was experienced as constant, multi-focused, and multidimensional as well as involving varying levels of conscious awareness, i.e., some decisions were experienced as "spontaneous," "intuitive," and "in the flow," while others were reflected upon and even "agonized over." In addition, the teachers experienced decision-making as a recursive and responsive process. In the second theme, *the teachers' awareness of self as decision-maker*, the teachers described themselves as confident and with an empowering acceptance of their responsibility to decide as needed. They experienced themselves as acting within a framework bounded by their personal beliefs and values, their knowledge of children, and their perceived pedagogical options. In the third theme, *the constraints and possibilities found in their individual teaching settings,* the teachers' described awareness moved to the contexts within which their decisions were made. For some, their settings were experienced as

either places of support or unobtrusive backgrounds. For others, the settings were much more figural with rules, mandates, and other people's actions strongly impacting their decision-making possibilities.

The discussion focused on the impact of these differences and addressed possible implications for teacher preparation programs when mentoring teachers mainly discuss their awareness of personal decision making as it is affected by prescribed mandates and perceived lack of options rather than their use of pedagogical knowledge.

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# Chapter I

## Introduction

Accountability, student assessment, teacher performance, "No Child Left Behind," standardized testing, failing schools, parental choice -- the list of headline buzzwords swirling in the popular media regarding the conditions affecting school performance highlights the complexities of educational activity. The debate is equally overwhelming within professional education research circles and it leads to serious questions: What should educational research be about? Whose voices should carry the most weight? What should we be trying to learn about the complex processes called teaching and learning? Who decides what happens in the classroom and what are the nature and the experience of these decisions? This latter question defined the conception of this research project since the aim of this investigation is to understand teachers' awareness of their decision making through a close examination of the experience of early childhood classroom practitioners. In this study, the request posed to each participant was: "Please describe a few specific incidents when you were aware of making classroom decisions."

According to Virginia Richardson (2001), the primary editor of the most current (fourth) edition of the *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, the main function of educational research should be to inform practice throughout the multiple intersecting and interactive layers of educational activity and influence. This position demands that such research must maintain a strong involvement in and a focused concern for the actuality of educational practice. Specifically, the educational thinkers associated with

this influential handbook encourage continued scholarship in the "exploration of teaching action in all its interesting formations and complexities" (p. xii). In short, they recommend intentional efforts to view the complex acts of teaching and learning through many different lenses using a variety of methodologies. In the current research, I used the lens of the teachers' lived experiences to examine one aspect of the complex act of teaching, that of making of classroom decisions.

Research on teaching and teacher education is currently in the midst of several major paradigm shifts (Loughran, Mitchell, & Mitchell, 2002). These shifts address more than the well documented differences between the process-product, causal research often identified in quantitative methods, and the qualitative and critical methodologies that marked so much of the discussion in the third edition of the *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (Wittrock, 1986). While that tension still exists, there is also sustained movement within the array of qualitative methodologies toward even wider attempts to provide venues for practitioners' voices to be heard. Loughran (2002) speaks to this issue by stating that although progress has been made in the last 20 years, the perceived gap between academic research and the messy world of the practitioner continues to exist. It is into this niche that this present study seeks to fit.

*Purpose and Rationale*

The purpose of this research is to achieve an understanding of the lived experiences of teachers' decision making from the perspective of the teachers themselves. The following vignette serves as a way to orient the reader to the importance of studying decision making in the classroom.

> A two year old hands her teacher a book and says, “Read.” The teacher makes a quick scan of the room and sits down in the corner of the classroom’s couch, facing out toward the room and motions for the child to sit in her lap. She scans the room again and says, “Okay Susanna, let’s read. What is the name of this book, its title?”

The teacher, for whom this vignette represented a few seconds of her daily classroom experience, identified at least five actions that required active decision-making prior to or during this brief classroom event. She identified decisions regarding the selection of classroom furniture and its position in the room, the specific collection of children’s books offered, the importance of her responsiveness to the requests of a single child, her immediate and quick assessment of the activity in the rest of the room, and finally, her choice to use the term “title” when talking about books, even with very young children.

As this simple anecdote indicates, teaching involves a series of ongoing subtle decisions (MacNaughton & Williams, 2004), and the purpose of this research is to explore those decisions, as they are lived by teachers, in an attempt to uncover what it is like to be in the moment of those decisions. What are the thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations, and tensions of those times – the lived experience of these events – for the teachers themselves? Specifically, what are teachers aware of when they make classroom decisions?

As noted, the research regarding teachers and decision-making requires both depth and breadth to understand the voices of those most involved – the teachers. This research project seeks to explore and describe, in-depth, the nature of the experience of

classroom decision-making, and also to note the breadth of decision-making, as it is experienced by early childhood teachers in classroom settings. It is not just important to create a meaningful audience for teachers' voices as they talk about decisions in their day-to-day classroom lives; it is also important to overlay the systematic study of the phenomenon of decision making onto their descriptions of classroom decision making.

Kirchler (2001) reminds those studying life processes that the description of the constantly changing and complex everyday incidents, experiences, and behaviors is never completed and that there is still a great and on-going need for "naturalistic, empirical research to learn about the world in which we live and which we seek to study" (p. 162). This study goes beyond a simple description of decision making or a superficial list of the "types' of classroom decisions. Rather, it is directed toward learning more about the experience of making classroom decisions, so that the information can be used (along with the other existing empirical information) to inform the practices of early childhood educators, their school administrators, and teacher educators of the essence of teachers' experiences when they are engaged in the act of making classroom decisions.

*Phenomenology as the Research Methodology*

There are, of course, a variety of methodologies and procedures appropriate to the study of decision making (these are noted by Kirchler as numerous and specific to context, e.g., particularly when examining close relationships). What is important is that the researcher chooses the right methodology for the question and the context. For this study, the methodology of phenomenology was selected because of its particular openness to allowing participants to use their own voices to share their experiences and understandings of the very personal processes of classroom decision making. Early

childhood educators often are isolated from other adults for much of the school day and may not be in the habit of articulating their daily decision making practices. Yet, those who are involved in the intensity of pedagogical relationships with children may need the intimacy of phenomenological interview techniques to bring out the nuances and importance of their daily decisions. Phenomenological methods provide a non-evaluative climate to examine each teacher's awareness of decision making within the context of their individual classroom settings.

In addition, we know that decisions and the processes that lead up to them are extremely difficult to isolate from each other and from the activities surrounding them (Kirchler, 2001). At times, decisions lack sharply defined boundaries, seeming to be just a part of the flow of time (Kirchler, 2001). Early childhood classrooms are characterized by constant change and seemingly never-ending activity. Often, this means that decisions cannot be analyzed adequately without reflection on the contexts in which they occur, without knowledge of the past and concurrent events, and the values and goals stimulating any given decision-making moment. Past decisions, with their baggage of relative successfulness, affect future decisions. The rules, spoken and unspoken, of each particular context are at play in each decision. A deep understanding of this aspect of the phenomenon of decision making directly influences the choice of appropriate methodologies. According to Kirchler, "decisions as observable units are hard for non-participants to recognize. They must be identified by the decision-makers themselves, even if they are difficult to define" (p. 164). A more thorough description of phenomenological methodology is included in the third chapter.

*Decision Making as the Topic of Research*

As noted in more detail in Chapter Three (methodology), one pivotal act in any research is the selection of the research question. Often the topic of inquiry has a personal overtone, and may represent some aspect of the researcher's personal challenges or puzzlement, particularly as she tries to understand herself and the world in which she lives. Thus, in this study, as in many studies, there is an autobiographical significance to the topic and it is addressed here briefly.

The formation of this topic began more than thirty years ago when, as a new classroom teacher, I was asked to participate in a study of classroom teaching. The intent of that study was to try and capture the cues, thoughts, emotions, and ideas that intruded into my awareness while I made classroom decisions. Although that study was never formally completed, the idea that, as a teacher, I could, and perhaps even should, be aware of how decisions affecting the children came about has always influenced my classroom teaching perspective. Yet, throughout my career as a classroom teacher and teacher educator, my experience has been that teachers often talk about and are asked about the *effects* of their decisions but rarely do they have formal opportunities to talk about making the decisions themselves. Interestingly, when teachers are given this rare opportunity, they have much to say, for the question reaches to the heart of their everyday concerns, uncertainties, and triumphs.

Research using phenomenological methodology focuses on asking the question "what" rather than "why," so as to capture experience as it is described and understood by the individual living the event. It attempts to understand human nature and the world by encouraging participants to describe specific events rather than asking for their

reflections upon the meaning of some events (Polkinghorne, 1989; Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997; Valle & Halling, 1989; Valle, King, & Halling, 1989). This value defines a major difference between a phenomenological study of teacher decision-making and the current interest in reflective practice research that offers a different lens for understanding teacher practice and actions (Clift, Houston, & Pugach, 1990; Loughran et al., 2002; Richardson, 2001; Westbury, Hopmann, & Riquarts, 2000). Additionally, most of the seminal and historical research on the topic of teacher decision-making has focused on teachers' thought processes, looking at the constraints and opportunities affecting these processes and the observable effects of teachers' actions (Clift et al., 1990). The specific aspect of the topic studied in this research focuses on what teachers themselves have to say regarding their experiences as they make classroom decisions. In this way, I have dialogued with teachers about what they consider to be important within their own acts of deciding or about the decisions they make.

In this chapter, I presented a brief introduction to this study, including a statement of the purpose and importance of the study, as well as a succinct rationale for why phenomenological research is an appropriate empirical methodology for this study of decision making. I completed this chapter with a concise, but important, personal accounting of why I chose decision making as the topic of my dissertation research. Having set the stage in this way, the remainder of this document includes: Chapter II – Review of Literature, Chapter III – Methodology, Chapter IV– Results and Analysis, and Chapter V – Discussion and Recommendations.

# Chapter II

## Review of Literature

It is an interesting conundrum for all reviewers to select what to include and where to begin a literature review, but when the topic is decision making, the process is almost humorous. How does one make meaningful decisions about reviewing the huge field of decision making?

One place to begin is to define the terms *decision* and *decision making.* Jason Baron (2000), one of the leading researchers on thinking and decision making, very simply states, “A decision is a choice of action – of what to do or not to do” (p. 6). Another definition adds still more complexity, “A decision is a commitment to a course of action that is intended to produce a satisfying state of affairs” (Yates, Veinott, & Patalano, 2003, p. 15). These definitions emphasize the generally understood meaning of decision making, i.e., that a process of some kind is occurring, a deliberative act, and that a choice among options is being made. To add to the complexity of definitions, Mullen and Roth (1991) remind us that “All important decisions arise in the middle of living one’s life” (p. 2). They suggest that living one’s life includes engaging in a set of more or less routine actions, as well as using some very well-established values and goals for which there is already a direction or present course. A decision situation occurs when information presents itself that indicates a situation, direction or “present course” might worsen or a goal might not be met unless something is done.

Baron’s (1994; 2000) research has indicated that decisions, and therefore the processes that generate them, have a number of clear characteristics. First, they always

involve some kind of hypothesis testing. This hypothesis testing is viewed as an active part of the search and inference process that is fundamental to thinking and deciding (especially open-minded thinking), since it requires being open to the possibility that the search and inference process will reveal other options, better choices. A second broad understanding is that decisions may fall any place along the continuum, from a simple choice between two options with an obvious goal in mind, to the far extreme of selecting among multiple layers of options, all of which may be many levels removed from broad and evasive, or even, changing goals. Third, it is recognized that decisions are based on personal beliefs about how goals are best achieved and while they are deeply influenced by personal values and beliefs, they also are strongly affected by the values and expectations of others, especially those with influential power (Baron, 2000; Mullen & Roth, 1991; Schneider & Shanteau, 2003b).

Fulcher (1965), in a rather basic manner, tried to describe four types of decisions and the processes that often surround them:

1. *Impulsive decisions* are essentially emotional reactions to situations often solved without much reflection;
2. *Routine decisions* involve decision making within familiar situations relying on habits, customs, or familiar rules;
3. *Casuistic decisions* are those resolved by a reliance on accepted ethical, moral, or religious principles or values;

4. *Thoughtful decisions* are those made after deliberatively attending to such pertinent factors as the problem situation, alternative courses of action, and the probable consequences of each. (pp. 6-7)

Thus, decisions and decision making, which refer to the processes of resolution when leading to the end actions, involve tensions of emotions, habit, accepted values and beliefs, and the role of deliberativeness.

Based on just these few paragraphs, much is known about decisions and the decision making process, however, it is possible to unpackage these ideas a bit more thoroughly. First, Baron (1994) adds to the discussion by emphasizing that decisions are a fundamental part of the thinking process. In fact, he defines thinking in this way: "Thinking is, in its most general sense, a method of finding and choosing among potential possibilities, that is, possible actions, beliefs or personal values" (Baron, 2000, p. 8). For the decision maker, a decision is seen as a commitment to something better. This seems so simple. People make decisions for the purpose of making things better; the status quo is inadequate and needs improvement, so they take steps to do something about it.

### *Theoretical Perspectives*

Generally, decision making research is viewed as an interdisciplinary topic with contributions from just about every discipline (Balachandran, 1987; Baron, 2000; Beach & Connolly, 2005; Mullen & Roth, 1991; Schneider & Shanteau, 2003a; Wright, 1985; Yates et al., 2003). Very simply, some researchers strive to suggest strategies, which if used, are designed to improve the quality and logic of the decisions made. Others are more interested in describing the processes people actually use and in wondering why people fail to use more logical strategies. Still others attempt to construct the basic

underlying processes that both influence and confound people while they are engaged in decision making and those that are activated by them during these processes. Still another body of literature attempts to describe how to best teach effective decision making to children, adolescents, and adults.

As background for the current discussion, a very brief description of some of the historical theories and explanatory models in decision making research seems appropriate. According to a summary provided by Byrnes (1998) more than 20 decision making models now exist. The six most commonly referred to models include: Expected Utility Model, Prospect Theory, Social Judgment Theory, Constraints Model, Self-Regulation Model, and Naturalistic Decision Making. It might be helpful to provide a short summary of each of these models.

*Expected Utility Model*

This model is one of the oldest and was originally designed by mathematicians to help individuals more effectively select among gambling choices. Its principles are often discussed under the large umbrellas of Classical Decision Making, Prescriptive Theories, and Organizational Decision Making. Often, it is presented as a prescriptive model describing what one should do in a particular context rather than what people actually do. This model also falls into the normative decision theory category (Baron, 2000; Beach & Connolly, 2005; Mullen & Roth, 1991; Schneider & Shanteau, 2003b). Byrnes (1998) identifies this model as the instruction manual for decision making, outlining ways to balance judgments about desirability against the likelihood of specific outcomes.

One focus that continues to affect research in this area includes the goals of those economists and business managers who address questions of business-oriented decision

making with the primary focus of creating workers who are efficient and successful. Since these theories are used to create models designed to explain decision making in optimal conditions, they tend to prescribe discrete steps to solving problems that would enable individuals and groups to produce direct, reproducible, and economically beneficial results. The foci of these theories often involve the use of logically created templates that can be easily understood and implemented in varied situations. Specifically, they are often designed to support industrial workers who would make primary decisions that ultimately reduce the number of decisions other workers need to make. The discussions within this field of research contain many "shoulds" and numerous axiomatic models that describe market forces for particular circumstances and prescribe appropriate actions (Beach & Connelly, 2005, p. 4). Often this work focuses on channeling or controlling the options within any given decision making situation.

Classical decision making, and the other related models, often attempt to find ways to make decision making a straightforward process. Generally, this model is viewed as useful in the construction of certain other theoretical models. Alone, however, it lacks the complexity of what happens in real life when optimal choices are not actually present, and when time and other situational realities interfere with this heavily rational and cognitive model (Lipshitz, Klein, Orasanu, & Salas, 2001).

*Prospect Theory*

Prospect theory was first developed by Kahneman and Tversky in 1979 to account for the problems encountered in the expected utility theory. In particular, they tried to explain the *certainty effect* (people's tendency to prefer a sure thing over a risky outcome of equal expected value); *the reflection effect* (people's tendency to be risk takers in loss

situations but not in gain situations); *the isolation effect* (people's tendency to disregard the common elements within option pairs in favor of the differentiating options.) (See Byrnes, 1998 for details).

*Social Judgment Theory*

Social judgment theory is used as a model to clarify social cues most relevant to situations in which people are making decisions and to help them develop cognitive aids or support structures for those decisions. In clarifying the causal relationships that effective decision makers notice when making social judgments, insights are gained about the relative effectiveness of attending to cues. This theory focuses strongly on a person's cognitive representation of the world and its match with the causal structure of situations. However, "this matching is not easy because the causal structure of the world is difficult to discern" (Brynes, 1998, p. 15). At the theoretical level, this model is particularly successful in using a person's current interests and beliefs to generate regression models to predict probable current choices, rather than to anticipate future decisions. The related *Health Belief Model* represents the extensive research on decision making within the health field. It attempts to explain "why people miss scheduled appointments, misuse medications and do not change behavior patterns when needed" (Brynes, 1998, p. 17).

*Constraints Model*

This model describes a structured manner of decision making, outlining a series of steps that can be undertaken by effective decision makers and is generally credited to the revised work of Janis developed in 1989. It basically builds upon the positive features of the expected utility theory with important revisions. In the constraints model, effective

decision makers engage in behaviors that survey a wide variety of options and take this multiplicity of options into account. They look for a range of alternative actions and search for new information. This information is considered even when it is different from the initially preferred course of action. These theorists suggest that effective decision makers reconsider options and examine the costs and risks as well as the positive consequences of actions. They make detailed provisions for implementing and monitoring the chosen course of actions. At the other end of the continuum, poor or ineffective decision makers (i.e., those whose decisions have more negative consequences) tend to use few of these behaviors and often opt unreflectively to use a standard operating procedure or to rely on the first alternative that comes to mind. These people may also routinely just accept the suggestions of others.

*Self-Regulation Model*

The focus of the self-regulation model is on making choices that seem to increase the possibility that adaptive goals will be achieved. In this model, it is assumed that self-regulated decision makers have adaptive goals and behave in ways that overcome their natural limitations, biases, and tendencies. This model is defined by four main components: (1) a generation phase; (2) an evaluation phase; (3) a learning phase, which roughly corresponds to the periods before, during, and after one makes a decision; and (4) moderating factors including the limitations, biases, and tendencies of the individual and the context. While it appears as if there is a successive time period here, Byrnes (1998) suggests that a recursiveness actually exists among these phases.

*Naturalistic Decision Making Theory*

Currently, naturalistic decision making theory (Lipshitz et al., 2001) is claiming the spotlight within decision making research literature. The proponents of this theory suggest that previous theories, while adding to the growing field of decision making, have a heavy emphasis on laboratory based experimentation, often with novice decision-makers and without the constraints of real world factors. To make their point more realistic, naturalistic decision making theorists stress the importance of studying decision making in the context of the normal constraints of "time pressure, uncertainty, ill-defined goals, high personal stakes, and the other complexities that characterize decision making in real world settings" (Lipshitz et al., 2001, p. 332). In addition, this model is favored by those seeking a developmental element in decision making, i.e., an element that will allow individuals to learn strategies and increase their aptitude and ability to make effective decisions over time and through normally recognized developmental stages of growth and aging.

## *Phases of Decision Making*

Another body of decision literature involves a study of the anatomy of decisions as well as of the decision making process itself. Summaries of previous research in this field generally agree that the decision making process can be described as having distinct parts and phases. (Baron, 2000; Beach & Connolly, 2005; Byrnes, 1998; Lipshitz et al., 2001). In spite of the theoretical orientations that commonly describe the decision making process, the process itself seems to follow these universally accepted phases: (a) a diagnosis of the anomalous event or problem, (b) a selection or choice of an action response and finally, (c) an attempt at implementation. Taken separately, the first step

may be thought of as the point of recognizing some doubt, of recognizing that events are not moving along smoothly, or as is the case often with teaching, a new step needs to be added. “This parent wants to talk with me, but the children are waiting. Who should get my attention now?”

Beach and Connolly (2005) suggest that the need for engaging in decision making processes arises when an anomalous event, something out of the ordinary, occurs. This event is usually due to one or more of three situations: (a) changes in internal wants – “I want to develop more of a sense of classroom community;” (b) changes in external demands – “The pacing guide indicates that it is time to teach the next unit,” and (c) the realization that previously made decisions are not yielding the wanted results – “Jennifer does not seem to understand this math concept so a different instructional tool should be considered.” Therefore, the process begins with an evaluative judgment, a phase identified as “recognizing the problem” (Mullen & Roth, 1991, p. 2) or the diagnostic phase (Beach & Connolly, 2005; Lipshitz et al., 2001; Mullen & Roth, 1991). An important aspect of the diagnostic phase is that of cue interpretation. Byrnes (1998) provides this summary:

> It is argued that the decision maker has to first detect a cue, then interpret the nature of the cue, then decide whether to respond to the cue and finally decide how to respond if the judgment is made that a response is in order. (p. 36)

Byrnes (1998) emphasizes the importance of this step by pointing out that individual differences among decision makers are quite evident at this point, since different people select different cues as worthy of response. The same is true for the

process of interpreting the cues, since the manner and clarity of interpretation will greatly affect the response. For example, if a teacher interprets a child's inattention during group time as developmentally appropriate, she may read his fidgeting as a cue to end the group time. On the other hand, if the teacher reads this behavior as deliberate misbehavior, she may feel a punishment is called for. (See Beach & Connolly, 2005; Brynes, 1998; and Mullen & Roth, 1991 for more in-depth information concerning how this process of understanding the problem takes place.) In addition, Mullen and Roth (1991) suggest that during this period, at the very time they are trying to understand the situation, peoples' confidence may be disturbed by their feeling of uncertainty, thus affecting the rationality of their cognitive processing of options and outcomes.

Beach and Connolly (2005) suggest that this stage involves comparing the situation to other problems the decision maker has experienced. This puts the problem into a context or frame, thereby allowing the person to call upon solutions used in the past. Currently, many researchers also suggest that people go through a "framing" process at this stage. That is, they put the problematic situation into a context that helps them to make sense of it, but just how the framing process is accomplished is still debated (Beach & Connolly, 2005; Hutton & Klein, 1999; Lipshitz et al., 2001).

Whatever the exact process is, it would appear that one aspect of making sense of a problem situation includes comparing the current situation to events from the past, thereby using information gained from those experiences to deal with the present dilemma. (Beach & Connolly, 2005; Hutton & Klein, 1999). If the event is similar to past experiences and the solutions used in those situations were satisfactory, it is likely those

solutions will be used again. Using the exact previously used solution rarely fits a complex situation, although recalling those solutions will assist the decision maker in categorizing the problem, thereby limiting the number of solutions to be considered (Beach & Connolly, 2005). If the event is different from past experiences, the decision maker may need to draw upon both old and new resources through comparison, analysis, and the gaining of new information. In either situation, the decision maker is generally expected to move through a process of identifying and framing the context of the current problem in order to compare it to previous problems and draw upon old or new resources to make a plan (Beach & Connolly, 2005; Hutton & Klein, 1999). Baron (2000) also supports this view by stating that judgment is an essential aspect of this process. "Judgment is the evaluation of one or more possibilities with respect to a specific set of evidence and goals" (p. 8). Of course, making a judgment involves committing oneself to a stand, so the clarity of one's values and beliefs greatly influences this step and the choices that will be available in future steps of the process.

Immediately, the decision maker is involved in the next phase, that of finding and evaluating options and choices. As noted above, people tend to find their options by comparing current problems to previous ones. Mullen and Roth (1991) claim that this phase of gathering information about possible alternatives or choices, is often done grudgingly, since changing "an already decided upon course of action threatens the comfort of the behavioral inertia established by the efficiency of past routines" (p. 3). These researchers suggest that this step ends with narrowing the choices by evaluating

them against the cost of dealing with the unfamiliar while comparing them to each other or to some external criteria.

Many researchers (Baron, 2000; Beach & Connolly, 2005; Byrnes, 1998; Byrnes, 2005; Mullen & Roth, 1991) describe a fundamental split as happening at this point in the process. Based on the seriousness or importance of the decision, their interest in the problem, and their time frame, people seem to opt for making the best possible or "optimal" decision. If the process becomes too complex and if the choices start to feel overwhelming, people tend to find a choice that will "do," a choice that will satisfy the minimum requirements. In either case, the evaluation of options seems to stop when a choice fulfills some personally determined criteria of acceptability. Mullen and Roth (1991) suggest that individuals seem to

> decide upon a decision rule and use it. A decision rule is a way of integrating the information we have gathered concerning goals, choices, states (those outside influences or matters beyond our control that may affect the outcome), probabilities of states, outcomes and values of outcomes. This is done in such a way as to consider which choice is 'best' and which choice will meet the satisficing criteria. (p. 4)

The final stage of a decision making process concerns the implementation of the plan. One aspect of this period is forcing one's self to stay with the decision long enough to enact the plan (Mullen and Roth, 2001). They suggest that implementation takes time and new information is often added that confounds the decision, when this happens

incentives to stay with the decision made may be needed or the decision maker may find it necessary to start the process again.

Mullen and Roth provide a succinct description of people's reaction to the results of their decision making processes. If this occurs smoothly, it reinforces people's perception of themselves as "good" decision-makers. Good decision makers are likely to have a realistic view of (a) reasonable choices that are available choices; (b) the emotional, social, and financial cost of their choices; and (c) the probable impact of outside influences on the decisions as well as reasonable assessment of their own ability to deal with those forces. People who generally make "good" decisions (those with favorable outcomes) tend to develop a trust in their abilities and to continue to make decisions and to seek out opportunities for decision making. On the other hand, people whose decisions tend to be negative (due to their own poor judgment or overwhelming external forces) will often question their abilities and become more reluctant to engage in the more costly and intensive optimizing process in future decision making situations.

Throughout a linear explanation of the phase of decision making, there is an implicit understanding that the process itself is not linear. In other words, although this process is described in a linear and sequential format, this is not what happens in real life situations. This process nicely describes those decisions teachers might have time to think through; for many other decisions, these apparent steps happen simultaneously, and often without apparent pre-reflection, again emphasizing the need for clear beliefs and values since they influence the very first step of the process.

*Decision Making and Values*

Mullen and Roth (1991) suggest that most people have a value hierarchy that might be imagined as a pyramidal form. The narrow top would consist of those "long-term goals and values that are the guiding principles for the individual" (p. 19). The middle range might be the goals and objectives that have been identified as "the best ways to further those longer-range objectives" whereas the wider base would be "the short run activities designed to ensure the attainment of the middle range goals and objectives" (p. 20). They have identified problems that confound the straightforward process of making choices based on goals and values. One such problem is the social context, which consists of both the opinions of others that influence and constraint decision makers, and the culture of the community, "the way things are done around here" attitude (p. 22). Following the rules of socially acceptable conduct in our personal settings is important, since it affects one's sense of self worth and self-attainment.

However, whether one accepts or rejects community values, the impact of the social context adds more layers of complexity to the decision making task. It is anticipated that this factor may significantly affect the decision making of teachers. Each classroom has its own social context just as is true of each school and school district. It is expected that the way teachers define themselves within each of these nested contexts will strongly affect their willingness to make decisions, their range of choices, and their available resources.

Mullen and Roth (1991) also identified problems that exist when individuals reflect on the values of the community and find them to be inadequate. "If the

communities to which we belong are out of touch or provincial and we conform our beliefs and values to them, we will be making decisions with inadequate data, guided by values inconsistent with our own" (p. 25). In these reviews of the literature, researchers suggest that unless people have created a sub-community that values their values, it is very difficult to maintain positive decision making stands. It has been found that having even one ally enables people to stand firm in their beliefs and decisions. Mullen and Roth also suggest that it is particularly difficult to "withstand the pressure to conform to the wishes of an authority figure" (p. 24).

With regard to the current study, one must consider the general tensions that exist in American schools surrounding issues such as mandated testing and scripted curricula, features of the school culture that may be related to authority and conformity and to teachers' personal beliefs and values about these important issues. The literature on teachers' values, beliefs, and attitudes and the relative influences that are associated with these is too broad to be included in this review, although it is noted that some aspect of this literature may be important in this study. Similarly, the influence of authority figures such as principals or school administrative officials may emerge as important to teachers' decision making.

*Stress and Decision Making*

Another area discussed by researchers but stated most clearly by Mullen and Roth (1991), deals with the stress created when important personal goals and values are threatened. Relevant findings highlight the stress felt by individuals in these situations. Much of the decision making literature points to stress as a recognized cause of quickly

made decisions, designed to resolve such uneasiness: “Because of its normal bias to induce action, stress can make reflective thought difficult” (p. 27). Individuals are found to take actions that provide the short term advantage of stress reduction at the expense of long term goals. Frequently stress was mentioned as a counterproductive factor in situations where calm reflection was required to make difficult decisions, i.e., decisions that required more processing or more resolve to implement.

Mullen and Roth (1991) highlighted still another factor affecting decision making. They suggested that since there is a human need to maintain a coherent and consistent view of the world and one’s place in it, decision makers may be faced with irrational attempts to preserve their original understandings rather than struggle to develop new ones. On the other hand, they may want to relieve the cognitive dissonance by accepting the conflicting view too quickly. These researchers warn that either action may cause dissatisfaction with the decisions made. Their point concerns complexity and most complex problems require new actions, or actions that step outside of the status quo. These kinds of decisions often have with multiple layers interacting with each other; therefore, individuals may be prone to simplifying the complexity, without the rigor needed to obtain more information and, in doing so, may make a variety of decision making errors and remain dissatisfied with the results. Dissatisfaction with decisions causes decision makers to question their ability to decide. This questioning entices people revert back to decisions based on their familiar ways of thinking.

*Expert Decision Making*

Another area of research within the decision making arena concerns what is called *expert decision making*. Hutton and Klein (1999), two of the foremost theorists in the field of naturalistic decision making, provide an excellent summary of the characteristics of expert performance based on work completed by Glaser and Chi, and discuss distinctions in the decision making processes used by novices and by experts in any field. They suggest that the processes used most effectively are perceptual rather than conceptual ones (Hutton & Klein, 1999). The expert is able to maintain keen ongoing situation awareness primarily through the use of recognitional skills. As a result, the experts usually consider just one course of action, based on their assessment and awareness of the situation:

> It is more a matter of how people see the world than the knowledge that they have accumulated. The reason is that knowledge, to be useful, must be translated into action. From a pragmatic perspective, decision making and problem solving are based on situation awareness, on the recognition of situations as typical or anomalous, and, with that, on the actions that are associated with that recognition. (p. 32)

*Literature Bias*

The above sections present an overview of the basic components of the decision making literature. With this background of general principles, it is appropriate now to look specifically at decision making research within the field of education. Since an ability to approach the data with "fresh eyes" is a crucial element of phenomenological

research, it is vital that the researcher be aware of and attempt to minimize the influence of existing theories and hypotheses when analyzing her data. While some understanding of the current literature is necessary for conceptualizing the research question and understanding participant responses, an in-depth literature review was undertaken only after the basic structure emerged from the data (Pollio et al, 2006). Thus, what follows is a review of the literature as it pertains directly to the field of education, and specifically, to this study.

### *Decision Making Research within the Field of Education*

The areas of interest within the broad topic of decision making and education that are currently generating the most research include: (a) teaching decision making strategies to students of all ages and within most curricular areas; (b) analyzing decision making strategies used by teachers and schools when making special education assessments and placements; and (c) studying group decision making practices within school reform domains and site-based management concerns. However, for the present research project, a narrower literature review focusing on describing and understanding decision making processes in the classroom seems to be most relevant. One stated purpose of this research is to help bridge the gap between academic work and the lives of teachers in schools. Therefore, this review will focus on simplifying a broad view of the concepts uncovered in previous research and in peeling back some of those understandings to make them relevant to current discussions of teachers' lived experiences.

*Classic Research*

Traditional research on teacher decision making focused on attempting to understand teachers' thought processes, so as to determine what teachers focus on and the content of teachers' decisions. It is now the accepted belief that teaching practice is significantly influenced by teacher thinking and teacher judgments (Calderhead, 1995; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Isenberg, 1990; National Institute of Education, 1975; Richardson & American Educational Research Association, 2001; Sardo-Brown, 1990). Secondly, it is understood that pre-teaching moments, or the planning aspects of teacher thought processes, often involve creating or reviewing mental scripts of possibilities. Such scripts enable teachers to focus on their knowledge of the content, use of materials, goals and objectives, and activities (Borko et al., 1979; Calderhead, 1995; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Isenberg, 1990; National Institute of Education, 1975; Richardson & American Educational Research Association, 2001; Sardo-Brown, 1990).

During the teaching moment, teachers make active decisions based on the interactive cues they receive from children or from the environment. Considerable differences between experienced teachers and novice teachers in their ability to respond to interactive cues while teaching have been noted. Also, each group responds to different cues, makes different kinds of decisions, and has different degrees of awareness concerning the decisions they make. One particular difference is that experienced teachers tend to make more decisions, are more aware of their decisions, and respond to a greater number of cues from the students (Byra & Sherman, 1993; Cleary & Groer, 1994).

Philip Jackson (1968) was credited with changing the conceptual understanding of research on decision making and teachers' thought processes with his descriptive portrayal of life in a few classrooms during the 1960s Through his book, *Life in Classrooms,* and his description of the pre-active and interactive phases of teaching, the importance of understanding the planning activities of teachers, as well as the interactive decisions teachers make while in the classroom, became more evident to researchers. Since then, much research has been completed on decision making and a large knowledge base has been created noting the many sub-topics within this larger theme of decision making. A very complete review of that literature is found in Clark and Peterson's (1986) chapter, "Teachers' Thought Processes," in the *Handbook of Research on Teaching.*

*Teachers' knowledge*

Another feature in the description of teacher as decision maker is the role of the teacher in gaining and using information to form inferences about children's abilities, readiness, needs and interests. The input of this information can be overwhelming to teachers and they probably deal with this information the way most people do – classify and categorize it into some kind of manageable units that are influenced by the teacher's attitudes, beliefs and values (Borko et al., 1979). Some teachers may be categorizing the information according to traits they find desirable or unappealing; others may be more influenced by learning styles, social competence, or achievement levels (Borko et al., 1979).

Another significant feature affecting teachers' decision making based on observations of children and the inferences made from this knowledge concerns the skills a teacher has in observing and learning from children's behavior (Cohen, Stern, &

Balaban, 1997; Curtis & Carter, 1996; Curtis & Carter, 2000; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). When teachers categorize behaviors as appropriate or, at least understandable, their responses or decisions differ from those used to respond to what they interpret as deliberate misbehavior (Gartrell, 2004). The teachers' personal beliefs and attitudes also affect the images or possibilities they are able to create from children's behavior and thinking (Edwards et al., 1998).

Another aspect of the early research situated the teacher as the gatherer, collector, and sorter of classroom information leading to decision making. This model is still considered valid and is consistent with the research that considered teaching through the metaphoric lens of "teacher as clinician." From this perspective, teachers were viewed as having some of the same decision-making type tasks as physicians, i.e., both groups had the challenge of making "sense of a diverse range of information, … theories and evidence as well as personal beliefs and expectations… in order to form judgments and make decisions" (Calderhead, 1995, p. 9). A teacher within this model was viewed as a "diagnostician of children's learning" and "prescriber" of appropriate learning activities (p. 9).

*Teachers' Individual Pedagogical Knowledge*

Pedagogical knowledge has to do with knowledge of teaching. How teachers use this knowledge cannot be separated from their beliefs, values, and attitudes about teaching. The research conducted by Stoffels (2005) raises several interesting issues concerning teachers' decision-making during a time of curricular change. His study involves South African teachers dealing with new constructivist-based approaches rather than the teacher-directed, textbook-oriented methods previously used. In this study,

Stoffels refers to the *theory of intensification* of teachers' professional lives. This theory of intensification was developed by Hargreaves (1984) to describe the concept of teachers' work becoming more and more routinized and deskilled, "less and less like that of autonomous professionals trusted to exercise the power and expertise of discretionary judgment with children…increasingly controlled by prescribed programs, mandated curricula, and step-by-step methods of instruction" (Stoffels, pp. 87-88). This phenomenon is conceptualized by Hargreaves as the

> bureaucratically driven escalation of pressures, expectations and controls concerning what teachers do and how much they should do within the teaching day.… [It is] typified by a lack of time, chronic and consistent overload and the enforced diversification of expertise (p. 535).

This theory, derived from labor process studies, considers how the separation of conception, i.e., the district level administrators or textbook writers who create the ideas, from those who execute the process (classroom teachers), potentially causes an "us and them" culture. Studies of primary and secondary schools report that teachers working within these school cultures tended to be experiencing higher levels of stress and lower levels of collegiality (Troman, 2000). Gitlin (2001) developed this concept in some detail, but prefers to call the phenomenon the *threat of intensification*. According to Stoffels (2005), Gitlin contends that intensification is "a subjective experience, dealt with by different people in their own way" (p. 535). One way teachers respond to the heavy workload or scripted curriculum is to make decisions "that allowed them to confront the

classroom press… [by] over-simplified lessons, following the recommended textbooks and…keeping learners occupied with menial tasks" (p 535).

The threat of intensification could explain the phenomenon where teachers, despite being afforded a considerable degree of autonomy and flexibility to make pedagogical decisions based on the needs of their learners, still opt not to exercise this power. This means teachers might minimize planning time by underutilizing their freedom to use a variety of learning materials, develop teaching strategies or assessment techniques, teach to the average learner, or follow the prescribed texts to the hilt. They might also spend a great deal of physical and mental energy in ensuring that classroom disorder does not add to this threat of intensification by creating more answer-oriented, structured and control-heavy pedagogy – defensive teaching where teachers adopt particular strategies to help them cope with the treat of intensification of classroom life.

Yet another aspect  of teachers' self beliefs and attitudes is discussed by Posnanski (2002). In this study he considers decision making by science teachers, particularly with regards to implementing methods of inquiry as the mode of instruction. The stated position of the National Science Foundation (NSF) is that teachers "are professionals who engage in constant decision-making processes regarding the facilitation of student learning" (p. 189). However, NSF also stated that quality science teaching is sometimes impeded by teachers' lack of experiences with innovative science activities. "Teaching science as a process of inquiry requires behaviors and attitudes that for many teachers are contrary to the ways in which they traditionally have taught and contrary to ways in which they have been taught as students" (Rakow cited in Posnanski,

p. 190). The results of the Posnanski study recognize that teaching decisions are frequently based on teachers' own experiential opportunities. When teachers themselves experienced new learning through multiple, satisfying experiences, they were less likely to return to their own previous teaching styles when in stressful classroom situations.

*Beliefs, Values, and Attitudes*

According to Borko et al, (1979), many of the differences in teachers' strategies result from differences in teachers' decisions. "Teaching, then, can be characterized as a process of decision making; sometimes teachers are aware of their decisions and sometimes they make them automatically" (p. 138). It is accepted in the research literature that teachers' decision making is a recursive process of acquiring information and cues and forming inferences about children's abilities, needs, and interests; filtering these inferences through a personal system of beliefs, values, and attitudes; and then interacting with individual pedagogical knowledge, skill, and dispositions about teaching strategies and content subject matter, recognizing the available resources and expectations.

It may be helpful to take these assumptions apart. The first aspect is that not all classroom room activities require conscious decision-making. Many routines are automatized through repetition and familiarity. This is consistent with all decision making explanations, i.e., frequently made decisions rarely require the intense scrutiny of weighing choices and selecting options on a daily basis. In fact, a smooth running classroom will have many clearly established routines in order for a sense of calmness and predictability to exist (Brown, 2004; Carter & Curtis, 1998; Curtis & Carter, 2003). The decisions about the formation of these routines is generally based on teachers' beliefs

and attitudes about children's needs and appropriate learning environments (Brown, 2004; Carter & Curtis, 1998; Curtis & Carter, 1996; Curtis & Carter, 2000; Curtis & Carter, 2003). Once established, most teachers do not actively think about these routine issues unless a problem arises. Some researchers such as Brown and Coles (2004) raise the issue of complacency in routine decision making in today's complex schools. They suggest that many teachers expect all children to behave the same way and may not be asking themselves to make decisions regarding the cultural sensitivity of routine decisions and responses.

*Agency and self efficacy.* Another aspect of decision making concerns the role of attitudes, values and beliefs. With regard to attitudes, values, and beliefs, Rimm-Kaufman and Sawyer (2004) state:

> Our starting premise is that teaching is an intensely psychological process and that teachers' ability to maintain productive classroom environments, motivate students, and make decisions depends on their personal qualities and ability to create personal relationships with students. (Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004, p. 322)

That quality classrooms depend on the personal attributes of teachers is an accepted premise in teacher education literature; therefore this concept will be narrowed to focus mainly on agency and self efficacy for the purpose of this study. Shepard (1995) reinforced the understanding that teachers' decision making efforts are influenced by their beliefs, especially their beliefs about their main responsibilities; the abilities of the students; and the way in which they think learning is achieved. He also suggested that the source of teachers' decision making "may be more accurately portrayed as extensions or

projections of the individual identities of teachers rather than as a rational evaluation of alternatives based on available data" (p. 510).

Ford (1992, as cited in Andersen, Dragsted, Evans & Sorensen, 2004) offered a "person-in-context" model to explain the processes associated with individual competence and achievement. He suggested that goals and emotions are necessary for persons to have the motivation to achieve. Emotions, along with goals, provide the individual with "the energy to act" and are closely associated with personal agency beliefs (Anderson et al., 2004, p. 28). Andersen, in discussing Ford's work, states that personal agency beliefs are

> composed of both capability and context beliefs, …about an individual's assessment of his or her ability to perform a given function (capability) and the helpfulness of the environment in that performance (context), are essential precursors to action for someone to be successful at a given task. (p. 28)

In addition, this body of research on the influence of beliefs on teacher decision making often considers the role of teachers' sense of self efficacy. According to Posnanski (2002), "Self efficacy refers to a person's perception of their ability to perform a task and the belief that they have the skills to perform certain behaviors that produce desired results" (p. 190). This concept, built upon the work of Bandura (1997), considers two aspects of efficacy. The first is expectancy -- the belief by teachers that they can successfully implement the behaviors needed to produce the desired outcomes and second, the conviction that the "behaviors performed will indeed lead to the desired outcomes" (Posnanski, 2002, p. 191). Bandura (1997) showed that self efficacy beliefs

affected teachers' performance in the following ways: (a) a teacher's choice of activities, (b) the effort expended on developing the activities, (c) the length of time a teacher persisted when confronted by obstacles and difficult situations, and (d) a teacher's development of coping skills.

Since an increased sense of self efficacy means having a "high internal locus of control and positive attitude toward overcoming difficult situations"(Posnanski, 2002, p. 191), research consistently notes that teachers with high efficacious feelings about themselves tend to make decisions that create stable and effective means of maintaining order and discipline within their classrooms (Guskey & Passaro, 1994). Their decisions also include effective strategies to deal with difficult situations in calm and consistent ways. In addition, they tend to have clear strategies for routine procedural events, and they do not get so overwhelmed by the cacophony of classroom events (Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004). These factors have been shown to improve student performance, thus ensuring that the bidirectional cycle continues. Self efficacious teachers tend to have students who are more likely to trust their own abilities to accomplish difficult tasks and to use the behaviors that will allow them to do so (Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004).

Guskey (1988) also found that highly efficacious teachers were also more likely to make decisions to implement innovations, especially innovations involving mastery learning. He noted that highly efficacious teachers also may be more open and receptive to news ideas about instructional practices, but acknowledges that his study dealt specifically with mastery learning, a strategy that may in itself be appealing to this type of teacher.

The effect of having an appropriately high sense of teacher efficacy also has been shown to encourage beginning teachers as they attempt to make classroom decisions. In the study completed by Hoy and Spero (2005), those teachers completing their first year with this positive view of their efficacy found greater satisfaction in teaching and experienced less stress. These beginning teachers also gave more positive rating to the support they received than those who ended the year concerned about their own sense of competence and with a less optimistic view of what teachers can accomplish. Those with a feeling of successful potential also found the other people in the environment to be more positive and helpful to them in their decision making and other activities (Hoy & Spero, 2005; Milner, 2002; Milner & Hoy, 2003). According to Milner (2002), "The belief teachers have about their abilities to affect students in desired ways influence their persistence when things do not go smoothly" (p. 29).

It is important to note that some other recent reviews are calling into question the correlation of teacher self-reported efficacy beliefs and student results (Wheatley, 2002; Wheatley, 2005). Wheatly suggested that the methods of measuring teacher efficacy may not give an appropriate picture of teachers' striving for democratic classrooms, where the locus of control is shared with students and where learning is understood to be constructed by the students rather than transferred from the teacher. At issue is the understanding that some degree of self doubt may in fact be a positive characteristic, one that leads teachers to search for more effective ways of teaching and supporting children's learning. "Overconfidence may leave [teachers] with little incentive to reflect or make improvement in their teaching" (p. 756).

*Reflective teaching and decision making.* The idea of adding a reflective step between the impulse to act and the action is discussed widely within educational research. Dewey (1916) discussed the importance of teachers reflecting on the children's actions and using those reflections to determine practices. Schön (1983)described the practice of "reflection in action" as a process of thinking about action in such a manner as to generate new knowledge, which will in turn generate new actions or vice versa" (cited in Jarvis, 1999, p. 63). Jarvis noted that some people seem to be more naturally reflective and raised questions regarding how impulsive people might add reflective practices to their decision making.

Decision making is, obviously, directly related to the practice of reflective teaching. This interactive process of pausing to consider what one has done, said, or considered, has both cognitive and affective aspects. It is a dispositional behavior that encourages teachers to intentionally develop logical reasoning skills, thoughtful judgment, and dispositions of reflection (as cited in Villar, 1995, p. 4). Through reflection, assumptions about teaching and learning that previously have been tacit and unspoken, "knowing-in-action" (Schön, 1983), become explicit and available for critical reflection. Thus, the teacher has the opportunity to more critically evaluate her decisions, rather than merely enact them (Bransford, Derry, Berliner, Hammerness, & Beckett, 2005).

The role of reflection in the process of educational decision making is as troublesome as in any field. John Dewey (as cited in Pollard, 2002), in *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Relative Thinking to Educative Process* states:

> To many persons both suspense of judgment and intellectual search are disagreeable; they want to get them ended as soon as possible. …It is at the point where examination and test enter into investigation that the difference between reflective thought and bad thinking come in. (p. 4)

The idea of reflective practice in teaching, once considered an innovative idea (Schön, 1983; 1987; 1990), is now considered an essential aspect of teaching and is a part of any serious attempt at school reform (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). The question of whether teachers in the field of early childhood education effectively and intentionally engage in reflective practice may be one of the questions considered in the interpretation of the findings of this research.

Atkinson and Claxton add to this debate about reflective practices by urging another look at the role of intuitive decisions, preferably within the expectations of reflective practices. They suggest that logical, rational reflection is necessary especially at the planning decision making stages but that teachers also need to develop a balance between logic and intuition, especially informed intuition.

In summary, this is a broad review of the literature associated with research on decision making. After reviewing some classic and contemporary theories and models of decision making, the literature more closely related to the field of education was reviewed. These latter genres of literature are revisited in the last chapter of this research as a vehicle for understanding and interpreting the findings and in providing informed conjecture about how these findings impact the field of early childhood teacher education.

# Chapter III

## Methodology

Critically considered research methodology should serve a deep and purposeful connection between the questions being asked and the way one seeks the answers. A sensitive researcher, therefore, would select phenomenology as a research methodology when the answer lies in the systematic study of a person's lived experience, since phenomenology is a "rigorous description of human life as it is lived and reflected upon in all of its first person concreteness, urgency, and ambiguity" (Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997, p. 5). When using this type of methodology, the researcher does not seek a "separation between subject and object; the observer and the observed" (Kracker & Pollio, 2003, p. 1105), rather through the use of dialogic interviews, the researcher invites participants to explore specific events (Pollio, Graves, & Arfken, 2006) as they lived them, in great detail and specificity.

Max van Manen (1990) emphasizes the need for this sensitive match even more critically when research is in the field of education. By stressing the dialectic between question and method, he encourages human science research, but especially research in education that addresses fundamental questions about life as it is lived with children, to always be guided by standards that include a phenomenological sensitivity to lived experience (van Manen, 1990). He states,

> The starting point…is the belief that human science research in education done by educators ought to be guided by pedagogical standards. The fundamental model of this approach is textual reflection on the lived experiences and practical actions

of everyday life with the intent to increase one's thoughtfulness and practical resourcefulness or tact. (p. 4)

What is unique about a "phenomenological sensitivity"? Like many qualitative methodologies, phenomenology emphasizes a fundamental and unwavering respect for people and utilizes in-depth interviews that are rigorously interpreted. As such, it differs from other forms of educational research in that it is not a means to explaining or controlling what is being studied. By conducting a phenomenological study, I was able to dialogue with teachers so the focus was on their lived experiences rather than on an assessment of their experiences. Berger and Luckmann (1966) clarify the importance of this nonjudgmental stance by stating, "The phenomenological analysis of everyday life, or rather of the subjective experience of everyday life, refrains from any causal or genetic hypothesis, as well as from assertations about the ontological status of the phenomena analyzed" (p. 20).

Used in this context, "existential phenomenology blends the philosophy of existentialism with the methods of phenomenology to produce rigorous and richly nuanced descriptions of human life" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 9). Essentially, this methodology brings together the meaning-seeking, existential philosophies which grew out of the works of Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus, and others, with the systematic way of studying fundamental aspects of life that might be taken for granted (Pollio et al, 1997; Pollio et al., 2006; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). This perspective also builds from the philosophies associated with the names of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Pollio et al., 2006). Thomas and Pollio (2002) summarize these

philosophies by recognizing that the intent of existential phenomenology is the careful description of human life, the uncovering of the essences of things themselves. "Phenomenology asks for the very nature of a phenomenon, for that which makes some-"thing" what it *is* – and without which it could not be what it is" (van Manen, 1990, p. 10). A deeper understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of this methodology are found in Creswell (1998), Merleau-Ponty (1962), Moustakas (1994), Polkinghorne (1989), Pollio (1997), Thomas and Pollio (2002), and Valle and Halling (1989).

One step in the process of looking at the lived world is to step back from it. This idea of *epoche,* meaning "to suspend or step back from our ordinary ways of looking" (Ihde, 1986, p. p. 32), allows us to see more clearly what happens in our everyday experience. It is this "stopping and looking" at the everyday moments of teaching that are the focus of this study.

## *Procedure*

Phenomenological research usually proceeds through the following steps, each of which will be explained in more detail and with specific application for this study: (a) the selection of a research topic that is designed to uncover the lived experiences of relevant participants, (b) the collection of data including a bracketing interview for the main investigator and dialogic interviews with participants, (c) the multi-step analyses of the texts, and (d) the preparation of a final report.

### *The Research Topic*

The selection of the research question is a pivotal act in any research. The topic of inquiry that the research seeks to illuminate is often one that has been a personal

challenge or puzzlement in the researcher's attempts to understand herself and the world in which she lives. Yet, while there may be autobiographical significance to the topic, "with virtually every question that matters there is also social – and perhaps universal – significance" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 17).

Research using phenomenological methodology focuses on asking the question "what" rather than "why," so as to explore experience as it is described and understood by the individuals living the event. This form of research attempts to understand human nature and the world by encouraging participants to describe specific events rather than asking for their reflections upon the meaning of some event (Polkinghorne, 1989; Pollio et al, 1997; Valle, 1989). This particular investigation is aimed at attempting to understand teachers' awareness of their decision making, and closely examining the lived experience of classroom practitioners. As van Manen (1990) notes,

> Lived experience is the starting point and ending point of phenomenological research. The aim…is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence – in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience. (p. 36)

Coming to understand the essence of experience implies coming to understand the particular structural connections that form that experience. Dilthey (as cited in van Manen, 1990, p. 37) identifies these connections as the "structural nexus" or the patterns and units of meaning that are explicated from the events through a process of reflection on their meaning. Gadamer (1975) states, "If something is called or considered an

experience, its meaning rounds it into the unity of a significant whole" (p. 60). Thus, in this particular research, it was known that teachers make many decisions every day, yet, the particular structure of the experience of making those decisions was not known.

### *The Purpose*

The intent of phenomenological research must be clear. The purpose of this type of research is not to prove something. Its purpose is to attempt to understand another, to try to uncover meaning by recognizing the structural connections inherent in the experiences, as the persons sharing the experience understand them. Essentially the format of this research involves two parts: first, an open ended phenomenological interview; second, the interpretation or analysis of this interview, which is the reflective attempt to put language to the structural connections described by the interviewee.

According to Pollio et al. (2006), "When a description of personal experience is at issue, methods are required that are both appropriate to the topic and rigorous in application" (p. 2). Hence, an ideal match is that of phenomenological analysis, a method through which an interested interviewer explores the meaning of an experience with an interested interviewee, the person that has actually experienced the phenomenon in question and who is now interested in exploring its meaning more deeply.

## *Data Collection*

### *The Phenomenological Interview*

Since the medium of understanding in phenomenological research is language, face-to-face dialogic interviews are the most powerful procedure for obtaining precise and systematic descriptions of experience (Pollio et al, 1997). The phenomenological

interview is often regarded as a conversation or dialogical discourse that involves an interpersonal engagement between the researcher and the participant (Polkinghorne, 1989). In this context, it is essential to create an atmosphere in which the participant feels comfortable, respected and understood (Pollio et al, 1997; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The meaning of the experience emerges in the give and take of the descriptive conversation and the clarification that happens between two people, one who tells of the lived experience and the other who seeks to understand and clarify it as an experience of importance. Typically, the interviewer is the researcher since the rapport and nuances of the interview are such a vital part of the process and need to be understood by the researcher.

Participants in this study, of course, were free to choose the incidents they wanted to describe. They were encouraged throughout the interview process, however, to describe the details of the event, rather than to focus solely on the reflective aspect of what the event meant to them. van Manen (1990) states, "Phenomenology is the study of the lifeworld (our everyday existence) as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize and reflect on it" (p. 9). Therefore, this methodology suggests that the interviewer, through sensitive responsiveness to the flow and language of the interviews, gently tries to keep the participants focused on descriptions of relevant experiences. The intention is always to work toward understanding the pre-reflected experience, the experience as it stands in memory, rather than one that has been conceptually analyzed or separated from the moment (Kracker & Pollio, 2003).

The role of the interviewer is crucial to this process and this person should be skilled in interpersonal exchanges that enable participants to feel comfortable discussing deeply personal and revealing events. The interview is not a test in which the interviewer seeks right answers; nor is it an attempt to produce an objective rendering of the situation being described. According to Polkinghorne (1989), "The data of phenomenological research are descriptions of experience as it presents itself, not descriptions of actions as they are assumed to exist outside of experience" (p. 49).

One step within phenomenological research is the complex process of phenomenological reduction (Polkinghorne, 1989). During this phase, attention shifts from everyday and ordinary concerns about the independent or objective existence of what appears in the world of experiences. Instead, it focuses on the incident, as it exists in the consciousness of the participant experiencing the event in the reflective act of describing the incident. This process results in descriptions that are different from those aimed at a "video" depiction of events, as they exist independently of a person's experience of them. Thus, during the interviews, the participants' awareness must always be directed and redirected towards their own experiencing. The way the interviewer frames questions can help the participants to report their personal experiences rather than to give objective depictions. Questions such as, "What did you experience?" or "What was it like for you?" are more likely to elicit thick experiential data than the "Why did you do that?" type of questions (Polkinghorne, 1989).

In this study, unstructured interviews were conducted during which an initial question, in the form of a request, was asked of each participant. This request/question was designed to focus the participant on the topic of interest. It was followed by

intentional and individualized additional questions, designed to elicit greater detail and better understanding of each incident until both the interviewer and the interviewee felt satisfied that the participant's experience had been communicated as clearly and richly as possible (Kracker & Pollio, 2003; Pollio et al, 1997). In this study, the initial request was *"Please describe a few specific incidents when you were aware of making classroom decisions."*

All interviews were audio tape-recorded and lasted between 50 minutes and 95 minutes. They ended when each participant seemed satisfied that her experiences had been adequately described, usually when she stopped talking and indicated she had nothing more to add. In this study, the researcher then summarized her understandings back to the participant. This "telling back" allowed the participant to clarify any misunderstandings or to add any elaborations she felt necessary to make herself be understood as completely as possible.

In this particular study, at the completion of each interview, participants were asked to provide basic demographic data including age, education, years of classroom experience, and a profile of the school structure and student population. They chose a pseudonym to protect their identity. Only the principal investigator knows the identity of the participants and all participants were reassured the standard procedures recommended to protect human subjects participating in research, especially their rights to confidentiality, were being followed rigorously.

*The Bracketing Interview*

Prior to conducting any participant interviews, a bracketing interview was done. This interview is one in which the researcher is taken through the same research question

and procedure by another skilled interviewer. The purpose of this interview is to enable the researcher to engage in self-reflection on the topic being investigated. Since the investigator has chosen the topic and is a major participant in the dialogical exchange that takes place, it is important to know how he or she feels about the topic and what assumptions he or she brings to the interview (Pollio et al., 2006).

I was interviewed about my own awareness of making classroom decisions by an experienced member of the phenomenological group from the University of Tennessee's Center for Applied Phenomenology. The text was then analyzed by the phenomenological research group in a process identical to that used for participants' interviews. The data from the researcher's bracketing interview are analyzed using the same procedures as those used for the participants. This process further increases the researcher's ability to be sensitive to nuances and potential directions where caution or extra sensitivity may be needed in the actual interviews (Pollio et al., 2006).

The results of this interview are reported in Appendix A. With explicit knowledge of the themes identified within my own experiences, I attempted to avoid asking leading questions or imposing my own beliefs about teaching, about awareness, or about making decisions, while conducting the interviews with the teachers. Pollio et al. (1997) points out:

> … the intention [of the bracketing interview] is not to have interviewers become objective – only to have them become more attuned to their presuppositions about the nature and meaning of the present phenomenon and thereby sensitize them to any potential demands they may impose on their co-participants either during the interview or in its subsequent interpretation. (p. 48)

Traditionally, in all quality research, researchers attempt to recognize their biases and develop a neutral stance toward the subject under study. In phenomenological studies, this process of bracketing implies understanding and recognizing one's own preconceptions and presuppositions by making them explicit in as clear a form as possible (Valle, 1989). The intention of this process is to heighten the awareness of the researcher's own biases and possibly to help the researcher hold those issues in abeyance and thus be able to respond more fully and sensitively to participants' experiences and stories. At the same time, it is also understood that during any interview process, two people with their own histories, biases, and understandings are engaged in a delicate communication process (Pollio et al., 2006). The interviewer is not just trying to capture the details of an event; rather he or she is attempting to understand the meaning of the language used to describe the event as the interviewee understands it. The bracketing interview, therefore, is designed to help the investigator become more sensitive to that dialogical dynamic.

*The Sample*

Generally, the sample subjects of a phenomenological project are considered participants and are viewed as co-researchers, persons who are willing to explore the topic because of its keen interest to them as well as to the researcher (Polkinghorne, 1989). There are only a few fundamental criteria for participation in any phenomenological project. The participants must have lived the experience being studied and must be sufficiently interested and articulate enough to describe personal experiences in an in-depth interview (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989; Pollio et al., 1997; van Manen, 1990). In addition, Polkinghorne (1989) recommends that

participants be selected from those who have experienced the events under study relatively recently, and that they have “the ability to sense and express inner feelings and emotions without shame or inhibition” (p. 47). Finally, they must be willing to grant the researcher permission to tape-record the interview and to publish the data after taking precautions to maintain anonymity.

Typically, there are no set criteria for the number of participants to be included in this type of research study (Polkinghorne, 1989). Often, six to twelve interviews yield sufficient diversity and redundancy as to ensure that the experience has been adequately captured. The aim is to include enough participants so broad ranges of variation in the set of descriptions are available for analyzing the phenomenon. If there is not sufficient redundancy after these interviews, additional interviews should be recorded and analyzed until no new themes are evident (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

For this study, I proposed to interview eight classroom teachers, who are interested and articulate about their experiences of decision-making regarding their classrooms, and then review the findings to determine their richness and redundancy, and complete more interviews if necessary. After conducting the eight interviews, it was decided that no further interviews were necessary.

In an attempt to find teachers who were sufficiently articulate about their awareness of classroom decision-making, participants were drawn from teachers with at least three years teaching experience and whose classroom work is considered highly effective by their supervisors, other teachers or parents. There were two reasons for selecting only experienced teachers in this study. In research conducted by Clark and

Peterson (1986), Richardson (2001), a noticeable distinction was found in the content of decision-making between beginning and more experienced teachers. Whether this difference will affect the essence of their decision-making is not known. However, this issue seemed to be a topic for another research project. A second reason for this decision concerned the depth of opportunities experienced teachers can call upon when sharing their stories. Quite simply, experienced teachers should have more events to select from and, therefore, will have more experiences to consider. For these reasons, all teachers participating in this study had at least three years experience and were currently teaching.

Participating teachers were recruited through personal contacts and through recommendations by university teacher education coordinators and principals (Weiss, 1994). Teacher education coordinators supervise student teaching interns in classroom settings that are led by master teachers. These master teachers are thought to be experienced practitioners who are in the habit of discussing their teaching practices with others. This is crucial since one criterion for participating in phenomenological interviews is the ability to be articulate about personal experiences and a willingness to talk about those experiences in an in-depth manner without embarrassment or undue stress or hesitation.

Because this researcher's primary area of interest is early childhood teacher education, participants were sought from those teaching in pre-k through grades three. In phenomenological research, generalizability is recognized in the universality of the depth of the descriptions and in the readers' recognition of familiar feelings, questions,

concerns, and in their "a-ha" of the moments portrayed, not in the universal broadness of the sample population.

Such criterion sampling, combined with the network sampling, yielded the names of approximately 18 potential participants. Before recommending a name, colleagues or principals talked about the project with the potential participant and gauged their willingness to participant. To ensure this willingness, the names of any teachers who appeared to be agreeing out of politeness rather than genuine interest were not forwarded to me. Since schools have their own culture, the researcher further refined the list by only selecting a maximum of two teachers from any given school. In most cases, I have only one teacher from a school. When I was successfully able to make contact with one teacher, I stopped trying to contact other teachers at the same school. After my first few interviews I went back to the list and purposefully selected teachers whose grade levels might complement each other, i.e., two public school teachers at the first grade level, a public school teacher and a private school teacher at the second grade level, two teachers working with five year olds. Only one teacher taught very young preschool aged children and only one teacher taught children within a self-contained setting. Both of their interviews seemed so rich and were not age specific; therefore it did not seem as if balancing, collaborating or elaborating their point of view was needed.

Each teacher was contacted individually by phone or email in order to explain the project. Usually an appointment was made to meet with the teacher within a week of this contact. All teachers contacted seemed very eager to participate and readily agreed to the use of audiotaping equipment. Each participant was assured anonymity both in their

selection of their own pseudonym and in my guarantee that all names would be changed and all identifying references would be eliminated or modified.

Table 1, found in Appendix C, summarizes the demographic information obtained from each participant. In total eight participants were interviewed. All were Caucasian and female; they represented a variety of school settings.

Cecilia teaches in a university based preschool that has a teacher education focus. She has been teaching for five years, has a master's degree and is in her late twenties. There are 16 children in her classroom and about 100 children in the entire program. Madeline teaches 14 five-year-olds in a junior kindergarten class (a class between pre-kindergarten and kindergarten) in a church related private school for girls. She has been teaching for 26 years and has a master's degree and is in her early fifties. There are about 750 children in this school, but only one class at this grade level. Patricia has taught kindergarten for 21 years in a suburban public school. She is in her fifties and has a bachelor's degree. There are 18 children in her class, including one child with Down Syndrome and two with Autism. There are 6 kindergarten classrooms in this school of approximately 700 children.

Pam and Rose are both first grade teachers in the same county school system. Pam is in her late forties and has been teaching for 21 years. She has a bachelor's degree and teaches in a school with approximately 550 students and 5 first grade classrooms. Rose has a master's degree, has just turned thirty and has been teaching for 6 years. Her school was newly renovated to accommodate more than 800 students with 6 classrooms at the first grade level.

Unfortunately, no school represented an inner-city setting; however, the experience of teachers working with children of poverty was addressed by both Rose and Pam. Their schools enroll a significant population of rural or transitionally rural families. "Transitionally rural" refers to communities that are experiencing an increase in subdivision development, but still have many families living on small farms and in mobile home communities. The standard of living for many families in these schools is near or below the poverty level with many children qualifying for free or reduced lunches. At the same time, a number of middle to upper-middle class families also attend Rose's school.

Virginia teaches second grade in a church affiliated private school in a suburban area. There are two second grade classrooms in this school of approximately 200 children. She has 17 children in her class. Virginia has been teaching for 6 years as a certified teacher but has more years of experience as an assistant teacher at the preschool level. She is in her fifties and has a master's degree.

Hillary is also a second grade teacher, with a similar population of children in a nearby public school. She is in her late forties, has a bachelor's degree and has been teaching for 12 years. Her class size is currently 19. There are approximately 600 students in this primary level school. Hillary and Virginia both teach in so-called "portable" classrooms, outside the main school building.

Betty teaches in a self-contained special education classroom within a public school. This classroom has 13 children whose particular needs (IEPS) require smaller group size and more individualized instruction and attention. Most often, Betty has a class of 6 to 8 year olds. This year she moved along with her students and her students

now range in age from 8 to 10 years old. Since she was particularly eager to participate in the study and her children were mainly performing work on first and second grade levels, it seemed appropriate to include her point of view.

*Collecting the Data*

Informed consent was obtained from each participant through the use of a standardized form (see Appendix B). The purpose of the research, the format (audio taped and open-ended) of the interview, and the promise of anonymity were explained prior to beginning each interview.

All participants selected their choice of a location for the interview. This procedure was selected to allow the participants maximum comfort and an opportunity to remain in familiar surroundings. Two participants selected my office or a familiar conference room, while the remaining six participants requested to have the interview take place in their own classrooms, utilizing the child-sized tables and chairs of their daily life. In most cases, being in the comfort of their own classrooms, also afforded the teachers the opportunity of retrieving artifacts from within the classroom to illustrate their points. (Each time this happened, the interviewer momentarily panicked as the participants spontaneously stood up and walked away from the microphone, leaving the interviewer frantically trying to write their comments verbatim and then appreciatively receive the proffered sample of a child's work or teacher's plan. These small gaps may be spotted throughout the transcripts.)

Most of the interviews, at the request of the teachers, took place in the late afternoon after school was dismissed. Each one concluded when the participant indicated that she had nothing more to add. Generally, as the interview seemed to be naturally

concluding, I offered a summary to the participant, pausing frequently to offer her an opportunity to clarify or expand an idea. Only when she seemed satisfied that she was sufficiently understood, was the interview over.

Establishing a sense of mutual respect is an essential aspect of phenomenological interviews. I was not there as the university expert but as a colleague and teacher who was extremely interested in their experiences. In each case, I explained my personal investment in teaching and my own 30 plus years in the classroom as a way to establish initial rapport with the teachers. I would begin our conversation by recognizing their long day of teaching and I always brought bottles of cold water for each of us, and a "special treat for their ride home" (brownies, candy or fruit). This, and my gratitude, was their only compensation for participating. Many teachers, however, said they truly appreciated being given the luxury of the time to think about their practices and of being listened to with appreciation and respect. They saw that as compensation for their time.

Each interview began with the same opening request, "Please talk about some specific times when you were aware of making decisions for your classroom." In all cases, the participants then began talking. Their interests dictated the direction of the interview. I followed carefully, making a few written notes to help me keep track of the ideas and to remind myself of points that might need clarification but at the same time, remaining mindful of the need to keep the interview as a meaningful dialogue between two interested co-participants. Hence, I was also aware of the conventions we all utilize when engaged in a rich conversation – nodding, agreeing in understanding but without judgment, supportively repeating a key word, and asking for clarification when the meaning of a phrase or action was not clear.

Pollio et al (1997) warns against asking “why” questions since “such questions shift the dialogue away from describing an experience to more abstract, theoretical discussions” (p. 30). Rather, I requested the participants to “tell me a specific time when that might happen”, always encouraging them to describe the experience in as much depth and detail as possible. I also attempted to use the participants’ own words when seeking clarification or expansion of an idea (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). In most interviews, the participant asked if she were responding as I “wanted”. In each situation, I reassured the participant that I was interested in whatever she wanted to discuss.

Following each interview, the audiotape was transcribed by me or a paid assistant. The assistant understood the seriousness of confidentiality and anonymity. She only knew the pseudonym of each participant. I personally reviewed each transcript against the original tape making sure of the accuracy of the transcription and that all possibly identifiable information was removed or altered.

### *Data Analysis*

Making sense of the hundreds of pages of textual data that resulted from the interviews is a complex and challenging task. It began with this basic understanding:

> to accomplish the task of describing what other people are aware of requires a method, that accepts from the very beginning, the perspectival nature of human experience and the fact that different people may be talking about similar experiences when using different words and different words when describing similar experiences. (Pollio et al, 1997, p. 28)

The first step in this process was a careful reading of the entire transcribed interview, often called the "protocol" of each participant. This immersion in the complete text of the interview allowed me to construct a sense of the experience as a whole for each participant. Through the language and experience of the phenomenological interviews, serious and systematic attempts were made to create a shared understanding of what is significant about the lifeworld experience of the participants. Since participants select only a few events to describe in specific detail, the events chosen are likely to be personally significant for each of them. Although these are the "stand out" incidents, they are not thought to be atypical of a person's experiences in that setting. According to Kracker and Pollio (2003), "Each situation chosen is thought to be a mnemonic nexus serving to connect a set of memories having a common meaning for the person in that situation" (p. 1105). Since these events are the ones that deserved detailed discourse, they hold the richness of the experience for the individual, and, as such, their meanings most likely will become transparent as they are repeated as connecting threads throughout the protocol. The first reading served to refresh the researcher's awareness of these readily apparent themes.

David Linge, in the introduction to *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Gadamer, 1976), calls attention to the depth and openness with which this process of interacting with the text must take place. He states:

> The dialogical character of interpretation is subverted when the interpreter concentrates on the other person as such rather than on the subject matter – when he looks *at* the other person, as it were, rather than *with* him at what the other attempts to communicate. Thus the hermeneutical conversation begins when the

> interpreter genuinely opens himself to the text by listening to it and allowing it to assert its viewpoint. It is precisely in confronting the otherness of the text – in hearing its challenging viewpoint…that the reader's own prejudices are thrown into relief and thus come to critical self consciousness. (p. xx – xxi)

The next step was for the researcher to bring the individual protocols to a "hermeneutic circle" for analysis. The hermeneutic circle or interpretative group consists of persons committed to understanding the lived world (Pollio, et. al., 1997). The interpretive groups this researcher worked with are composed of faculty and graduate students from many departments and fields of study, who accept the responsibility of supporting fellow researchers by making themselves available for the systematic study of protocols (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

When a protocol is brought to this group, it is read aloud by two group members, each taking the role of either the participant or interviewer. The reading stops at the end of a thought unit or whenever a group member has a question or sees something noteworthy in the text. These ideas are then discussed by the group in the attempt to answer these basic questions: "Just what did the participant say?" "How specifically did the participant describe this aspect of her experience?" "What connections can be drawn between this statement and previous statements?" The members of this group grapple with the text until summary statements can be made about this participant's experience. These summations are suggested by the text itself and use the language of the text (Pollio et al., 2006). Since the phenomenological method seeks to develop a thematic structure from the verbal description of the experience, this method allows the richness and profundity of human reality to become apparent (Polkinghorne, 1989).

The interpretative group also functions to focus the interpretations. The members are aware of the research topic. They have read and thematized the researcher's bracketing interview and are therefore aware of personal "biases" in interpretation (Pollio et al., 2006). They also serve to check each for other biases and intrusions. "Collisions with the other's horizons makes us aware of assumptions so deep-seated that they would otherwise remain unnoticed" (Gadamer, 1976, p. xxi). The frequent refrain around the interpretative table is "Where does it say that in the text?" – always refocusing and redirecting the discussion back to the words of the participants.

This interpretative group has strict rules of procedure; group members agree to participate on a regular basis, thereby providing continuity. Confidentially statements are signed and their importance frequently discussed. They also cooperate, in a sensitive and caring way, in the effort to hold their biases in abeyance and to accept the cajoling of the group to recognize when insights offered may be coming from their own interests rather than from the protocol. This process helps to keep everyone, especially the researcher, alert to the constant need to reference and re-reference the text as the authority on the experience.

In the next step of the process, the researcher, in a process called the horizonalization of the data (Creswell, 1998), looks for commonalities across the interviews (Pollio et al, 2006). Global themes or significant statements are listed, giving each one equal worth. These statements are further collapsed into meaning units, a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements supported by textual language. It is from these meaning units that the researcher begins the process of writing the textual description of

the experiences, and using verbatim examples to illustrate and support the structural descriptions (Creswell, 1998).

The researcher continues to collapse these summary statements through a recursive process between text and explication. At this point in the process, the researcher's own creativity and imagination come forth as the meanings of the investigated experience, in the language of the participants, are made relevant to the discipline through connections drawn by the researcher. This final thematic structure is again shared with the interpretive group for reactions and clarifications. The result should be a clear, precise, and systematic thematic structure, which is finally expressed in a textually rich report that describes the "essence" or nature of the experience as lived by the participants (Polkinghorne, 1989). The themes and their supporting specific textual interpretative data (page and line numbers and direct quotes of words and phrases from each text) are brought back to the interpretative group for their final review (Pollio, 2004).

In most cases, time is not available nor is it necessary to analyze all interviews in the interpretive group. Often themes become obvious and redundant, and easily, but still rigorously, can be recognized by the researcher. If an interview is not analyzed by the whole group, discrepancies in interpretation would be caught when the final thematic presentation was presented to the group. For this study, all or part of all interviews were analyzed following this procedure.

### *Presentation of Results*

The results or findings of phenomenological research are the descriptions of the essential structure of the experience being investigated (Polkinghorne, 1989). The

purpose of phenomenology is not to explain or justify actions, but to describe them in sufficient detail such that their universal nature is recognizable (Pollio et al, 1997). The experience or phenomenon will have been adequately described when "the description reawakens or shows us the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper manner" (van Manen, 1990, p. ). Since the essence or universal structure uncovered by the thick descriptions and themes that use the participants' own language resonate with readers, a connection of familiarity can be made. Readers can make the "a-ha" of recognition of a thought process, an emotion, a struggle, an action. This recognition enables the readers to move closer to understanding their own experiences and those of others.

The power of this process lies in the phenomenological understanding that the "sphere of experience" that occurs at the intersection of person and world has a basic organizational structure with contents that appear as meaning. This intersection of persons and world is not chaotic confusion; rather it contains differentiated structures that provide clarity, meaning, and discrimination. The task of phenomenological analysis is to search for those processes of consciousness that make such structures apparent (Polkinghorne, 1989). The task of the final report is to make those apparent structures and connections available to the reader with clear and compelling examples and implications.

According to Gadamer, (1976)

> To understand a text is to come to understand oneself in a kind of dialogue. This contention is confirmed by the fact that the concrete dealing with a text yields understanding only when what is said in text begins to find expression in the interpreter's own language. Interpretation belongs to the essential unity of

> understanding. One must take up into himself what is said to him in such a fashion that it speaks and finds an answer in the words of his own language. (p. 57)

One powerful way through which the process of understandings and interpretations are shared with the reader is through the use of the participants own words. By sharing the very language used by the participants, the reader is invited into the interpretative process. In this study, when I quote the participants, those are the words of the teachers as they were spoken by them. The thinking pauses and self corrections of their everyday speech remain, unless they seem unnecessarily cumbersome and therefore distracting to the reader. Ellipses (…) are used in this text as expected, to indicate that one or more words have been left out. Usually this is to eliminate repetition and make the shared text a more reasonable length. The short pauses of our everyday speech are not always indicated as they tend to break the flow of the teachers' words; however, longer pauses where the participants actually stop talking are marked with the word "pause." Occasionally a word will be italicized in order to keep the particularly strongly stressed emphases of the teachers' tone of voice. At times, the illustrative passages of text included in the findings are lengthy. This is a purposeful decision offered to readers; enough of the participants' own words are provided to allow readers to immerse themselves in the participants' flow of language and thought structure.

### *Research Rigor*

Phenomenological research, such as other forms of research, must adhere to the tenets of its form in order to be taken seriously. As with all research, researchers within the phenomenological paradigm must rigorously follow its conceptual bases, select

careful samples according the methodological norms and criteria, systematically and openly interpret the data that was collected by established strategies for the discipline, and share the findings in the recognized format. Deliberate attention to these details strengthens the value of the research and the worthiness of the findings. Similarly, phenomenological researchers must address issues of validity, reliability, and generalizability.

Validity, in research terms, generally questions whether the research investigated what it intended to investigate. Within the methodological parameters of phenomenology this question is raised at three points of the study: the wording of the question, the selection of the participants, and the faithfulness to the participants' experience within the interpretation of the data. Essentially, each phenomenological research project is questioned as to the extent to which the interviews and the interpretations investigate and clarify the meaning of the life-world themes of those interviewed (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Trustworthiness is sometimes used as a synonym for validity in qualitative research (Glesne, 1999). It is strengthened within phenomenological methodology through the deliberate use of the hermeneutic circle. The circular action of using a hermeneutic group to (a) question and challenge the appropriateness of one's question (Will the question enable participants to fully explore their lived experiences on this topic?); (b) interpret the researcher's bracketing interview; (c) read and interpret the text; and (d) consider the consistency of the final themes. All add depth of understanding and challenge potentially biased interpretations (Pollio et al, 1997). An additional measure of

“validity” within this methodology pertains to the findings. Are they “plausible and illuminating” (Thomas and Pollio, 2002)? “The more rigorous and appropriate the methodology, the more plausible and illuminating the results are likely to be” (Pollio et al, 1997, p.55). The final validation of the research will be in the minds and hearts of the reader. If the reader is able to understand the experience more deeply and more completely, the research will have answered its intended question (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Another measure of the rigor of a research project is its reliability. Since no two interviews will ever be the same, the question of reliability must be answered in some other way than exact replication (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The themes of a study, if they represent shared lived experiences, should be replicated if the study were repeated. Since the dialogic interview depends on the sensitive rapport that was established between the participant and the interviewer, as well as on the nuances and particulars of experience, it is reasonable to expect subtle differences in expression of the same topic and lived experience. The fact that themes become redundant across transcripts is also a measure of the likelihood of reproducing similar descriptions in another study. Again, going back to the purpose of hermeneutic phenomenology will clarify this question; which is to make the essence of the lived experience of individuals become accessible to others. As Thomas and Pollio state, “One crucial test of any study is its relevance and value in bringing about new insights regarding the phenomenon being studied” (p. 40).

Generalizability in phenomenological research is not achieved by the breadth or diversity of its sample. Polkinghorne (1989) argues that the purpose of phenomenological research is to explore the structure of lived experiences and it is in the applicability of

these descriptions that phenomenological research should be judged. When the reader expresses an empathic appreciation for the lives of others, the research has served its purpose. According to Thomas and Pollio (2002), “When and if a description rings true, each specific reader who derives insight from the results of a phenomenological study may be thought to extend its generalizability” (p. 42).

### *Summary*

The task of understanding the many actions involved in the teaching process seems at times like that of the blind men trying to describe the elephant. Taken separately each description is incomplete and superficial, yet taken together each description helps integrate the parts of the whole, contributing depth and breadth to the total understanding. Hopefully, through the increased knowledge of the lived experiences of teachers making classroom decisions, the contribution of this research will be the generation of additional layers to our collective knowledge about decision making within the action called teaching.

# Chapter IV

## Findings and Analysis

The teachers in this study taught in public and non-public school settings. They taught in preschools, primary schools, and elementary schools. Some taught in schools that allowed teachers incredible flexibility and freedom and others in schools with mandated time schedules, curriculum content, and teaching strategies. One very interesting overall finding that emerged from reviewing the transcripts had to do with the teachers' styles of talking about their experiences. They were all eager to talk and all talked for at least one hour. Decision making for these teachers was not a series of discreet events, rather, it seemed to form a gestalt in which time, content and process merged. A few teachers seemed to have a practiced ability to untangle these processes and therefore seem more articulate especially about their pedagogical decisions. Consequently, although these themes were found across the participants, some voices may be heard more often in these analyses. This difference will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

From the analysis of the eight transcripts in this study, three major themes were found to describe teachers' awareness when making decisions for their classrooms. Essentially, as the teachers talked of their experiences, they were aware of *(1) the multiple facets of the process of deciding, (2) the self as decision-maker,* and *(3) the constraints and possibilities found in individual teaching settings.*

The first theme, *the multiple facets of the process of deciding*, revealed that the teachers were aware of the complexities of making decisions even as they were involved

in the very acts of decision making. For these teachers, the process of decision-making was experienced as constant, multi-focused, and multidimensional. The process of deciding was experienced as being enacted on varying levels of conscious awareness, “spontaneous,” “intuitive,” and “in the flow” as well as reflected upon and “agonized over.” In addition, while the beginning of a decision-making cycle was often difficult to determine, the teachers were also aware that decision-making was instigated by something (e.g., a child’s perplexed look, a time pressure) and a recursive and responsive process was a part of the continued experience. The needs of the children often started the decision making cycle, but time factors and mandated expectations were also among the demands that fit into the process.

In the second theme, *the teachers’ awareness of self as decision-maker*, the teachers described themselves as confident and with an empowering acceptance of their responsibility to make the decisions needed. They experienced themselves as acting within a framework bound by their personal beliefs and values, their personal knowledge of children, and their pedagogical options. In the third theme, *the constraints and possibilities found in their individual teaching settings,* the teachers’ awareness moved to their settings, the contexts within which the decisions were made. For some, the setting was experienced as either a place of support or an unobtrusive and barely mentioned background. For others, the setting was much more figural with many rules, mandates, and other people affecting their decision-making possibilities.

In this chapter, I will use the teachers’ own words to describe how the teachers actually experienced these efficacious, figural selves making multifaceted decisions against the ground of possibilities and constraints defined by their school contexts. As I

attempt to unpackage each of these themes so that we can come closer to understanding the experiences, I will separate them as if they were distinct entities. Of course, the teachers did not experience categories or distinctions. They never thought of themselves as a figure against a ground. They simply described themselves and their experiences as always occurring within their own personal contexts. They simply lived with young children, with all the recursive urgency implied in deciding how to teach today, day after day. Occasionally as the teachers described their experiences, they shifted their tone of voice to show strong emphases. This tone is indicated in the text with italics.

### *Theme I: Teachers Experience the Multiple Facets of the Process of Deciding*

The teachers were aware, often very aware, of the act of making decisions. This awareness seemed to encompass two broad ideas: the complexity of the act and the process of the act. When the teachers described the complexity of making decisions, the experiences fell into the following categories: (a) the constancy of the need for making decisions, (b) the multi-focused content of the decisions and (c) the multidimensionality of the kinds of decisions made. When they described the decision-making process, the teachers were most often aware of dual factors, specifically, their varying degrees of conscious awareness while engaged in the process of deciding and the series of interactive actions forming the process. This section of the findings will explore these themes more fully.

#### *The Constancy of Decision Making*

When the teachers began to describe their awareness of making decisions and of the multiple facets of the act of decision-making, constancy proved to be something about which the teachers were aware. They described this constancy as "decision-making…that

is what I do all day, every day." This concept of decision-making as continually occurring and reoccurring "every minute of the day" and as being persistently present in "every aspect of every day," was so powerful that each teacher actually began her interview with a reference to the time spent making decisions. For example:

> Virginia: Well, obviously that's because you make a decision every step of the way. You have to make decisions on every moment of where the kids go, where the kid has been, what you can do to get him to the next spot.

> Betty: Oh wow, that is all the time. I think especially with the special needs population that we have, um, decision making is so spur of the moment, all the time, as far as with the academics and even, in fact, for social instruction….

Madeline adds her awareness that classroom decisions are made over the summer and at other times, "even when the children aren't there."

> You know what? I am aware of how constant it is. For a lot of these little bitty decisions… for a lot of these constant, all day long, making decisions … that I make like all the time. There are decisions when the children aren't even there, decisions in terms of what am I going to do with the environment....

Another teacher, Hillary, extends her awareness of the constancy of decision-making with some questions she asks herself about juggling time between school, committees, and her personal life.

> I could stay here all night and all day and still have a ton left to do. We have to make a decision each night. When is enough, enough? When do I look at my family and say it is time for you? That is very hard and I think that is one of the hardest things to do as a new teacher. When to say no and when is it okay to say no? Committees, when is it okay to say no? When it is just too much? My first five years I think I did every kind of committee there could be because I thought that was what I was supposed to do. I still feel guilty if I say no. …There is time away from home and on the weekends, I've got to make the decision, okay lesson planning, you know, when is that?... Do I take my Saturday or my Sunday afternoon and that is when I do my lesson plans?

Interestingly, none of the eight participants seemed to be complaining as they talked of these instances of constancy. Every teacher simply stated this awareness in a

matter-of-fact tone; but Hillary's attempt at some humor in the following quote, perhaps covering up a sense of being overwhelmed, is possibly a feeling that many of these teachers have experienced, even though she was the only one to give it voice.

> I think my mind is constantly working. I have never really thought about it like that. Sometimes I don't feel like I have one [a mind], maybe that is the problem. It is constantly making decisions and it is shutting down (chuckles).

This sense of being aware of the constant need to make decisions all day, every day began each interview and was repeated frequently throughout the interviews. This sense of constancy was the single most pervasive theme found.

*The Multi-focused Content within the Process of Decision Making*

In addition to the sense of constancy, the teachers were aware of the varied and complex content of the decisions that faced them each day. The three topics about which they made the majority of their decisions included: (a) trying to meet the needs of individual children, (b) figuring out the intricacies of curricular content, and (c) ways of adapting teaching strategies (pedagogical processes). These three topics will be discussed in some detail in other sections within this chapter. However, in this section with its focus on the teachers' awareness of the complexity of the decision-making process, I will pay particular attention to how aware teachers were that they had to make decisions on many varied topics daily.

The teachers reported that the content of the decisions changed rapidly and that they often made several decisions simultaneously. For example, Betty described deciding on a behavioral management strategy for Jonathon, while thinking about the next reading question to ask Joshua (pedagogical decision), while deciding to keep the reading

instruction going for a few extra minutes for all the children (time and group management decisions).

Hillary, a second grade teacher, was particularly aware of the numerous kinds of decisions she made on a regular basis. The following lengthy example, in fact, speaks of the kind of lists that all the teachers mentioned. Hillary simply collected them all together in this almost breathless flash of a few moments of her morning. It is an exhausting demonstration of the expansive array of topics about which she is aware when making decisions.

> It is little things too, not just curriculum which *is* all the time, but it could be a parent who needs to see me at 8:00 in the morning but yet I need to start morning work…. I would need to make a decision. Do I stop and talk to this woman who really needs to speak to me or do I nicely tell her this is an inconvenient time, please call me and we will meet some other time?
>
> …There are little things that can make or break your day. It might be going on a field trip, what field trip is going to benefit these kids the most? What field trip works with our curriculum? Is it worth all the paperwork we will have to do to go on a field trip and are we going to go on more than one?
>
> …Are these children ready for a test? The pacing guide says they are but yet I know how the children are and sometimes what it says in the guide is not necessarily what is in the classroom. So I need to make a decision. Will I test them according to the pacing guide this Friday or will I give them an extra week and make sure the majority of the children do understand the material before I move on and cut into the second area of study? It is constant; I could talk to you for days.
>
> What about the video that goes with the curriculum? …Does this video have some meat? What can I do with this video after they have seen it? …What kind of activity can I incorporate with that video? …
>
> With a (university) student intern, what is she ready or he ready to teach? When should I let go and step back so she can learn? … I want it to be the best experience ever and so there is sometimes where I step back and I don't say anything and normally I would step in. ...Every year I go through this time, usually they let me know and again it is just a decision …okay, I think they are ready. We are going to try that.
>
> It is everything. I could even go into what I am going to wear that morning. We have center day, which we had today, and there is a lot of movement and we do it all afternoon and … it is like, okay, will I be on the floor? You know simple things like that.

> Also, what parents will I ask for centers? I am so blessed. I have some wonderful, wonderful parents, moms and dads, grandparents that are awesome. …. So I have to make the decision. Do I invite these particular people and I take the risk of again upsetting somebody if I don't?
>
> …. Another decision: I might have a child that is having a bad day… a child who had many issues… When did this child's behavior affect the others? ... When, when did I take and remove this child from the room and put him with a principal knowing that this child would miss a whole day's worth of work? …So that was a decision, that one particular year that was a daily decision. …
>
> I use a ticket system [behavior management strategy] in the classroom and I have to make a decision every time I need to take a ticket. … Does this child need to lose the ticket? … For some, the negative is better, for some the positive is and you can tell with a few they are just devastated that they have lost a ticket and they will do anything. …
>
> Going back to centers, the decision has to be made, is this an easy center, is it an average center, is it a challenging center? Is it a little bit of all, will all different levels of learning benefit from this one center or will just one type of group benefit? If so, maybe I need to go back and look at it again….
>
> Okay, what kind of fundraisers will we be involved in? …We did have the Tsunami that happened recently and we were given the choice to raise money if we wanted to with our own classroom doing our own thing, doing our own charity. I had to research the charity because this was relatively new and I didn't want to raise money or have parents raise money for something that wasn't legit…
>
> We have a brand new math series. What children are going to benefit from intervention? What children will benefit from going to a more challenging activity? What child is average now but you see the glimmer?

In this list, Hillary spoke of decisions regarding individual children and the class as a whole. She spoke of parents, of fundraising, of curriculum pacing, and of classroom activities such as center work. These decisions included the selection and timing of assessment, and the use of supplemental materials such as videos and field trips. She made timing decisions – this week or next week, now or later. She made several interpersonal decisions: whether to talk with this parent or not, how to scaffold the student intern; which parents will effectively support the center activities. She made behavior management decisions for a troubled child and for individuals with differing learning styles and temperaments.

Several of these sub-themes, especially the pedagogical issues and interpersonal relationships, will be revisited in later sections of this chapter, but the importance of highlighting them now is twofold. First, the content of the decisions made by teachers was not neat and tidy. It was inclusive and varied. Second, the diverse content of decisions required that teachers have personal expertise in multiple areas. These areas included: knowledge of curriculum content and curricular scope and sequence; skill in developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships; skill in using effective behavior management strategies; knowledge of strategies for responding to multiple learning styles; skill in effective planning and organizational strategies; and so on. In short, the complex and varied content of these decisions required complex and varied responses from teachers, and teachers were aware of this demand.

*The Multi-dimensional Aspects of the Process of Decision Making*

A third aspect of decision making as experienced by the teachers dealt with the dimensionality of making decisions. Dimensionality refers to layers of complexity that existed within the process of making decisions. One aspect of this dimensionality describes the way teachers experienced decision-making as being intricately interconnected, with some factors being more important than other factors, even when making what appeared to be similar decisions, but at different moments. Another aspect of dimensionality refers to the scope of the decisions, what the teachers experienced as "little in-the-moment" decisions and "big-picture" decisions.

Cecilia provided a summary thought on the interwoven nature of this multi-dimensional aspect of decision-making when she said:

> …and that is what makes it challenging and interesting, because in most teaching decisions I think there is not just one factor going into the decision. There are lots of factors and probably lots of great solutions, but you are going for the best one, so you have got to kind of put in lots of different factors or layers into the decision. …but it is the combination of several factors, even if one kind of becomes the more important one, which I guess is probably part of the decision-making process, because I am probably trying to figure out in my head, which is the more important factor, which one needs to guide the decision more than the other factor. (Pause) And a lot of the time, I think that the decision, as I think they should, has so much to do with the individual child that it is concerning at the time. And so, with any decision I make, I am going to have a few different factors… to help me make this decision in this moment.

Cecilia explores these factors later in the interview and names them as the collective of time concerns, individual personalities, the classroom materials and current goals and objectives, the environmental mood and tone of the classroom at that point, and "what I want the child to learn as a result of this experience." Clearly, what she is describing is the intricately woven nature of decision-making. Sometimes these threads are more predominant and at other times they slip back to form the background and other threads must be pulled to the foreground.

The second aspect of this idea of the multiple dimensions that exist within the process of making decisions deals with the scope of the decisions. Several teachers described their awareness of making small decisions about an immediate need and also making larger decisions, representative of a broader range. The relative importance of larger, big picture decisions will be discussed at length later in this section.

In-the-moment decisions were described by the teachers as "spontaneous and fast," "split-second" decision-making, made while in the act of deciding. Cecilia, more so than any other teacher, was aware of her experience of making these in-the-moment decisions.

> It wasn't something I really noticed ahead of time. I kind of noticed it in an instant and, well, it is not that I noticed it in an instant. It is that I made the decision kind of *as I was* noticing it…. I kind of think I noticed it because I made the decision to change it.

In addition, the teachers described these decisions as often taking place when "what is happening now is not working." In the following example, Cecilia described how the scope of the decision-making interacts with the multi-layered nature of the decisions and it all happens in "two seconds."

> The little in-the-moment, split-second decision making about, you know, things are getting chaotic and I need to do something or whatever is happening now is not working, so I need to adjust my teaching … and the little in-the-moment decisions … because that process is so fast and in turmoil and whenever you are making those decisions in the moment, you are putting together hundreds of different pieces of information and experiences and aspects of life as a teacher to make a decision that only takes two seconds sometimes.

She continued to contrast these rapid decisions with the more complex and reflective decisions that she makes during the "big-picture" decisions:

> An example of a big-picture kind of issue, that is a kind of classroom policy that you have to turn over and over in your mind and think about what's on this side and what's on that side and how do we arrive at this decision and you take into account what we know has been happening, what is the pattern here and what is the reason for the pattern… I mean, I think my philosophy has a lot to do with it. … and I guess the big-picture things are … big-picture things because they are not such easy answers. That is how they become big picture things, because if we knew exactly how to respond to them in the moment, then we would have responded to them in the moment and there won't be any issue. So I guess it only becomes a big-picture thing when we have a dilemma about it and then, I want to think about what is our responsibility in terms of education in regards to this situation.

Most of the teachers were not as articulate about the nuances of the dimensionality of the decision-making process as Cecilia, but they spoke of them in other ways. For example, Virginia was aware of how the in-the-moment decisions supported her big-picture decisions. In one example, she spoke of a big-picture decision about

creating a sense of community within the classroom, a community where all the children are "participating members." She described her awareness of how her in-the-moment decisions were in alignment with this classroom philosophy decision and illustrated this by describing her intentional selection of children's books on Alaska and the Arctic regions. These books represented various reading levels but they were all about the common social studies topic, thereby allowing all the children to be participating, contributing members of the classroom community by researching the same topic on their own reading skill level. She also gave similar examples with spelling, math and writing content where her big-picture decisions influenced her smaller daily decisions.

Big-picture decisions often were associated with long term effects. According to the teachers, these were the decisions that "evolved" over time and were often driven by values and beliefs. That is not to say that in-the-moment decision were not based on values and beliefs. Rather, that the teachers were more aware of referring to values and beliefs when they discussed big-picture decisions. This point is revisited and discussed in the interpretation of the findings in the next chapter.

While there was little affect evident in the teachers' discussion of the constancy of decision making or the multi-focused content of the decisions, the teacher's personal feelings became increasingly more evident when they talked about big-picture decisions. For example, when Patricia spoke of her major decision to have children with special needs integrated into her classroom, long before this was mandated policy, she spoke of this decision as "a commitment," knowing it would have long term consequences for her and all the children. She said, "It is *really important* to me, to have a very inclusive and

diverse environment in my classroom … really a lot of totally different learning styles, different strengths and weaknesses."

In another instance, Madeline added the dimension of a kind of painfulness to her repeated reflections on some "big-picture" decisions:

> There are some monumental ones too…. There are some that I *agonize* over time. I mean, sort of, I have to evolve a decision. A decision has to evolve. Yeah, so there are some that I make …even over the summer….

She explained this idea with a lengthy description of a decision to set up two different pretend play areas in her classroom, a decision that took several years of trial and error to finally take the shape she felt met the children's needs and interests.

Other teachers described their decisions to include certain curricular strategies into their daily program as long term decisions. Patricia, for example, spoke of her decision to use the SMART™ gym program first thing in the morning with her kindergarten class. She felt this focused physical activity helped the children to learn during the regular class time. "When you get back to the classroom, they are *on task*. They have had their exercise; they are ready to go. ... They are ready to roll." Rose provided yet another example with her lengthy description of daily center activities. She felt that having the structure in place with its clear rotation of tasks and choices made the day easier, more flexible and interesting for the children and her teaching.

Finally, Cecilia added one more aspect that she was aware of when making "big-picture" decisions. For her, the "big-picture" decisions were about "what I want the children to really learn from this experience." For Cecilia, the big-picture decision helped her figure out how to respond to a child who is hitting another child. Because she wants the children to learn that negotiating personal needs and wants is an important life skill,

she does not just punish the child who hits. She makes many "instinctual" decisions designed to help both children become more effective in these interpersonal situations, which is her real goal.

In summary, the teachers were aware of the multidimensionality of their decisions. In particular, they experienced quick, fast-paced decisions and long term decisions. The in-the-moment decisions were often made before or while they were noticing the problem, while "big picture" or policy decisions tended to take longer to make, or perhaps to "evolve" and they were acknowledged as examples of values and belief systems and often framed the direction of other, smaller decisions. Teachers certainly were aware of multiple aspects involved in the process of making decisions and of the processes involved in making those decisions. They keenly experienced the ubiquitous nature of decision-making, as well as how varied, multidimensional, and interwoven the content of the decisions was, regardless of the scope or speed/timing of the decision making.

*Awareness of the Decision Making Process*

In addition to these multiple facets of the process of decision-making, teachers were also aware of the processes involved in making decisions. When describing these processes, they were often aware of dual factors: (a) their varying degrees of conscious awareness while engaged in the act of deciding, and (b) the interactive stimuli that initiated decision-making processes.

*Conscious awareness while engaged in the act of deciding.* Some of the teachers tried to describe their awareness of actually making a decision to act. Other teachers were more aware of the actual decisions. Those who did describe their awareness of actually

making decisions seemed to describe mainly those in-the-moment acts of deciding. For these kinds of decisions, they were aware of time issues. What happened before, after, and simultaneously? They also were aware of some actions they called "intuitive' actions. Cecelia, again the most articulate about her processes of being aware of the experience of deciding, wondered aloud if she noticed something before acting, or while acting. She debated with herself as to whether her actions were unplanned, instinctive practices. In the following excerpt, Cecilia seemed to be attempting to understand this process of deciding even as she was being interviewed. The field notes indicate that she is speaking slowly and deliberately as if constructing her own meaning while sharing her experiences.

> It wasn't something I really noticed ahead of time. I kind of noticed it in an instant and, well, it is not that I noticed it in an instant. It is that I made the decision kind of *as I was* noticing it ... I kind of think I noticed it because I made the decision to change it. …Actually, it was one of those things that I was kind of watching five different things at once … and so I wasn't really noticing in my head ... yeah, I think I notice things first and make a decision, but probably in those teaching moments, it is kind of happening simultaneously … or before *I* really acknowledge, before *I* really recognize that I have noticed something, I am already changing it … but I definitely think that has gotten faster. I have gotten faster at that process as I have been teaching. I think that I probably am more; probably it just used to take a lot longer to figure out the process and to think through the process…

In this example, Cecilia was aware that the act of deciding was often convoluted and intricately tangled. It was not the straightforward "I noticed and then I decided" process she initially thought teaching would be. Rather, she was aware that sometimes she is not so "aware" of deciding, that sometimes she decides before she "notices" the problem, or that she initiated the act of deciding. Definitely, she was aware that she often acts before she has deliberated on a decision as she explained in this excerpt:

> …because I do a lot of reflecting after the fact now, even if it is just two seconds later, whereas the process used to be much more clearly defined in my mind as separated steps. I would notice something and then go through the process of figuring, okay, what are my possible options here, taking apart those options, making a choice about them and then acting and now, (chuckling) not that that was a ten minute process, but more like 30 second process probably. Whereas now, I think I notice things and because I have a big bank of ideas for whatever the situation is and I have a lot more experience in choosing and going with it, I think the noticing, well, obviously the noticing happens a tiny bit before the decision but the entire thing happens so fast, it feels like it happens at the same time, like I am acting at the same time that I am noticing something….

She concluded her reflection on her own process by stating that decision-making has gotten faster with experience, that it is no longer a series of discrete steps and that it has become an internalized process where actions and thoughts are not separate.

> I have internalized that process, that it is not a conscious act any more, that it is just a part of my thinking and how it works and my thoughts just get translated into action, I guess, quickly, but that the more experience you have in a classroom of two year olds your actions must be fast, so once you can get those actions and options to be fast, that is the strategy you want to use, so (shrug) that is what I do. I have much better results that way…

Madeline also referred to her awareness that many of her decisions, especially the in-the-moment decisions have a kind of intuitive quality to them, even though she shied away from calling them "intuitive.'

> It is, I am not going to say it is intuitive, because it isn't. It's very, I'll be very conscious, but it flows like intuition. Do you know what I am saying? So, hmmm, it feels like intuition, in the sense that I, that I can also be doing something else sometimes at the same time

Later she added more to this discussion by sharing her awareness of an intuitive moment:

> Yeah, they [decisions] feel intuitive but I am realizing that they are quite cognitive. It is just because they flow and because they don't interrupt. Making them doesn't necessarily stop everything I'm doing and okay I am making a decision now. It is just like instantaneous. For example, I am really busy with a little group working on something and a child comes up to me with this awesome idea or observation or something like that. I have to make a decision right then,

> you know, what I am going to do about being in two places at once. That is the kind of decision that seems intuitive.
> Interviewer: Between which of these two really good choices, do I want to go with?
> Madeline: Exactly. You have to make some kind of creative solution quickly so nobody loses their moment.

It seemed as if both Madeline and Cecilia were struggling with the idea that intuitive might mean "not cognitive" or unplanned actions. Pam referred to this process as "teaching is automatic. It is go, go, go." For them, it seemed as if their actions were so automatized that they can be enacted without conspicuous conscious thought. They are describing decisions that can be applied spontaneously, probably because they were actions that they have repeated many times in many similar situations. Some of these decisions may fit, in fact, into the category of routines or almost habits, those repetitious and familiar actions that hardly attract our attentions.

Interestingly, Madeline added more understanding of this aspect of decision-making when she explored her "intuitive" acting further by adding the word "flow" to her discussion. She described herself as being aware of engaging in the process of deciding while "in the flow of things," meaning while she was in the continuous stream of the ongoing actions, as in the sense of being completely involved in an activity for its own sake (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; , 1996); while at other times, she acts perhaps less intuitively, with more conscious thought, even to the point of agonizing over her decisions.

> Yeah, there is probably, there are some that I make in the flow of things and they vary to the degree that they are not entirely conscious, but they have the feel of intuition, and I probably make some intuitively as well and then there are some that I agonize over.

The other teachers did not name instinct or intuition during their interviews, but they did describe decisions that seemed to have the same feel as those described by these teachers. For example several of them, while discussing another aspect of their day, told of children not understanding something and their response was "and so I just…," indicating a repetitive or familiar action spontaneously used in the context of the moment. Patricia described this kind of action as the result of her experience of working with children "with these learning styles" over time, resulting in her knowledge of the children and the situation.

In contrast to these intuitive, in the flow, and/or perhaps routine decisions, the teachers were also aware of those decisions that took them longer to make. These were usually the big-picture decisions, those they reflected upon over time. Some of the features of these decisions have already been discussed and some other features will be discussed in the sections on decision-making with colleagues, and the role of values in the decision- making process.

*Awareness of the cycles of interaction.* Another aspect of the teachers' awareness of the process of making decisions included a cycle of interaction. During this iterative process of interaction, the teachers were aware of the multiple cues around them and their responses to these cues.

Frequently, the teachers discussed moments of being with the children in their classrooms during which they noticed how particular actions or cues offered by the children and provoked intentional decisions to respond to those cues. Madeline summed up her awareness of decision-making as a relational process in this way:

> It is a truly collaborative thing between the teacher and child. And you know, my observing, my trying to read what it is they are trying to do, either picking up on their, hmm, picking up and supporting their provocations of each other or offering them provocations, or not. And then seeing what happens, you know, starting to listen again.

Madeline was the only teacher to specifically address how she values this back and forth exchange of reading cues and using that information to form the next step. She was also the only teacher to use phrases and terms such as “a collaborative thing between the teacher and the child” and “offering provocations,” (a term from the municipal preschool programs of Reggio Emilia, Italy, meaning thought-provoking responses or suggestions. See Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1998) and “starting to listen again” to describe this interactive process between children and teacher. The other teachers basically experienced the same kind of catalytic, relational process. However, their examples were more embedded throughout their texts as parts of other incidents that they were discussing. Betty, for example, discussed her experiences with the individual children in her self-contained class and how she carefully monitored her interactions with each child, so the lessons could be modified as they proceeded through each day. Patricia spoke of how she noticed when children needed reminders during group time. In each situation, the teachers observed the behavior of the children, and either pondered a decision or instantaneously responded with some action. The teachers referred to those interactive responses as decisions.

For Madeline and some of the other teachers this interactive process seemed to consist of observing, reading cues, offering provocations and suggestions, and then reflecting on the results and continuing this often instantaneous and recursive cycle, again. For some of the teachers, it also included knowing beforehand the knowledge,

skills and dispositions the children of this age and stage of development were often ready to learn. Then the teachers looked for opportunities to offer those experiences. Madeline experienced this process in this way:

> I am always taking advantage of what comes up ... It is not that I am trying to fit something in so much, as … well, it is looking for my chance ... looking for my window, looking for when it is right, looking for when it is needed, looking for the opportunity. …Yeah, yeah, when the moment is right, when the children are ready, when they want it and when they are excited, when the need is there… when there is conflict and, and it is a great time to have the children see how they can talk through that. The day is full of opportunities like that. Because I do have filed away in my head, these ideas of what I would like them to learn. …

Sometimes but not always, the teachers were aware of the stimuli for the interactive process beginning their decision-making. Not surprisingly, they frequently described a sense of disequilibrium in the environment. Something was wrong, usually a child was in need, and some action was called for. Virginia described a moment when she looked at a child during a math assessment: "But one particular little girl had that panic look on her face, like "I don't know this.'" The look caused a reflective moment for Virginia, who then followed through with this action:

> It was the first time we had done the assessment and I said, "You know you are allowed to use the hundreds board." OOOHH. I mean her whole, I mean, her attitude changed. She was just able to do the whole thing.

This reflective awareness will be revisited again in the next section as the teachers described a recursive awareness that took place while making decisions. In these instances, some teachers were aware of reflecting on and evaluating their decisions while making them and at times, they were aware of themselves acting in a reflective manner.

In addition to the interaction with children, the teachers were also aware of their interactive responses to the rest of their classroom environment. The expectations of

curricular demands, parents and principals, and all the other things to be done were an active part of this interactive process. Frequently, the teachers were aware that they were under pressure to get something done, such as the list Hillary shared. The teachers were also aware that others in their settings, such as their colleagues, assistants, parents, and administrators stimulated the need for a decision. Examples of these decisions will be shared later in this chapter.

In summary, decision making as a process was very figural in the teachers' experience. They experienced decision-making as constant, multi-focused, and multidimensional. They were also aware of the processes of deciding itself. They had the experience of making some decisions more automatically and perhaps intuitively, than others. That is, they felt that decision-making generally required varying degrees of conscious awareness. This experience included the awareness that some decisions are made instantly, others over time. The "instant" decisions may occur as the problem is noticed or even before a conscious awareness of the problem. Automatic actions, intuition, previous knowledge and being in the "flow" of the moment were part of the teachers' awareness while making fast decisions. Conversely, other decisions evolved over time with very conscious thought, characterized by agonized and prolonged thought. The teachers were also aware that deciding might include a decision not to act as well as to do something.

Lastly, when considering the process of deciding, the teachers were aware of the relational, interactive, responsive act between themselves and the children and the other aspects of the environment. This recursive cycle of input and response flowed continually throughout the teachers' experience.

### *Theme II: Teachers' Experience of Self as Decision Maker*

In their particular settings, these eight teachers described themselves as capable of making successful classroom decisions, that is, they experienced *self as decision maker,* where they experienced and accepted the complex and ongoing task of making decisions as a salient aspect of their job. Each participant experienced *self as agent,* "as the one that acts or has the power or authority to act or is the means by which something is done" (American Heritage Dictionary, 1991, p. 86). They spoke of self as an efficacious decision maker in terms of: (a) a sense of confidence, (b) a sense of responsibility, (c) the ability to reflectively respond in the moment, and (d) the awareness of pedagogical knowledge.

From the first theme, it was evident that the teachers experienced themselves as people who made decisions all day, everyday. As the teachers shared their awareness of making decisions, aspects of their personal identity became more apparent. It is this experience of self as decision-maker that will be explored in this section.

#### *A Sense of Confidence*

The teachers in this study were all experienced teachers who were well aware of their personal sense of confidence when making decisions. They described this confidence as a sense of self-assurance that most of their decisions were right, there was leeway to make some wrong decisions, and they were willing to explore options. They described the source of this confidence as coming from success ("most of my decisions seem to work") and experience ("probably a little bit from age" and "having had other children with similar learning styles").

Cecilia clarified this sense of confidence with more details:

> What I mean by confidence is knowing that I am good at whatever the particular teaching skill is that I am working with or using or whatever. That I am good at that and then also being comfortable with my knowledge base, knowing that I have a lot of strategies or ideas to solve the particular problems and knowing that I have all those ideas and solutions, that helps me step into the decision that I might not have been so … comfortable stepping into if I wasn't so confident … I might not have felt so good stepping into it had I not known that I had all those strategies.

Patricia also stated:

> I think that probably comes a little bit … you know, how you have worked with students that have the same kind of learning style or just the same kind of personality.

Clearly, for these teachers, confidence meant trusting their own abilities because they had knowledge of what works, knowledge that was supported by previous experiences with children. At the same time that these teachers described their confidence in usually making good decisions, they were quick to acknowledge that being confident included not being stymied by the burden of being perfect. They had a willingness to be flexible. A reliable sense of assurance in their decision-making included accepting the probability that some suggestions and some decisions may be "wrong" or "not good" decisions for these children.

> Cecilia: But also, when I say confident in teaching, I also mean knowing that whatever the outcome is, it is going to be okay. And knowing that even if I made the wrong decision, it is not a huge failure or even if the real moment is a failure, it is not a big deal. That is a huge part of confidence in teaching for me, because although my goal (chuckle) is to be a perfect teacher 100 per cent of the time, it is never going to happen. It doesn't exist, so the little things that don't go the way that I planned are learning experiences and you get what you can get from them and it doesn't shake my confidence and comfortability with the process of teaching at all. And so, it doesn't deter me from making that decision or choosing a solution.

Betty described this leeway in making decisions by explaining the role of seeking options and using trial and error in her decision making. She said, "I mean, sometimes you'll try something and it will work and sometimes it won't. So you go back to the drawing board. A lot of times what will work for one kid, won't work for another." Madeline described this awareness of being willing to personally accept what might appear to be "misjudgments" as a natural part of the decision making process:

> Sometimes you make decisions and they turn out to be not good. Sometimes you make a decision to offer a provocation and it, you know, it flops. They were not interested. It does not go anywhere … and that is, that is just as instructive as when one works … that is the other thing, if you sort of make a wrong decision, or offer a provocation that doesn't work, the cool thing is that if it was important or if you interrupt something that turns out was important to the children … if it really was important to the children, it will come back. You don't agonize over that.

The important factor in this finding is that these teachers believe they make appropriate decisions and that they have given themselves some leeway about "misjudgments" and do not "agonize" over them. Therefore, they were personally empowered to try out ideas, to observe more, to test hypotheses, and to act without fear of doing something "wrong," because most of their decisions work most of the time.

One teacher described her experiences of having the confidence to seek options and to stay open to possibilities while in the act of deciding what to do, as different from the beginning teachers working in her classroom:

> Cecilia: I think it has so much to do with confidence. I see this with [university] students all the time. I mean, I know that I have the skills to do it and so it is okay to start that process even if I don't know what the end of the road is going to be, whereas the more inexperienced teachers do not feel comfortable starting that process until they know exactly what the final results are going to be. And so, I feel comfortable stepping into that decision, even if I only know what the first half of it will be like.

Other teachers saw the same openness to options in their active decisions to meet the needs of the children. Hillary referred to her decisions to check out the teacher supply store for more options: “Does [that store] have something that I really love that is going to be more understandable.” Rose spoke of checking with colleagues for suggestions, “a very valuable resource so, of course I am not going to waste that. I am going to use every valuable resource I have left.” And Betty said:

> This child wasn’t able to get this, so what can we do differently? So we are always looking at different ways to do instruction, maybe breaking it down, maybe doing more visual teaching, more tactile, whatever that child needs is what we look at doing … I get ideas from everywhere ... other teachers … the Internet … conferences.

So confidence in themselves meant that the teachers felt their judgments were usually accurate and the suggestions or provocations they offered to the children successfully complemented the children’s needs. Importantly, it also meant that if the decision was “wrong” or not obvious, it was acceptable because the teachers granted themselves leeway and options and because both the children and the teachers had many more opportunities to present more needs and offer other suggestions. As Betty said, “I use trial and error and hopefully it works.” Of course, this trial and error approach was not a random collection of attempts but was, as we shall explore later, based on knowledge of child development. It was based especially on personal knowledge of these specific children, as well as on practical and pedagogical knowledge of curricular goals, behavioral objectives, and effective teaching strategies.

*A Sense of Responsibility*

The teachers revealed self as agent when they described their empowering responsibility to make the decisions that needed to be made. Each teacher in this study

said some version of, “Every day I make decisions. That is what I do all day.” They accepted this responsibility to do whatever needed to be done at the time. Sometimes that meant deciding in the moment as when Rose spoke of the child in her class whose mother had died recently: “So there are days where he thinks of mom a lot … [The county], they don’t tell you how to teach when a kid loses his mom, but you have to make that decision.” At other times, it meant assuming responsibilities. In this example, Pam accepted the responsibility of making decisions for the entire first grade team when she said, “Kelly and I do a lot of the planning and say, here, this is what you are doing. …We are guiding everybody along right now, because we have been doing it for the longest amount of time.”

In both of these examples, the teachers recognized that decisions had to be made and they made them. Virginia articulated the seriousness of this responsibility, “I think that there are standards that have to be met. I mean, I can’t let them out of here without being able to write a sentence. I think that I am responsible. I feel that I should be held responsible for that.” Because teachers saw themselves as efficacious *and* responsible, they claimed the right to make the decisions needed to effectively teach. Rose indicated these decisions were her job responsibility:

> Obviously, according to the county and my contract, my job is to teach children, in first grade, this number of skills … have a year of grade one. My job is to show that year and how am I going to do that? … (By) sitting down and planning … the best way to reach these kids and teach them new skills….

Patricia, in a very adamant tone of voice, declared this sense of agency and asserted her right to be an autonomous decision-maker:

> …I’ve done it for so long that I feel more confident with my own decisions than I do with having someone who’s written a textbook, that I have never met or has

> never been in my community, making decisions about my students. In reality, I make decisions every day, and I have to keep what I think is good from the tools that are provided to me, and I have to toss what I think is not good because my primary concern is to meet the needs of my children. So every day I make decisions and sometimes you have to make decisions to be a little bit outside the law (chuckling). ... So I feel like I am the best person to decide what tool or what method I am going to use to teach my students.

In this aspect of the theme, the teachers in their role as agents experienced themselves as getting done what needed to be done, and claimed their right to teach, including the personal authority to make decisions that allowed them to carry out this role effectively. By defining themselves as decision-makers, these teachers simply accepted the responsibility for the actions they took.

On the other hand, several of the public school teachers also acknowledged the difficulties they were currently experiencing with this stance. In the last example of responsible decision maker, Patricia referred to the ongoing struggle she was having with the increasingly scripted curriculum that is now expected to be used in kindergarten. She said,

> Academically, I have to look at the students, see their strengths and weaknesses and decide what kind of learners they are, which route do I need to take, but I feel limited now by the tools the school system provides for us because … now it is pretty much mandated that this what you use. This is what you use on this, and this is what you use on that.

For most of the teachers, the mandates had not changed their sense of self as agent, but Pam did acknowledge, “I am a real follower for the biggest majority of [school system mandates]. If somebody tells me this is what you have to do, then I feel guilty if I don’t do it.” Although she described many examples of deciding based on the needs of the child, it was clear that she was uncomfortable acknowledging that stand: “I am just

worried that [the principal], I am afraid that she is going to walk in and catch me, but I keep thinking this is what is best for this child."

In spite of these conflicts and at times, clandestine actions, the teachers still maintained their sense of responsibility to make the needed decisions for their classrooms. In all situations then, their identity as teacher was synonymous with their experience of being responsible for making decisions.

*Reflectively Responding in the Moment*

The teachers were also aware of self as agent, self as decision-maker, when they described their experiences of reflectively responding in the moment. Their experience of self as decision maker included their awareness of the gestalt of decision-making moments, moments which seemed to be a recursive cyclical system of observation, initiation, reflection, and response. Patricia described this reflective responsiveness when she recounted being with one of her kindergarten students, a child with special needs, as he went to a specialist's class for the first time. She said, "I was just trying to show him and then I had that a-ha moment that I could back off a little bit and let him deal with it more independently." In this moment, Patricia was aware that she initiated (show), noticed, reflected (the a-ha moment), and acted (backed off).

Cecilia explained her similar experiences in the gestalt of the moment as she shared this lengthy look at her cycle of initiation, reflection, and response to the cues from a two-year-old child who was trying to build with blocks. She described her ongoing decision-making while she tried to support this child as he struggled to place round tops upon the cylindrical columns:

> …I knew that he had not built with those blocks recently, so when I came over, he was, I think, about at the point where he was going to give up. I watched him for a second and he was struggling and so I moved in and said, "Do you want to put this kind of block on top?" He said, "No, I want to use this one," talking about the cylinder. But I knew that he really wanted to use the other one and that he didn't even want to try anymore, because it was too frustrating to him. So I said, "Well, I was watching you and I saw you take this block and try to put it on the top, but it looked like it kept falling off …."
>
> The second time when I tried to prompt him, when I asked him and actually described what I had seen, then he said, "Yeah, it fell off and I didn't like it and I am going to use this block." And I said, "What if I helped you use this other block, because I think it will stay up there and I think that is a really good idea?" … It was difficult to balance the small block, so I showed him a couple of examples. "If you put it too far this way it will fall down and if you put too far that way it will fall over, but if you put it right in the middle, it will stay." And so, I went through that explanation and set one down and he said, "Yeah thanks," and got another cylinder and started to add it to his wall. And so, even though he was engaging with me in the conversation about this, he still was not confident enough to try it himself. It was good enough that I put one there and maybe he only wanted one to begin with (shrugs shoulders) and so that accomplished the goal. But I didn't think so, I think he really wanted to do more, but he didn't feel like he could do it. So, I took another one and said, "Here, you try it." … I actually expected him to say no, but then he tried it and the first couple of times he tried it, it didn't work and it fell over, but that time he kept trying and I don't remember actually what I did at that point but I gave him little prompts to get it right, but I didn't give him little prompts to persist at it. He persisted at the task, without my help. He just needed my help to get it where he wanted to get it. (Pause)

Next, she added another in-the-action reflection as she continued to clarify the responsive nature of her decisions. This was an example of how the teachers experienced self as able to reflectively respond in the moment. Cecilia talked about her analysis of being in the reflective cycle while she was involved in her actions. She recounted that she metacognitively analyzed her actions based on the child's responses and then decided what to do next. In the moment, this is a gestalt for her. In the interview, she metacognitively separated out the individual elements.

> …So I often make decisions, in addition to the initial decision to enter the play, then figuring out what to say, I also made little decisions *as* I was interacting with him, like the fact that when he seems really engaged by my explanation of how to

> put the block on there, I kind of made it longer and more detailed because he seemed to be so interested in what I was saying. A lot of the times at that age, a child doesn't want a long explanation. It is too long and doesn't fit their attention span, but he seemed interested and so I made it longer and more detailed, because it seemed like he was getting something out of it. And then I decided to pick one up and hand it to him, rather than just use verbal prompts. (Pause)

Although this was the most detailed description of reflectively responding in the moment, all the teachers spoke of some kind of reflective interactions with specific children. For example, Betty spoke of a child with whom she has been working for more than a year "trying to get him to say the word 'with' and he calls it 'white' every time." She described her attempted strategies, reflections, and limited results. Likewise, Patricia described group time strategies she used to reengage specific children, while Rose spoke of adapting to the very unusual needs of a disabled child in her classroom – all examples of the teachers' sense of self as reflectively responding in the moment. Thus, teachers recognized self as responding in the moment.

However, it must be noted that the depth of reflectiveness in those responses was significantly different among the teachers. Some teachers, particularly Virginia, Cecilia, Madeline, and Betty focused their dialogue on their awareness of reading cues from children and how they responded. Well over half of their interviews contained these reflective scenarios. On the other hand, Pam described only one responsive moment, Rose described two moments with special needs children, Hillary none, Patricia described those listed above. This is not to say these teachers do not respond to children during the teaching moment. It merely recognizes that responding reflectively was not in their figural awareness during the time of the interview.

*An Awareness of Pedagogical Knowledge*

The final aspect of self as efficacious decision maker was portrayed by the teachers' awareness of their pedagogical knowledge. Pedagogical knowledge refers to (a) knowing the content of the subject matter, (b) how that content is generally learned by the students with differing learning styles, and developmental and cognitive abilities, and (c) the strategies that will best facilitate children's learning of that subject matter. In this study, the teachers believed they had knowledge of children, knowledge of curriculum, and knowledge of their personal values and beliefs about teaching strategies, therefore, they felt they had the agency of self to make pedagogical decisions.

Cecilia, in this lengthy excerpt, outlined the multiple kinds of knowledge she is aware of using when she approached teaching moments:

> If I am approaching a situation with, oh okay, if I am doing a table activity with magnets. We have these great magnets with rods and dowels … and in this activity, I feel like I have knowledge about what children of this age might be wondering about with this material, the kinds of prompts that I might give to help the children ask questions about those materials … I have a lot of information about the individual children … and I know a lot about how to keep children engaged or how to re-engage children who become disengaged. …
>
> I know about how to help children work together, how to prompt one child to help another child, which adds another level to the activity. I have a lot of information about guidance and discipline type issues and how to help children work through the conflicts that might arise … or how to help them work through the sharing of materials….
>
> And so there are all those little categories of knowledge that are going to come into play with this activity, and the fact that I have all of this knowledge, in addition to the basics of how do children learn and how do they become comfortable with materials, how do children explore materials and what do children at this developmental level look for out of these materials….
>
> You know, I mean, I could list 500 things but, I have these categories of knowledge that come into play when I am leading this activity and I would say that would be my knowledge base for that activity. (Pause) But I think in general, knowledge about child development in lots of different areas and about how to teach young children, having that knowledge is kind of the foundation of where

> you go, then with your experience in teaching and … so then I apply the knowledge, well, the combination of knowledge and experience.

In this example of pedagogical knowledge, not only was Cecilia aware of making decisions about her actions, she was also metacognitively aware of what she knew about the affordances of the material, about a variety of strategies for engaging children this age, and about her learning goals. She also was aware of how this "knowledge is … the foundation of where you go," in other words, the foundation of her agency as decision maker.

The teachers in this study often spoke about the knowledge they had of specific children and they referenced this knowledge as the explanation for certain decisions they made. In the following examples, the teachers were aware that they observed children and reflected on the information gleaned from these observations and interactions and used their knowledge about specific children to make decisions that facilitated learning:

> So okay, this child wasn't able to get this, so what can we do differently? So we are always looking at different ways to do instruction, maybe breaking it down, maybe doing more visual teaching, more tactile, whatever that child needs is what we look at doing. (Betty)

> Okay, I have one little boy, lots of struggling in kindergarten. … Well, there is no way that this little boy can come back here with a group of six children and me tell them to start reading…. He is just going to sit there and look at me. He doesn't have enough of the skills yet to even read, even the very first book. He is very good at memorizing though, after you have told him two or three times and he will fly through the book, but when you go back and isolate words, he won't know what he's reading. He comes back here with me one-on-one and we go through the book. Usually it's me feeding just about every word to him and he is just repeating it but that is what he needs right now, so that is how we do it. (Pam)

Betty, in the following excerpt, provides a typical explanation, for why she made the decision she had made on the day several children were absent. It represents a small

classroom moment, but a moment reiterated by all teachers, in which she is essentially saying *I* know this child and this is what *I* thought he needed today.

> B: Well, because he needs extra practicing. That is just what he needs, one of his most difficult areas is reading and the kids really like that one-on-one time when you have reading and that gave him some extra practice with reading and he needed it.
> I: When you were deciding, was it about whether to do something different in reading with him or whether to continue with the daily plan with him?
> B: Yes, to do something maybe more fun because all the kids weren't here or to do something that wasn't quite as 'nose to the grindstone' sort of thing.
> I: So what did you decide to do?
> B: We went ahead and did what we were supposed to do for the day because that is what he needed. …
> I: So you chose
> B: The work. Yeah, I thought that best.

Madeline, however, took the concept of knowing the children in her classroom to a more complex level. She described her method of gathering this information through a detailed system of daily logs and narratives that was vital to her decision making. Each day she gathered "raw data…documenting what the children were doing and at the end of the day….put it on [the] web page …and sent [it] to parents." Madeline then described how these daily logs were connected to her decision making, "Making the log is what gives me the insight to know what we ought to be thinking about tomorrow." She goes on to describe how the photos and sketches of the children's work or segments of their conversations enable her to create the curriculum and to plan for the next day's activities. In this case, Madeline's identity of herself includes the aspect of classroom researcher, carefully reviewing the "raw data" of the children's work, and using this systematic and deliberate strategy for gathering daily knowledge of children. This is one example of the agency of self that was Madeline, as she made and projected her daily classroom decisions.

In addition, these experienced teachers knew the curriculum for their grade levels and were aware of how their knowledge of children framed their curricular decisions. Pam, for example, combined her knowledge of the math curriculum with that of a specific child and developed supplementary work for him:

> I did have a little boy … that was very high in math. Just anything I lay in front of him he was going to do it. So I started copying things out of one of our enrichment books and sent it home. ... So he always had enrichment type homework activities, but he absolutely loved doing them and it really helped his self-esteem. So that was the decision.

Another aspect of importance of knowing the curriculum became evident when several of the public school teachers described the new math series, which the school system had recently adopted. This aspect dealt with their comfort level and degree of familiarity with the content and pacing of the series. Rose admitted that she needed to go to colleagues for help in deciding the crucial parts of the curriculum, while Hillary was confident in her own expertise. Hillary described being part of the group who had piloted the series the year before,

> I was fortunate enough to pilot it last year so I knew what worked … I have to make the decision what is meat here versus what is fluff because some of it is very redundant. Some of it needs to be redundant because, you know, over-teaching to some respect is a good thing to do, especially at certain age levels, certain maturity levels, certain learning styles. I have to decide that.

The public school teachers followed complete curricular scope and sequence guides, "written in stone as far as these are the skills you are to teach," which they were expected to follow. Thus, the public school teachers did not have the flexibility of planning curriculum that the non-public school teachers, Virginia, Madeline, and Cecilia, had. Nonetheless, they claimed ownership for the adaptation decisions that they did make. Many of these adaptations centered on the pacing of activities, (Hillary wondered

about giving a unit test this week or the next week), or the use of supplementary materials (Rose decided between using familiar math materials or those recommended in the new math series). It is interesting to note that the teachers confined their discussion to their knowledge of the series, not their knowledge of the subject matter.

Another interesting subtheme emerged around pedagogical knowledge. The non-public school teachers spent well over half of their interviews discussing decisions they made regarding the details of their teaching strategies. Virginia (non-public school) and Hillary (public school) taught the same grade level in schools only a few miles away from each other. Their interviews described many of the same curricular topics – math, reading, phonics, and writing. Hillary recognized the pressure she faced in trying to teach numerous distinct subjects. Although she tried to integrate these subjects, each content area had its own distinct pacing guides and assessments. Virginia, on the other hand, assumed her right to integrate the content and focused her decision making on ways to personalize the curriculum for herself and her students. For example, she described teaching decisions she recently made regarding the second grade social studies curriculum. Her daughter now lives in Alaska so Virginia was able to add new information about the Iditarod races and real artifacts she received from her daughter to the generally taught topic of climate regions. She spoke of her pleasure and "passion" at researching the details and creating this new focus of study for the children, as well as the ways she integrated reading, math and science into this study. The topic "arctic climate regions" was not new, however her presentation and teaching strategies were totally personalized and within her decision making control. Conversely, Hillary bemoaned her inability to add much "personality" to her curriculum.

In summary, the teachers saw themselves as efficacious decision makers because of their perceived pedagogical knowledge. They referenced their knowledge of curriculum and were aware of making decisions regarding teaching strategies. However, the depth of the descriptions given by Virginia, Cecilia, and Madeline (non-public school teachers) were markedly different from those given by Hillary, Betty, Rose, Pam, and Patricia (public school teachers). Virginia connected each pedagogical statement to a child's need and she gave in-depth descriptions of decisions made within the context of several curricular areas. Madeline shared multiple teaching strategies in an in-depth manner that was consistent with her understanding of learning and development, and Cecilia described her reflective stance while in the pedagogical moment. On the other hand, most of the public school teachers described very few actual teaching moments.

*Personal Beliefs and Values*

A third aspect of teachers' awareness of pedagogical knowledge involved their personal values and beliefs. Several teachers were very articulate about how their self agency involved intentionally making classroom decisions based on their personal values and beliefs regarding pedagogy. Others, again mostly the public school teachers, were noticeably less articulate about their awareness of experiences in making in-depth decisions based on their beliefs and values.

In spite of other differences, all the teachers identified self as agency with regard to one basic fundamental belief and value. They all were aware of making decisions on behalf of the well-being of the children. This was a crucial aspect of their personal identity of self and especially their identity of self as agency. Every teacher spoke of deciding to do "what was best for this child." For several of the public school teachers,

these decisions seemed to carry some risk of stepping outside the mandated system and possibly of being "caught" by a judging supervisor or principal. Pam, for example, had a new principal this year and she gave this same example twice during the interview:

> I mean, we were talking the other day in a group and I said something about one of my low kids … about how we are struggling, how it was really hard, etc, etc. and I just told them. I am just calling those kids back one at a time because that is what they need, but every time I do it I am just worried that our principal. I am afraid that she is going to walk in and catch me, but I keep thinking, this is what is best for the child. I am going to do what I think is best, and if she does come in I am just going to say, "Hey, this is what this child needs. They are not ready for small group yet."
> I: Do you think she would not approve of that?
> P: I don't know because I don't know her yet. We have not been together that long so I don't know how she would judge it one way or the other.
> I: People that you have had in the past, anything happen like that?
> P: I think once if I'd had a chance to explain my side of it, I really think it would have been okay. I really do because I am assuming down deep that principals believe we should do what is best for the child too. I think it would be all right, especially if you've got a principal that you know trusts you to do the best thing. I am assuming I have gained her trust, but I don't know. She has never been in here to tell me I am doing anything wrong. So I am just assuming that everything is okay.

Hillary also understood that she would need to justify her decisions to modify materials and integrate subject matter to her curriculum supervisor, "It is not like I am not teaching." She felt that her years of showing successful achievement would ensure approval, but it would add a step into her process. Patricia demonstrated this concept of self as agency when she discussed her belief that the need for consistency for children with special needs should supersede many other needs within the school. She defended her position to the administration and she explained to me that she would "go to the hill" for one particular child, as she refused a change requested by her principal.

Virginia, Madeline, and Cecilia all taught in non-public schools and appeared to have much more autonomy when making classroom decisions. Although this theme will

be discussed at length in the next section, it is worth mentioning here as it is a pivotal aspect of self as agency. For example, throughout the interview, Patricia, a public school kindergarten teacher, expressed her lack of autonomy and her struggle to continue teaching kindergarten with the increasingly scripted and mandated curriculum she is being required to use. She shared the conflict it is causing her:

> So I feel like I am the best person to decide what tool or what method I am going to use to teach my students **...** *I* know them; *I* am with them every day. These children have lots of experiences and I think we all have our feet well planted, and we know how to put up our backpacks, and we know what to do with our materials when we are finished with them. We will learn to read. We will do that. I am not going to change that. I am not wasting time. But, I am building some skills that I think are lifelong skills. I am teaching them how to manage their life and *I know I am*. I am with them. I know them and I would prefer that that decision was left to me *when I began* to teach the alphabet.

Patricia was the only public school teacher to be consistently aware of the disconnection between her personal attitudes, values, and beliefs about what kindergarten age children should learn and the required curriculum.

On the other hand, Virginia, a non-public school teacher, believed that she should teach in a certain way and had the ability and agency to affect school policy, based on her beliefs and values. In this example offered by Virginia, she discussed her belief about the children's use of a mathematical tool during an assessment test:

> We do give assessments, like the end of the chapter assessments. And talking with other teachers, I realized and to me, to me, it was never an issue. The children *are* allowed to use the hundreds board on the assessment. That is what they are used to using. That's how they learn and, and that's how they get the answer. … But … one particular little girl had that panic look on her face, like "I don't know this"… and I said, "You know, you are allowed to use the hundreds board … And then talking with the other teachers, … everybody hadn't really been doing that, but realized, of course, … you can't teach them one way and then … assess them on it without it.

So, the demonstration of self as agency for the public school teachers, with regards to beliefs and values, seemed to come from their determination to act on behalf of the children, sometimes in spite of school policies, whereas Virginia's beliefs about how children learn influenced not only her classroom but her interactions with other teachers as well.

Virginia's example also illustrates the emergence of what appears to be what a major difference between public and non-public school teachers in their demonstration of self as agency. The public school teachers definitely gave examples of acting on behalf of children's well-being, but those decisions were limited to what might be considered minor changes in teaching strategies or material use. For example, Pam, in the example given above, justified her decision to work with a child individually rather than only in a whole group setting. In another place in the transcript, she stated that she might use unifix cubes instead of the manipulative materials suggested by the teacher's manual for the math curriculum, or she might develop some particular homework. Rose and Hillary made similar justifications with regards to changes in materials and time usage. Betty made many adaptations since the children in her class all have unique learning needs. She was also aware of district mandates and the explanations she may need to posit if confronted by a supervisor. However, only Patricia actively questioned whether the content or presentation of the curriculum is appropriate for the children in her classrooms.

Some teachers, such as Madeline, expanded their awareness of self as agency making pedagogical decisions based on personal values and beliefs. She was particularly knowledgeable about pedagogical options and firm in how her personal beliefs framed her decision making. The following examples, while focusing on Madeline, also

represent some of the same thinking expressed by Virginia and Cecilia, and offer an interesting model of what some teachers are aware of when making decisions based on knowledge and beliefs.

In the first excerpt Madeline discussed her value of helping children to develop the disposition of collaboration:

> M: Oh yeah, it is something that I want to encourage, the disposition toward collaboration, and I want them to do it and they do not come to me, well, they don't come to me knowing each other, for one. And so they don't have relationships yet, that gets developed through the year. Then, when they are learning how to collaborate, how to have cognitive conflict without emotional conflict, how to consider the ideas of others, how to, you know, learning that the collaborative idea, the group idea, can be much bigger and much neater. Oh, that is a wonderful moment when that happens. When kids realize, really realize, how much cooler the thing is because, *because* they worked together to do it, the play of ideas, the exchange of ideas really going back and forth. So, that and, and, all the other basic goals, I guess, that we have for kids are always part of the decision making. Or else, how do you decide, I mean how do you make decisions if you don't have that foundation? Do you know what I am saying?

In this next excerpt, Madeline explained her personal belief that children should be encouraged to work on a task until they are satisfied with the results, rather than just meeting the teacher's approval or having only one try:

> Now, in the beginning [of the school year] the children who come to me don't expect, they don't have a satisfaction bar. They don't expect to, I don't know if they even know what that feels like, but as time goes on and we do engage in investigations, they become adamant that they not let go of an idea until they are satisfied … the child would make a Ferris wheel and it did what she wanted it to do and I thought she was happy with that one and I turned around and she was making another one and another one. She would draw one and she would make another one and I realized that her satisfaction wasn't there. She had a satisfaction bar and she was going to keep doing this until sure enough, when she was satisfied she stopped. I think this happens with individuals and especially, I think, with the group having reached the satisfaction bar with an investigation.

Madeline also talked about the children co-constructing knowledge:

> … if I understand how people learn, if I think, now, let me see, if I am operating from what I do understand about how people learn, then I can support the children in a way that actually will speak to them, in a way that will actually support their, ahmm, making their intent happen, why we want children to co-construct theory together and why we do not give all the answers right away.

She also explained how she decided to involve children in learning through what she calls investigations, a style of learning and teaching where the teacher supports the children's efforts to make sense of new information, rather telling them what they should be thinking and learning.

> It is my understanding that if, that if I were to tell the children about spiders, read them books about spiders, tell them facts about spiders, tell them what I knew about spiders, because I know that young children will construct knowledge from the information themselves. I can not impart knowledge to them, because I know that, I know that if I were just to give them this information, then they would still take that information and construct their own theory about it, which … won't lead to more accurate theories, but will also stop the process, because they have already been told so there is no investigation. There is no inquiry necessary, so they are not developing the disposition towards inquiry and towards co-constructing theory. And they are not getting any more accurate a picture necessarily, if that were the goal, which I guess it is. You are just telling them. … So, what I have learned is that children, if they stay in an investigation of an idea long enough and they are doing it collaboratively, they will go from very magical thinking, usually, these are five-year-olds, and as they keep revisiting the idea, the magical explanations do not seem to satisfy them and then they begin to become more and more plausible in the theories that they are proposing and many times, I see them come close to a theory that is so close to accurate without anybody saying this is the way it is, but by working it through, and not only that, but once they get there, when they get to that level of thinking about it, it sort of is always there, so that wherever they are, for a long time. Parents have told me about this, that years later, any information that comes their way about that, any idea on the topic, has a place to go and, and so I have had kids months after an investigation, I thought, was over, come back and say, remember when we did such and such, well, yesterday, I saw … and then bring it all right back again. And sometimes even engage the entire class again. This rarely happens, if you just read a book and tell them the facts. You can tell I am really passionate about it.

This lengthy excerpt provides an understanding about how Madeline established learning in her classroom. Her decisions were situated in listening to and observing the

children's conversations and play so that she might discover the areas that hold deep interests for the children. Then she made decisions about how the children would work to make sense of the information they were gathering. One such decision included the strategy she used to help children use drawing as a tool to clarify their thinking. In the following excerpt, she described how she reflected on ways to support children's efforts to overcome the uncertainty most of the children have about drawing their ideas.

> Thinking pens, that is what we call those dark black pens, fine tipped pens. Right now we are using Flairs, but in the past we have used all kinds. And I call them thinking pens, because from what I have observed, children who are using those particularly to draft theories or to try drawing something, hmm, what we call studies, which is trying to draw something which is in your mind, either from life or, or just an idea or a dog, a horse, or whatever and you do not know how to draw it. We have a protocol for helping the children. They are doing the protocol; I am not doing the protocol. They have protocol for trying to make that happen. I will tell you why we have that protocol. It is because when the children come to me at five, they often have, almost always have reached that point, and it happens for some kids at three, some at four, some at five, where they want to draw, they want to represent some idea, but they do not have the tools or techniques and nobody really helps them do it. You know, when they come to me, very often, they will not be drawing. That is, they will not be drawing their ideas, they will be drawing what they know how to draw or they will try to draw their ideas and get frustrated and keep throwing paper after paper in the trash at best, or feeling helpless and crying and getting upset or they just do not draw at all. … So the protocol that we use and we call it "a study," is that you make an attempt to draw what you want to draw. If you do not like it, you do not throw it away. You keep it because it is important to the process. You put a "1" on it. And you try again. If you do not like that one, then you put a "2" on it and you keep going until you like the one you did. And if they ask me for help or if I observe that they really need some help, then I have a little system that I use for helping them, beginning with asking them what they know about that. Say it is a horse. What does a horse have? Sometimes, they can just talk it through, because it is an issue of confidence more than anything else. If that is not enough, then I may offer them a picture if they want it, a drawing, or a photograph. But the study protocol itself was an experiment years ago and I discovered that it freed children up tremendously. They were no longer throwing away, getting so frustrated, and throwing their things away because there was something they could do about it. They were learning to set satisfaction bars. They were in different places, but what needed to happen was that they needed to realize that they were drawing to satisfy themselves. You know, children who would just sort of make, every now

> and again, there is a child who would make a very quick kind of attempt at drawing something and then say it is enough. But you know that is not the image that she had of that thing and so this helps, this helps them to ask more of themselves.

In this series of excerpts from Madeline, it was clear that she had significant ownership of her knowledge of children and how they learn, her ongoing observations of the children who currently were in her classroom, and the personal goals for their learning. As she says,

> I look for my opportunity. I know that I want to do it eventually so I look for an opportunity and often it will come just so naturally and all I have to do is give it a name.

Curriculum choices and pedagogical strategies that were more flexible in Madeline and Cecilia's classrooms were not just an artifact of working with younger children (pre-kindergarten or kindergarten children). Virginia described many curriculum choices available within her second grade setting. These included the choice of words and manner of teaching spelling, integration of writing across many curricular areas, books chosen for whole class readings and the related activities, math strategies and practice methods, and the development of social studies and science concepts. She explained how she made some of these decisions based on the pedagogical knowledge involved in her personal values and beliefs.

> We have to do a science project every year, have to do a science project. Now, the science project in second grade is a joint project with the teachers and the students. They are not doing it individually. The curriculum is not laid out. It is not boom, boom, boom (showing with hands). You have to do this, you have to do that. …
> But every year, I do not do the same science project. You know, this year, this class is just studying about teeth. Somebody lost a tooth and a lot of them are done with their teeth. Yet, there are still some losing teeth and so one kid brought in a tooth and said, "My mom said that if I put this in chocolate milk, it is going to decay faster than white milk." … And so, then we talked about it until we got

> enough teeth to do a science experiment and then we could figure it out. Well, you go to the library and there are a gazillion eighty-nine books on teeth. So, it is that part of it. The curriculum can't mandate that, the curriculum can't suggest that part of it. You have to make those decisions. *You* have to be in the moment with them, with them as a community, because it wouldn't work if it were only one kid interested in it. And you have to have everybody buy into it. And they did.
> … Now, the curriculum says you have to do science. The curriculum doesn't say you have to do the science experiment about certain things. But I could have very easily said, Okay I want to do an experiment on rainfall and I want to measure the rainfall. Well, nobody is going to buy into that. They are not there. They don't care about that. They don't have that. That doesn't fall; you have to have those conversations with the children. You have to have those conversations with the children. You have to know what they are interested in.

So Virginia drew a picture of curriculum plans that provided some parameters, but also allowed her to make individual choices about how those skills would be developed and practiced. Virginia, then, was able to "be in the conversation" with the children. She made decisions about choosing topics based on the emotional connection needed to help the children learn. "You know, but letting them be part of it, instead of just letting them be observers."

In another example, Cecilia summarized her decisions on some curricular questions:

> We use resources. We look things up in books, articles, primarily. I would say that we use those six books that we really love and we use them all the time and they have all of our post-its and you know, page markers in them. We look for new research to inform our practice, but I would say the majority of the curriculum decisions that we make are based on our knowledge of child development and our knowledge of these individual children and when I am helping a student teacher, for example, plan for the science area for two weeks, I often refer them to a particular resource or encourage them to go look up some things, but that is more like twenty percent of what I am working with. Eighty per cent of what I am working on is really, here is what I know is the agenda for these children with science. You are looking at sensory exploration. You are looking at the relationship with nature and the world around you. I am working from my knowledge and experience and that is what we base most of our curricular decisions on, and at this point really I almost don't even know how much of it is

> actual learned knowledge from books and things, and how much of it is experience. I can't really separate it at this point. Most of the time it just all blends together into what I know, but I know that this is what I know.

Hillary, also a second grade teacher but in a public school, discussed developing activities and strategies based on her areas of high interest, especially science, as an organizing and motivating way to keep the children involved. She talked about deciding on ways to integrate the concepts across curriculum areas as a focal point of her decision making strategies and the way she manages to cover more curricular material. In this exceptional case, a public school teacher discussed integration of content, though without the articulate reflection that was evidenced in the transcripts of the non-public school teachers. Hillary (public school) discussed content, whereas Madeline, Virginia, and Cecelia (non-public school teachers) related knowledge of child development and pedagogy to their curriculum development.

For the public school teachers, this ownership of pedagogy seemed tentative and controlled by mandated curriculum expectations. Pam said:

> My first two years of first grade, we were told not to teach science and social studies. We primarily did reading and math because the theory is if you can read, then the social studies and the science, everything else should follow along with it.

When she talked about deciding what to do each day she pointed to her red, three-ring binder open on her desk and said:

> Every day they are a little bit different. The county told us that this is how, this is what we want you to have on a certain day out of the reading program. We just went through the guidelines and we filled out you know this is what we are doing for all these subjects. So, I have these for the entire school year. Then the other teachers just come and get them and run the copies so this is a guideline of what they are going to do all week and then our phonics program, we have lesson plans for them too and in the beginning. These are ... this is it. I mean this is in stone

> kind of/sort of because this is what the county says you've got to do this. So that is what we do.

When asked a follow up question about a particular child who was struggling to learn the current math materials, Pam was sympathetic and worried about him, but still said,

> … Well, they all do all lessons in a whole group and you just keep chugging along. You can't wait on certain kids to get it because it just might never happen. You have a schedule you have to keep up with like tomorrow we are giving the first half of the math test. You've got to because you still have to stay within your frame line, like they told us, this unit should take six to eight weeks to teach and this unit should take three weeks to teach. You've got to stay within that because if you don't, you will get to the end of the year and you won't have anything done.

Pam, like many other teachers, also talked about decisions to squeeze a few minutes here and there of extra time with particular children and to use homework as a strategy to help individual children practice skills. Other public school teachers seemed to make decisions about using more group times and activity centers as modes of instruction. Hillary and Rose both gave long and detailed accounts of center activities and how they made decisions on their content and organizations.

Thus, although there were differences in how the public and non-public school teachers addressed the involvement of their pedagogical knowledge in their personal values and beliefs, all of the teachers were aware, albeit to differing extents, of how this impacted their decision making. In fact, these teachers may fall along a continuum from highly articulate (e.g., Madeline, highly informed pedagogical beliefs and values) to least articulate (e.g., Pam, so narrowly focused on mandated curriculum that she barely articulated pedagogical beliefs and values), with the non-public school teachers falling at the highly articulate end of the continuum.

In summary, the teachers in this study were aware of themselves as decision-makers. They felt confident and empowered with the right to make decisions and skilled at using the knowledge they had about children and curriculum to do so effectively. Some teachers experienced this empowerment more deeply and practiced broader decision-making, in more detailed and articulate ways. Some seemed to decide from a more thoroughly owned philosophy of education and theory of learning base. Some teachers were clearly constrained by the mandates of their teaching positions. This idea will be explored more thoroughly in the next section.

### *Theme III: Teachers' Awareness of Making Decisions within the Constraints and Possibilities Found in Their Individual Teaching Setting*

As the teachers described their awareness of making decisions for their classrooms, they described the constraints and possibilities of the contexts within which they taught. These contexts or settings were experienced by the teachers as: (a) *the people*, i.e., the colleagues, parents, and administrators, who were present to the teachers within the school building or at the district level; and (b) the *school or district level policies* including curricular mandates, time and organizational issues, and the other environmental aspects that help to form a school culture. In addition, the findings revealed a marked difference in the constraints and possibilities found in public school settings and non-public school settings. Since this distinction was so dramatic, the findings for this section are organized by school type, (non-public and public), and for each of these contexts, both sub-themes, *people* and *school or district level policies,* are addressed.

Overall, the settings for the teachers in the non-public schools were far less focal than the settings for the public school teachers. For instance, the non-public school teachers described only a few references to colleagues or parents. None of these teachers mentioned their administrators, and there were no references to top-down policies or mandated curricular decisions. There could be, of course, many reasons why these dimensions were not mentioned. Possibly these teachers were comfortable with the ways these aspects of their school lives function and currently did not spend much time making decisions regarding these features, or these features may not influence their daily decision making. What is known for sure is that they did not discuss these features during their interviews. Interestingly, all three non-public school teachers held professional teaching certificates that allowed them to teach in public schools and at least two of these teachers previously taught in public school settings before choosing to teach in their current schools.

In contrast, while making classroom decisions, all five public school teachers were aware of the others in their setting and were extremely aware of the mandated policies. They were aware of planning with colleagues and they were aware of their interactions with their school's administrative staff and with district level supervisors. Moreover, they were aware of how those interactions impacted their possibilities of making decisions, as seen in their reports of the scripted nature of curricular policies which limited their decision-making options. They talked about how these mandates affected not only decisions about what they taught, but also their decisions about time schedules, teaching strategies, and personal adaptations needed to meet individual

children's learning needs. Their experience of classroom decision making was impacted significantly by the constraints and the possibilities found in their individual settings.

### *Non-Public School Settings*

The non-public school teachers, Virginia, Madeline, and Cecilia, taught in settings that they may have perceived as supportive or at least benign in their influence on their decision making. It is difficult to know since they really did not talk about their settings. As noted in theme two, these teachers discussed their curricular decisions in considerable depth and with a great deal of personal ownership and responsibility for decisions. Their rationale for decisions was more detailed and generally more reflective of current educational trends and research. The non-public school teachers also seemed to wrestle with educational decisions on a more reflective and analytical level. They frequently revisited decisions about teaching strategies as well as about discipline and behavioral management decisions. It appeared as if the teaching context or school settings may have offered these teachers an implicit context of possibilities, or at least did not hinder their decision making, whereas there appeared to be more of a climate of constraint existing in the public school settings. To better understand the meaning of context to these teachers, the analysis of non-public school teachers is presented by teacher, rather than subtheme since it seemed so personal to each one.

The non-public school teachers seemed to have more personal responsibility for their classrooms, and therefore, perhaps, broader and more in-depth classroom decisions could be made. For example, Virginia, a second grade teacher, said "We do not give

report cards here, but we do assessments" and then proceeded to explain her decisions about the use of the "hundreds chart" by children while they are taking the chapter-ending assessment test. She continued by explaining her influence on the other teachers regarding their use of this mathematics tool and how she successfully urged them to follow her practices. Her ability to question the format of the assessment and to influence her colleagues was an example of the possibilities her setting afforded her.

As seen in the last section on curriculum development, Virginia exercised considerable control and decision-making autonomy regarding the books she chose to read with the children, the way she adapted social studies themes, math practice and spelling lists. It was particularly evident in the way she described individual learners and respected their development. It appeared as if Virginia knew the expected competency levels of her grade, yet had the flexibility and possibilities to modify the rate of her teaching to accommodate both high achieving students and less competent students. She stated:

> I think that there are standards that have to be met. I mean, I can't let them out of here without being able to write a sentence. I think that I am responsible. I feel that I should be held responsible for that. But I think you can do that in many ways. Do I have to have them do a lot of worksheets, if I can have them write in their book about teeth? Do I have to do a lot of worksheets, if I can have them talking about and playing a lot of math games? Do I have to do it that *one* way? And I also think that, that because of No Child Left Behind and all that stuff, that … mandated this and mandated that, that it is not allowing the teacher to make those decisions.

So, it appeared as if Virginia were responsible for making appropriate decisions for all aspects of the teaching task, room organization, discipline, curriculum content, teaching strategies, and pacing. Also, it appeared as if she were aware of national standards and felt that she should be accountable for meeting standards but be allowed to use the

strategies that best facilitated learning for her students. And finally, for Virginia, learning was about life skills as well as math facts. Virginia seemed to be teaching within an environment that encouraged or at least allowed her to teach in this manner.

The adults in Virginia's context were definitely in the background. She kept parents informed of curriculum developments, often through reading projects that the children were expected to share with parents on a regular, if not daily, basis. She seemed to interact with parents regarding the developmental history of their children. This knowledge was influential in her decision making, e.g., when she referred to different language and cultural influences on several children and how she worked with those influences. Virginia did not describe these interactions with parents in terms of time. She seemed to regard parents as supportive and helpful influences. Her only other reference to others was in regard to colleagues, when she mentioned that the library teacher gave her class an extra fifteen minutes a week because she enjoyed working with them.

As noted before, Madeline also described her considerable autonomy with regard to her decision-making about curriculum, again a possibility found in her setting. She was quite adamant that the parameters for her decision-making regarding curriculum were the learning strategies she valued so highly. She did not mention administrators and barely mentioned parents as influencing factors in her curricular decisions.

In fact, she did not mention any limitations or restraints placed upon her by the administrators, colleagues, or parents. Twice, she momentarily referenced an assistant as in: "We talked about this problem" and "If I made arrangements ahead of time to stay in this area instead of moving to another area of the classroom, I could." She also referenced the larger school on a few occasions with comments such as "…asking the fifth graders

because they know everything…" and "…on picture day," etc. Perhaps, Madeline did not describe her environment with any kind of evaluative language or tone, because she assumed I knew of her setting through her national publications and workshops ("I don't know how much you know of my work" and "Do you know the chapter on…)." However, it is also possible that she took the setting for granted. In any case, the context of Madeline's teaching was such that she appeared to be able to make curricular decisions with a personal autonomy that allowed for open-ended possibilities. She was free to make decisions based on her firm beliefs about how people learn, as documented in theme two.

Cecilia, the third non-public school teacher, referred to her setting mainly in terms of the others who worked with her – her assistant teacher and the university students who were in her classroom to learn about teaching. In particular, she compared her decision making processes to those of the students', finding more fluidity, speed, and depth to her own decision-making, while theirs was labored and hesitant. She also felt that the others made decisions based on expediency and ease of transitions, while she chose to reflect on yet-to-be discovered possibilities and asked big-picture questions about certain decisions. In particular, she provided two vignettes to portray these ideas.

In these two examples, she described the current resolution of a recurring and bothersome classroom problem, children wanting to play with toys brought from home. Using a "big-picture" perspective, Cecilia viewed the situation as learning moments. From the lived "in-the-moment" perspective, the assistant teacher and student teacher were trying to maintain a peaceful environment, one without conflict. Cecilia recognized that since she was not personally in charge of the classroom for that hour (i.e., it is not her in-the-moment decision), she compromised a solution. However, it clearly remained

an issue for her, a dilemma worthy of continued reflection. Unlike in some settings, Cecelia worked in a school where she could revisit classroom policy decisions and had the autonomy to create and recreate them as needed.

In this second example, Cecilia described another environmentally situated issue which seemed to have no good solution. Her personal value included helping children learn appropriate mealtime behavior including being seated at the table and learning how to engage in mealtime conversations. However, at age two, some children had less to say and were less engaged with the eating process and so they quickly became fidgety and troublesome to the other children who were still eating and talking. She provided this example as one of the issues that she revisited often, since it did not appear to have a "good" solution. Her context was open enough that she felt encouraged to revisit uncomfortable solutions. Although Cecilia did not directly refer to her setting as supportive, she clearly taught in a school that allowed for and was responsive to this kind of reflective activity: "We kind of talked as a team to figure out what we should do about this and we talked it through." Two of the issues discussed by the classroom team included the role of punishment in helping children to learn appropriate behaviors and the differences between what the teachers thought they were teaching and what the children may actually have been learning.

While Cecilia did not explicitly talk about her setting, two features became apparent. First, in her setting, Cecilia had the ability to be flexible and change rules as needed. Second, Cecilia was teaching in a context where the staff team asked questions and reflected on policy issues. This kind of dialogue was not seen any of the transcripts from public school teachers.

Therefore, the teaching contexts for the non-public school teachers appeared to stay in the background. Teaching contexts appeared in these transcripts as a generally unobtrusive background for the teachers.

### *Public School Settings*

In contrast, the public school teachers were very aware of the impact of their settings on their personal decision-making. In particular, they seemed to be very aware of other people in their settings and of the effect that countywide policies had on their personal context. This awareness was expressed in both positive and negative terms.

#### *People in the Public School Context*

For the most part, the teachers' experience of these school-based personnel in their environment was as positive and supportive influences on their decision-making to the extent that their decision-making was facilitated by the input of these other people. However, at times, these other people also caused the teachers anxiety and were viewed by the teacher as a threat to autonomy. Parents were also viewed as great resources, but also as costly aspects of the environment because of the time teachers spent interacting with them. All the teachers (both in public and non-public schools) were aware of issues of time – usually the lack of enough time, but the public school teachers specifically, experienced episodes of their time being controlled by others and not themselves.

*Administrators and district level personnel.* School administrators, such as principals and assistant principals, were mentioned by three of the five public school teachers. Pam made several direct references to her new school principal, one while she discussed her decision to make copies of the small paperback readers for the children to take home for practice. She stated:

> … It is paper and a lot of it has to do with our [new] principal this year. She told us that we are not going to have to worry about paper, I mean always in the past, by the end of the year, I ended up buying reams of paper out of my own pocket, and this year we are not going to have that problem we have been told.

This may seem like a small item, but having access to supplies practically affects a teacher's classroom activities and emotionally affects her sense of possibilities and hopefulness. Later in the interview, Pam acknowledged that she also felt constrained by standardized procedures and expectations and by not yet knowing how the new principal might react to her decisions:

> I know that we have certain rules we are supposed to be following all the time but I don't follow them. I believe in doing what's best for that child in whatever given time that is. So that's probably a more conscious decision because every time I do it, I think, oh I may get caught, but it isn't what you think. It is nothing horrible, but like in reading … That [changing the standardized reading protocol] is a conscious decision that I make every single day with the kids.

A second time during the interview, Pam mentioned this same idea of "getting caught" for deviating from the approved instructional model and discussed how she had prepared a response, " I will tell her this is what this child needs."

On the other hand, Rose spoke very positively of her school's administrative team and their influence on her decision-making. She regularly sought advice from the principal and assistant principal and frequently chose to keep them informed of her classroom decisions. She indicated that this interaction was a positive, but also an expected, part of her school's culture. The administrators wished to know about classroom issues and they expected to be updated and consulted regularly. They, in turn, provided positive support when receiving this information.

> When making decisions, especially when you've got a touchy situation, it could be behavior; it could be a parent concern. That is when I think it is very important to talk to the principal or our vice principal, especially when you have that parent

> you have a concern about. They may be in your face, not supportive, questioning what you are doing. It is nice for the principal to know heads up. This parent might be upset. These are the interactions I've had with this parent, you will probably hear from this parent.… The assistant is very supportive about coming and helping with making decisions; he has helped me with some behavior issues this year.…
>
> The principal is very supportive; she likes the teacher's input. What is working, what is not working? Something is not clicking, not working, is there a better way? She is very perceptive on what is a better way to reach this particular child.… She [the principal] is e-mailing me three weeks into it. How is this little one doing? We had a question on how his reading has been coming along. The principal and I have had a conference with his parents. We started an intervention, I am doing these modifications, I am anxious to see what this test says and then we are going to go from there. So she keeps up with those children, especially the little ones that we consider high risk for any problems and behavior issues, too. I just let them know without having to be asked. I like keeping them informed. I like for them to know.

So, for Rose, the school administration was a support and a help to her decision-making; while for Pam, at least at this point in the school year, the principal was possibly a help but also possibly a threat.

Patricia indicated that her decisions were supported by the administration of her school. The principal helped to ensure that the kindergarten class had access to the gymnasium at an appropriate time and that they were assigned a physical education teacher to help them with the SMART™ gym program they wanted to develop with their classes.

> Last year was the first time we have ever used it appropriately. Before, we weren't given access to the gym because of scheduling.… We got a new principal last year and she made it happen so that we could have it. She really believed in the program.

Patricia also felt that the principal would listen to her when she made a request:

> Yeah, I don't know if it will actually happen, but I think they will listen to it because I don't ask often. If I ask for something, I ask for it because there is a reason for it and something like that is one, I am going to "go to the hill" on.

There are many things I am not going to "go to the hill" on but that is one of them.

In the next case, Patricia objected to the principal's request to reassign her teacher's aide, because she was most keenly aware that the teacher's aide was a key component of maintaining the consistent classroom environment for a child with special needs. For Patricia, the classroom context was more important than the whole school context:

> We have someone on our faculty who is sick and someone needs to fill in for her, someone that is knowledgeable about what she does in her classroom and they really wanted to take my assistant and replace her with someone else that was new to the building. But, this is just a place where you want someone who knows this particular child because it is so broad and each child is so different that you just can't come in and say, well I know this and I can work with it. Each child is so unique and I need someone who is familiar with that child or I am going to take three weeks back and lose ground with that child. So I had to say you need to go somewhere else because I have a child that, really, consistency is important to them. I need you to do everything you can before you come back to me and say let's make the switch.

Patricia was clearly aware of the constraint and possibilities others have on her decision-making and she was willing to try to decide first for the children in her immediate setting her classroom.

The two other public school teachers did not comment on this kind of close interaction with their administrative team. Hillary and Betty did not mention their school administrators at all. Hillary was aware that the district curriculum specialist expected to see her class at a certain chapter or level of progress when she visited. Hillary felt she had some flexibility but was still very accountable for explaining any discrepancy: "If I had my curriculum facilitator come in, she would want to make sure at least my target skills

had been taught." Betty also was aware of her need to justify her practices to the supervisors:

> We do our best and … I am real good at justifying why I am not doing something if it comes to that. We have some supervisors and people … that seem to be pretty understanding as far as that goes…. Yes, because I'm always advocating for the kid, you know, if the kid can't do it, why do something that is a waste of their time? They could be spending their time doing something else that is more effective for them.… [Sometimes we are told to still try it, so,] we do it anyway and when the kids make no progress, you say it's not appropriate for them. You want to say I told you so but you can't do that to your boss (chuckling).

Betty continued to share her experiences of being accountable for her special education classroom practices, specifically her responsibility for regularly testing the children to demonstrate progress:

> I do what needs to be done for the kids. We are doing the reading inventories every week.… We do more practice reading to give them practice for when it comes to their tests, so they will show more improvement as far as that goes. Some days I hate doing that because that is kind of teaching the test, I mean, I think a lot of teachers fall into that kind of thing because they monitor you for how well your kids are doing. You do the things on the Internet and they pull it up and it is kind of frustrating sometimes, when they ask, "Well, why isn't this kid making any of the progress you said he would make?" Well, you want to watch him take a test? What do you do with someone when he is not able to?
> I: How much of your day would you say gets caught up in that debate or tension?
>
> P: I try not to let it bother me unless the person is here … like last week we had, a supervisor came in and was, um, I forget what her exact title is, … and I probably spent 20 minutes with her discussing the goals we have to make for the kids and why we have to do it this way and they are wanting us to go back and change stuff on our IEPs and how he needs to change one goal. I just said, you know, so and so, if someone asks me, I'll say you told me to do this but I am not doing it, because it is ridiculous to come in here and change one goal on my IEP. We are lucky enough to get our parents in here once or twice a year for what we need them to be in here for. I think it is ridiculous for the county to say you have to change all this when they just decided this over the summer that it needed to be re-changed. That kind of stuff. There are times when I stand up and say it is a waste of time … a waste of my time and my parents' time and I could be teaching. There are times when you have to stand up because that is what the kid needs.

So while Betty complied with mandates that made sense to her, she was quite clear that her preferred and usual practice was to do “what is best for the children,” and she was very willing to defend that position with supervisors. Patricia, who was even less eager to comply with mandates she disliked, shared a very difficult recent encounter with a district level supervisor, regarding the issue of mentoring first year teachers. Patricia, who regularly supervised university interns in her classroom, had been approached by one of the first year teachers about becoming her mentor. When Patricia, a twenty year veteran teacher, inquired about this possibility, she was told that the district did not want her to be a mentor “since she didn’t always follow the rules and probably would mentor the new teacher in some of the ‘old ways of teaching’ rather than the whole class instruction with the mandated curriculum currently being used by the county.” Patricia was visibly hurt by this experience.

It seemed evident that while these teachers, especially Rose, found some support from administrators and district level supervisors, they were aware that their decisions would be questioned by others and that they needed to justify their decisions. Some teachers such as Hillary seemed satisfied that their explanations would be accepted while Pam was less certain. Betty was more concerned about the time wasted both in accountability efforts and in trying the recommended practices that she considered to be unreasonable for the children in her classroom.

*Colleagues.* Colleagues figured strongly within the context of most of the public school teachers. In particular, they were discussed at length especially by Rose, Betty, and Pam. These teachers experienced their colleagues as positive resources who helped them make better decisions for their classrooms.

Rose spoke of going to her colleagues for help with discipline procedures, as well as with curriculum and planning questions. The input from these colleagues figured strongly in her decision-making. For example,

> Every day I sit and talk with my colleagues and they give me ideas, every single day.… I had a lot of support staff. I had the HEPT and the physical therapist, speech therapist, CDC teachers, teaching assistants, and the reading specialist and they were all working, we all worked very closely.… That made a huge difference, it did for me to have that support and know you have it. When I'm flustered and I am out of ideas and I can go to a first grade colleague that has not had the child, but they have modifications, they say we'll try this.

She continued to say that her more experienced colleagues helped her make decisions about what is "fluff" and what are "essential" skills:

> What are the objectives, the best way to meet the objectives? … There is all this extra stuff they throw at you. It helps for them to help me prioritize what it is I need to look at most importantly first … and it is a timesaver, too.

In Betty's context, she gathered information from her assistant and other teachers to help her make decisions about how to "run" her classroom:

> Yes, and I have a great assistant.… She is really good about asking if she is struggling with something, um, to ask for help with that, and myself if I am having problems, I discuss it with her and say can you think of anything differently that I can do, um, and if she can't come up with something that we try or if we try something and both of us can't figure out, we will go to the resource teacher across the hall or someone else to try to get more ideas, because I think the more brains you have together, have working together, the better the chance you have of making success with the kids, but getting help from other people is the best way to run a classroom, I think, because other people have more ideas than I do.

Pam's view of decision-making in regard to others was situated in her view of herself as a follower: "I am a real follower for the biggest majority of it. If somebody tells me this is what you have to do, then I feel guilty if I don't do it." Yet, she was still responsible for making decisions with/for others during grade level meetings. Support for

Pam was not about getting new ideas. It was about the camaraderie and trust she experienced within this group. Although she was now a first grade team leader, she said the other teachers do not "have to follow" her suggestions, but she fondly remembered when she had the support of the whole team because they were all on the "same page."

> I: So you plan as a group?
>
> P: We have grade level meetings. Kelly and I do a whole lot of planning together because she and I are the two [with longevity at this grade level]… and say, "Here this is what you are doing" because we are guiding everybody along right now.… We plan the big stuff but we don't say … you have to do this page on this day, that type of thing. Everybody is still open to putting your ideas into it. When I taught kindergarten we did it, I mean I could tell you if I was doing page 52, everybody else was to. It was that controlled and it worked great because four of the people I worked with, we had been down there for quite a few years and we knew each other really well and we trusted each other and it is just how we did it. We met together and just planned out every detail every week. You can't do that in the first grade.

While other teachers seemed to thrive in self-planned contexts that were open to possibilities and options, Pam was aware of her personal need for organization and structure:

> I am a very organized, structured person. I like everything to be in its little place. That is the way I run my classroom, messes drive me crazy … and I think that structure side of it goes with that a whole lot. I get really irritated with people that I think are not doing their job the right way.… I do know people, one person in particular that got out of the classroom because she was very tired of it being so scripted. You've got to do this; you've got to do this. I mean it is almost like. "Here is your scripts, stand up here and read this." It didn't really bother me. I like the structure as far as this goes and those plans, I think it is wonderful. Especially for a first year teacher, I think they need that structure and then you start being able to venture out and you kind of find out what your limitations are and you can go away from the curve so far and you know you are still okay, that kind of thing.

Pam felt supported when the setting was highly structured and well-organized and she and her colleagues had carefully planned the lessons. She did say that the other teachers

did not have to follow these suggestions, however she was somewhat skeptical of those choices, "I would love to know how that teacher makes her decisions," and she was clearly cognizant of her own need to closely adhere to the mandated curriculum.

Colleagues, therefore, figured as supportive people in the school contexts for these teachers. They were resources for ideas and especially for camaraderie. For some teachers such as Pam, they served to mirror and reflect her teacher's own thinking.

*Parents in the school context.* While Madeline described the daily log that provided parents with a picture of the children's day and Virginia encouraged the children to read with parents and to share activities and discussions with them, parents did not seem to be a figural aspect in the decision-making of the non-public school teachers. It was quite different in the public school context.

Patricia and Hillary both spoke of parent volunteers and how they selected and planned for them. It seemed as if having these classroom volunteers were an integral part of the classroom day. Hillary, in particular, spoke at length of her decisions regarding parents. She was aware of deciding which parents to invite into the classroom to help with center activities, and how to word the directions for each activity, so the parent, a non-educator, would be able to help the children successfully. She thought about her responses to parents, both what she told them about children's progress and behaviors and what time frame she used when making responses. She was aware of "hurting some parents' feelings" by not responding soon enough, but also weighing her responses against other duties and responsibilities.

Rose seemed very similar in the way parents figured in her decision making. She was especially aware of the time elements involved in interacting with parents. While she

viewed her relationships with parents as supportive, she also listed the decisions she made involving parents. These included returning phone calls, sending a weekly newsletter home with a folder of each child's work, sending home daily behavioral progress reports as needed, having frequent parent conferences. In summary, Rose shared why she made these decisions to stay in touch with parents in this intense way.

> It is worth the time up front. I find the more time you put into it, it has always been worth it in the end, getting their support, knowing that I am working with them. They are important in their child's education and I would like for them to know that. They are their child's advocate … they need to let me know. I think that there is a mutual respect.

Pam, on the other hand, seemed to struggle more with her decisions regarding parents. Many of the students in Pam's school lived in a rural community that had not changed in a very long time. She said this about one group of parents:

> It all boils down to and this is my philosophy, if the parents aren't helping, you are going up an up-hill road. It is just really hard, because I know these kids, if they'd work with them 10 to 15 minutes a night. It would just be amazing what could happen … in this community unfortunately … I don't think they expect too much out of their children.… One parent told me 'ain't none of my kids ever graduated from high school and I don't think this one is going to either.' I mean it is a mentality for this, not all this community but there is a lot of low-income kids in this community and they just don't worry about it. They don't expect a whole lot out of people, but you don't expect a lot out of yourself, you're not going to expect a lot out for your kids.
>
> I: Does that affect how you look at decisions for the kids?
>
> P: Yeah … though sometimes I'm afraid it makes me make negative decisions, like I assume up front, this is this type of child and I really, really try to make sure I don't do that. I expect the same out of all these children and I expect the same out of all these parents. But, I have a feeling that sometimes it colors my decisions just a little bit because I just think about the community … but you have to make sure you break through that and think the same for everybody. All children can learn (chuckles). That is what we say.

Pam clarified the effect this thinking had on one of her decisions when she spoke about photocopied booklets she made for beginning readers in her classroom. Her dilemma centered on the time, energy, and especially paper used in making the booklets which the children were supposed to take home, read to their parents, and return:

> The first year I did it I sent it home with everybody and you were real lucky to get them back and then that got expensive because you started having to make copies and it is time consuming. Then like the next two years I was very choosy who I sent it home with. I sent it home with kids I knew would bring it back, but in the long run the ones you know you are going to get it back are not the ones that really need to be reading this little thing at home. So this year I have really tried…. So I am just sending them home and you know some of them are bringing them back. I am not always convinced that they actually read it, but you know. Sometimes I wonder if the parents can actually read it but, you know, it is like I said. I am just making myself do it because that is what you need to do for the kids.

So while parents seemed to be a source of support for some teachers, for Pam, they seemed to cause uncertainty and discomfort. She found herself thinking about them in judgmental ways and then being uncomfortable with that self-recognition. She also sent home the required weekly folders and behavioral plans to parents, but did not get the same degree of parental response that so supported Rose as she invested herself in this time consuming work.

*Countywide Policies*

In addition to the people within their school community, the public school teachers in this study were aware of the many county mandates that affected their decision making. These teachers all taught in the same medium sized southern city with a centralized administration. The centralized administration set the policies regarding the adopted textbook series and the matching required local and state standards. They also provided pacing guides which recommend the time frame for when particular topics

should be taught during the school year and how much time should be spent on each subject each day or each week. In addition, they recommended instructional strategies such as whole group (whole class) or small group presentations.

These district policies seemed to control, at least in intent, decisions the teachers made about how they organized their day as well as what and how they taught. For instance, block scheduling was recently mandated across parts of the school district. Block scheduling refers to the concept that a certain content area will be taught during a certain time frame each day in each school across the county, e.g., reading and language arts will be taught from 8 o'clock to 10 o'clock every day. Pam was aware of some conflict this change created for her. She wanted to do "what is best for that child in whatever given time" and found herself aware of this dilemma:

> If I had it my way, I'd teach math first thing in the morning, because I think that is when the kids are the freshest and I think math is a harder concept than reading, but I have to go by block scheduling.

On the other hand she recognized that because of block scheduling, there was now an organized and mandated time for science and social studies, which previously had been slighted subjects. She acknowledged her responsiveness to school mandates and her willingness to try to adapt her classroom decisions as positively as possible:

> Since this year we've gone to this block scheduling, it was really hard to get used to and I am totally not acclimated to it, but I really have enjoyed it. I feel like I'm teaching science and social studies and health a whole lot better this year, because I am being forced to think it about it. Now I've got to plan out the time that that is what has to get done in there. So that has been really good.… So you've got that 45 minutes every day that you know that you've got allotted for that subject, so that has worked out real well.

The county prescribed all content area curricular series and provided pacing guides for each curricular area. Each teacher presented a slightly different experience of

how the district mandates and expectations impacted their ability to make appropriate decisions. This section will highlight some of those reactions.

Rose provided this list of the subjects that she is required to teach in the first grade:

> Let me see if I can remember all of them. Reading and math take on a big portion. Language Arts is combined with reading, well, kind of combined. We have, however, a separate language arts series and it is different from our reading series. We have a science curriculum as well as science books and resources and things, also, social studies books. We got health books last year to use. We have Spanish. I teach it with some of the support materials, the *Amigos* videos. The Spanish curriculum is more of an "exposure." They are encouraged to be "exposed" to it versus "knowing it." I do science, social studies, health, Spanish, reading, language arts, math, and penmanship, writing. I make up my own booklets for that. We also have to have CARE – the county implements CARE. It is the reading and language arts component. CARE is *Children Achieving Reading Excellence* is what it stands for and it is another way of saying "phonics"…. CARE goes along with handwriting. There is a handwriting assessment for CARE. There is a spelling assessment for CARE…. So they correlated it with our reading series but I have a whole other method for CARE…. I think I have covered all the subjects.

It was evident that the teachers had an extensive curriculum to teach, not just a list of mandated skills and outcomes. Pam described her experience using the district mandated curriculum to create her plans for the school year:

> [Taking a form from the filled 3-inch loose leaf binder that was open on her desk.] The county told us that this is … what we want. You have this on a certain day out of the reading program.… We [two first grade teachers] just went through and we filled out … what we are doing for all these subjects. So, I have these for the entire school year.… So this is a guideline of what they are going to do all week. … We have got [binders] with lesson plans for [each subject] … This is it. I mean this is in stone, kind of, sort of, because this is what the county says you've got to do. So that is what we do…. This is everything I need for every day.… You can do it any way you want to, but you know by the end of the day, you know, this is what I've got to cover on Wednesday and this is what I've got to do today. So it is pretty cut and dry.

Although Pam made several comments about helping individual children, it appeared as if "covering the curriculum" was a serious influence on her decision making.

> It does keep you on track because you know when you get to the end of the year you have covered every bit of it. I am sure that is why they do it because I can see, just knowing some people's personalities they'd never get to the last of it.
>
> I: Most of your students, do they get to the end of it?
>
> P: Yes, we always, I've never not gotten it done.

Pam also noted that "first grade is not very relaxed" and "you really can't add your personality to it." When talking about teaching children in small math groups, she commented that "The principal would come and tell us to stop and…, you'd just have to stop. We have already been told we are not allowed to do that. It is not county policy and so they can't do it anymore.… Unless you have a principal that is totally out of touch, I guess, and then you could do what you wanted to."

Rose, also a first grade teacher, did not appear to be in direct conflict with these expectations either, except for her concerns about time. She said that there is never enough time to do what she wants to do – whether it is calling parents, making materials, practicing new skills, or providing the children with choices:

> There is no time to waste. Our day is so packed full. There is no time to waste. You can't just waste it on anything. There is not a lot of wasting time. You just don't have it.

Rose, however, seemed to personalize the curriculum in more ways than Pam. She particularly felt that she had the freedom to decide among the teacher-made and other supplementary materials and about modifications to some lessons as she developed particular units:

> So you have to teach those objectives and you have to use the county test form that they send you. How you teach it and what you use, some might say you can be more flexible.… So, with the new series, they encourage you, 'Use these things, go with the book, how it paces you... In the order of sequence, use what you need as the book goes. This is the first time for the series. Let's do it exactly that way and see how your kids are doing.…' So yes, I use the math resources, but there are a lot of other things I use in addition to that … versus taking the time to make what they suggested. I look at what they suggest and what I have. This is what I've got and to me it looks a whole lot better and it is already there and available and I am going to use that and that is what I've done.

Hillary was very aware of the pacing guides but like Rose and also Patricia, Hillary used centers and activity areas for small group work. Regarding curriculum development, Hillary spoke of piloting the math program the previous year, so she had a sense of familiarity and ownership which neither Rose nor Pam shared. They both spoke of getting used to the new math series and making decisions about adjusting their materials and pacing to this change.

Since Betty taught in a self-contained class for children with diagnosed special needs, the requirements were slightly different. She had a mandated curriculum but the children's individual educational plans (IEP) took precedence over county policies. Therefore, Betty was aware that she has more flexibility, ownership, and opportunity to choose materials and methods:

> The programs that we use, um, that the county has used, are basically direct instruction programs that they have recommended, and now with the No Child Left Behind, everything has to be research-based and luckily the programs we use have a lot of a research base in them, so it's pretty much set forth, structure by structure, you know, you teach this first, this next and so on. But a lot of the times, our kids don't get it like typical kids do and so, a lot of times we have to go back into the lesson and this kid's really having trouble with this and we need to re-teach this or this needs to be done in a different way or they're just not getting it.

In spite of this, Betty considered her classroom decisions in terms of some of the hassles with which she deals when the mandates interfered with the needs of the children. In this example, she was concerned about a computer program she must use with the children. The program was connected to the central office which recorded how long each child used the program:

> I'm not sure how well the computer thing is going to be effective or not … but getting two hours a week on computer time [per child is difficult and the district office can] monitor the time and … if they want to check on you downtown on how much time this child has been on the computer they can pull that up. So, yeah, Big Brother is watching in that room.

Although the levels of frustration among the teachers were apparent, they seemed to fall on a continuum of acceptance: Pam at one end ("I like the organization") and Patricia at the other end (I am "limited" by the organization). Patricia was the most vocal in her opposition to what she viewed as heavy, scripted, and mandated expectations from the county. She was keenly aware of the decisions she feels were taken from her:

> I feel limited now by the tools the school system provides for us … now it is very specific and the tools that we're given, text books and teacher's manuals, that we are given now are scripted, so that is really hard for me to go from making my own decisions, and I've done it for so long that I feel more confident with my own decisions than I do with having someone who's written a textbook that I have never met or has never been in my community making decisions about my students…. They used to give us programs and would say these are the tools we are giving you. You pick and choose and use what you want to use. Now it is pretty much mandated that this is what you use, this is what you use on this and this is what you use on that.… I make decisions every day, decisions that are very important in my world, but there are also decisions … that are made downtown, and at the state level, and at the national level. Those are the things that really, really affect me…. In correlation with the state curriculum, phhff, it is not in correlation with the children in this community…. There are people making decisions for me that have never walked in my shoes.

Later in the interview, Patricia returned to this theme of her increasing sense of powerlessness:

> You know I hate it, I hate it, I hate it, I hate it. I don't feel like I am doing exactly what I should be doing, and I'm doing it in the most nurturing way I know how, but I have to do it. I think there is going to be a backlash. They have said this pays off in the end. I don't think by fourth grade, you are going to have any more readers than you ever had. But worse, they are not having the life experiences. I hate it, but I do it the best I know how. Can they read in my class? Oh, let me tell you, they can definitely. They may be able to read, but they won't want to and they will not know where butter comes from.

### *Summary*

In summary, each teacher described making decisions within the possibilities or limitations of her school context. One aspect of the context involved the people in their settings. For the public school teachers, these decisions included definite awareness of the supervisors in their context, mainly principals and other administrators at the school level, and with supervisors on the district level as well as with colleagues and the children's parents. Clearly the relationships with administrators, not matter how collegial, were uneven in status. The teachers were aware that these people had more power than they did. This sub-theme was barely present for the nonpublic school teachers.

In addition, each school had its own culture or ways of behaving and organizing itself. All the teachers were aware of their classroom culture and most, but not all of the public school teachers, discussed their awareness of their school's culture and its impact on their decision making. For most, this awareness was a crucial part of their experiences of making decisions. The public school teachers were critically aware of the district level mandates and restrictions. Several teachers found themselves hampered by the restrictions, but some also appreciated the organization these mandates provided.

From the analysis of the eight transcripts in this study, three main themes were found to describe teachers' awareness when making decisions for their classrooms.

Teachers were aware of (1) *the multiple facets of the process of deciding, (2) the self as decision-maker,* and *(3) the constraints and possibilities found in individual teaching settings.* The findings of the first theme, especially, mirrored what is already contained in volumes of writing about decision making published by other theorists and researchers. Themes two and three revealed some nuances of decision making that were uncovered in this study, perhaps due to the utilization of a phenomenological approach. These findings are discussed in more detail in Chapter V.

# Chapter V

## Discussion and Recommendations

Despite the wealth of research on teacher decision making, the fact that there continues to be such a keen interest in learning how, why, and to what extent teachers make classroom decisions speaks to the relevance of this research. The purpose of this study was to develop a phenomenological understanding of teachers' experience of their awareness of making classroom decisions. Since the existing, well developed, and varied literature on teacher decision making most often uses methodologies other than phenomenology, a purposeful niche exists for these findings.

In this study, decision making was explored through the lens of the teachers' described awareness as they experienced making classroom decisions. These teachers reported being aware of: (1) *the multiple facets of the process of deciding, (2) the self as decision-maker,* and *(3) the constraints and possibilities found in individual teaching settings.* Consistent with the literature described in Chapter Two, the teachers' experiences of making decisions usually began with either a disruption to the expected or ongoing routine, a realization that their goals were not being accomplished, or that the goal itself had shifted (Baron, 2000; Beach & Connolly, 2005; Byrnes, 1998; Lipshitz et al., 2001). Teachers then needed to decide whether to observe more or to intervene. When the teachers reported the steps in any decision making process, these teachers resembled the "experts" that were described in expertise and in naturalistic decision-making theories (Hutton & Klein, 1999; Pliske & Klein, 2003; Salas & Klein, 2001). That is, they usually had a goal in mind and considered very few options, often only one. Their choices were

limited by their experiences of what worked in the past and they rarely had the time to stop and consider a more expansive array of choices. Similar to other experts, they historically made good decisions, at least by their own and their school's criteria, and therefore stayed within their successful behavioral framework.

The influence of the sociocultural context of the decision maker is a factor in decision making research. According to Peterson and his colleagues (Peterson, Miranda, Smith, & Haskell, 2003), the influence of culture and context affects the knowledge base of decision makers, the issues revolving around the perception and understanding of power within the context, and the role of individuals or groups in actually making decisions or in modifying decisions made by others. It appears as if this factor, the role of the sociocultural context, is particularly relevant in this study because the school settings were so notably different.

Although all the themes uncovered might provide substance for provocative discussion, I have chosen to elaborate on the findings that seem to have the most impact on teacher preparation issues, since this is the primary context for conducting this research. These results cut across all themes, but deal specifically with the influence that context seems to have on the decision making of teachers. There were many similarities in the reported experiences provided by the teachers in this study, however, the differences in their descriptions of their awareness of the use of pedagogical knowledge in classroom decision making was striking. It is this difference that I explore further in this chapter, looking closely at the questions and concerns stimulated by these differences and attempting to explain, hypothesize about, and interpret the way public and non-public school teachers varied in their awareness of their experiences of decision making. Finally,

some implications and recommendations for teacher preparation programs will be suggested.

As noted, there was a marked difference in the way the teachers spoke about their knowledge of child development and their attention to individual children, and about curricula content and their choices of teaching strategies. Major differences also occurred in the articulation of their personal values and beliefs. These are areas of pedagogical knowledge which, according to previous research, predictably appear when teachers discuss decision making and these are generally assumed to inform and frame teacher decision-making (Anderson, 1995; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Grossman, 1995).

In their interviews, some teachers described rich and detailed awareness of their on-going use of pedagogical knowledge whereas other teachers provided more shallow descriptions. These latter teachers provided only a few examples of being aware of making decisions around curriculum content, usually in the context of selecting among classroom materials such as unifix cubes or dominoes as math manipulatives or integrating science and literacy materials into learning centers. There were a few examples of these teachers describing curriculum adaptations for particular children, usually mentioned in the context of sending home additional work or making adaptations for children with recognized special needs. They did not discuss, however, exploring their own knowledge of curriculum content as a part of making decisions about teaching strategies, which the other teachers did in some depth. Knowledge of general pedagogy refers to a knowledge base of classroom strategies such as organizational routines, systems for establishing and maintaining order, lesson structures, and teaching

methodologies (Grossman, 1995). Therefore, it seems noteworthy when teachers do not comment on these ideas in a discussion of decision making.

It must be restated that all these teachers were viewed by principals or teacher educators as articulate teachers who had well-organized classrooms in which children consistently learn. Therefore, the question arises as to the relationship between teacher effectiveness and the articulation of their awareness of pedagogical knowledge. Since this study has no data on outcome measures of children, this question cannot be conclusively answered for this group of teachers. However, recent research by Jinkins (2001) specifically examined this relationship and found that the teachers in their study who were less articulate about their specific learning objectives or teaching strategies made less accurate matches between children's needs and lesson content and structure. The children in their groups did not demonstrate the same level of reading progress as did children who were in groups where the goals and strategies were better articulated. Consequently, there may be grounds to wonder about the long term effect of this difference on children's progress and how teacher articulation is related to children's learning.

## *Articulating Knowledge and Beliefs within the Decision Making Process*

### *The Continuum of Responses*

Looking more closely at the teachers in the current study, one sees a continuum of awareness concerning pedagogical decision making practices. On one side of this continuum are those teachers who described being aware of processes of learning as they taught and described making decisions to intentionally support children's thinking and self motivation. They spoke of decision making that focused on empowering children to

become intentional learners in a purposeful learning community. They described individualized teaching strategies and personalized curriculum adaptations. They indicated knowledge of current and long range classroom goals and purposes and how their immediate actions intentionally supported the children's progress toward achieving those goals. On the opposite side are those teachers who spoke about "covering the curriculum," as if they viewed children's learning as synonymous with completing the mandated subject matter. Some of them described feeling as if this were what they were expected to think; even if they personally struggled to do so.

At one extreme were the teachers such as Madeline, who was deeply committed to a social constructivist perspective of teaching and learning (Bodrova & Leong, 1996), similar to that modeled in the Italian preschools of Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al., 1998). She used language such as "develop theories together," "learn to collaborate," "reach a learning satisfaction bar", and "observe the children so I will know what the provocations for the next day might be." This teacher easily articulated classroom goals and was confident that opportunities will arise when she could support the children's learning toward those goals. Her teaching was thoughtfully planned to embed skill learning into content understanding and theory making, rather than considering them as isolated items. Furthermore, she is able to support her theoretical language with classroom examples.

Some might say that because Madeline is a teacher of five-year-olds, she may have more flexibility in curriculum development. However, Virginia, another equally articulate example, is a second grade teacher. She described her awareness of needing to meet grade level standards, but still spoke of the children's active role in the "community of learners." She reported making individual curriculum decisions for and with children,

and developing purposeful learning activities based on her personal knowledge and interests as well as those of the children.

In contrast, on the opposite side of the continuum is Pam, a teacher whose articulation of pedagogical strategies revolves around her proud sharing of a three-inch binder containing the year's math and reading curriculum, outlined day-by-day. She said that she never failed to complete the year's work. In her description, the content and pacing were mandated, and she saw value in tight organization. She expressed concern for children who could not keep pace and attempted to work with them. That work, however, seemed to be expressed as a side bar, squeezed in surreptitiously next to the accepted whole-class math instruction. Making space for individual learners did not appear to be the central focus of her classroom as it was for the other group of teachers. The juxtaposition of experiences is clear. Some teachers were very aware of their theoretical and practical knowledge base when they described their experiences and others were much less so.

*Public School Teachers and Non- Public School Teachers on the Continuum*

Clearly, teachers occupied different spaces along the continuum. In this study, however, a major divide occurred and it was characterized by context and setting. The public school teachers described a different awareness of their experience of using pedagogical knowledge than those teaching in non-public schools. This should not be interpreted to mean that all non-public school teachers will be more articulate or have more depth of knowledge. In fact, this is surely not the case. Being articulate and knowledgeable was a criterion for participating and these teachers volunteered because they heard about the study and were sincerely interested in discussing their teaching.

When the participants were interviewed, they were not selected to represent any particular population of public or non-public school teachers. By virtue of the analysis, however, these three individuals were sorted out according to their abilities to give voice to an awareness of their decisions in rich and complex ways.

The public school teachers were distributed on the other side of the continuum, but with a greater range of responses. That is, the descriptions of their awareness of deciding about pedagogical practices were situated in various locations along the continuum. They seemed resigned, in greater or lesser degrees, to accepting district mandates and teaching within them. Betty, who teaches a self-contained class of children with special needs, came closest to the center position. She shared a number of examples of decision making for individual children, as well as examples of decisions about teaching strategies, in a manner closer to that of the non-public school teachers. Her choices, however, were more limited and she had to justify herself to her supervisors more frequently.

Therefore, on one side of the continuum, it appears as if creativity, informed decision-making, and teacher and child autonomy are valued by teachers and accepted in their settings. The other side of the continuum is characterized by varying levels of teacher conformity; limited articulation of classroom goals; less depth of independently designed curriculum features; an acceptance, even if grudgingly, of curriculum materials as a script rather than a guide; and an overwhelming awareness of the organization of classroom life. Most of these teachers showed that the context of their setting affected their teaching. Again, this description is not to be interpreted as standing for all public school teachers, rather only those in this study. This dichotomy, however, does raise

questions regarding the intrusive role of context on teachers' awareness of their pedagogy.

*Teachers' Personal Practical Knowledge*

Why did this difference arise and what does it mean? Several options are recognized. First, it is possible that the interview itself was a factor. If a different, perhaps more specific, question were asked, the teachers might have offered more detailed descriptions of their teaching knowledge and strategies. That, however, would have been a different study and might not have yielded the interesting dilemma that is now being addressed. Now, there are only the current responses of these eight accomplished teachers to consider. One conclusion that could be drawn from this work, therefore, is the possibility that these teachers do, in fact, limit their use of pedagogical knowledge in decision making for their classrooms. If this is true, how does an ongoing restricted use of pedagogical knowledge affect effective teaching and successful learning over time?

Another option might be that these teachers do have adequate pedagogical knowledge but just did not talk about it during these interviews for several reasons. It is possible that teachers, who are so rarely offered the opportunity to talk about their classrooms and their teaching, had so much to say that one 60 to 90 minute interview was not sufficient to allow them to first discuss their current struggles with mandated and scripted policies (which is what they did discuss) and then to move on into a discussion of their next layer of awareness. In other words, perhaps, they are aware of their use of pedagogical knowledge when making decisions, but did not get around to sharing those experiences.

This is an important consideration since research in this area has indicated that teachers often focus more on what they do than what they implicitly or explicitly can describe (Grossman, 1995). There is a general understanding that most teachers merge their content knowledge with teaching strategies on an implicit level, so the two become embedded and difficult to consider separately. This tacit knowledge or knowing-in-action have be largely intuitive and harder to describe (Atkinson, 2000). This option, then, brings up the question of successful ways of accessing teacher knowledge. If the seemingly "less aware" teachers were outside of the formal interview situation or if they had more time, then perhaps they might describe teaching strategies and their knowledge of children's development and learning in more depth. There is also agreement that teachers' knowledge of classroom practices may be more narrative than explicit and therefore harder to extract without a storytelling forum (Grossman, 1995).

Since this layer of knowledge fits the description offered by Clandinin and Connelly (1996) of *personal practical knowledge*, understanding this term may be helpful. These authors use the phrase as a "term designed to capture the idea of experience in a way that allows us to talk about teachers as knowledgeable and knowing persons" (Connelly, Clandinin, & He, 1997, p. 666). Personal practical knowledge, then, describes teacher knowledge that is not limited by a set of objective strategies or codified information that exists independently of the teacher; rather it is the collective of each teacher's experiences. This personalized knowledge, well recognized in the narrative tradition of educational research, is thought of as "the body of convictions and meanings, conscious or unconscious, that have arisen from experience (intimate, social, and traditional) and that are expressed in a person's practices" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995,

p. 7). The important aspect of this concept for the current research is the recognition of how this knowledge is most successfully shared.

According to these researchers (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; 1996; 2000; Connelly et al., 1997; Olson & Craig, 2005), teachers live in multiple, complex worlds – the classrooms where their expertise is alive and well; the outside world of faculty meetings, curriculum recommendations, district mandates, scripted policies, and even university instructors; and a middle space where they try to manage the dilemmas, contradictions, and realities of the other two spaces. Each "landscape" has its own form of narrative descriptors or "stories." These stories are characterized by the teachers' attempts to be true to their own experiences as experts of their classrooms and yet manage the demands and expectations of the world outside of the classroom. This idea may provide insight for us into the experiences of the two first grade teachers in this current study, Rose and Pam. Both were very interested in being interviewed, but seemed to be a bit awed by the process. They indicated that they were not used to being audio taped and certainly were not used to the "university," another level of expertise, coming to hear their opinions. It seemed, at times during the interview, as if they were conflicted, trying to be loyal to both themselves and to their schools.

The "outside" world also expects teachers to be experts, but to use a different set of words as descriptors of their experiences. The words belonging to the outside world include disconnected abstractions such *chapter and unit tests*, *district guidelines*, and *expectations and must-dos.* The classroom stories, on the other hand, were told with the words of individual children and described about hidden times spent trying to deal with real life needs. The middle area of this landscape is where the two worlds meet.

Clandinin and Connelly (1995) suggest that "cover stories" permeate this boundary space, "stories in which [teachers] portray themselves as characters who are certain, expert people. These cover stories are a way of managing their dilemmas" (p. 15). It is possible that the cover stories of the middle spaces are represented in the experiences shared by the public school teachers in this study. That is, they talked about their worries and concerns. They shared their struggles managing the discrete and separate outside world of too many curricular areas, forced activities, and inappropriate expectations, as well as their sense of automatized teaching and their perceived lack of freedom to act autonomously. These conflicts lead to questions about the long term impact these concerns have on the daily lives of teachers. What happens over time, when teachers are more aware of these issues than of their pedagogical decision making? This is certainly an area for further research.

Another perspective to consider is that some teachers may not discuss pedagogical knowledge because they are not in the habit of articulating their teaching strategies. They may teach in environments that do not support reflective habits of mind (Katz & Chard, 2000), and therefore may find it difficult to begin talking about those practices. It certainly could be that speaking about teaching strategies and children's development is not a valued practice in their school contexts, thus their voices on these subjects may have become silenced, or even atrophied. If this is so, there could be serious implications for local teacher education programs. Many times, these public school teachers work with university interns and student teachers. If they have difficulty describing their teaching practices, then what is the quality of the interactions these

teachers have with the interns they are mentoring? Are they able to support reflective practices in beginning teachers?

*Reflective Practice*

The arguments regarding the use of reflective practice are straightforward: "To be reflective about what one is doing is to give that act some thoughtful consideration rather than to perform it in a routine and unexamined way" (Bartell, 2005, p. 116). John Dewey expressed the same ideas in this way: "Reflective practice converts action that is merely appetitive, blind, and impulsive into intelligent action" (from *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process*, 1933, p. 17 as cited in Bartell, 2005, p. 117). Being able to discuss teaching decisions explicitly is an aspect of reflective practice. Today, there is no longer any debate as to the value of the role of reflective practice in teaching. In 2005, the National Academy of Education, a premier think tank of national and international educational scholars, issued a comprehensive report on the state of teaching, educational research and teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, Baratz-Snowden, & National Academy of Education, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). This report strongly recommended the essential nature of reflection in teacher practice. "By making tacit theories explicit, people can think more critically about them. This allows us to improve upon ideas and assumptions that may be partially true but far from complete" (Bransford et al., 2005, p. 41).

Therefore, since reflective practice increases the possibility of intentional actions, classroom teachers who are involved in the task of mentoring new teachers have particular responsibilities to model ongoing reflective practices and to involve interns in

the actual use of these reflective behaviors in the multiple arenas that engage teachers. This actual engagement between mentoring and beginning teachers in joint reflective practice becomes even more critical when one understands how practical personal knowledge is developed.  If mentoring teachers are similar to those teachers in this study who did not address their use of pedagogical knowledge, then perhaps teacher educators may wish to examine their methods of selecting, training, and supporting the mentors with whom student interns are placed.

One theory of the development of practical personal knowledge is taken from sociocultural theory and is described by Barbara Rogoff and colleagues (Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacasa, & Goldsmith, 1995) as *participatory appropriation.* This term describes the concept that by participating in community activities, individuals are contributing to the development of community practices that simultaneously contribute to their own individual development. In this model, interns and mentoring teachers both individually teach and reflect on their own teaching and jointly reflect on each other's teaching and learning as well as on the children's experiences. In doing so, the lives of all members of the community are affected. In particular, the practices of all three members of this triad – the mentor, the beginning teacher, and the children – can be changed. This concept highlights the fundamental understanding of learning as a "process of transformation through people's participation rather than acquisition" (p. 46). Unreflective practice strongly supports the opposite underlying assumption – that knowledge and skill are simply transmitted and not constructed by the learner.

In summary, some teachers in this study were very articulate about their teaching practices, articulate in ways that revealed habits of reflection, extensive theoretical and

practical knowledge of curricular content and teaching strategies. Other teachers expressed less awareness of these understandings, raising the question of why some teachers were less articulate about these features of their decision making process. The possible differences in teachers' comfort levels in discussing their personal practice knowledge were discussed as were reasons why modeling reflective practices is an important aspect of the role of mentoring teachers in supporting the development of positive teaching practices in the next generation of teachers.

*Stress and Intensification of the Workload*

Of course, the reason why some teachers were less articulate about their use of pedagogical knowledge might be better answered by staying with the text offered by these individuals. What did the teachers describe that might help us to understand them and their experience better? As a group, the teachers who provided fewer rich descriptions of teaching moments gave powerful descriptions of the complexity and the volume of the kinds of decisions they faced. They reported mandated procedures and schedules, volumes of scripted curricula, and an incredible number of pressures and interruptions in their world. They described children living in complex home situations or with significant handicapping conditions. They described a large network of parents, colleagues, administrators, and district level supervisors, all with opinions, recommendations, and demands. They also were aware of the limited time they had to accomplish their many goals. All of these factors could cause the problems identified earlier as resulting from stress and the threat of intensification in decision making.

*Classroom press.* The concept of classroom press was identified by Huberman "as the daily experience of the fast pace and interpersonal intensity of teaching and the

classroom environment" (as cited in Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004, p. 323). This cacophony of classroom activity often

> requires immediate reactions to students, principals, and parents; obligates teachers to do many activities simultaneously; and requires that teachers cope with unpredictable environments. The constant stressors that accompanying teaching prevent teachers from concentrating on their long term goals, limit their ability to reflect on their practices, and increase their tendency to rely on personal, experiential knowledge rather than that from other sources. (Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004, p. 323)

Unpacking this idea further reveals several connections to the teachers described in this current study. One teacher gave this exact description of her awareness of decision making when she recited a long list of the daily decisions she felt that she faced. All of the participants spoke of the constant, all-day nature of deciding, but some teachers added the sense of press, an almost unrelenting noise always intruding from the background. This consideration generates at least two areas of concern. The first is the connection that stress has on limiting reflective decision making. According to Mullen and Roth (1991) most people are eager to relieve feelings of stress and often act quickly rather than reflectively. The second concern is the ordinary tendency of individuals to revert to familiar ways of behaving when faced with stress or overload, often choosing a well known stress-reducing solution rather than the more difficult, but potentially more beneficial, strategy.

Shepard (1995) considers this second effect of stress and overload in his research. He notes that effective classroom decision makers, through the use of purposeful,

practiced routines, have acquired the necessary skills of simplifying the structure of their classroom. Reducing the complexity of the overall environment allows these teachers to attend more purposefully to salient features rather than the discord of the more incidental events. This concept is also supported by the research of Rimm-Kaufman and her colleagues (Rimm-Kaufman, La Paro, Downer, & Pianta, 2005; Rimm-Kaufman, Storm, Sawyer, Pianta, & LaParo, 2006), who studied teachers' reactions to intensive organizational training using the well-respected Responsive Classroom model (Charney, Clayton, Wood, & Northeast Foundation for Children, 1998; Wood, 2002). Throughout this intensive and ongoing training, teachers were encouraged to refine essential classroom routines, policies, and activities. This training and ongoing support helped teachers to focus on the goal of creating and maintaining peaceful, caring, and democratic learning environments by addressing those elements which, in practical terms, support learning goals. The intention is to prevent daily annoyances of a classroom from becoming the primary focus of attention and of decision making. This simplification of purpose within the environment helped everyone, as students and teachers demonstrated an ability to maintain a calmer presence and had more energy to deal with other issues. A simplified environment also was shown to reinforce teachers feeling more confident and claiming a higher sense of self efficacy (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2006). This was one area in which all the teachers in this current study did concur. All had well organized environments, although they did differ in the degree to which they contained high interest content. The question for teacher educators refers back to previous statements. Will less articulate mentoring teachers be able to help novice teachers appreciate and comprehend the role of an organized environment?

Another organizational source of stress is role conflict. Schwab defines this as occurring when "an individual is faced with two conflicting sets of inconsistent but expected role behaviors" (Schwab, 1995, p. 54). At least two teachers from the current study very clearly described this exact conflict. One teacher voiced her conflict and fear of "getting caught" when recognizing the need to do independent work with one child, yet being expected to instruct using only whole class methods. In a second illustration, the teacher stated that she "hated, hated, hated" the scripted curriculum but was teaching it "in the most nurturing way" she knew.

*Effects of mandates and scripted curriculum on self efficacy.* Davis (2004), in an editorial position paper, describes the state of flux many teachers feel about themselves and their teaching, when faced with the current trend of mandates and accountability requirements. He states a view given by many teachers,

> Educators claim that they see no option except to comply with mandated rules. They report that they have no reason to *think*. Rather, they believe that they only must *act*, to follow mandates, to live with the new mandates…They feel that new requirements predetermine and rigidly restrict curriculum. (p. 285)

Several teachers in this study voiced these same words and emotions, a feeling of powerlessness and perceived lack of autonomy.

These findings raise questions of how to help teachers gain the knowledge, confidence, skill, and voice that is needed to move through the constraints of their environment. One set of answers points back to teacher education programs providing new teachers with learning opportunities that closely resemble positive teaching experiences. The same is true for in-depth in-service experiences. Research by Rimm-

Kaufmann and Sawyer (2004) noted that when teachers hold priorities consistent with areas in which they feel efficacy, they will be more likely to make decisions which are consistent with those priorities. All of the teachers in the present study were found to have a strong degree of efficacy – they saw themselves as effective decision makers. Yet, for some, there also emerged a conflict between the strategies they felt required to use and the decisions they believed were better for children. There was a perceived disconnect, tension, and sometimes frustration inherent in this recurring situation for many teachers. At what point will teachers' efficacy in decision making be compromised due to the required mandates, and children's learning become negatively affected?

Some research, especially that of Rimm-Kaufmann, Sawyer and their colleagues, is beginning to notice this trend. They have found a relationship between classrooms that are run with an appropriate amount of organization, thereby eliminating high levels of overload, and creating a positive bidirectional effect between students and teachers in regard to teachers' self efficacy. Both teachers and students feel and act in more efficacious ways in situations with well-considered classroom practices. Creating opportunities for beginning teachers to develop ways of thinking about successful strategies of dealing with overload also will support their development of appropriate levels of organizational self efficacy. Since self efficacy is one teacher quality that generally is viewed to be directly correlated to student learning (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2005; Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004), this relation between overload and decision making is an important insight.

In summary, some teachers in this study described their awareness of classroom press and a sense of work overload. They also reported feelings of annoyance and

dissatisfaction with district policies which were leading them to question the validity of some of their classroom decisions. An overview of some of the current decision making literature supported and validated the predictability of these perceptions.

### *Recommendations*

The next generation of teachers will be making classroom decisions in extremely fast paced and complex settings. This study revealed the awareness some teachers were able to share regarding their deep understandings about children's learning and their pedagogical responses. Other teachers' experiences revealed that their decision making focused on very different but equally serious issues. While we still do not know if the latter teachers possessed a depth of pedagogical knowledge equal to the first group, research is clear that individuals generally revert to places of comfort during times of change or stress. Therefore, it is crucially important for novice teachers to develop places of comfort that are consistent with a sound knowledge base, appropriate learning goals, and current, positive understandings about the teaching learning process.

All teachers have some means of handling the daily pressures of teaching. Some teachers in this study seemed to prefer roles of compliance and preferences for structure as their places of comfort. Still others accumulated more and more school activities around themselves, or unwaveringly plowed through great quantities of seemingly disparate pieces of information and unconnected skills. Some teachers took what was essential from the mandates and found ways to individualize it to meet the needs of their students. These experienced teachers are, in fact, from the same population of educators that become the mentors (formally or informally) and the role models for new teachers. While all of the teachers in this study seemed to provide children with a classroom

environment that was caring, nurturing, organized, and educationally focused, it would be more reassuring to those of us in teacher education programs to know that, when under classroom press, mentoring teachers articulately and reflectively reverted to well-developed and grounded theoretical constructs (within their preferred organizational styles) to explain and explore their decisions regarding children's learning and curriculum content and structure.

Therefore, the implications of this study revolve around the individual ways that teachers accepted the challenge of classroom decision making. Some teachers, having grounded themselves in a sociocultural theory base and a commitment to reflective practices, were aware of their pedagogical knowledge while making their classroom decisions. Their decisions seemed to emanate from this center. Other teachers presented their context or school setting as their organizing core and their decision making radiated from the policies, restrictions, or benefits they perceived in that center. This is a significant difference for teacher educators to understand.

The recommendation from this understanding is that, while teacher educators may attempt to adequately prepare beginning teachers to connect theory and practice, we also need to pay serious attention to supporting their understanding of the social, emotional, and political climates of schools and school systems. This current study presented evidence of the overwhelming power of the culture of both individual schools and school systems. While teacher educators usually discuss the culture shock of the first year of teaching with beginning teachers, a more focused and systematic approach to preparing them to intentionally recognize how they might deal with pressure and unrelenting requests and demands seems appropriate. Novice teachers also need practice in

interpreting curriculum mandates and requirements in developmentally appropriate ways. Those public school teachers in this study who were most aware of their teaching strategies had developed a balance between accepting mandates, modifying what was important, and standing their ground in reasonable ways. These are skills teacher educators must explore with novice teachers.

Since decisions are made within a social context of knowledge and beliefs, it is important for beginning teachers and experienced teachers to be cognizant of their values and beliefs. Therefore, it is consistently advocated that teacher educators make pointed efforts to encourage beginning teachers "to reconstruct the roots of their own beliefs and then be confronted with the histories of others' belief systems [as a part of] training that raises the conscious awareness of specific biases… a necessary step in monitoring automatically activated pathways" (Shepard, 1995, p. 513). Since teachers are more likely to resort to familiar behaviors and decisions in times of stress, recognizing biases can help to modify existing tendencies.

Some teachers in this study described their awareness of making mistakes while making decisions. Eisner (as cited in Woods, 1996), in a discussion of the artistry involved in teaching, supported the natural acceptance of this happening during decision-making. He also reflected on the need for teachers to "exploit opportunities as they occur" (p. 25) and, according to Woods, implied that

> goals and intentions need to be fluid – in contrast to the single-mindedness and clarity of rational planning. Teaching involves freedom to try out new ways, new activities, different solutions, some of which will inevitably fail. It is important

> that education provides that kind of opportunity and disposition…to be able to play with new ideas… to throw them into new combinations. (p.25)

Eisner continued to stress that educational improvement comes "not from the discovery of scientific methods that can be applied universally…but rather from enabling teachers… to improve their ability to see and think about what they do" (as cited in Woods, 1996, p. 23).

As teacher educators, we also need to strengthen the intuitive decision making behaviors of teachers, particularly when these teachers have already looked at their own histories and confronted their biases. Given that some of our participants were self forgiving of their own mistakes in decision making (indicating an awareness of acting on intuitive impulses and knowledge) and that they also discussed their intuitive awareness within their classrooms, affirming conversations about the intuitive sense of knowing what to do in classrooms is warranted. Terry Atkinson (2000) notes that

> reflection on practice may lead to better understanding but not necessarily to better practice. The understanding built out of reflection can be applied at the planning stage when deliberative thinking is needed, but in the crucial delivery stage in the classroom, intuitive thinking is required. Knowledge creation 'post hoc' cannot replace the need for thinking in action. (p. 71)

Peter John (2000) also supports this position by suggesting that student interns have multiple experiences in which they consider and acknowledge their use of intuition related to opportunity creation and improvisation, especially in response to individual children's needs during formal lesson situations.

Finally, research looking at the acts of teaching is basically considering issues of school reform. School reform is such a complex topic that any mention here will, of necessity, be cursory and limited. However, it must be granted that efforts taken to understand how teachers really work is directly connected to understanding how schools might improve. Attempts to improve schools are a step into the political arena of equality, power, and trust versus the reality of inequality, powerlessness, and mistrust. Any number of sources will attest to the lack of improvement schools as a whole have seen in the last decade or more, in spite of increased money, laws and efforts (Greene, Forster, & Winters, 2005; Smyth & Shacklock, 1998; Williams, 2005). Although the following view of reform efforts may be seen as extreme by some, it does reflect the conversation of numerous teachers. It also echoes the feelings of Patricia throughout her interview and especially when she was turned down as a mentoring teacher. Hargraves (1994) states:

> In England and Wales, policy makers tend to treat teachers rather like naughty children; in need of firm guidelines, strict requirements, and a few short sharp evaluative shocks to keep them up to the mark. In the United States, the tendency is to treat teachers more like recovering alcoholics; subjecting them to step-by-step programs of effective instruction, conflict management or professional growth in ways which make them overly dependent on pseudo-scientific expertise developed and imposed by others (Hargreaves, 1994, p. xiv as cited in Smyth & Shacklock, 1998, p. 121).

Since it is so clear that beliefs, attitudes, and values are crucial to teacher and student achievement, this kind of tone within school reform hardly makes progress seem possible. Some teachers are clearly embodying the ideals of great schools – respecting

children, getting to know and understand them as individuals, and rigorously adapting reflective teaching strategies to their needs and interests so in-depth learning and teaching occurs (Duckworth and The Experienced Teachers Group, 1997). Therefore the tone and content of the following recommendation is crucially important:

> Given the challenges of contemporary schooling, it would be naïve to suggest that merely producing more highly skilled teachers can, by itself, dramatically change the outcomes of education. We must attend simultaneously to both sides of the reform coin: better teachers and better systems. Schools need to continue to change to create the conditions within which powerful teaching and learning can occur and teachers will need to be prepared to be part of this change process. (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005, p. 5)

Therefore, one last recommendation will be made. Teaching is a political activity and one significant task for teacher educators is to help beginning teachers become accustomed to using their voices and making themselves heard in the political arena. It matters.

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Appendices

*Appendix A:*

*Analysis of Bracketing Interview*

## *Appendix A: Analysis of the Bracketing Interview*

Kathy Fitzgerald was interviewed by Deborah W. Tegano and the transcribed was interpreted at the UT phenomenology lab. The following ideas emerged:

1. Awareness of time included issues such as
   a) Timing of children's learning –
      i) Finding ways to allow children to have enough time to develop understandings before being urged to become efficient
      ii) Concern for individual children whose timing for learning a particular concept is out or step with the class
   b) Timing of teaching and curricular development
      i) Aware of curricular pacing
      ii) To meet children's current needs
      iii) Prepare children for future goals and activities
      iv) Timing of routines and self care skill
   c) Efficiency and control versus children's pace
   d) Enough time
      i) Not wanting to be rushed
      ii) Time to play and learn
      iii) Time for social needs and problem solving
      iv) Fragmented time versus long periods of time
2. Aware of process of decision making
   a) Very aware of periods of indecision and deciding
   b) Everything is a decision - Multiplicity of levels of decision making

c) Seeking “right” way (moral undertone) to make decisions

d) Struggle for the freedom to decide time issues

e) Isolated decisions versus decision made with the gestalt of classroom climate and community

f) Separating tasks and decisions into small decisions and reconfiguring them into a whole

3. Awareness of others

a) Needs of the children

b) Needs of student teachers

*Appendix B*

*Institution Review Board of Human Subjects permission form*

*Appendix B: Informed Consent Form*

**Teachers' Lived Experiences of Decision-Making: A Phenomenological Study**

Teachers are continually involved in the process of making classroom decisions. This study seeks to understand that process from the perspective of the teacher. During this interview, you will be asked to describe several specific incidents in which you were aware of making decisions affecting the teaching action. The teaching action is defined as the sum total of the interactions and interconnectedness among teachers, students, curriculum, parents, administrators, and community.

After the interview, you will be asked to provide some basic demographic information about yourself and your school.

Your identity will be kept strictly confidential. You have the option of choosing a pseudonym or of having one assigned. All interview content that could possibly identify an individual or community will be made anonymous by the interviewer in the transcriptions. Only the interviewer (the principal investigator) will have a list of actual names, the pseudonyms, and this consent form. These items will be stored in a locked cabinet in a locked room for the length of the study plus three years, after which time they will be destroyed.

The interview will be audio taped and then transcribed by the interviewer and/or a research assistant for analysis. Research assistant will sign a statement of confidentiality. Both the audiotape and the transcript will be identified by pseudonym only. Interviews typically last about 1½ hours and conclude when you are satisfied that your experiences have been adequately described and understood. The transcripts will be analyzed both by the interviewer alone and with the aid of an interpretive research group that upholds

confidentiality of all material analyzed by the group. The audiotape and transcript will be stored in a locked drawer and retained for the length of the study plus three years, after which time they will be destroyed.

It is possible that short passages from your transcript will be used in reporting the findings. If this occurs, your pseudonym will be used and any information in your description that might lead to your identity will be altered or removed as appropriate.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned or destroyed.

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, please contact Mary K. Fitzgerald (Kathy) by phone (865-974-2126) or by email (mkfitz@utk.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the Research Compliance Services section of the Office of Research (865-974-3466).

I consent to participate in this research.

Name ________________________________________ Date __________________

*(Please Print)*

Signature ____________________________________________________________________

*Appendix C*

*Table 1: Description of Participants*

Table 1

Description of Participants

| Participants Age range | Children and grade level | Educational degree | Years of teaching | Type of school | Children in school |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Betty 50-59 | 13 with special needs Mixed ages | MS | 10 | Suburban /rural Public school | 500+ |
| Cecilia 25-29 | 16 children Mixed ages 2-3.5 years | MS | 5 | University – based preschool | 110 |
| Virginia 50-59 | 17 children Second grade | MS | 6+ | Church related suburban school | 200 |
| Hillary 40-49 | 19 children Second grade | BS | 12 | Suburban public school | 600 |
| Madeline 50-59 | 14 children Junior K | M.Ed. | 26 | Church related girls school | 750 |
| Patricia 50-59 | 18 children Kindergarten | BS | 21 | Suburban public school | 700 |
| Pam 40-49 | 16 children First grade | BS | 21 | Suburban/rural public school | 530 |
| Rose 25-29 | 17 children First grade | MS | 6 | Suburban/rural public school | 800 |

# Vita

Mary Kathryn Fitzgerald began making decisions with groups of children as a teenager when she organized a children's club in her local parish, St. Joseph's Church, Yonkers, New York. She shutters to think of some of those early decisions such as taking 34 youngsters across city lines on public transportation to the Bronx Zoo – with only two other teenagers as support staff. However, everyone had a great day and all came back safely, thereby reinforcing her concept of self as a competent decision maker. In 1965, when Head Start began its first summer program, she was hired as a teacher assistant and was introduced to the world of early childhood education and the complexity of teachers' daily decision making.

Kathy, as she is generally known, graduated from the College of Mount St. Vincent in Riverdale, New York in 1968. She regularly uses the phrase from Dr. Mildred Toner, an education professor there, "Your task as a teacher is to meet each child where he or she is and bring them on." Upon graduation she was hired as a teacher in the Head Start program in the Yonkers public school system and the following year joined the staff of the New York State-Sarah Lawrence-Yonkers Experimental Pre-Kindergarten Program. It was as a novice teacher in this incredible program, directed by Dorothy Gross from Sarah Lawrence College, that she was introduced to the idea of reflective practices and the exploration of decision making. In 1975, Kathy earned her master's degree from the Bank Street College of Education after studying with Dr. Dorothy Cohen and Dr. Harriet Cuffaro. Kathy's master's thesis is entitled *Blocks: A Curricular Tool to Support the Development of Symbolic-Representational Thought in Young Children.*

Kathy also taught at the Little Red Schoolhouse in Greenwich Village, and the Roosevelt School in Englewood, New Jersey. She directed the Freedom Day Care Center in Yonkers, NY. In 1975 she joined the faculty of Rhode Island College and taught at the Henry Barnard Lab School, (mentoring college students and teaching children in grades pre-K through second). While at Rhode Island College, Kathy won the prestigious National Science Foundation teaching award, *The Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching*. She presented at many conferences and provided in-service training at teacher workshops throughout New England on the importance of blocks and pretend play in early childhood classrooms, mathematics education and early literacy and writing as a process.

In addition, Kathy was a co-founder of Adoption Rhode Island, a grassroots adoptive family support group. She and her daughter, Erica, were presented with the RI Adoptive Family of the Year Award. Kathy also presented workshops at numerous educational and adoption conferences on the topics of single adoptive parenting and the impact adoption may have on school progress.

In 1998, she began graduate studies at the University of Tennessee Knoxville focusing on teacher education. She was the assistant director of the UT Infant Toddler Center at Laurel and then the interim director of the Child Development Labs, UT Department of Child and Family Studies, and is now an Instructor and Coordinator of Teaching Practica in that department.