

Fort Hays State University

FHSU Scholars Repository

College of Education One-Room Schoolhouse
Oral Histories

Archives Online

4-1-1995

Master Teacher Interview with Sonya Herl

Janci Koehler

Fort Hays State University

Patericia Thorell

Fort Hays State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ors>

Content Disclaimer

The primary source materials contained in the Fort Hays State University Special Collections and Archives have been placed there for research purposes, preservation of the historical record, and as reflections of a past belonging to all members of society. Because this material reflects the expressions of an ongoing culture, some items in the collections may be sensitive in nature and may not represent the attitudes, beliefs, or ideas of their creators, persons named in the collections, or the position of Fort Hays State University.

Recommended Citation

Koehler, Janci and Thorell, Patericia, "Master Teacher Interview with Sonya Herl" (1995). *College of Education One-Room Schoolhouse Oral Histories*. 250.

<https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ors/250>

This Document is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives Online at FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Education One-Room Schoolhouse Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of FHSU Scholars Repository.

**MASTER TEACHER INTERVIEW WITH
SONYA HERL**

**JANCI KOEHLER
PATRICIA THORELL**

**Fort Hays State University
Educational Research: Qualitative
Spring, 1995**

Chapter II: Interview with Sonya Herl

Variable 1: Changes in Education

On Wednesday, April 19, 1995, Sonya Herl was interviewed and videotaped at Kathryn O'Loughlin McCarthy Elementary School located at 1401 Hall Street in Hays, Kansas. The interview concerned Sonya's career in education, with special emphasis placed on her years as a teacher at O'Loughlin Elementary School. During the past year, Sonya was selected as the 1994 recipient of the Presidential Award for Excellence in Elementary Science and Mathematics Teaching. The award was sponsored by the White House and the National Science Foundation.

Sonya Dreiling was born and raised in Hays, Kansas. She lived with her mother, father and brother, Mark. In 1991, she married Dave Herl and they currently reside in Hays. It was also in Hays that she attended elementary school, middle school and high school. As a child she enjoyed working with supplies that she used as a teacher: crayons, markers, paper and pencils. She maintained a life-long love of reading which increased her professional teaching techniques and enriched her knowledge in subjects of interest to her students. Sonya attended a Catholic high school, Thomas More Prep-Marian High School and eventually took her first teaching position at a Catholic elementary school, St. Mary's Parochial School in Ellis, Kansas. Before accepting that position, she attended Fort Hays State University and graduated with her teaching degree in 1987. During her childhood, Sonya felt that teaching was a worthwhile profession and that teachers were important people because they helped to enrich the lives of children. The continuation of that belief led her to consider and to embark upon a career in education, to take counseling classes and attend many workshops.

In 1987, Sonya accepted her first teaching position at St. Mary's Parochial School in Ellis, Kansas. She stated that at the time there were many differences between the public school setting and the private school setting. At St. Mary's, a teacher wasn't given as many resources as the public school teacher was allowed. There was not as much funding for the private sector as there was for the public schools which received state allocations. St. Mary's students were required to pay a tuition which was low in cost to attend the private school. Students really wanted to attend this school and made a conscious choice to go to a facility that incorporated their faith. Students were respectful to the teacher and had been taught respectfulness at home. No special services or pull-out activities such as Chapter I Reading, Math, or speech/language pathology assistance occurred at this time for any of the students. Sonya took on the responsibilities of many descriptions. . . teacher, nurse, physical education instructor, art teacher and counselor. She did not have many conveniences which are taken for granted by classroom teachers today.

Sonya received only \$60.00 per year at St. Mary's as classroom money. This money was to be used for art supplies, room decorations and any other needed items. Mrs. Herl explained that this money was of such a small amount that it was spent quickly.

The technological resources available to Sonya at St. Mary's consisted of a reel-to-reel projector and film strips, one television and VCR (which were kept in a janitorial closet and infrequently utilized). Teachers were expected to buy any needed equipment or art supplies throughout the year. Textbooks were old, some as many as fifteen years. However, Sonya reported that new social studies textbooks were adopted during her years at St. Mary's. The library was small. . . "the size of a bedroom," and was run by a nun who read Biblical stories to the classes once a week.

She conceded that although resources there were lacking by today's standards, "a good teacher could teach from anything."

Sonya was expected to be active in many educational roles for her students. She recounted that medical supplies were kept in a station which was actually a school supply closet/teacher bathroom. If one of her students needed medical attention she was expected to attend to that student and often left her classroom alone to do so.

Sonya taught in a one grade rotation at St. Mary's. Her class size generally was nineteen students. The school did not have a kindergarten and consisted of grades one through five. Other than regular classroom teachers, the school had two nuns and a principal.

St. Mary's offered no staff development or inservice opportunities, but Sonya felt it important to be able to teach within her Catholic faith and to share growth in that faith with her students.

From St. Mary's Parochial school, Sonya moved to Kathryn O'Loughlin McCarthy Elementary School in Hays, Kansas. This change in location occurred in 1990 during the conception of the school. The site was formerly the girls attendance center for Thomas More Prep-Marian High School. Sonya taught fourth and fifth grades using an integrated curriculum without the use of textbooks or workbooks. She also utilized portfolio-based assessment for her students.

The above mentioned implementations, along with her unique style of teaching, led to the bestowment of a national teaching award which Sonya received in 1994. The award was the Presidential Award for Excellence in Elementary Science and Mathematics Teaching. Sonya was awarded for her methods of teaching science. Sonya explained that to receive the award, her building principal, Tanya Channell,

submitted her name to the reigning national award team. She received an application packet from the Kansas State Board of Education in December of 1993. The completed application was a form that strongly resembled a resume. When completed, it was seventeen pages in length. Sonya was required to submit a working science theme or unit that she had utilized within her classroom. She had to write possible questions that people could ask about her unit and was asked to develop answers for those questions. Another aspect of the application was her explanation of how she incorporated parent volunteers into her classroom. Sonya reported to the interviewers that she relied on parents quite extensively. Eleven to twenty parent volunteers worked in her room throughout the course of a week. Many helped during their lunch hours, during a break or after their shift of work was completed. Sonya believed that by incorporating parents into her classroom she created a more positive learning environment for her students.

In May of 1993, Sonya became a state finalist for the award and received \$750.00 to use for science and math supplies at her school. Her original application was then forwarded to Washington, D.C. and she was later selected from among all state finalists to receive the national award. After her acceptance of the award, Sonya received \$7,500.00 on behalf of her school. Sonya was also awarded a one week trip to Washington D.C. for herself and one guest. She left for this trip in April, 1995. On her trip she attended numerous science workshops, one of which gave her suggestions as how to spend the \$7,500.00. Sonya also had the opportunity to meet with Vice President Al Gore and members of congress such as Bob Dole.

Mrs. Herl explained that the impact of this award was the reception of many new ideas for science projects via the mail. Many companies became aware of her name. They sent her free gifts to be used for science in her school and asked that she

implement more of their products. Upon receipt of the award, Sonya graciously stated that she felt most teachers were award winners who just needed a principal to send in a nomination on their behalf. She stated that she was fortunate to have such a principal in Tanya Channell.

Continuing the topic of changes in education, Sonya reflected on her teaching techniques throughout the years. She reported that at St. Mary's in Ellis, the students were attending a choice school and attitudes were generally fine. At O'Loughlin, Sonya felt that she needed to make learning a "fun" experience for all students. She held high expectations of those in her classroom, taught her students "a lot in a day" and kept things light-hearted in a no-nonsense manner. Sonya made students want to come to school by varying her instruction. One such example was a unit study of the Revolutionary War. Students read, researched, made time lines and presented plays to parents which ranged from topics of the settlement of Jamestown to the writing of the Constitution. Students also brought ingredients to prepare an entire meal with foods enjoyed during the time of the Revolutionary War. By incorporating such a variety of activities, Sonya believed that students spent more time on task while enjoying the learning that was taking place. Mrs. Herl stated that she challenges anyone to take a poll of her students concerning their school day. "They may not have enjoyed everything we did, but I tried to accommodate each style of learning every day. If I wasn't having fun, I know that they were not having fun."

Sonya explained that education has changed in many ways for students since she began teaching. One such way is technology. When she student taught in 1987 in Hays, Kansas, her school utilized only six computers. Students were given ten minutes a day on these computers and games were the only available option. Centers

were visible in classrooms, but many times did not utilize meaningful learning activities.

In recent years, Sonya implemented individual projects for students. They were given a deadline and then proceeded to work at their own pace to meet the deadline. Mrs. Herl believed that the State Board of Education's incorporation of the Kansas State Assessments in the subjects of math, reading, writing, science and social studies pushed teachers to utilize fresh, new ideas into their classrooms.

Sonya did not understand the use of whole language in the past. She used only basal readers and didn't know what a literature trade book was. Integration of subjects across the curriculum was nonexistent. At O'Loughlin she taught in ways opposite to her former years of teaching. She implemented trade books and whole language. She also worked out year long themes and units which centered around several main points and objectives.

Sonya has frequently reflected on her first group of students from Ellis. She has wondered how they have fared in their academic lives. She stated that since teaching that group of students, she has taken many seminars, workshops and has attended many inservice meetings which have increased her knowledge of the teaching profession. Sonya has also integrated a multitude of technology approaches into her instruction. "One doesn't necessarily need a masters degree to be a good teacher. Just implement the many opportunities provided by your district and continue to improve your individual teaching style."

During her years at O'Loughlin, Sonya became a cooperating teacher for several early college students. Her advice to others who are in the same situation was to let the students ask questions, and be willing to answer the questions or help them find the answers. Let the student know that the profession of teaching is one that is

ever-changing. Give that student time to know how you teach. Sonya stated that college students need to delve into professional journal reading to increase their understanding. Sonya believed that you must provide a student with time to observe and to learn from other teachers in the building.

The changes for those training to become teachers have been many during Sonya's years of teaching. She explained that more is expected from today's students. In her college days, she was expected to student teach for only one semester and was given little feedback on her teaching attempts. She did not have to write lesson plans and felt little confidence in her ability to teach. In 1995, future teachers at Fort Hays State University entered field schools in the district as freshmen and continued through their senior year. These young people were held accountable for what they learned and put these theories into practice. They wrote lesson plans, read professional journals, took more classes and were given a longer period of time to spend in elementary or high schools during their college education. As a part of O'Loughlin's interviewing team for several years, Sonya believed that "tough" questions were posed to these young people. . . and they knew the answers!

The thoughts of wisdom that Sonya imparted upon her student teachers were these: utilize parent volunteers, engage the students in science experiments several times a week, do not teach in rigid time expectations for each subject and most importantly. . . be flexible!

As mentioned earlier, Sonya was a member of several interview teams for prospective new teachers at O'Loughlin. She helped to choose candidates to work at the same grade level that she was teaching. Sonya was adept at incorporating these new staff members into the O'Loughlin ideal. The two started working as a team in the summer by meeting frequently. In the first week of June, they met and Sonya asked,

"What questions do you have?" If that person responded with, "When do you go to lunch," she knew that she had her work cut out for her. But if that new teacher asked how to integrate computer technology into social studies units, then Sonya knew that she would have less "instruction" to do. These questions gave the two a fresh start, and also provided an indication into that new teacher's stage of teaching readiness.

To start the summer, Sonya and her new co-teacher would bring out the district curriculum objectives in order to implement all needed grade level tasks. From that point, the two developed a plan for the year to integrate all those objectives into the classroom plus more, if time allowed. They decided, "by December we'll have taught these concepts." A map of the year was made, by taking individual subjects and then building in flexibility. Sonya encouraged the newcomer to bring what he/she had to share during these meetings and together they began to gather resources.

It is the perception of Sonya that the new teacher received this instruction period gracefully. At first this person may not have had a complete understanding as to the reason for the summer meetings, but by mid-school year, that person gratefully acknowledged that the summer planning time was extremely helpful.

For an at-risk teacher, Mrs. Herl suggested that others step in to listen, ask questions, allow that teacher to observe in your room and offer helpful strategies to that person. She had such an opportunity last year and offered assistance to someone. Sonya had the teacher get her grade level objectives and together they sat down to make a plan for the year. She stated that this person didn't require as much aid as a new teacher would, but she offered encouragement, compliments, and made it known that her door was always open for further assistance.

The changes in education that Sonya noticed over the past years are many. She reported that locally, parents expect more from their child's teachers; they hold

high expectations for performance and educational accountability. Teachers must prove themselves to parents, administrators and the public. Parents were more visible as volunteers in the classroom and that helped to keep teachers "on the ball" at all times. Sonya felt that parents wanted a decision-making voice in their child's education. She made a poignant statement when she said, "Parents are a child's main instructor, while the classroom teacher is that child's supporting staff."

Sonya believed that school board members truly affect a community. She had never given this governing body a thought until she began attending meetings. She explained that this governing body "calls the shots," and is supportive of the teachers, staff and the administrative people within the district. They are the ultimate decision-makers who do not take their jobs lightly. Sonya then understood that they must be knowledgeable about school finances, state standards and the needs of the local citizens. She felt that teachers would make the best board members!

Variable 2: School Environment

At this point in the interview, Sonya traveled from O'Loughlin's media center to her classroom. Her room consisted of kid-work everywhere. In her room a "living portfolio" of charts, simulation games, invertebrate research, bird nests, agendas, math terms, current news articles and Gil Grammar campaign posters were found. "Gil" was taking a tour of the USA to campaign for the eight parts of speech and for proper language usage. Sonya also taught a unit on the importance of recycling. Her students brought different types of recyclable items to be placed in labeled boxes on the floor. Charts and graphs of the items were recorded on the walls.

Sonya had not had any formal training in cooperative learning such as the views according to Johnson and Johnson, but had strongly implemented it into her

classroom. She placed student desks in groups at all times and organized them into small working cooperative groups for science, math, reading and social studies. She stated that these are kid-support groups. . . "you do this, I'll do that." Many projects were also completed in group situations. If groups didn't mesh well together, Mrs. Herl would allow them to openly discuss the problems and if nothing could be worked out, a switch would be made. She explained that helping students learn the importance of adjustments and group flexibility were equally as important as the attempt at cooperation.

O'Loughlin was a school that taught without the use of textbooks or workbooks. The teachers did not give letter grades to students, but implemented portfolio-based assessments. Sonya believed that to have no textbooks opened up a world of activities and ideas. Instead of being confined to one author's ideas, many resources on a topic were utilized. She further explained that letter grades were a valuable tool for those students in medical school, but for those in grades four or five, letter grades just weren't that critical. Self-motivation was a powerful tool for these students to learn to implement. Collecting work for portfolios resulted in less pressure and competition among students, and instead encouraged children to do their personal best. Sonya reported that students who came to O'Loughlin from graded curriculum schools flourished with the portfolio system. . . the pressure was eased for the majority of these children.

The role of a building administrator was important to Sonya. She expected that person to demonstrate an understanding of staff members, be a role model for the staff and to be a good listener. She wanted that person to be a "people person," and to push to receive the personal best from each teacher. She desired the principal to recognize the potential of each instructor, to offer current research journal articles for

teachers to read, to be an educated person and most of all to "know a little about every aspect of education."

Variable 3: Leadership

Sonya discussed the topic of leadership in great length throughout the entire interview. Sonya felt that an effective leader is an effective teacher and she hoped to project this image to her students. Sonya told of her classroom by describing what we would see if we were to visit her classroom. She stated that we would see a variety of group activities taking place on the floor around the room during the subjects of math, reading and science. She mentioned that she ran a very fast paced classroom. Sonya suggested that there was not a great deal of down time in her classroom. Down time provided the students an opportunity to become bored and to possibly get into trouble, therefore she really strived to eliminate this time by keeping things moving right along throughout the day. Sonya expressed there were times at the end of the day when she wondered if she moved too quickly or maybe pushed her students too hard, but then she realized how much she accomplished with her students throughout the day. Sonya saw this as a positive arrangement for herself and for her class.

Effective leaders constantly evaluate themselves and visualize what traits need to be changed or improved. When asked how she evaluated herself and her teaching, Sonya answered very honestly that there were subjects she knew better and felt more comfortable about teaching than others. Sonya felt she was stronger in the areas of science and math and may have needed to improve upon the areas of writing and literature. Sonya emphasized that she was an effective teacher in the way she delivered instruction to her students. She felt confident in saying this because she pictured herself as a hard worker. Sonya stated that if you tried to do your very

best to teach new material to students and you strived to present content in a meaningful way, you were successful. Sonya expressed that students should feel this way about themselves and their own personal accomplishments. She also verbalized that if you worked hard to meet the needs of all of your students while you were teaching, then you were successful.

Sonya was viewed as a leader by her students and her peers. Sonya was highly regarded by students and parents in her classroom. Sonya felt her students and parents would describe her positively. Her students would have stated that she was fun. She felt this way because she felt that many of her students thought of her as a person in the fifth grade. This worked to Sonya's advantage because her students saw her as one of them. Sonya was learning right along with her students and she felt this was an important trait in being a good teacher. Mrs. Herl also stated that her students would have mentioned that she was a fair person in the classroom. She looked for the best in each of her students. Sonya found something handsome and beautiful about every boy and girl and expressed to her students that she liked and enjoyed each and every one of them. Sonya believed that her classroom parents would have described her by saying she was full of energy. Her students' parents would also have mentioned that a great deal of learning took place in her classroom on a daily basis.

Parents are the first and most important influence on a child's life. Sonya verbalized that parents play a very large role in the progress of their child's education. She found that a parent's main priority was to be involved and knowledgeable about their child's education. Sonya stated that to be an effective leader you must keep everyone abreast of the classroom happenings. To help assist with this belief, Sonya published a bi-monthly newsletter to help keep parents informed about what was

taking place in the classroom. A child is a parent's number one concern. Sonya knew that parents expected their children to be receiving a good, quality education during the six hours they were at school. Parents wanted their children to be happy, healthy, safe and to have learned the skills necessary to become a successful person. Sonya recalled something that she heard at a conference. The presenter reminded the teachers present that they were working with children "who are in someone's wallet," someone very special, and it is the teacher's responsibility to take care of those children during the time they spend with them. Sonya felt very strongly that it was her responsibility to not let her students or parents down.

Variable 4: Philosophy of Education:

Sonya was very comfortable discussing her philosophy of education. Sonya felt that education is striving for a national effort to improve by the year 2000. This effort to move forward came about because of the development of the state and national standards that were currently in place or were being developed in various subject areas in 1995, and because of the Goals 2000 movement. Sonya mentioned her experience with the National Board Certification. She expressed that this is one area where the nation has decided to set a standard for teachers. Sonya believed expectations of teachers were going to greatly increase in the future. Sonya stated that not everyone could be a teacher. Because of the high expectations of students, parents, the government at state and local levels, and the world; teachers needed to be better educated to do their job successfully.

Sonya felt that there are so many positive aspects about teaching. Sonya really liked and enjoyed children, especially at the age she was teaching. She thought of her students as friends and she appreciated that feeling. Sonya also liked the fact that

this profession was one where she could really be herself. She didn't think of herself as being a different person outside of her classroom as she was within her classroom. Sonya didn't think she could be herself in any other profession the way she was able to be herself in the profession of teaching. Sonya pictured herself as a very positive person in the lives of her students. It made her feel good that she was a role model and looked up to by her students and her peers. Sonya gained a great deal from her students each and every day.

In looking toward the future, Sonya discussed both professional and personal aspects. Professionally, Sonya wished to get her master's degree. However, she was undecided in what area she would pursue this because she was not ready to give up the classroom. Sonya hoped to continue to present various educational topics to others. This was an area that Sonya very much enjoyed. Sonya also wished to improve her teaching skills in the area of reading and writing.

Personally, Sonya hoped to someday begin a family with her husband, Dave. When she decided to have children, she felt she would have many decisions to make concerning her career and the direction she will be headed professionally. "Will I be an educator of many or will I be only one child's educator?" is a question Sonya asked herself. Until that time, Sonya planned to continue to enjoy teaching and working with young children.