

CHAPTER ONE

SUCCESSFUL STUDENT, STRUGGLING TEACHER

For twenty-four of my thirty-six years, I was a student, and I was good at it. I generally did what I was asked, showed interest, put in a good amount of effort, and was rewarded by excellent grades and mostly positive regard from my teachers, peers, and family for my success. I felt good when I was in school—praised, validated, made much of, and so on. My success in school defined me—I was “smart” and a “good student,” and I reveled in that identity. This aspect of who I was became my focus; I always wanted people to know this about me and I would try to evidence it however I could (casually mentioning my number of college degrees, using erudite vocabulary in conversation, etc.).

I thought school was a good place. I was one of those anomalous students who actually did not dread the end of summer vacation, for to me school held mostly positive connections. Because I felt so positively about school, it seemed almost natural that I would ultimately decide to become a teacher. I reasoned that if school could be so positive for me as a student, then it would surely be a positive and rewarding place for a career. I was in for some surprises.

I got my teaching license and Master of Arts in Education at the same time. My prior higher education had included a B.A. in history and sociology, and an M.A. in history, and so I was twenty-seven when I began my teaching career as a middle school social studies and language arts teacher in North Carolina.

In my first year I was assigned to teach the “middle of the road” students—those who had not been identified as either academically gifted or learning disabled. I was on a two-teacher team in which I taught language arts and social studies and my teacher partner (a second-year teacher) taught

math and science. The students would also have a number of elective-course teachers, but their core teachers would be my teammate and me.

My first year of teaching was a doozy, filled with many frustrating days and jaw-clenching, troubled-dream-filled nights. My main problem was that I felt I could not be the teacher I wanted to be. I wanted to be that idealized educator who inspired all her students to be engaged, work hard, and succeed. I wanted my students to have a role in decision making in the classroom, and to develop concern and kindness toward their peers. I wanted my classes to be filled with well-mannered and well-behaved students, all of whom saw me as a friendly guide, not a dictatorial enemy. I wanted to have the autonomy to plan classes and design assessments as I saw fit. I achieved few of these goals, and felt a failure—something totally unknown to me within the realm of school.

I constantly sensed that I was in a battle with many of my students, trying to compel them to study subjects and perform activities they didn't seem interested in, forcing them to be "on task" and behave when all they seemed to want to do was socialize with one another and torment fellow students or me. I don't want to leave readers with the impression that my classes were reminiscent of early scenes of classroom life from the films *Dangerous Minds* or *To Sir, with Love*—that was definitely not the case. What I had on my hands was more flat, under-the-surface malaise, only occasionally spiked with student outbursts or blatant misbehavior. I saw a great deal of glazed eyes, surreptitious note writing and passing, lackadaisical effort, and so on. To counter this, I tried to involve the students in making decisions about what work we should do or how we would go about some tasks, but I was often met by arguments instead of reasonable discussion. Thus, my hopes for democratic classroom governance and true engagement were dashed.

I also frequently felt hypocritical. I had known, to some degree from my own experience, that being a good student was like a game—figure out what the teacher wanted and do it, determine how to appear to do the most work and get the most credit for the least effort, appear to be one type of person to teachers and other authority figures yet be someone else to one's peers, and so on. I knew these things, yet I still expected my students to be truly and personally engaged by my teaching and positively shaped by the classroom environment I had created. The hypocrisy here is that I had somewhat playacted my way through school, yet I expected my students to not play this game with me. Another hypocrisy occurred in the advisor-advisee homeroom period at the end of each day. During this time, teachers were expected to conduct "character education" lessons based on the school district's defined character traits, which included respect, responsibility, honesty, self-discipline, and so on. In teaching many of these lessons, which were planned across the whole grade and in conjunction with the guidance counselor, I truly felt like a fraud. For example, I taught about the value of honesty and never cheating, even though in my past schooling I had occasionally cheated to get a good grade.

My first year of teaching also showed me that I could not be autonomous in my planning. I was stuck with a statewide curriculum filled with quite specific goals and objectives, all of which would be tested in May in the standardized, criterion-referenced, end of grade (EOG) tests. Thus, in social studies I had to rush to cover all of Africa and Asia—including geography, sociology, history, economic and political systems, and culture. I could not often slow down for in-depth discussion or analysis of subjects the students seemed genuinely interested in for I had to expose them to the breadth of information that might appear on the test. In language arts, I had a bit more leeway, except when it came to writing. I was a seventh-grade teacher and the seventh grade had a major, statewide writing assessment that occurred in March and I had to prep my students to write a timed, fifty-minute expository essay. I went to training sessions that strongly implied I should teach students to write a formulaic five-paragraph essay to achieve a passing score. So, for much of the year up to March, I was highly focused on teaching writing in a way that I (and, I suspect, my students) found dull and lifeless.

I also discovered in my first year that I despised grading. As a student I loved to have my work evaluated because it usually meant positive praise and regard, yet as a teacher I found that grading couldn't be more awful. I had no problem with giving students tips and suggestions for improving a piece of work or rephrasing questions or comments to help them get a deeper understanding of some question or concept. All of these things helped me to assess how well students were doing and thereby plan for future instruction, and thus were authentic and formative assessments. But what I disliked so intensely was having to distill all that I seemed to know about the student's understanding into a single letter or number grade. I hated the potential impact of these evaluations and assessments. If I gave a bad grade, would the student shut down and give up? Would I receive an irate parental phone call? Would the student openly challenge me in front of the whole class? Or if I assigned a good grade to a piece of work, would the student then expect all good grades thereafter and get upset if this didn't occur? Or would the student become dependent on me to say exactly how to do something so he or she would be assured of getting another good grade? Or, worse yet, would the student develop an inflated sense of self-esteem based on these grades (or a deflated sense, if the grades were low), much as I had as a student?

I was uncomfortable, too, with the effects of my grades in the school's incentive system. During my first years of teaching, the school used a pyramid level system, an incentive program designed to motivate kids to get good grades and behave according to school rules. Students with all As and Bs and no disciplinary action on their records were placed in level one. Students with all As and Bs and one C and no disciplinary action were on level two, and so on until level five, which was made up of students with low grades (multiple Ds or one F) and disciplinary action on their record (out of school suspension, in-school suspension, detention, etc.). The students' levels changed

each marking period according to report card grades and any discipline incurred during the marking period. Different benefits were associated with being on the different, higher levels (levels one–three) and punishments for being on the lowest levels (levels four–five). The most prominent benefit was a field trip for the level-one students to places like the bowling alley, roller rink, or movies, and the worst of the punishments for the level-five students was a ban on their attending school functions (plays, award ceremonies, concerts, etc.). I hated that a grade I gave could make the difference between the student’s being on level one or two, thus potentially causing the student to miss out on prime benefits, or between level four and five, resulting in punitive consequences. Mainly what I didn’t like about grades was that they turned the students’ focus away from learning and seeing school as a place in which ability could be developed and improved on, to one involving performance and just trying to look good on the surface so one could avoid negatives and reap positives.

These discomforts about teaching, about being hypocritical, about evaluations and assessments, about the compulsory curriculum, and about students’ disengaged attitudes led me to think that perhaps I was doing something wrong and that I needed to find the “right” way to teach. Hadn’t many of my education courses, along with the high-sounding, motivational, beginning-of-year speeches and conference keynotes I had ever attended all promised certain guaranteed ways to be a “good” teacher? I just had to discover the “right” methods. I began signing up for as many staff development workshops and conferences as I could. I attended many during my first year of teaching; in the summer after that year, I even went to a weeklong, residential Teacher Academy devoted to creating a balanced literacy program. These programs provided a lot of great methodological ideas and my reflections on my first year of teaching also gave me some ideas on things I wanted to do differently. So, I approached my second year of teaching with a positive attitude. I thought, “Okay, now I’ve got it. These are the things I should have done, the methods I should have employed. I’ll be all right now for the most part. This year will be better.”

To some extent, this was true—the second year *was* better. I was again on a two-person team, and again teaching two language arts/social studies blocks. Of those two blocks, one consisted of higher ability and academically gifted students and the other consisted of those deemed to be average or lower ability students and some with learning disabilities. With one year of experience behind me, along with some new methodological tips gleaned from my many staff development programs, I had a better sense of how to be with my students. I had fewer behavior problems, partly because they were different people, partly because I had more techniques at my disposal for interacting with them, and partly because I had a stronger sense of confidence in front of the class. I also had some more successful lesson plans due to a combination of experience, reflection on the previous year’s lessons, and new

methodological techniques. Although things were better in this second year, I was still disturbed by many of the same issues I had faced the year before, and I started to get troubled by some new things.

I was still extremely uncomfortable with grading, especially with what grading really meant, particularly when one factors in students' "natural" abilities. For example, I taught generally similar content to my higher ability class as I did to my lower/average ability class. Most of the students in the higher ability class evidenced mastery over the concepts and skills and thus received high grades. My lower/average ability class struggled with the material and sometimes received lower grades because of it. I was plagued by the question: what were grades supposed to mean? Did they indicate concept attainment or effort? Many students in the high ability class mastered concepts with little effort as opposed to some students in my lower/average ability class who struggled and worked hard, yet still did not attain mastery. Who should get an A, who a B? I began planning different lessons for the two classes in an attempt to challenge all the students, but also to try to make success attainable for each student. This was no easy trick, particularly with a standardized state curriculum and end of grade (EOG) tests looming at the end of the year implying that I should teach all students the same, or when the students began to inquire why they were doing things differently from the other class, or when I got a report at the end of each grading period from the principal reviewing how many As, Bs, Cs, Ds, and Fs I had assigned—somewhat suggesting that I should be giving a mix and not aiming for all successes.

In addition to my unease about grading and planning, I also became uncomfortable with the power relationships between my students and myself. Although I had learned in my first year some new ways of dealing with students' "off task" and inappropriate behavior, all these new ways tended to make me more authoritarian than I really wanted to be. I now would disallow arguments and discussion on misbehaviors between the students and myself in order to maintain a more structured classroom, but this had the effect of silencing students more than I had anticipated. Even in employing teaching techniques that traditionally have been conceived as "successful," I was still moving away from my ideal vision of a good teacher.

In my second year, I was also confronted with a student who was placed in my lower/average ability class midyear after he had attended a wilderness camp for adjudicated and behaviorally oppositional youth. Although the student was very bright, he seemed to have absolutely no interest in doing schoolwork, no matter how I tried to interest or compel him. He was frequently disruptive in class and sorely tried my patience and compassion. I found myself wishing that his behavior both in and out of my class would warrant his removal from the school altogether. Such thoughts caused me to wonder about myself as a teacher—did I only want to teach the "good" kids, the ones "easy" to teach? If so, what did that say about me?

But even the “good” students worried me. For example, I tried out the method of curriculum compacting with the students in my higher ability class. This method involves pretesting the students before beginning a unit of instruction to see if any of them already has mastery of the concepts or skills. If such students exist, then they would be allowed to do an independent study project during the time the rest of class did the lessons instead of subjecting them to lessons on content they had already mastered. Prior to teaching a unit on some aspect of the seventh-grade writing test, I assigned students an in-class essay. Three students gave evidence in their writing that they had already mastered the skills I was about to teach, so I set them up to do independent study projects in the library during the days I would be teaching these skills to the rest of the class. At first they seemed excited by this novelty, but their enthusiasm soon waned. The independent nature of the project left many of them rootless—they seemed more content to do as I asked (even if they already knew how) rather than map out a course of action and pursue a topic on their own. Granted, these students had experienced past success in their schooling history doing as teachers asked, but it still troubled me that they appeared so reluctant to pursue studies on their own.

So, although some things felt better in my second year, I was discovering new points of dis-ease with school. I continued my quest for the “one best way” of teaching, attending staff development workshops and training programs for particular methods, and I again took part in a summertime, week-long, residential Teacher Academy—this one involving teaching to learning styles. I entered my third year of teaching with another new set of methodologies and continued to hope that I would soon be attaining my goal of being an ideal teacher.

Again, my third year of teaching was better—I was becoming more adept at handling classroom organization and management and thus was encountering fewer problems that typically plague novice teachers. Yet, I was still experiencing some old problems and uncovering new ones that I didn’t quite know how to handle.

One situation arose from my new sense of confidence and use of more authoritarian management styles. Lunchtime was a prime example of how my discomfort from such management styles would surface. At the middle school where I taught, teachers escorted their classes to the cafeteria for lunch and then helped to monitor all the students in the cafeteria while eating their own lunches. After lunch, the teachers then monitored the students during a brief ten-minute break out in the commons/lobby area of the school. When walking with my students to the cafeteria, I enforced a strict straight-line policy—they walked quickly and quietly in a straight line along the right-hand wall toward the cafeteria. I asked the lead student to stop at each hallway corner before proceeding until I was sure the class was orderly and ready to go on. The class was fairly compliant with my requests and I often got a strange thrill of satisfaction as administrators or other

teachers passed us on our procession toward the cafeteria. I experienced a sense of power and prestige connected to how well my students walked to lunch, of all things! This feeling was repeated when the cafeteria volume got too high and I used my whistle to gain student attention to bring the volume back down, and when, during lunch break, I would walk among the students maintaining order here and there. Sometimes, although (I'm chagrined to confess) not often, I had occasion to wonder at this feeling of power and why I enjoyed it. At the time, I merely concluded that the good feeling came because I felt effective at those moments, that the kids respected me and my rules. In the back of my mind, however, I wondered—what did it really matter whether the kids were walking down the hall in a straight line? As long as they kept the volume down, what was the problem? We weren't even passing any rooms with classes going on to disrupt. And in the cafeteria, which was located away from any classrooms, what difference did it make if the kids got a bit loud? Was it really necessary to maintain such tight control? Don't seventh graders need some degree of freedom during the school day? I never raised these questions for fear that the other teachers might see me as lax or permissive, but the doubts within me did not disappear just because I never expressed them to others.

Another discomfort revolved around feeling isolated in my teaching. While I was still ostensibly on a two-person team, my team teacher and I really didn't function as a team in any real way (nor had I with my previous years' team partners). For the most part this didn't bother me, yet I did start to sense the lack when I planned an integrated unit on the foodways of African nations that was to culminate in the preparation and eating of a variety of African dishes. Without another teacher to help with organization and implementation, I soon found myself in over my head. I was, ultimately, able to carry things off with a modicum of success, but was completely drained when it was all done. I knew I could never undertake such a project again without damaging my physical or emotional health. I wondered, after the fact, about my unwillingness to seek help from others, especially my team teacher. In many ways, school structure does not encourage collaboration, but there was also something internal, I think, that prevented me from requesting assistance when I needed it, and this realization made me question my fitness for teaching.

My apprehension about grading still persisted in my third year. I continued trying to determine if grades were more to signify effort or mastery, particularly because I had a student who, although mostly high functioning, had a medical history that included minor brain trauma. Although he was not formally identified as in need of special services and accommodations, his work quality, particularly his presentation of written or project work, was exceptionally low. Without guidance, I was frequently torn between grading him for effort, which at times was extremely difficult to gauge, versus grading for mastery and final product quality.

Student disengagement and low motivation for planned tasks were, again, nothing new—but I was still troubled by them, especially since I had obtained two grants to buy supplies to create a “learning styles-ready” classroom. The Teacher Academy staff developments I had attended the past two summers had taught me ways of engaging and motivating students by creating a classroom in which students could take part in activities according to their cognitive preferences or learning styles. I used the money from the grants to purchase supplies such as headphones and classical CD tapes for kids who preferred to have music playing as they worked independently; I bought cushions, lamps, and low-wattage bulbs to create informal workspaces for students who worked most effectively in such conditions; I found materials that would appeal more to those with strong tactile learning preferences; planned more active learning tasks for the more kinesthetically inclined, and so on. I believe all these resources and techniques helped my students to engage somewhat, but some sort of invisible barrier still existed—the students did not seem completely *into* the tasks and activities I had planned. I realize it would be unrealistic to think I could engage all the students all the time, especially given the existence of the strict, standardized curriculum around which neither the students nor I had any substantive control, but I was still dismayed that even with all these techniques, I rarely saw instances when my students seemed truly and deeply connected or engaged in learning.

Toward the end of my third year of teaching, I was pretty discouraged. Although in many ways I had achieved more successes than in my earlier teaching, I still was aware of the lag between my performance and my ideal vision. I began to think about when I had felt most successful in my teaching and recognized that it was in working with students identified as very high ability or academically gifted. Was this because these students were easy to teach or because I was more cut out for working with this population? I ultimately concluded (perhaps self-servingly) that it was the latter, and so when a position opened up in a neighboring school district to work with this academically gifted population in two separate schools, I jumped at the chance, applied, and got the job. At the time I believed this move was the right thing for me and for the students. Perhaps all my issues concerning grading, the curriculum, engagement, unequal power dynamics, and isolation would dissipate in this new position.

In this job as gifted support specialist, one I held for the next two years, I was split between two middle schools, with two days at the smaller school, three days at the larger. I worked with language arts and math teachers (thus forcing me out of isolation) who had clusters (small groups of at least eight) of identified academically gifted students embedded in their average/high ability classes. I aided these teachers in making sure the curriculum was challenging and engaging enough for the high level, academically gifted learners. This meant researching and providing these teachers with additional planning and classroom resources, or coming into the class to present

enrichment lessons, or pulling out small groups from the class if some students compacted out (already had mastery) of the lessons and working with them on independent study projects, and so on. In this position, because I was essentially an inclusion teacher for academically gifted students, I did not have primary grading or assessment responsibilities (although for individual lessons and independent study projects I did). I thought that being free of most grading responsibilities would ease my anxiety about this aspect of teaching. And by not being one of the students' core teachers, I believed I could develop more convivial, less authoritarian, relationships with the students, thus removing some of my unease with power dynamics. I also believed that because my job involved individualizing the curriculum for the advanced ability learners, many of my misgivings surrounding the standardized curriculum would dissipate. And since these academically gifted students, for the most part, tended to be highly motivated learners, I further believed that my worries about compelling students to do things against their wishes would disappear. In some ways, these discomforts did recede, but some still nagged at me and some new ones, not surprisingly, emerged.

Because I would be working closely with twenty-six teachers at two separate schools, I approached the job of gifted support specialist with high hopes that I would move out of the isolation I had experienced in my first three years of teaching. To some extent, these hopes came true, but a flip side emerged that I had not anticipated—some of the teachers did not want to work with me. In the first weeks of my new job, I set about arranging meetings at the two schools to introduce myself, explain what services and resources I could offer the teachers, and ask what they would like to see me do for them. I thought that many of them would jump at the chance to have extra assistance in differentiating their instruction for their academically gifted students, but what I found was that most teachers were resistant to what, I believe, they saw as my intrusion into their responsibilities. At one of the meetings, I recall some passive hostility, evidenced when some of the teachers busied themselves with paperwork and grading as I was trying to speak with them about how I could serve them and their students. I was taken aback by this reception, but could understand it. Here I was, an unknown, making promises that I would help make their planning a bit easier, but also making demands on their time to meet with me, to explain their planning, to allow me to come into their classes to take over a lesson or observe their teaching. Could they rely on me? Would I judge them or their teaching harshly? Would my teaching of enrichment lessons show them up somehow or, worse, waste class time? Understanding their wariness about my involvement, I redoubled my efforts. I made sure to follow through on any commitments; I was diligent in seeking out additional resources for them; I tried to plan excellent enrichment lessons so they could feel comfortable turning over class time to me; I was supportive and positive about what I saw in their classrooms, even if I didn't always truly feel it, and so on. Although

my efforts resulted in acceptance from several teachers over time, I still felt a sense of distance and isolation. Because I was itinerant between two schools, the teachers whom I worked with did not see me for all five days and if they needed something from me on a day I was at the other school, then perhaps this led them to think I was not available, reliable, and so on. They knew I did not have the same responsibilities and duties, and thus it seemed I was not one of them, not “in the trenches” in the same way. This gifted support specialist position was supposed to have removed me from my lonely classroom isolation, but instead I actually experienced a more peculiar isolation in this job than in my first three years of teaching. I felt unaccepted and unvalued by some of my colleagues and was clueless as to how to break through this.

One area in which I did find significant relief involved my relationships with the students, but this, too, had a darker side. Because I was not a main classroom teacher, my interactions with students could take on a more relaxed air. When I worked with students, it was generally in conjunction with their core subject teacher; if any misbehavior occurred, the teacher tended to step in to assist in the smooth functioning of the class. This is not to say that I never took a role in classroom management when teaching my enrichment lessons; there was just a different feel to my role as disciplinarian in these classes. I could thus develop different relationships with students—I could be more amiable, serve more as their ally than their opponent on behavior issues, and so on. Obviously, I did not undermine the classroom teacher’s role or rules, but I was more like a favorite aunt come to visit when I taught, someone who would support and help enforce the classroom rules of conduct, but was not seen as the primary “heavy” or focus of student animosity about these rules. This new role pleased me a great deal, for I felt I could get to know the students better and be more able to see what their interests were. The other side of this different relationship, though, emerged when the core teacher briefly stepped out of the room or turned the class entirely over to me. I certainly had experience with being in charge, but since it wasn’t my main classroom and I wasn’t a regular presence, the students sometimes saw opportunities to try to challenge or test me and our more relaxed relationship. At these times I most keenly felt the difficulty of having a more egalitarian relationship with students within the very non-egalitarian greater school environment. The students seemed to regard any letup of strict control (i.e., the core classroom teacher leaving the room) as an opportunity to push for full release and could become highly oppositional if anyone tried to reassert control, benign as it might attempt to appear. This odd situation made me wonder if it was better never to give students a sense of equality or freedom for fear they’d take it too far or whether they should regularly experience some sense of power, control, freedom, and equality so that when a core teacher left the scene, they would know how to handle it. Most teachers I asked about this seemed to favor the first scenario, but this

left me cold. I questioned if, by strictly controlling the kids at all times, we weren't contributing to their lack of self-regulation and failure to see adults as human beings and not their enemies.

Another area of previous discomfort in which I experienced some relief was in the area of grading, though this, too, involved new dimensions. My job as an inclusion teacher freed me from many of the primary grading and assessment requirements; with a few minor exceptions, I did not collect homework, or administer quizzes, unit tests, or assign projects, and thus was not responsible for grading students in these tasks. This was the job of the classroom teachers with whom I worked. I was, however, responsible for evaluation and assessment on a different level. Part of my job was to determine if any students were newly eligible for identification as academically gifted. This was primarily judged by the students' grades in their math and language arts classes and their scores on the end of grade (EOG) tests in these subjects. According to the county's eligibility criteria, students needed both an A in the course and a score of four (the highest score) on the EOG test to be identified as academically gifted and thus eligible for extra services. Classroom teachers could also bring to my attention students who they sensed were gifted in math or language arts, even if the student did not meet the two criteria. At that point, I was to administer an IQ test to each student to see if the result was high enough to warrant the child's placement in the academically gifted program. I was extremely torn about this process. In some ways, I believed it was the only way to pinpoint those students in need of additional services, but I also recognized that some students who had made it through these criterion in the past and were now formally identified as academically gifted were really just good students, good teacher pleasers and test takers, and not truly gifted in the traditional conception of the word. They thus did not require a great deal of extra differentiation to make the content more challenging. I believed that in some ways the eligibility criteria were flawed because they did not truly identify exceptionality, but rather highlighted past student success in playing the school game. Another flaw of the eligibility criteria emerged after the federal Office of Civil Rights reviewed our school district's gifted education program. They indicated that our number of students of color identified as academically gifted was proportionately too low. Because approximately thirty percent of our middle school student population was identified as academically gifted (an outrageously inflated number in the first place if one considers research arguing that exceptionality doesn't occur at this high a rate), then within that thirty percent there should have been a percentage of students of color proportional to the percentage of students of color in the district as a whole (e.g., if the district has twenty-five percent students of color, then twenty-five percent of the students identified as academically gifted should have been students of color). We had nowhere near this number, thus revealing an apparent bias toward white students of European descent in our eligibility

criteria. This information gave me pause—did we have the deck stacked in favor of some students? I thought about who the academically gifted students were that I served at the two schools. Although the district as a whole was rural and by no means wealthy, the students on the academically gifted rolls were, for the most part, white students from middle-class, white-collar families. So, not only did ethnicity and race come to play a role in our eligibility criteria, so, too, did social class. I was somewhat troubled by this realization at the time, but not enough to do anything about it. Was this because I didn't care? Or because nothing could be done? Or did I see it as no more than an individual effort problem? I tended to favor the last explanation, and thus was starting to confuse giftedness with effort, but my course work for my academically gifted licensing had indicated that the two were largely separate, that giftedness often exists apart from effort. I was back to the same old grading dilemma of effort and natural ability versus mastery and true understanding and learning. And this time even more was at stake. If one was identified as academically gifted, one received extra benefits not only at the middle school level (in terms of enrichment lessons, teachers who received extra help in differentiating instruction, extra before-school programs, occasional trips, and so on) but also at the high school level in terms of placement into the upper, more accelerated, college-bound tracks. My discomfort around grading and evaluation was thus still alive and kicking, just in a slightly modified form.

The final area in which I hoped for relief by taking the gifted support specialist position involved the standardized curriculum. The public schools in which I had worked always made a big deal (at least at the lip-service level) about individualization of instruction. At faculty meetings, staff development programs, and other communications from the local or state level, the presenters or senders frequently made an argument in favor of teachers individualizing their lessons. We were to modify lessons for faster learners, for students with special needs, for students' learning styles, and so on. All this talk of individualizing centered around modifying the *presentation* of the content, but rarely ventured into the idea of actually *individualizing the content itself*. The existence of the state mandated standardized curriculum largely prevented any implementation of this sort of individualization. This often struck me as odd, for if we really believe that each child is different, has different interests and motivations, learns differently and at different paces, then wouldn't it be logical to allow students to pursue whatever subjects interested them, whenever and however they saw fit? I realize that this suggestion has troubling implications for how schools are set up as a whole (what teacher can effectively help twenty-five students, each pursuing some different topic at the same time?), but I also felt really uncomfortable with trying to simultaneously individualize instruction for my students using a mandated, standardized curriculum. The whole idea struck me as somewhat oxymoronic. When I got the job as gifted support specialist I knew one of

my main responsibilities would be to individualize instruction on this standardized curriculum to make it more challenging to high ability learners. But there was also the implied promise that because students were so quick to master that curriculum, we could also then move beyond it to areas in which the students had interests and thus individualize the content of what they learned. This promise was one of the biggest draws of my new position. To a very limited extent, I *was* able to help students pursue subjects of interest connected to or beyond the standardized curriculum and I did see some students genuinely engage in learning. This pleased me inordinately, but it wasn't enough, because there still were limitations. My ability to help teachers individualize the content of instruction was hampered by having to be split among twenty-six teachers at two separate schools. For example, one sixth-grade math teacher gave a pretest prior to teaching a unit on fractions; the results indicated that six students already had mastery of that content. So we set up an independent study project for those students in which I would pull them out of the class in the three days I was at the school to help them with their projects. This meant that I was unavailable to meet with other teachers who had planning time that period to aid them in differentiating instruction and that I couldn't do in-class lessons with any other classes. On my two days at the other school, I was not available to the independent study students at this school. So, although I was helping some students obtain an individualized curriculum, I was unable to help all of them due to time constraints and the structure of my job.

My ability to individualize content was also limited by many of the students' institutional histories. Because they had been successful with almost always doing what the teacher requested, many academically gifted students seemed uncomfortable with stepping away from this. Much as I had experienced in my second year of teaching with curriculum compacting, many of the students I worked with while serving as gifted support specialist were reluctant to pursue studies on their own. At times, they seemed unable to identify personal interest areas or appeared incapable of planning out any kind of individual study. To a large extent, I understood this problem—they had had no prior experience in doing any of this and they had to be shown how to pursue an interest. Even though I could understand their hesitance, I was also somewhat flabbergasted that students would not jump at the chance to study what they wanted. This set me to wondering if schools were really doing what many of their mission statements indicated—creating lifelong learners. How could schools truly achieve this mission if kids were rarely, if ever, given the opportunity to map out their own course of study and action? As I saw with the academically gifted students, few of even the brightest kids knew how to chart their own course in terms of learning on their own.

By the midpoint of my fifth year of teaching, I knew I couldn't continue with all these misgivings about teaching and schooling eating away at

me. My previous attempts to solve my problems by attending staff development, summer training sessions, and so on were not getting at the roots of the problem. I started to view these methodological approaches as bandages laid over a dirty wound. The bandage wouldn't deter a potential infection or cure one already there—it just covered up the problem a bit and maybe stopped the immediate bleeding, but nothing more. The methodological solutions I had encountered made things somewhat better in my teaching, but I still wasn't satisfied. I was also still stuck in thinking that perhaps there was something wrong with me—somehow I wasn't doing something right, and if I could just figure it out, then all would be well. I was approaching problems on an individual blame level mainly because no other approach presented itself. I decided that maybe I needed to step away from teaching and go back to school myself to find out what I was doing wrong. I applied and was accepted into a doctoral program in the cultural foundations of education at a local university, and also got a job as a part-time eighth-grade history teacher at a private school in the same town.

I took the job at the private school in part to subsidize my graduate study, but mainly to see if I would experience the same discomforts there as I had in public school. I thought that the private school environment, by virtue of its affluent clientele, small class and school size, and relative freedom from statewide educational mandates, would allow me to meet my goals of being the ideal teacher. I guess I wanted to know if my problems came from within or from some aspect of how public schools were structured. Unfortunately, I encountered the same issues I faced in public schools— isolation, dissatisfaction with grading, uncomfortable power dynamics with students, student disengagement caused by a standardized curriculum that required me to try to compel students to do work, hypocrisy, and so on. While the private school environment did mute some discomforts (e.g., I had very low class sizes and the students were all pretty amiable, compliant, and motivated and thus I didn't have to come off as too terribly authoritarian), my unease still existed. Although students seemed motivated, it was mainly a motivation for good grades, which in turn made me fearful of giving out low grades, even if well deserved, for fear of student and parent responses; I still felt isolated from my colleagues; I still was asked to teach all the same content and though I did try individual projects, the students again balked, and so on. I naively believed that the problems I encountered in public school would not exist in a privileged environment such as this private school, but this was not the case.

The answers I had sought were all about isolating variables—did I cause the problem? Was it the size of my classes? Was it the state mandates? Was it the students? I had personalized my dissatisfactions with education—believing that I or some other individual factor was the main source of my discomfort. I persisted in this belief and in my quest to find a personalized, individualized solution because I had never encountered any other way to

approach teaching problems. None of the staff development programs or faculty meetings I attended or readings I did ever indicated that the problems I was encountering were in need of anything beyond individualized solutions. To my knowledge, no other way of conceptualizing the discomforts existed other than “You (individual teacher, individual school) are just not doing the right things.”

Through the course work in my first year of graduate school (simultaneous with my year of teaching at the private school), I began to be exposed to thinkers who suggested that the problems I was experiencing with American education were not caused by individual factors, but by the confluence of several different factors at once, and by a misguided conception of the purpose of schools. These educational thinkers, people who have been identified in the field as critical social theorists, critical pedagogues, existentialist or humanistic educators, and progressive educators, offered a new view of what I had been going through—a systemic view. Until this point, I never thought about schools in this way. I had always viewed schools on an individualistic level; the system that lay beneath had been invisible. But now I was reading authors and having teachers who laid bare the system that existed and how it gave rise to many of the discomforts I had experienced in my teaching and some that I had felt as a student. These authors and teachers offered me a *language* for understanding what I had experienced. Their words resonated with my experiences and caused me to rethink much of what I thought I knew about schools, about what it means to be a teacher, and about who I was as a person. This was powerful stuff and I was transformed by it.