

# CHAPTER 1

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## MOTIVATION AND METHOD

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In a sense this inquiry began when I first met Jim and we got into a terrific argument. As you will soon discover, Jim teaches eleventh- and twelfth-grade social studies in a high school in downtown Tuscaloosa, Alabama. At the time, I was a faculty member at the University of Alabama in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, the division that houses the preservice teacher education programs.

The context of our meeting was a joint school-university committee appointed by the university director of student teaching to redesign the forms used to evaluate student teachers. Jim and two other teachers on the committee represented cooperating teachers who regularly hosted student teachers; I was one of three professors representing university faculty who regularly supervised student teachers.

In the course of the committee's initial meeting, Jim delivered an impassioned digression on the "games" a student teacher is forced to play in order to win the approval of his or her university supervisor. Jim was referring to supervisors' habit of requiring student teachers to demonstrate particular instructional strategies, like cooperative learning. According to Jim, these special demonstrations constituted highly artificial disruptions in the normal routine of his classroom.

The basis of Jim's objection was twofold: the injection of special lessons impeded his covering the curriculum, and the "cute games" taught in educational methods courses wasted class time. In Jim's opinion there was only one way to cover the curriculum and that was to address it explicitly. For him that meant "lecture," a term he knew was regarded with derision by education professors like me.

Although Jim said he would not presume to mandate the same style for other social studies teachers, he felt that university supervisors ought to respect the integrity of his classroom. He added that he was happy to share his professional knowledge with student teachers, but that he should not be expected to provide guidance about instructional styles he never used.

I responded to Jim's comments with equal passion, citing the obligation of cooperating teachers to give student teachers chances to practice a variety of instructional models, especially those that are taught in methods courses and are founded on sound theory or research. I added a snide remark about the misguided use of lecture with secondary students.

"Aha," Jim pounced, "that's exactly the attitude I'm talking about!" The pressures placed on cooperating teachers to let their student teachers play games caused him to decide years ago that his student teachers would be limited to only ten days of full-time teaching during their respective placements (the state minimum).

I was outraged by this and said that if I ever supervised a student teacher who was assigned to Jim, I would demand a different cooperating teacher. Surprisingly this did not intimidate Jim, and we continued to argue for the next forty-five minutes as fellow committee members looked on aghast.

The committee met over the subsequent six weeks and eventually accomplished its task of developing evaluation forms acceptable to both school and university personnel. During those six weeks, Jim and I continued our dialogue, albeit with reduced passions. It was the first time in my fourteen years of working in preservice teacher education that an in-service teacher had dared to be so outspoken about his dissatisfaction with university procedures. I had suspected

that displeasure existed, but teachers were always too polite or too intimidated to verbalize it.

By the end of the sixth week of dialogue with Jim, a curious thing occurred: I found myself reexamining some of my own very strong beliefs about the role of a cooperating teacher, the role of a university supervisor, and a unilateral definition of "good teaching."

I also began to suspect the existence of an underground, a group of cooperating teachers who adhered to a set of pedagogical beliefs that were diametrically opposed to those espoused by university professors of education. In short, I began to glimpse a subculture among in-service teachers that was not acknowledged by my university colleagues. And I wanted to know more about that subculture.

For example, if those teachers were given the power to restructure student teaching, how would they change it? At the University of Alabama, student teaching was conducted in the traditional manner. That is, each student teacher was assigned to a cooperating teacher and a university supervisor, the latter completing six formal site evaluations and assigning a final grade. What would happen if cooperating teachers were given total responsibility for supervising and evaluating their respective student teachers (i.e., with no university supervisors)? Would the cooperating teachers employ different evaluation criteria or require their student teachers to perform different duties? The subsequent semester my curiosity led to an experiment in which five experienced secondary teachers (of English and social studies, respectively) were given exclusive authority to supervise their own student teachers. Using recommendations of principals and district administrators in the Tuscaloosa City Schools, I identified five cooperating teachers who were scheduled to host student teachers that semester. Each cooperating teacher was described as an outstanding classroom teacher who had high standards for student teachers and the courage to enforce them. Jim was one of the five cooperating teachers. So was Laura, who teaches English in the same high school as Jim.

Although I served as the university supervisor of record for their student teachers that semester, I made no formal

visits or evaluations. Instead the five secondary teachers and I met weekly as a team to discuss the student teachers, compare perceptions, and validate judgments. Those five teachers were to become the first Clinical Master Teachers at the University of Alabama. That term refers to a cadre of outstanding classroom teachers who are granted adjunct faculty status by the university and are empowered to supervise preservice candidates in their field experiences. At the time this is being written, this cadre of teachers has grown to twenty-four.

As I attended the weekly meetings of that first Clinical Master Teacher team and got to know Laura, I discovered that some of her pedagogical beliefs were similar to Jim's. Like Jim, she appeared to endorse a rather traditional, teacher-centered instructional style and was inured to methods professors' versions of "good teaching."

I also learned that Jim and Laura were regarded by colleagues, students, parents, and their principal as outstanding teachers; that Jim had even won a statewide award for best teacher of American history. Both teachers were often given advanced placement classes and, although generally regarded as "hard" teachers, were liked by students who visited between classes to chat. Both teachers were also active in intramural activities: Jim coordinated committees and raised money for the junior/senior prom; Laura sponsored the Scholar Bowl.

How could one explain the seeming contradiction: Jim and Laura were outstanding and popular teachers, yet adhered to instructional styles that are anathema to education professors, particularly those who teach methods courses? This did not represent a new phenomenon to me. In fact, it is a graphic illustration of the notorious "gap between theory and practice": what preservice candidates learn in university course work versus what they see practiced by experienced teachers.

Preservice candidates appear to be particularly sensitive to this gap, for "with regard to the methods and foundations courses, there is much evidence that the knowledge, skills, and dispositions introduced to students in these courses have

little influence on their subsequent actions. . .” (Zeichner and Gore, 1990, p. 336).

The implications of research and theory that are so revered by methods professors are generally ignored by in-service teachers (Hall and Loucks, 1982). Instead teachers appear to obtain most of their ideas from actual practice: their own and that of their colleagues (Zahorik, 1987).

This is also true among student teachers who are more influenced by their cooperating teachers than by their university supervisors or course work (Calderhead, 1988; Hoy and Woolfolk, 1989; Zeichner, Tabachnick, and Densmore, 1987). After entering service, teachers continue to solve instructional problems largely by relying on their own beliefs and experiences (Ashton and Webb, 1986; Hoy, 1969; Rosenholtz, 1989; Smylie, 1989).

In this sense teachers appear to develop “practical knowledge” of their craft: knowledge that is situation specific, personally compelling, and oriented toward action (Feiman-Nemser and Floden, 1986). Contemporary research on teacher belief suggests that an effective teacher’s practice is rooted in a complex personal pedagogy, a network of beliefs derived from the teacher’s personality and thousands of hours of classroom practice (Kagan, 1992).

Long before I met Jim and Laura, I had begun to ask myself: if the instructional methods derived from theory and research represent the most effective teaching strategies, why do so many good teachers eschew them? This question was posed indirectly by Cohen (1991) after studying seven outstanding secondary teachers, each of whom ran traditional, teacher-centered classrooms:

In the classrooms of these teachers there are a lot of frontal lectures and conventional tests. . . Indeed, though it was not always obvious on the surface, all their classrooms were the very opposite of student-centered. . . Even when students freely interacted with each other, challenged the teacher’s remarks, or engaged in guided inquiry, the teacher remained the pivotal figure. When there was debate, all

waited for the teacher to deliver the final verdict. (Cohen, 1991, p. 104).

In short, each of the expert teachers Cohen studied failed to correspond to modern notions of good teaching: that is self-directed learning in which the teacher functions more as a resource and facilitator of student-constructed knowledge than an authority.

. . . the overriding goal of their teaching had little to do with student-enablement. They were concerned, rather, with self-enablement—with getting and holding power. . . Indeed, in every case, the subject's classroom functions as a kind of stage on which a variety of [the teacher's] needs can be asserted and worked through—the need for applause, the need for control, the need for expressing personal talents and interests. . . In the case of these teachers. . . student enablement is merely a by-product of the teacher's own pursuit of self-actualization. (Cohen, 1991, p. 105)

This conundrum lies at the heart of this inquiry. After working with Jim and Laura for a year on the Clinical Master Teacher project, I embarked upon an intense analysis of their respective beliefs and classroom practices in hopes of gaining some insight into the gap between theory and practice. The result was this book.

## **Method and Overview**

This inquiry was conducted in four distinct phases that extended over five months, the spring semester of 1992. Each phase is outlined below.

### *Phase 1*

My goal during the first phase was to obtain accurate descriptions of Laura's and Jim's pedagogical beliefs and practices. This included explanations of how each used textbooks, organized and presented academic material,

evaluated student learning, designed homework, related to students, and handled class discipline.

I spent twelve hours observing each of them and taking ethnographic field notes. I made a point of observing each teacher in a variety of contexts: presenting different kinds of academic material, presenting the same material to different classes of students, beginning units, and ending units. Each night I typed that day's field notes, often inserting inferences and questions about things I had observed.

After twelve hours of classroom observation extending over a period of five weeks, I used my field notes to construct a narrative description of each teacher.

I gave Laura and Jim copies of their respective narratives and asked them to think about the questions listed below. A week later I obtained their answers via separate ninety-minute interviews:

1. Are any of my observations about your instruction incorrect or misleading?

2. How did you arrive at your present instructional style? What experiences as a student or as a teacher influenced your style? How and why has your style evolved over the years? Has your definition of good teaching changed?

3. What principles or beliefs guide your choice of what you teach and how you teach it?

4. How long have you taught in public schools: what grades/subjects? How have students, classrooms, schools, and teaching changed over those years? What makes you an effective teacher?

5. How did you happen to choose teaching as a career? If one of your own children expressed interest in becoming a teacher, how would you feel?

I audiotaped each interview, transcribed the tapes, and used the transcripts to describe the cognition and values underlying Laura's and Jim's respective practices. My description of what I observed in Laura's classroom, supplemented with the Copyrighted Material cognition underlying her behavior,

appears in chapter 2. The corresponding narrative for Jim appears in chapter 5.

### *Phase 2*

During the second phase I tried to obtain accurate descriptions of the professional beliefs and practices of the university professors who taught corresponding methods courses in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction: Beth Burch, the secondary English specialist; Liza Wilson, the secondary social studies specialist. Each was completing her first year at the University of Alabama. I gave each professor a copy of the questions listed below and interviewed each a week later:

1. Describe your methods course in detail. What do you tell preservice teachers about: selecting, organizing, and presenting academic material; evaluating students; managing a classroom?

2. How did you arrive at your current methods course? What experiences as a student or as a classroom teacher influenced you? Include a description of your background as a classroom teacher. What caused you to leave the public school classroom for a career in higher education?

3. How does the content of your methods course relate to your definition of good English/social studies teaching at the secondary level?

4. In what contexts have you observed secondary English/social studies teachers in Tuscaloosa? How would you evaluate them in general? If you could give teachers one piece of advice, what would it be?

After completing each interview, I gave Beth a copy of the narrative describing Laura's English classes and I gave Liza the corresponding description for Jim's social studies classes. It is important to note that I did *not* give Beth or Liza descriptions of the cognition underlying Laura's or Jim's practices.



I withheld information about cognition for two reasons. First, I wanted to simulate the conditions under which a university professor would usually get to observe and evaluate a classroom teacher. Secondly, I wanted to see what each methods professor might infer from observable classroom practice. Would Beth or Liza leap to any wrong conclusions about why Laura or Jim teach as they do? Would the professors accurately intuit the contextual classroom variables that may have caused Laura and Jim to evolve their respective instructional styles?

A week after giving Beth and Liza descriptions of their respective counterparts, I interviewed each professor again, this time focusing on her evaluation of the classroom teacher. Each of these ninety-minute interviews was audiotaped and transcribed. Chapter 3 contains descriptions of the two interviews conducted with Beth; chapter 6 contains the corresponding descriptions for Liza.

*A note about my interviewing technique.* It is important here to note the method of interviewing I used with Beth and Liza, when they critiqued the teachers' practices. Each of the professors is sensitive, sympathetic to teachers, and aware of the many constraints imposed upon them. Without provocation, Beth and Liza tended to focus on the positive aspects of their counterparts' practices. Unfortunately, this would serve only to emphasize points of agreement rather than disagreement.

For this reason I assumed a purposely provocative stance during these interviews: often playing devil's advocate and probing the professors' comments for fundamental values. In this sense I did not play the role of a neutral interrogator. Beth and Liza each began by reviewing notes she had made on the written description of Laura's or Jim's practice. I tried to follow each note with broader based questions designed to uncover and examine differences between their perspectives and those of the classroom teachers.

Sometimes I asked Beth or Liza to speculate about the cognition underlying the practice of teachers like Laura and Jim. At other times I drew inferences or generalizations from the professors' comments. Whenever I did so, I stated them

explicitly and asked the professors for validation: was this what they meant to say? In describing the interviews, I made a point of preserving the actual texture of our interaction.

### *Phase 3*

During the next phase, I gave a copy of chapter 3 (my interviews with Beth) to Laura; a copy of chapter 6 (my interviews with Liza) to Jim. Now I wanted to obtain the teachers' reactions to the professors' beliefs, methods courses, and critiques of the teachers' practices. I gave the teachers a week to read and digest the respective chapters and then conducted separate interviews with each of them. During each of these 90–120-minute interviews, I asked the following questions:

1. How appropriate is the methods course for preservice teachers? How accurately and usefully does it address the task of teaching secondary English/social studies?

2. If you could give Beth/Liza one piece of advice about her methods course, what would it be?

3. What are the most common strengths/weaknesses of the student teachers with whom you have worked? Do student teachers appear to be getting better or worse (in terms of preparation)?

4. Please react to Beth's/Liza's evaluation of your practice, as it was described by me. Is it fair? Did she misunderstand something about your beliefs?

I audiotaped these interviews, transcribed the tapes, and used the transcripts to write chapters 4 (Laura's response to Beth) and 7 (Jim's response to Liza).

### *Phase 4*

Finally, I used all the data I had gathered (my own field notes, transcripts of my interviews with the professors and the teachers) to draw inferences about the gap between theory and practice: namely, to compare the teachers' and the professors' perspectives.

I supplemented my own insights with those of two student teachers: one who was working with Laura, the other with Jim. I interviewed each student teacher for about an hour, during which I asked the following questions:

1. What (if any) inconsistencies have you noticed between what you were taught in your methods course at the university and what you observed while working with your cooperating teacher?

2. In what ways does Laura's/Jim's classroom practice seem to differ from the principles you learned during your university coursework?

3. What university courses gave you useful information about classroom teaching?

4. When you get your own classes next fall, what methods do you plan to use: those presented in your methods course or those modeled by your cooperating teacher?

Because these student teachers had, in fact, taken their respective methods courses from Beth and Liza, they preferred to remain anonymous, so pseudonyms are used. I audiotaped the interviews and transcribed the tapes.

Armed with my own perceptions and these transcripts, I tried to answer several questions. How did the teachers' and the professors' views of teaching differ and what appeared to cause those differences? How could Laura and Jim be considered outstanding teachers, yet not conform to Beth's or Liza's beliefs? How sensitive to this gap between university and school were the student teachers? My analysis appears in chapter 8.

Before beginning this project each participant was provided with a copy of this introduction. Once data collection began, there was no written or oral communication between the teachers and the professors. As coauthors, each participant (including the student teachers) received and revised successive drafts of the chapters to follow. This means that my descriptions of interviews (audiotapes) were always read and edited by the interviewees.

## **The Utility of This Project**

Readers may wonder why I chose to have the teachers and the professors interact indirectly through me and written texts. Past experience had taught me that teachers are reluctant to criticize professors and often consider even mild disagreement to be impolite. As I mentioned earlier, my experience with Jim's frankness was unique in my fourteen years of practice in higher education. Similarly, I feared that Beth and Liza might censor their respective critiques of the teachers in order to avoid hurting their (the teachers') feelings.

I tried to overcome the reluctance to criticize and confront by buffering direct interaction and by working with two classroom teachers who I felt knew me well enough to risk total honesty. Readers can judge for themselves whether I succeeded in my attempts to obtain honest reactions from all the participants. Again, it is important to stress that each participant was provided with preliminary and final drafts of all the chapters in this book. Changes, corrections, and additions indicated by each participant were incorporated into the final draft.

It is appropriate here to address the value of an inquiry like this: a small case study of two teachers and two methods professors. It is obviously an example of qualitative research, but what may not be so obvious is that it is "qualitative" in the sense that Eisner (1991) uses that term to refer to that which attends to the naturalistic, the interpretive, and the particular.

Its interpretive quality comes from my role as a research instrument. That is, my perceptions and inferences were intended to be integral parts of this inquiry. Given this subjectivity and the extremely narrow scope of this study, readers may question its value: namely, its generalizability to other classroom teachers and methods professors. In the final chapter, I try to assess its generalizability by relating my findings to empirical and theoretical literature on teaching and teacher education. However, I also want to emphasize Eisner's (1991) explanation of knowledge accumulation in the social sciences:

. . . if knowledge can be said to accumulate, its growth in both education and in the other social sciences is more horizontal than vertical. By horizontal I mean that what we generate through inquiry into educational matters are ideas that contribute to the development or refinement of conceptual frameworks, perspectives, or metaphors through which the world is viewed. We learn . . . to work with and shift those perspectives, to examine situations from multiple perspectives. . . [knowledge accumulation] is an expansion of our kit of conceptual tools. . . Connections have to be built by readers, who must also make generalizations by analogy and extrapolation, not by watertight logic applied to a common language. Problems in the social sciences are more complex than putting the pieces of a puzzle together to create a single, unified picture. Given the diversity of methods, concepts, and theories, it's more a matter of seeing what works, what appears right for particular settings, and creating different perspectives from which the situation can be construed. (Eisner, 1991, pp. 110-11)

In short, knowledge and meaning lie in the eye of the reader, who I trust has the “spectacular capacity to go beyond the information given, to fill in gaps, to generate interpretations, to extrapolate, and to make inferences in order to construe meanings” (Eisner, 1991, p. 211). In this sense I invite each reader to be an active participant in this study, a partner in the investigation, not of “truth,” but of meaning.

### **Acknowledgments**

I want to thank Beth and Liza for allowing me to put them in the uncomfortable position of having to evaluate the practices of classroom teaches whom they respect. This was a particularly difficult task for Liza, who admires much of what Jim does with his students.

I am also indebted to Laura and Jim for allowing me to observe and probe their practices. It required great trust and courage, although we had known one another for a year prior to this project. When I first approached them with the idea

for this investigation, Laura said she was surprised and flattered that I considered her interesting enough to write about. Jim said he would participate, but as a favor to me: because he liked me and wanted to help me complete this project.

Laura's and Jim's reactions illustrate the tendency of most experienced classroom teachers to diminish their own worth as professionals, their inability to conceive of their practice as expert behavior worthy of close study. How could anyone, especially a university professor, find their teaching interesting enough to write a book about it? Above all, I hope that this project allowed Laura and Jim to see their teaching in a new light, to understand how it evolved, and to appreciate the expertise they have acquired from long practice, talent, and intuition.

### **How This is a Different Kind of Educational Research**

This inquiry is not educational research in the traditional sense of a theory-driven outsider view of classrooms and teaching. Instead it reflects a "primary concern with describing social events and processes in detail and a distaste for theories which . . . ride roughshod over the complexity of the social world" (Day, 1991, p. 538). It is also in the tradition of practitioner/teacher research in that it represents, in part, an attempt to help Laura and Jim make visible the craft the underlies their practices (Carr and Kemmis, 1986: Lytle and Cochran-Smith, 1991 ).

This inquiry is also based on the assumption that it is in the "lived situations of actual children and teachers . . . that the teaching enterprise exists and can best be understood" (Ayers, 1992, p. 152). Schubert and Ayers (1992) call this kind of narrative "teacher lore," the stories of teachers and their lives that constitute the natural history of teaching.

Readers will see that in order to explain Laura's and Jim's practices I had to examine biographical details of their lives because the unique trajectories of Laura's and Jim's lives

greatly influenced the professional roles they chose to play. To truly understand what these teachers do and why they do it, one must understand the unique set of circumstances that brought each of them to a classroom in Central High in the spring of 1992.

### The School Context

Which brings us to the school context. Let me set the scene before I introduce Laura and Jim.

Although there are two high schools in Tuscaloosa, they are regarded as two campuses of one school: Central High. The West campus houses all ninth and tenth graders in the district; the East campus, where Laura and Jim work, houses all eleventh and twelfth graders. This rather strange arrangement is an artifact of court-ordered integration dating back twenty years.

The student body on the East campus numbers about 1,150, 55 percent of whom are black. In some ways Central High is typical of other inner-city schools, but in other ways it isn't. It is a large, lively center of activity located in the heart of a business district. It appears to draw students from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. About 80 percent graduate and go on to two- or four-year colleges or technical schools.

Student teachers have told me that if one looks closely, one can find evidence at Central of the same ills that plague inner-city schools throughout the United States: student gangs, drugs, racial tension. However, none of these factors are obvious nor do they dominate life at Central. Incidents of violence among students are rare. The few instances of which I am aware occurred after hours on school grounds but not inside the school itself. I have never heard of any physical confrontations between students and teachers.

Indeed, most of the teachers appear to maintain exceptionally warm and relaxed relationships with their students. As one walks down the corridors of Central, classes are orderly and apparently on task; one assumes teaching and learning

are taking place. Students, black or white, seem to possess school spirit and support social and athletic events. One cannot spot obviously burnt-out or unhappy teachers, although it would be naive to assume none exist among a faculty of seventy.

To someone like me, who grew up and attended high school in a suburb of New York City, the atmosphere at Central seems decidedly relaxed. The principal is regarded by my colleagues at the university as young, bright, and progressive. He appears to be supportive of and well-liked by the majority of his faculty; at least I have never heard teachers speak of him in other than positive terms. In sum, as inner-city schools in the 1990s go, Central High seems to be a pleasant place for both students and teachers.