A Methodology for Research
with Young Students

Interpreting Webs of Significance

It quickly became clear to me that if I wanted to compare experiences of social adjustment to middle school, I needed to understand the cultural contexts in which this adjustment was taking place. Clifford Geertz (1973) describes culture and the study of culture in this way: ". . . man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (p. 5). Searching for meaning is a fundamentally relational endeavor.

The story that emerged over the two years of data collection is one that is perhaps best described as a web or tapestry: multiple strands, woven together, in varying colors and textures. In order to understand the transition to seventh grade from the perspective of the thirty students in this research project, I needed to listen to many stories, simultaneously told, in a variety of languages. This was not easy to do, first, because I was nearly forty years away from the experience I was trying to understand, and second, because we often tune our ears to the loudest, or most urgent, or most familiar voices. We seldom expect children to be the *primary* experts in conveying important knowledge, and without caution, preconceptions based on past experience can limit what we hear to what we *expect* to hear.

These concerns were made clear to me when I realized that I had to hear the same thing several times from several sources before I *really* heard it. Once I realized this, I tried to listen differently. I took several actions, explained in this chapter, to help in the ongoing process of genuine listening, challenging assumptions, and noticing discrepancies in the data.

The students in this study were members of diverse groups and operated in a number of environments. Every day students navigated, at the very least, the contrasting environments of home, bus stop, school bus, a variety of classrooms, school corridors, lunch room, and after-school activities, each with their own set of rules and distinct pace, tone, purpose, and people. Students were members of many groups, such as family and friendship networks, summer camp, church and civic organizations, and community recreation programs. Some students whose parents were divorced had two homes—one with their mother and the other with their father.

Rather than a pursuit of the one or two most influential factors leading to successful or difficult adjustment to grade seven, this study was a search for deepening complexity; it was, in every possible way, an interpretive analysis in search of individual and collective meaning. Contrary to the fears of some empirical social scientists, interpretation need not be a subjective analysis, laden with bias, and driven by ideological standpoints. The challenge of interpretive work is to operate from beginning to end in the presence of alternative points of view, skeptical guides, clear questions, and a sense of direction articulated and used. Interpretive work is consciously flexible and relational. This study had these components in the form of a local community advisory group, critical readers, and a conceptual framework that I invoked continuously.

In order to document complexity and development within a variety of contexts, there were multiple data collection points over an eighteen-month period and multiple methods: group and individual interviews, school and community observations, questionnaires, and an assessment of student grades, attendance, and test results.

While I agree with the viewpoint that qualitative research needs to be flexible, creative, and open to modification (Marshall and Rossman, 1995), I could not venture into the lives of thirty young students and their families without clear ethical and methodological guidelines, expectations, and questions. The following sections give readers a sense of the many factors that influenced how information was given and interpreted, and the special circumstances that require thought when children are research participants.

Underlying Assumptions and Guiding Questions

Elias et al. (1992) studied academic and interpersonal adaptation to middle school and advised researchers to consider these points: first, they said, the child's appraisal of adaptation difficulties is phenomeno-

logical; second, the experiences of children often go unnoticed by adults in the environment; third, adjustment is linked to the context of the environment, as well as to individual child factors; and finally, sources of information about the child's behavior outside of school should be obtained.

Despite this counsel, I found in a review of the literature on middle-school transition and adjustment that researchers have not examined middle-school experience from the students' perspective, nor have they considered school and community contexts. Little research has been conducted in rural areas, how students understand and experience social class diversity has not been explored, and inquiries that uncover the profound interpersonal lives of middle school students are few and far between. This research project responds to these gaps in the research literature.

Addison (1989: pp. 41–42) described interpretive research as a "co-constitutive" and "dialogical" process in which the researcher's prior experience leads her to enter the field with certain expectations that are tested through interactions with research participants. My research questions were informed by twenty-five years of practice with adolescents in rural areas. What social-emotional issues would students from different social class backgrounds face when they transitioned from the elementary schools in their own communities to a six-town regional middle school? What personal, familial, peer, school, and community resources would students engage to help them during the transition year? Does social class background influence the extent to which students successfully integrate their familial and community "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992) within the school setting? What patterns of interaction and participation would emerge over the transition from grade six to grade seven? Is there evidence in these patterns that the school environment provides a better fit for some than for others?

A number of assumptions are embedded in these questions and in the methods I used. First, I believed that students would be reliable and valuable sources of information; I believed, in fact, that they would be the *best* sources to answer these questions. Second, I assumed that social class would play an important and visible role in student adjustment to middle school, and I believed that socioeconomic and town diversity would be salient factors for students when they transitioned to their new school. Third, I believed that students would arrive at the middle school with a variety of skills, styles, and resources derived from their unique temperaments, home and community cultures, and past experiences. Students would be met by a school environment that is a composite of many factors: teacher personalities and styles; school policies,

rules, and norms; classroom resources, such as books and computers; subject matter and curriculum; and student evaluation processes. Finally, I began this project with the hypothesis that the middle school environment would provide a better fit for some than for others and that students from lower social class backgrounds would not easily be able to integrate their familial and community knowledge and resources into the middle school setting, which I assumed to be an environment influenced more powerfully by middle-class values and norms. I searched for data that might contradict these assumptions, and indeed, these preconceptions were challenged over and over again by the research participants.

Human lives are lived much more idiosyncratically than sociology would have us believe and are much more normative than psychology would have us believe. I needed a methodological and theoretical foundation that would capture that reality. The theoretical frameworks for this study are interdisciplinary, drawing from sociology, history, and developmental psychology; the conceptual framework takes its shape from the work of social psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) depicted human development as the "progressive, mutual accommodation, between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives" (p. 21). So the relevant question here is not only how do students adjust to their new environment, but also how does their new environment shift and change over time to adjust to them? How do teachers, parents, mentors and the broader culture mediate this experience?

Research Design Overview

In this research project I worked to understand how and why students from different social class backgrounds and communities interact with each other, participate in extracurricular activities, hold leadership positions, access resources such as teacher attention, provide assistance to their families, and make friends across social class and town-of-residence lines.

After students were selected using a criterion-based random selection procedure, I began the project by visiting each family in their home between January and March 1999. Data were collected from students in three waves: spring of 1999 when the students were sixth graders, fall of 1999, when the students were new to the middle school, and spring of 2000, when the students were experienced seventh graders. I wanted to grasp the sixth graders' expectations and hopes as they approached sev-

enth grade, the new seventh graders' initial experiences and reactions to the middle school, and the experienced seventh graders' interpretations and adjustment strategies.

The matched group of students from two elementary schools represented an economically diverse group of students who had, so far, been academically and socially successful. The study group had sixteen students from Lakeview (eight boys and eight girls) and fourteen students from Hillside-Two Rivers (seven boys and seven girls). These thirty students were 18% of the total student population in the same grade from these towns. All thirty students attended every data collection session, so I had the unusual advantage of having complete questionnaires and interviews from all research participants at all data collections points.

Each data collection point included individual in-depth interviews and student focus-group sessions, during which students also completed questionnaires. I consulted town history books, historical societies, local newspapers, and school documents, such as newsletters, the middle school handbook, and correspondence sent from the middle school to the families of incoming seventh graders. At the end of the sixth and seventh grades, I collected grade reports and standardized test scores for all students. Interviews with elementary and middle school staff and conversations with parents provided important contextual information.

Since I had lived in the school district for nearly eighteen years, it could be argued that I had been collecting data for a long time and that I was always collecting data. The long history of interactions with students, teachers, and parents of this school district formed what Heidegger (1962) referred to as a "forestructure of understanding"—an interpretation that precedes formal data collection and analysis. I learned to use this forestructure as background context and as a hypothetical stand—a possible explanation to be *disproven* rather than proven. In the end, some of my early assumptions were strengthened, but many were found to be inaccurate or incomplete.

More than fifty hours of community observations were conducted at local coffee shops, on the street, and at public events like community suppers, holiday fairs, and the Fourth of July parade. Casual conversations about the towns and schools had an entirely different meaning to me (and still do) because of this project. I also attended school and community meetings, sixth grade promotion nights, a middle-school information night for parents, and school district meetings. During the observation, or immediately after, I took notes and recorded them in the computer as soon as possible.

School observations were conducted over six days and more than fifty hours, during the winter of 2000. I got on the school bus before

6:00 a.m., attended all classes with a group of students, ate lunch in the cafeteria, stayed after school, and took the bus back to my car at the end of the day. I tried to spend some time in classes with all the students in the study group. The purpose of these observations was to get a feel for the middle school environment—the sounds, smells, sights, challenges, and emotions that students faced every day. I did not intend to observe individual students during this time but I could not help but notice how the research participants interacted in the classroom setting. However, I maintained our confidentiality agreement during this time and did not single out or pay special attention to student research participants, unless they made it clear to me that they wanted my attention. Students liked the covert connection we shared; we acknowledged each other in subtle ways.

Another component of the research design was the use of community advisory groups in each town. I convened these groups to provide resource and factual information and to be skeptical advisors throughout the project. Each group met four times over a two-year period, with consistent attendance from ten people. Getting this project off the ground required a rigorous negotiation process with the school district. It took a full year to negotiate entry with the school district. Politics, community relations, and methodological concerns were central to this process. Having a group of interested, informed, community members helped tremendously.

Selecting Matched Groups from Two Communities

As soon as I got the go ahead from the district office in early December 1998, I contacted the principals of both elementary schools and arranged to begin the selection process, with the help of sixth grade teachers. A criterion-based random sample selection protocol was established with clearly defined procedures. I supplied teachers with sheets of paper for selected, alternative, and not selected students, a basket, and numbered chips. As teachers drew numbers and looked to the class list for the student that number represented, they needed to be able to answer yes to all these questions before placing the name of the student on the selected list:

Has the student lived in the school district for two years or more?

As far as you know, is the student reasonably likely to remain in the district and make the transition to middle school?

Does the student have three or less discipline referrals so far this year?

Does the student have at least a C– average so far this year?

Is the student without a significant physical, emotional, cognitive, developmental, or learning disability?

In order to clarify "significant" and to help teachers decide whether or not a student fit the above criteria, I gave these instructions: "If you answered 'no' to any of the questions, you will have to make a judgment about whether or not you feel this 'negative' factor is likely to be a risk to that student as he or she makes the social adjustment to middle school" (Selection memo, December 7, 1998). Also, I asked teachers to keep a record of the reasons why they decided that a student did not fit the criteria. The process proceeded in this way until the selected and alternate lists were filled, or until all the chips were drawn.

Finally, I asked teachers to look at the list of students carefully to make another judgment: "As far as you know, does this group of students accurately and proportionately represent the social class and lifestyle demographics of your community? If the group is unbalanced in a way that you think might cause distorted results, please draw another name" (ibid.). Again, teachers were asked to document how and why they made the decisions they made along the way.

To protect student privacy, I did not see the names of students on these lists. A letter to parents explaining the project and requesting their child's participation was in a stamped envelope ready to be addressed and mailed by school staff. The mailing included a stamped, addressed, return envelope and reply form that requested parents to check either "Yes, I am interested in hearing more about this study. Please contact me." or "No. Please do not contact me." Forms were returned to the school and I received only the yes responses. By requesting an active response, the process fully met the concerns of the school district regarding family privacy.

Hillside Elementary School has students from Hillside and from the small neighboring town of Two Rivers; Lakeview Elementary School has a few students from the neighboring town of Meadow. After consulting with teachers, we decided to include students from Two Rivers and Meadow. One Hillside teacher said, "Two Rivers students come to Hillside elementary in the fourth grade, when they go to the middle school, they are thought of as Hillside kids." Once data collection started, I heard this from students as well. In the final study group, there were seven students from Hillside, seven from Two Rivers, fifteen from Lakeview, and one from

Meadow. These groups were diverse economically, but well matched in terms of grades, school attendance, participation, and social development.

Teachers from Lakeview and Hillside reported striking differences in the way they experienced the selection process. Lakeview teachers said it was quick and easy, and they filled both the selected and alternative lists with names to spare. In Hillside, however, they found that they had to draw every name to fill both lists because so many of their students did not meet the criteria. Hillside teachers said they found the experience validating. As they thought about each student and evaluated whether or not he or she met the selection criteria, they recognized the enormous challenges they faced. "No wonder we're so tired," one of them said.

In Hillside, seventy-six names were drawn. Forty-one students (54%) were excluded because they did not meet the criteria. Seventeen students (22%) did not meet the residence longevity criterion for selection; twelve students had a significant learning disability (14.3%); eight students had average grades lower than C– (10.4%); and four had too many discipline referrals (5.2%).

Lakeview teachers drew only fifty-six names out of ninety and filled the selected and alternative lists with thirty-eight names altogether. They had to exclude eighteen students (32.1%) because they did not meet the criteria. They gave the following reasons for excluding students from the potential sample: eight moved to town less than two years ago or were planning to move away before grade seven (14.3%), four had more than three discipline referrals (7.1%), four had a significant learning disability. By contrast, only two students had low grades.

As a teacher, I knew the sad experience of coming to school one morning to find one of my students gone—suddenly withdrawn from school. In low-income communities this happens often, sometimes without warning, and frequently under highly stressful circumstances, causing a disruption in classroom life. In Lakeview, teachers reported that children were less likely to move in or out during the school year, less likely to move because of stressful circumstances, and less likely to move suddenly. These differences in student population and the fact that fewer Hillside students met the selection criteria is an indication that the Lakeview students selected for the study may have been more representative of their classmates than the Hillside students.

Building Rapport by Visiting Homes

Information packets, including a letter of introduction and a summary of the research project, went out to sixty parents. In all, twenty-six

families—fifteen from Lakeview and eleven from Hillside—responded to the mailing. Five other families became involved through word of mouth.

Right after the holidays I began what was one of the many enjoyable and memorable parts of this project: visiting each family at home. In all, I went to thirty-one student homes in the winter of 1999 (two families had two sixth graders each). All but one family decided to participate in the study and another family moved out of the school district before the children went to middle school.

There are a few things I would change if I were going to do this research project all over again; one of them is that I would not design the project in a way that would require thirty-one home visits in the middle of a northeastern winter! What I recall most vividly about these visits, aside from the blinding snowstorms and ankle deep mud, are the warm conversations, often over tea and cookies at the kitchen table, with enthusiastic parents and their children. From January through March I drove all over this rural, hilly, school district, enjoyed the hospitality of wonderfully generous people, and began to feel comfortable in my researcher role.

At each visit I met with the sixth grader and at least one parent; sometimes, curious siblings or friends joined us. Usually mothers met with me but in Lakeview, two fathers were actively involved in the meeting, and in Hillside, *six* fathers were actively involved and stayed involved throughout the project. The home visit folder that I left with each family included a three-page overview of the project, a time line with interview and questionnaire schedules, a draft of the questionnaire and interview questions, ethical guidelines concerning informed consent and confidentiality, and a permission form. Parents and students were encouraged to take their time thinking about whether or not they could make a commitment to this project, but almost all parents and students signed on to the project during the home visit.

The home visits gave me the important opportunity to establish a connection with parents and students in their own territory. I believed that the success of the project—the retention of students and the quality of the information they would give me—would be positively influenced by this initial visit and the trust and openness that it encouraged. The conversations we had during these home visits gave me a chance to take in parental concerns about the transition to middle school and attitudes toward education. These visits gave me a glimpse of family life and the physical surroundings that were home to each of the students—the tone, pace, and sensations of their lives. Images from these encounters remain clear: the goat that bounded over to meet me in the yard, the fifteen disassembled motor vehicles scattered here and there around the house and surrounding woods, the mother who showed me an oily hand when I offered a handshake and said, "Sorry, but I just changed the oil in the

car," the artifacts from international travel, the happy dog present in each and every household, the family photos on the walls, refrigerator reminders to organize intensely busy lives, the interruptions of visiting neighborhood children and curious siblings, the television or CB radio going as we talked, the special treats picked up just for my visit, the smell of wood stove burning, the question asked by one mother, "Do you have biases about this?" All these and countless many other experiences gave me an essential (and, of course, incomplete) contextual understanding of the lives of the children in this study.

Meeting with families in their homes, making my intentions, biases and research goals known, and asking for their trust and commitment made me feel vulnerable and this vulnerability helped me grasp what I was asking these children to do. The home visits were my first negotiation at defining the boundaries of our relationship. I had signed permission forms from everyone from the start, but requesting parental permission, explaining informed consent and confidentiality, and providing information were a part of every interaction for the duration of the study. Throughout the project and beyond, I stayed in touch with research participants and their families through letters, cards, phone calls, and visits.

Characteristics of the Research Group

The fifteen boys and fifteen girls who were research participants in this study were reliable and earnest sources of information about the transition from grade six to grade seven and about life in the middle school. In the spring of sixth grade, the students ranged in age from eleven to thirteen years old. There were eight girls and eight boys from Lakeview, seven girls and seven boys from Hillside-Two Rivers. They were all shapes and sizes, dressed in a variety of ways, and had very different communication styles. They impressed me over and over again with their observations, insights, and self-understanding.

In the process of exploring issues together, we developed a common language for understanding their transition to middle school. The students not only generously shared their experiences of being seventh graders, but they were actively involved in the process, regularly making suggestions about research procedures. One day a girl from Two Rivers told me I needed to see a certain part of her town if I wanted to grasp some of the issues townspeople face, and so she took me there. They often offered recommendations for how the transition to middle school or the middle school itself could be improved.

These young research participants, on the cusp of their teen years, lived complex and full lives. They were serious players of lacrosse, ice hockey, baseball, field hockey, track, soccer, and basketball. They played paintball, rode their four-wheelers, and took their horses out for long walks. In a beautiful, quiet gesture of caring, one Hillside participant had her gorgeous, waist-length auburn hair cut short to give to a cancer patient. Another student lovingly cared for his three younger siblings most days after school because his mom, a single parent, was either at her waitressing job or at school, working hard on her baccalaureate degree. By grade six, one of the girls had published two of her poems, and another wrote a regular column for the local conservation newsletter. One boy frequently joined his father doing electrical work to raise money to go on a People-to-People trip to Europe.

They had dreams of playing in the NFL, becoming a lawyer, teaching kindergarten, writing books and comic strips, having careers as vets and in acting, and being the first in their family to go to college. They listened to Korn, Garth Brooks, Slipknot, P.O.D., Tupac, and Metallica. Some got up in the morning when it was barely light to bring in firewood and to feed chickens and rabbits and goats. Some had family members who were ill and some had lost grandparents and beloved pets. In the fall of seventh grade, one student was seriously injured while she rode her four-wheeler alone on steep, rocky terrain. They were amazingly different, yet they shared a lot in common and treated each other with respect.

Research participants were from rural northeastern communities with a year-round population of less than 5,000 people. They were of white, mixed European heritage. Half of the thirty research participants had experienced their parent's divorce at some point in their lives. Seven of them lived with a stepparent and eight lived with single mothers. Their relationships with non-custodial biological parents ranged from nonexistent to consistent, full, and supportive.

Ascribing Socioeconomic Status

Since I wanted to know how social class influenced social adjustment to middle school, I needed to find a way to determine socioeconomic status. Drawing from the work of Entwisle and Astone (1994), four factors were considered: property value, the number of parents in the household, the occupation of the adult with the higher status job, and the level of education of the adult with the most advanced certificate or diploma.

This information was gathered through telephone conversations with parents and public property tax records.

Values from 1 through 5 were assigned to each education, occupation, and property value category, and the added value of 1 was assigned to a household with two adults as care takers. These values were added together to obtain total scores and then divided into categories to define high, middle, and low social status. Scores of 5 through 7 were considered low; 8 through 11, middle; and 12 through 15, high. Appendix 2 provides a more detailed summary of the categories and values used.

A few students lived in homes that were rented; others lived in properties that ranged in assessed value from less than $25,000 to nearly $500,000. Some of their parents had graduate degrees and some went to work before finishing high school. Occupations spanned a similarly diverse spectrum, from owners of international corporations to carpenters, electricians, teachers, and waitresses. A few parents were disabled or unemployed.

My own background shared some similarities and some differences with the students in the study. In many ways, the culture of Hillside reminded me of the working class, Italian-American neighborhood of my childhood located in an urban mill town of a neighboring state.

The Gap Between Observed and Perceived Affluence

Using level of education, occupation, property value, and number of caretakers in the household to assess social class status, more than half of the Lakeview children and *none* of the Hillside-Two Rivers children were in the highest social class group. Hillside-Two Rivers children were split between the lowest social class group where there were six (out of 14) and the middle group where there were eight. Talking with people from these communities, I often heard the misperception that everyone in Lakeview is middle or upper class, but in this study group, two of the Lakeview children were in the lowest social class category. Some of the children in the research group lived with a considerable amount of economic stress in their lives.

Figure 1.1 shows the number of students from Lakeview and Hillside in each of three social status categories. However, social status is much more than economic indicators and is, therefore, hard to assess. For example, families with a high level of involvement in their communities may benefit from "social capital" (Putnam, 1993) that contributes to overall social status and levels the playing field for some lower income

Figure1.1. Number of Lakeview and Hillside Students in Low, Middle, and High Social Class Categories
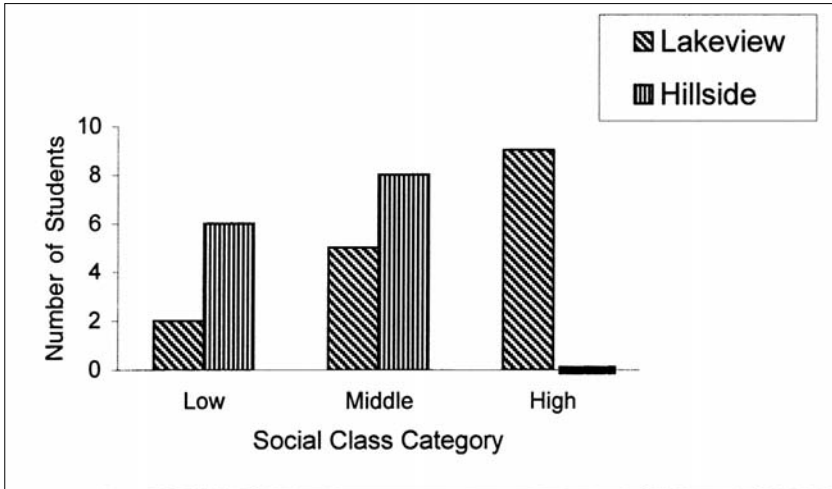
families (Duncan, 1999). Researchers had previously found what I found, that students of this age tended to report, "We are all the same," when answering comparative questions about social class (e.g., Rosenberg and Pearlin, 1978).

The subjective complexity of social class status is clear in how the students in my study responded to the question, "On a scale of 1 to 10, where would you place your family in terms of affluence, compared to the other students in your school." I asked this question of all students at the beginning and at the end of seventh grade, and categorized their answers into low, middle, and high scores of perceived social status. In general, their responses remained stable over time, indicating that perceptions of social class status were not influenced to a large degree by exposure to greater economic diversity. These responses do suggest, however, that students made within-town comparisons that influenced how well off they perceived themselves to be. Figure 1.2 combines perceived social status by town, at the end of grade seven, with the calculated indicators of social status reported above.

In general, Hillside-Two Rivers students perceived themselves to be better off and Lakeview students perceived themselves to be worse off than the objective signs indicated. Two Hillside-Two Rivers children placed themselves in the highest social class group; four Lakeview children and

Figure 1.2. Calculated and Perceived Social Class by Town
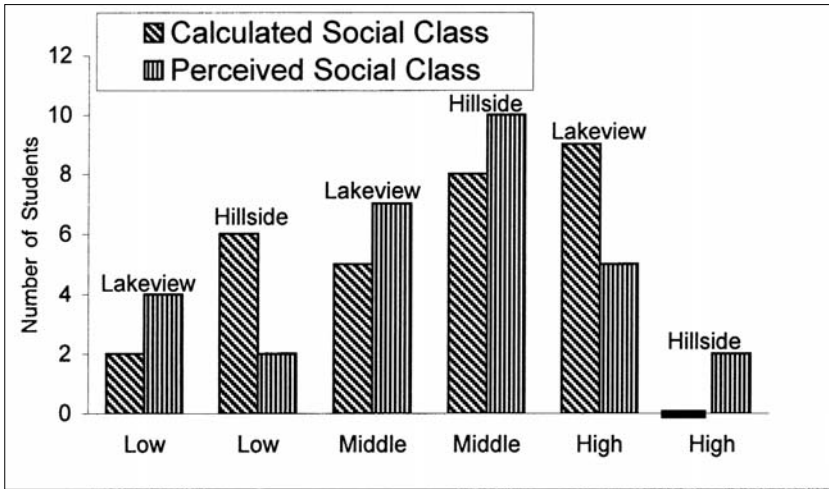
only two Hillside-Two Rivers children placed themselves in the lowest group. Most students placed themselves in the middle.

The Flexible Role of the Researcher

Some ethnographic researchers have studied middle schools using a participant-observer approach (e.g., Wells, 1996). I chose not to use this approach because, being considerably older than twelve, I was skeptical of the idea that I would blend in with the research participants. It was immediately clear that I needed to have personal clarity regarding my research role, and I needed to make my role and purpose explicit to research participants, their parents, and school staff. However, as I interacted with students and their families, I found that the way I defined this role was a negotiated process, requiring constant reflection and modification.

For almost two years, I never left my house without a research notebook and often a tape recorder. My residence and work in the same area gave me many opportunities for informative casual observations and conversations. As the director of a youth service organization, I also had access to educational and counseling services and information. Occasionally, parents sought information from me that was connected to my youth development work. I saw this as a part of my

commitment to families and students, a very small exchange for the enormous generosity they showed me. When necessary, I referred parents to other youth counselors and resources, so that my role with students remained as a researcher throughout the research period, albeit a researcher who was mindful of, and open to, the mentoring potential in adult-child relationships.

Rapport was established more easily with students because we had something else in common: a love for our dogs. Hollingshead (1949) brought his dachshund with him on research visits with students to "break the ice," and I often had my Siberian husky along for that same purpose. Each time I reconnected with students to set up the next round of interviews, I paid close attention to any signs of emerging reluctance on their part but research participants remained eager and accessible informants. They seemed to appreciate my interest in them and they reciprocated by treating my requests with kindness and generosity.

The way research relationships require flexibility in role definition is evident in this end-of-interview exchange that took place between Arianna, a Two Rivers student, and me when she was in the sixth grade:

> Donna: Is there anything else you'd like to tell me, anything more about yourself or things I didn't ask that I should have asked?
>
> Arianna: No, I think you asked me real good.
>
> Donna: Yeah, we covered a lot of ground. Is there anything you want to ask me?
>
> Arianna: Did you go to college?
>
> [I explain to her in some detail that I went to college after high school and later went to graduate school, and still later, went back to school for more graduate work.]
>
> Donna: For someone who was very nervous in school, like you, I sure spent a lot of time in school. I think half of my life I've been in school.
>
> Arianna: Has this been a goal for you?

I was so touched by this question from Arianna on our first encounter and after I answered how this was indeed a goal for me, we talked for a while about her own goals. In this moment I was extremely aware of my mentoring role.

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) wrote that much of social science seeks to uncover failure and pathology, and this tendency overlooks health and resilience, "magnifies what is wrong and neglects evidence of promise and potential" (p. 9). She continued, "Portraiture resists this tradition-laden effort to document failure. It is an intentionally generous, and eclectic process that begins by searching for what is good and healthy and assumes that the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfections" (ibid.). I did not begin this study looking for goodness but I indeed found "goodness laced with imperfections." I couldn't help it. Through my relationships with research participants, I came to understand the complexity of their lives. The more complex my understanding became the more goodness and health I saw.

Student Focus Groups

Small group sessions gave students an opportunity to share their impressions, opinions, and feelings with their peers. Students became important sources of information to one another. Not only did they come to anticipate hard questions about their beliefs, values, and experiences, they also looked forward to the special time with their peers. The focus-group sessions were held after school or on Saturday mornings, for between ninety minutes and two hours, with usually four to six students at a time. We used space in local churches and agencies. I had the time of my life doing these sessions and the students enjoyed themselves too; none of them missed a single meeting. We met in March and April 1999, when students were sixth graders, October and November 1999 and March and April 2000, when students were seventh graders.

These field notes, written in March 1999 just after our first session together, reveal the enthusiasm, energy, diligence, and humor I experienced throughout the project:

> I picked up the boys [all from Lakeview] right after school at 3:30. They were all anticipating our time together and they were very excited. They continued to be excited when they saw the pizza in the car: "Wow, we are getting a lot for doing this: pizza, a ride home . . ." They thanked me over and over again. At first they played with the church-school toys, and then they easily settled in, eating, drinking root beer, and talking nicely to each other and me. After we finished [the questionnaires], I taped

their discussion, which they were so excited about they wanted to listen to it in the car as I was driving each of them home. They took the tape recording very seriously, speaking clearly and moving closer to the tape recorder in order to be sure to be heard. They had heard about seventh grade organizational planners and talking right into the tape recorder they protested, "No planners! Do you hear me? No planners!" When we listened to the tape again in the car as I was dropping them off at home we laughed a lot when we came to this part.

Every session followed basically the same format. A letter home announced the meeting times and locations and a phone call arranged the specific day each student would attend the group session. I always made a reminder call a day or two in advance. Students were picked up at school or they were dropped off at the meeting place by a parent. We always had food and talked informally at the beginning, then they completed questionnaires for about fifty minutes while I wrote notes on their interactions, what they were wearing, and so on. Finally, we had a discussion that I sometimes taped.

Many purposes were filled by this research component. Most obviously, I was able to get all the questionnaires filled out, and while students were still there, I checked them quickly to be sure they were complete and legible. While they filled out questionnaires, they sat separately and worked quietly. Their automatic demeanor was to act like they were taking a test, and for these academically successful students, test-taking was mostly a positive experience.

During the discussion time, I let students lead the way with whatever issues they wanted to discuss. On two occasions, seventh grade girls talked about sexual harassment, both surprising and, I think, embarrassing the boys with their bold honesty. These sessions also gave me an opportunity to watch students interact with their peers in single-gender and mixed-gender groups, and in single-town and mixed-town groups. I noticed, for example, that Lakeview children seemed more sure of themselves:

> There is a sense from most of the Lakeview kids that they feel sure of themselves, aware of their own voice, confident and self-possessed with their peers and with adults, and sure that what they have to say is worth listening to. At no time did I have the impression that Lakeview students were at all surprised that I would value what they have to say—they expected my attentiveness. (Field notes, April 1999)

I did feel, however, that some Hillside children were less sure that what they had to say was valuable. It was not until after they filled out one of the questionnaires that the Hillside students took snacks on our first day together. Did they now feel they were more deserving of the reward? I found that most Hillside children did not take my attention or this experience for granted. If I was not careful, Lakeview children could have easily dominated these sessions, risking the loss of insights the Hillside students had to offer. The initial reticence on the part of Hillside students may sadly be misinterpreted by some as resistance, distrust, dullness, disinterest, or even defiance, to the great detriment of these students *and* their Lakeview classmates who have much to learn from them.

The gender differences were also evident during these sessions: single-gender groups seemed far more relaxed and covered a much wider range of topics than coed groups in both sixth and seventh grades. The girls often wanted to meet in coed groups, while the boys said they did not mind either way, but boys in mixed groups were more quiet and, perhaps, self-conscious. Single-gender sessions just happened by chance depending on who was able to make it on that day and were an opportunity for important and rare social interactions and exchanges of information. My field notes from April 2000 documented a memorable interaction between the boys about getting a girlfriend— something that had become very important, frustrating, and confusing to some of them by the end of seventh grade:

> These 12–13 year old boys from both towns go from cutting-edge insights about interpersonal and group relations at the middle school to expressing their young and innocent desire for romance and connection.
>
> [One boy] was especially exasperated by the situation at the middle school—the girls seem to go for the boys who get into trouble, not for the respectful boys.
>
> [Another boy] "Yeah, like that saying, 'Nice guys finish last.'"
>
> "I don't get it," said the first boy. "When I was in the second grade *all* the girls had a crush on me."
>
> His classmate, another boy who said very little the whole meeting, quipped, "When we were in the second grade, even *I* had a crush on you!"

They were totally unselfconscious as they shared these intimate longings with each other—this exchange between early adolescent boys could

not have happened in a coed group and, I fear, will not happen as they get older.

In another instance, students talked about their parents' divorce and shared hope and comfort with their friends also dealing with parental discord and separation. Research participants also learned new things about themselves during these sessions. One student handed me her completed self-esteem questionnaire and said, "I guess my self-esteem is lower at home than at school." Another student said he was beginning to see himself "through the eyes of other kids." It is easy to see how children can be harmed in research relationships if there is not careful attention to understanding our role as researchers and the impact of research participation in the lives of children. It is essential to establish norms of interaction that are appropriately responsive.

Emerging social class-consciousness was also evident during these sessions. In fact, meeting in this way *encouraged* students to think about social class differently than they might have. On one occasion, two students from Lakeview traveled with me to Hillside for a meeting. My notes from that day demonstrate how increased social class awareness may have resulted from participation in this project:

> As we drove into Hillside Center, I wondered what the two Lakeview students riding in the back of the van were seeing and taking in. We pulled up in front of Hillside Crossing, the location of several social service programs, where our meeting would be. The Two Rivers girls climbed out of a faded, red Pinto whose approximate age could be guessed by the generous amount of rust along the doorframes. They seemed happy to be there and ready to go. I remembered the large sports utility vehicles that dropped off the two Lakeview girls riding with me and I wondered what they were thinking. For an uncomfortable moment, they remained seated in the van. Did they feel out of place? Once we got going they were friendly to each other. One Lakeview girl asked a girl from Two Rivers, "Are you like middle class?" (Field notes, October 1999)

These girls were working out a definition of class right in front of my eyes. The conversation that pursued was an amazing comparing of notes about where they buy their clothes, why some students are called "snobs," and misunderstandings about Hillside and Lakeview. The Lakeview students had never been to Center Hillside before—a fact that Hillside and Two Rivers students found incredible. At the end of this session, the Lakeview students rode with me as I dropped off Hillside-Two Rivers students

at home. This session helped to reduce the mystery and stereotypes that prevail in the minds of children who had never been to Hillside but had "heard things." Over and over again I noticed how exposure to each other enhanced student's self-understanding and awareness of others.

However, on another occasion I picked up silent cues from a Hillside student that he would have been uncomfortable with Lakeview students seeing where he lived, so I arranged the transportation to drop off Lakeview students first. These are the important subtle kinds of things researchers who work with children are responsible to figure out. These children signed up to be research participants, not to have their lives insensitively exposed. We can do harm if we are not astute to the sometimes fragile nature of early adolescent self-esteem and peer acceptance.

These brief snap shots of the focus-group sessions portray how the sessions were used to gather information, but they also reveal something equally important in research work with children: the research experience was a powerful and meaningful intervention in the lives of the children involved in it. I have no doubt that it changed the way they thought about and experienced the transition to grade seven. My unambivalent position throughout the project was to acknowledge that out of their relationships with me and each other would come new insights and new ideas about school, social class, gender, future plans, and so on. While I used a great deal of caution to facilitate interactions rather than dominate them, and while I was careful to explore *their* opinions and feelings rather than disclose my own, I was also committed to allowing them to enlist me as an adult mentor and guide. Discussions about provocative issues such as divorce, sexual harassment, and social class stereotypes required very careful facilitation. In addition, I encouraged and sometimes even advised students around educational issues when I worried that students lacked the requisite information to make important decisions or envision future plans. When I occasionally worried that a student might be in danger of emotional harm, I spoke with the student and his or her parents.

From the start, the students in this project were fully and actively engaged. I referred to students as "research participants" throughout the project to reflect this active and influential role, and I have chosen to maintain this active phrase in my writing rather than the more passive, "research sample." Throughout this book when I refer to "research participants," I mean the thirty students selected for the project.

In-Depth Individual Interviews

As soon as focus-group sessions and questionnaires were complete at each data collection point, I began to meet individually with eight of the