

“Real” Middle School Teachers

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*Effective middle school teachers are more than the sum total of their educational beliefs and practices. They are whole persons whose lives reflect receptivity to growth, treasured relationships, and the intertwining of their personal and professional lives. This article uses the children’s classic, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, as a metaphor to describe effective middle school teachers. Key words: Middle School Teachers, Effective Teachers, Metaphor, Case Study, and Qualitative Research*

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“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit.

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt....It doesn’t happen all at once.”

The Skin Horse had lived longer in the nursery than any of the others....He had seen a long succession of mechanical toys arrive...and pass away....He knew they were only toys, and would never turn into anything else. For nursery magic is very strange and wonderful, and only those playthings that are old and wise and experienced like the Skin Horse understand all about it.

“I am the nursery magic Fairy,” she said. “I take care of all the playthings that the children have loved....I come and...turn them into Real.”

“Wasn’t I Real before?” asked the little Rabbit.

“You were Real to the Boy,” the Fairy said, “because he loved you. Now you shall be Real to every one.”

[The Rabbit] gave one leap and the joy...was so great that he went springing about..., jumping sideways and whirling round.

He was a Real Rabbit at last.

(Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*)

I became a middle school teacher after spending 10 years teaching in elementary classrooms. I was scared to death of my assignment, but I quickly discovered that I loved middle schoolers and thrived on teaching them. As I rubbed shoulders with effective teachers committed to middle schoolers, I began wondering what made them so successful. It was obvious to me that

they were unique, but I wondered how that had happened. What allowed them to continue giving and giving of themselves without burning out? What enabled them to successfully navigate the many changes in the field of education while maintaining their focus on students? How had they become so down-to-earth that even perceptive middle schoolers viewed them as authentic individuals? In the middle school literature I discovered what effective middle school teachers do and believe, but I wondered if there were common ingredients that shaped and directed these teachers' lives.

The Quest

Because of my questions, I spent a year observing in the classrooms of four effective middle school teachers, interviewing them, and trying to understand who they are and the events that have shaped their lives. I decided to use a qualitative case study design for my study since it would allow me to draw from the wisdom and insight of those who have experienced and understand the myriad facets of teaching middle schoolers. This design allowed me to listen to the stories of those who have "lived [long] in the [middle school classroom]" (Williams, 1981, p. 12) and have blazed a trail for others to follow in the quest for excellence in middle school education.

A major task was to find effective middle school teachers willing to give of their time and themselves to participate in my study. I wanted to work with teachers recognized by fellow educators as effective middle school teachers. This led me to follow Maxwell's (1996) suggestion of using purposeful sampling when persons are "selected deliberately in order to provide important information that [cannot] be gotten as well from other choices" (p. 70). I combined purposeful sampling with reputational selection, or participants "chosen on the recommendation of an 'expert' or 'key informant'" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28). This made sense because key informants, like the Skin Horse, have had experiences I have not been privy to.

My first step was to contact education professors at a Midwestern university who have direct contact with middle school principals and teachers, requesting them to identify schools where they have met effective middle school teachers or schools that they believe have effective middle school programs. I phrased my inquiry so that these experienced educators would use their own criteria in nominating schools or specific teachers. I then contacted principals of these schools via letter and asked them to select teachers whom they consider effective. Principals also used their own criteria in nominating effective teachers.

After the principals selected effective teachers in their schools, these teachers were given a questionnaire "found to be statistically valid and reliable in discriminating among teachers whose self-reported knowledge, practices, attitudes, and beliefs [are] or [are] not aligned with the findings about effective middle school teachers in a review of the literature" (Smith, 1992, p. 108). From the returned questionnaires, I contacted four teachers whose completed questionnaires strongly indicated that they were effective middle school teachers.

While gaining permission to conduct my study, I initially received approval from my institution's human subjects review board. I laid careful plans concerning confidentiality of data, anonymity of participants and sites, and informed consent. All principal and teacher participants were given an abstract of the intended research study and a consent form explaining the research protocol. During my initial interviews with the four main participants, I alluded to Eisner's (1998) comments about the fallibility of informed consent, that "researchers usually do not know

what will emerge . . . and therefore are not in a good position to inform those to be observed about what to expect" (p. 215).

The relationship that I as the researcher negotiated with each teacher participant varied (Maxwell, 1996). My face-to-face conversations began in November and continued through June of the following year. The numbers of classroom observations ranged in number from five to seven, but some visits were longer than others due to each teacher's schedule, classroom activities, and personal constraints. I conducted from four to six interviews with each teacher. The length of the interviews varied, the time spent conversing following the interviews varied, and with two participants I also had significant telephone conversations that I included in my field notes. By the end of our journey together, each participant had become a friend; in each case I viewed them as my personal "teachers" as I sought to understand their lives and settings (Spradley, 1979, p. 25).

During data collection, I organized a research notebook for each of the four participants from which I created each teacher's story. Throughout both data collection and analysis I used member checks (Maxwell, 1996) by asking for clarification and requesting that each participant review his or her story, suggesting corrections, additions, and commenting on interpretations. By using interviews, observations, and collecting documents, allowing for triangulation of data and methods, I was able to corroborate what I saw emerging as each teacher's beliefs and practices.

I conducted analysis by coding the interview transcripts and field notes. This was largely an intuitive process, but I also, as Merriam (1998) stresses, considered issues such as frequency, uniqueness, and previously unrecognized areas. After I had identified the overarching categories for my data, I sorted through each category and looked for ways to organize the data into manageable pieces that fit together. A final interview was conducted to discuss the accuracy of my portrayal, needed corrections, and suggested additions and items to delete, leading to minor revisions.

It was after these revisions that I placed participants' stories side-by-side to find common themes. During this time, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, one rabbit's story of becoming Real, kept coming to my mind. I realized that these teachers could best be described using this metaphor: Real.

The Discovery

What makes a middle school teacher Real? Debbie, Jack, Renae, and Mark taught me that their receptivity to continual growth, treasured relationships, and living intertwined professional and personal lives have allowed them to be Real.

Receptive to Growth

When describing teachers who will be successful in the 21st century, Malone and Tulbert (1996) discuss "centered teachers" (p. 46). Among the qualities of centered teachers is the ability to change as students, schools, and the teaching profession change. "They participate in continuous self-improvement, are willing to break out of the comfort zone in order to make needed changes" (Malone & Tulbert, 1996, p. 46). Centered teachers' commitment to life-long learning allows them to renew themselves; this in turn allows them to perform more effectively in both professional and personal arenas.

Similar thoughts are expressed by Senge (1990) when he uses the phrase "personal mastery" to describe a characteristic achieved through "the discipline of personal growth and

learning" which includes every area of life, both personal and professional (p. 141). Senge goes on to describe individuals with high personal mastery: "They feel connected to others and to life itself.... [They] live in a continual learning mode [and] never 'arrive'....Personal mastery is not something you possess. It is a process. It is a lifelong discipline" (p. 142).

The concepts of centered teachers and personal mastery were evident in all four of the teachers who allowed me to enter their classrooms and lives. Instead of using either of these two phrases, I prefer calling this characteristic receptivity to growth.

Rena explained that she learned how to teach middle schoolers effectively from her students: "They've just kind of helped me to learn....They teach you if you're willing to listen. They're great teachers...I still learn from them everyday. There's always something to be discovered from them."

Debbie, Jack, and Mark see themselves as once having been curriculum- rather than student-centered. Jack commented, "I knew kids were important, but there was a curriculum they just had to have or they would die because nobody else would give it to them....I was the teacher. I was in charge, and I pretty much charged around the room doing that!" Though Debbie's transformation was more recent than Jack's, her reflections mirror his:

I've learned a lot about kids over the years....If kids like you, they respect you and...want to please you....I didn't really care if they liked me or [not]. I was trying to teach...the curriculum and wasn't extremely compassionate.

Mark's story of change began with a workshop he attended while teaching math in Vermont. A colleague approached Mark about attending a class called "Problem Solving and Writing." He describes his experience:

[The class] was being taught by teachers...that came out of the classroom.... I walked in and here were all these experiential things. They had manipulatives to work with....[We talked about] looking at approach and reasoning and trying to get the students to understand the strategy they're using, why they're using the strategy, what they do with them, and then having them reason that through and explain it.

By the end of the week, Mark felt that "things were coming around a little bit." Mark kept in touch with several teachers from the class and found this contact invaluable:

It was that kind of networking that proved to be really crucial for me to maintain what seemed to be a really different style of teaching and instructing, but yet it seemed fascinating....We were all collaborating in finding ways that we could do this. The collaboration helped because...we were piggy backing off of each other.

Mark's comfort level was stretched and a whole new world of possibilities in teaching and learning were opened.

Not only did Mark emphasize the need for networking with other teachers to enhance the growth process, but the other three teachers mentioned this as well. Debbie spoke of the "fellow mentoring type of teachers" she could talk to and with whom she could be honest. These teachers were ones whose advice Debbie valued and trusted.

Jack's networking came from both inside and outside of his district. An early principal and a fellow teacher taught him to be more caring about his students and to view them through a gray lens. Jack also associated with educators at the state and national levels and these "professional opportunities outside the district allowed [him] to come back and do [his] job better."

Renaë had been out of the K-12 classroom for a number of years when she began teaching middle school. She "needed a crash course" on manipulatives. One of the things she did while trying to change her approach to teaching was to contact the Intermediate School District (ISD) in her county and take classes. This allowed her to network and learn from others. The ISD continues to support Renaë's efforts in the classroom, and she has in turn been sharing her expertise with others.

These four teachers' stories underscore the value of support from peers when changing one's approach to teaching. Becoming Real is a process built on one's receptivity to growth. Networking with other educators fuels the desire for continued growth and is only possible when one has an adequate emotional well from which to draw.

Treasured Relationships

Gardner (1990), a leader in business and political realms, speaks about the need for those in leadership to have "a circle of associates who are...supportive" (p. 135). Teachers, as leaders in the classroom, also need supportive relationships that help them combat the stresses and emotional drain of their tasks.

Using open-ended questionnaires, Pajak and Blase (1989) collected data from 200 teachers concerning the impact of their personal lives on their profession. They discovered that relationships outside of school are an important source of support in fulfilling professional duties. When teachers spend time with family and friends "they are more likely to return to their classrooms...mentally and emotionally refreshed" (Pajak & Blase, 1989, p. 307). Malone and Tulbert (1996) also emphasize that an aspect of self-renewal for teachers is developing human relationships that provide a support network and allow teachers to balance their professional and personal lives.

As I considered the lives of Debbie, Jack, Renaë, and Mark, I observed that they all live rich lives. Part of this richness stems from the joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment they find in their careers as educators, but that constitutes only part of their lives. Gradually I came to realize that their lives are filled with, as Jack said, "things that make richer fabric rather than more fabric." Relationships with family and friends have created a rich tapestry in these four teachers' lives that spills over into their classrooms. This rich tapestry allows them to draw from their emotional wells when relating to students without depleting the supply because their wells are regularly replenished by other meaningful relationships in their lives.

Though all four of these teachers range in age from mid-30s to mid-50s, they spoke about the importance of a continuing relationship with their parents. Other important relationships also provide solace and strength. Debbie remarked that "getting married to...Jim...was like finding my best friend in life. [I] feel very fortunate to know that no matter what happens in my life; Jim will be there for me." Renaë is the only one of the four teachers with children living at home, but even these relationships are treasured: "When [my kids] come [home] and it's time for them to have a meal, I sit with them and converse with them. They talk to me the whole time." Jack commented that "no matter how tired I am on Wednesday evenings, [Steve and I] always have

dinner with friends....We so much enjoy making richer fabric with other people.” One of Mark’s comments best sums up the need we have for each other, “[Mine has] been a life where I have been helped....There...needs to be other people who stand alongside of you.”

It was only as the Rabbit interacted with and allowed himself to first love the boy and be honest with the fairy that he became Real. Like the Rabbit, Debbie, Jack, Renae, and Mark focus on the intangible aspects that make life richer and fuller.

Live Intertwined Professional and Personal Lives

Teaching does not occur within a vacuum, but life experiences shape who teachers are currently as well as impact their future experiences (Beattie, 1997). As I listened to the four teachers share their stories and talk about their lives, I was constantly amazed at how they wove together their professional and personal lives. Each teacher specifically associated events or relationships in their personal lives with their beliefs and practices as a teacher. For Jack, being in the military opened up a whole new way of thinking: “[The military] may be what made me a liberal rather than a conservative. I really started to look at both sides of the coin. I can’t see black and white.” Debbie and Renae both point to the influence of their family life in helping them become the teachers they are. Debbie believes that having a good marriage makes her a better teacher because she doesn’t have “any kind of personal issues...that would cause [her] unhappiness.” Renae has learned about dealing with kids through being a parent. She observed that this experience has “made [her] much more tolerant, much more patient and understanding.” Mark identified his religious beliefs as impacting who he is in the classroom: “[I am] a cautious risk taker....My faith has enabled me to take risks. [I] do some things not knowing how they’re going to turn out, but I know God is with me.”

Connelly and Clandinin (1995) use the metaphor of a landscape in describing teachers’ professional lives. They believe that the professional landscape is in “intimate interaction with what one might call landscapes of the personal, outside the professional setting” (p. 27). Teachers’ professional landscapes take on a unique, particular shape as they draw from their own

Individual biographies, on the particular histories of the professional landscape in which they find themselves, on how they are positioned on the landscape, and on the form of everyday school life on the landscape. Conversely, teachers’ professional life on the landscape influences their personal life off the landscape. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995, p. 27)

While using a landscape as a metaphor for teachers’ lives strikes a cord in my own mind and heart, I prefer the metaphor of a house. To me a house depicts an object that is a complete unit with distinct outside boundaries. Others are free to pass by, make assumptions about what occurs inside, and speculate concerning decorations; however, one needs to enter and explore its rooms and furnishings to appreciate its real value. Inside the houses built by teachers’ lives are separate rooms designating their personal and professional lives, but one finds easy access between the rooms. From the entryway, one can view bits and pieces of the rooms. A general theme is prevalent in the decor of the entire house and the treasures in one room lead to and spill out into other rooms of the house. Though the appearance of individual teachers’ houses varies and some appear more welcoming initially, once one enters the houses created by Real middle school teachers’ lives, one finds safety, love, and acceptance.

Coda

The qualities of receptivity to growth, treasured relationships, and living intertwined professional and personal lives I saw in Debbie, Jack, Renae, and Mark remind me that they are whole persons, just like the young adolescents they teach. They live lives that allow them to be whole and complete—Real. When they grow mentally, they are also touched emotionally and morally. When they feel renewed emotionally, they are able to be more creative and give of themselves to their students (Covey, 1989). These teachers are not only effective middle school teachers, but they are also effective in their personal lives.

I began my study as a professional exercise, but to my surprise and initial dismay, it became a life-altering enterprise. Debbie, Jack, Renae, and Mark challenged me to reflect deeply on my own journey. Even as I began searching for themes, I realized I had much to learn about two of the three characteristics so evident in my participants' lives: Developing treasured relationships and thoughtfully integrating my professional and personal lives. As a result, I have become intentional about deepening relationships with family members. Allowing my personal and professional worlds to become intertwined has been a greater challenge for me; however, I see progress. Debbie, Jack, Renae, and Mark have given me courage to begin sharing with other professionals and students the life experiences that have shaped and continue to influence my teaching philosophy. This has allowed me to grapple with my life as a whole rather than see it in fragmented pieces.

Why have I chosen to share this story with you? My hope is that wherever you are in your journey, you too will be encouraged to follow Debbie, Jack, Renae, and Mark's example. Though you may not be a middle school teacher, you may see aspects of yourself in their lives and may want to, like me, target an area in which to grow. One of the values in narrative case studies such as this is that others can read about the practices and beliefs of effective middle school teachers and restory their own lives (Clandinin & Connally, 1991). Those, who read how the four participants deal with opportunities and challenges in life, may be motivated to look at their own lives through new eyes. Teachers learning about other teachers can become a powerful tool in shaping practices. I have provided readers with a brief description of four effective middle school teachers that "they would have missed without [my] observations" (Eisner, 1998, p. 114).

I began this journey with questions. While I found some answers, I have also uncovered more questions: Are there personal characteristics that differentiate middle school teachers from their colleagues in elementary and high schools? Are the characteristics I found running through the four participants' lives that make them Real unique to middle school teachers? If there are differing characteristics that reside in effective elementary, middle, and high school teachers, how do teacher educators identify these and encourage preservice teachers to prepare for teaching in these respective areas? If certain qualities are representative of all effective teachers, how can these be developed in preservice teachers?

Debbie, Jack, Renae, and Mark are Real because they love and are loved. They recognize that becoming Real is sometimes a painful process, yet they open their arms to embrace the lessons of life as they continue the journey toward being Real. As they allow their lives to touch those around them, others are invited to also become Real by embracing the process. The journey toward becoming Real leads to more joy, adventure, and fulfillment than one could ever imagine.

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