IV: Context of this Study

The School

In considering changes, especially complex ones such as evolving beliefs and changes in behavior, it becomes essential to consider the context within which these changes are occurring. In the case of this study, we are considering Thacker Middle School, one of the hundreds of schools that comprise the New York Public School system.

Thacker was housed in an older, three-story tall building nestled in among Victorian styled houses and apartments, co-op buildings, and a doughnut shop. From the outside, Thacker was neither inviting nor uninviting. It was just a building with a lot of windows covered in beige grates. The school did have a playground of sorts attached to it, consisting of a large asphalt-covered lot surrounded by an extremely tall fence. Each day when I arrived at school, I found a class of students playing in this area. In addition to a couple of basketball hoops and a lot of open space, the yard also featured a tall wall designed for squash or other similar games.

Like most inner-city schools, Thacker had to be aware of security risks and meets the challenge by allowing entrance to the building from only one side. In fact,

during the time I spent there, the doors were all replaced so that no exterior doors had windows and only the main entrance had door handles on the outside.

On my first visit to Thacker for this research, I was quickly reminded of my earlier visits to the school for a different research project two years earlier. I entered the building through the main doors, then proceeded through the inner doors. The inner doors were, like the outer doors, painted red, but they had windows. I found myself standing just outside the auditorium at a guard's desk. Visitors were required to sign in, but the guards realized quickly who did or did not belong in this building – so, I was no longer required to sign in after the first visit. The guards greeted students and teachers with a friendly "Hello" or a smile and a nod. Generally, there were three or four guards on duty, however only one or two stayed at the desk at one time. The guard desk faces a row of guest couches that provide a place where staff members and an occasional student go to relax for a few minutes.

In this entrance area, I got my first flavor for the school as it is now. I did not know what to expect even though I had been there two years earlier. Through the signs and display that adorn the walls, it is apparent that there are four separate divisions to this building – each dedicated to a different mission. The glass front display cases proudly heralded the specialty of each division. They included a school focused on bilingual education, a school focused on law, one on science and

technology, and a fourth unit focused on the arts. In addition to the displays advertising each of these magnet schools, a map showed where each of the magnets was housed in the building.

The schools within the school operate, for the most part, as separate entities. There was a principal for the building, and an assistant principal led each institute (magnet). However, within the school all of the titles have been changed to more accurately reflect the positions these people held. The building principal is considered to be the CEO – Chief Educational Officer – and the heads of the four institutes are considered to be "directors."

In addition to the other displays highlighting the magnets, there was also a display about a corporate partnership the bilingual magnet of the school was involved in. Signs outlining the school's mission statement, a poster announcing "Total Quality Education," and an overview of the performance standards for the school also decorated the lobby of the school. As I looked around this visually busy lobby area, I also noticed signs naming the honor students for each magnet and a sign hung over the visitor couch naming "Exemplary Middle School Practices" (Unknown, c. 1998). Each was listed with a small symbol next to it. The ten practices included:

1. Advisor/Advisee Programs

2. Heterogeneous Grouping
3. Authentic Assessment
4. Interdisciplinary Teaching
5. Community Service
6. Peer mediation
7. Cooperative Learning
8. Small School Setting
9. Flexible Scheduling
10. Teaming

I checked in with the security guard and made my way up to the director's office in the magnet where I did my data collection. The familiar trip down the hall and up the stairs made it feel as if I had never quit visiting Thacker. I climbed the stairs, being careful to follow the directions that clearly outlined which side of the stairs was for going up and which side was for going down, I emerged in the center of the math and technology magnet. I was amazed at how quiet it was. I had remembered the building being a lot noisier. Within 20 minutes, it had returned to the noise level I remembered. The noise seemed somehow tied to the lunch schedule (Observation, 10/22/98).

I exited the stairway, turned left and noticed the student work and decorations on the wall. Throughout my four months at Thacker, I was always surprised by the amount of student work and school information that donned the hallways. Sometimes, the displays focused on a particular project such as research the students had done on the real "witches" of Salem. In another area, one teacher, Mr. Deveneau,

kept a weekly math puzzler posted across the hall from his room. The walls, because of this work, told a lot about what the students were doing, and also added a human element to this very institutional building.

About half-way down the hall, I arrived at Mr. Gabel's office. His long, fairly narrow room, maybe 10'x20', had windows overlooking the courtyard at one end and the entrance to the room at the other. The cemented courtyard featured several broken cement benches and a flagpole. There were some patches of grass in the area as well. I only occasionally saw anyone in the area. Mr. Gabel's office was lined with tables and bookcases, all generally overflowing with curriculum and support materials, newsletters and announcements. Mr. Gabel's desk was turned sideways so that it faced out into the hallway. Behind the desk there was a credenza which held a coffee maker and small refrigerator. Also behind the desk was a gym locker as well as a pair of institutional gray filing cabinets. Mr. Gabel also fit an older Macintosh computer and laser printer in the office. All three of the concrete block walls in the office held bulletin boards with various information that was updated regularly. One board held information about the institute's philosophy and mission, another held information about some of the special projects the school was involved in, including Classroom, Inc. newsletters. The third held information about technology and other relevant materials. In addition to serving as the teacher lounge and Mr. Gabel's

office, this office would become my waiting room during the many weeks I was at the school.

Mr. Gabel greeted me warmly and took me to see the magnet's new computers. The lab, which housed 20 PCs and a new laser printer, occupied a classroom that had belonged to Ms. Murray when she worked with me in the earlier research effort. The metal-covered door remained locked anytime no one was in the room. As we entered the room, I saw that the computers lined two walls – the back wall and the length of the wall with windows. The rest of the room was filled with tables pushed to create two long rows (one that was two tables wide and another that is only one table wide) up the center of the room. There was also a short "ell" at the top of one of the rows of tables as well as a teacher's desk situated near the door. The room could accommodate over 30 students. It was used throughout the day as a classroom for both computer classes and other classes. When we arrived, the teacher using the room did not even seem to be trying to keep the students calm or quiet. I silently hoped that this was a study hall or something because there seemed to be no way that meaningful learning could take place with so much disorder in the room. However, I remembered the last work I did here and was amazed by how much calmer the school was overall. As I glanced around the room, I recognized a few of the faces from two years ago. They were all a little older (Observation, 10/22/98).

The computers were password protected, which prevented students from getting at most of the programs including the three CRI simulations. Mr. Gabel demonstrated with glee how fast the computers were. He told me that they got the computers last year with grant money, but were unable to hook them to the Internet then because no one was sure where the phone line came into the building (Observation, 10/22/98). I later heard from Mr. Peachtree, the magnet technology expert, that the problem with the computers last year was at least partially due to the district technology coordinator not believing the problems being reported by the school. Mr. Peachtree told me that it took six months and going over the technology coordinator's head to finally discover that the wiring for the school was run to the basement, but the server was on the third floor (observation, 11/12/98). While Mr. Gabel told me initially that this room was only partially networked and another room in a different part of the building was totally networked (observation, 10/22/98), by the time I left Thacker, every computer in the room was able to run from the network and every machine had Internet access. Each computer (PC) is locked inside an anti-theft box that attached the CPU to the table. Wires poured in lines out of the cabinet where the network connection is housed. The room is crowded, but the 20 machines were, to Mr. Gabel, a welcome addition. He commented how with the classes of 30 the students will be able to work in teams of three and be spread out on every other

computer (Observation, 10/22/98). Ideally, however, he would have liked to set the room up with work islands which would allow teams to work together both on and off the computers in a workspace (Interview, 2/25/99).

The Atmosphere

There were few things about Thacker that seemed familiar to me based on my own experience in mid-western and southern schools. Thacker was overcrowded, housing 1300 students in a space designed for 800. Its student-body was 94% below the poverty level, and the students spoke more than 25 languages. Over 300 students attended classes in the two hallways dedicated to the math and technology institute (Interview, 2/25/99). However, the most foreign aspect of the school was the militaristic atmosphere that pervaded. The students were expected to live by a set of policies that seem both extreme and unusual to me. For instance, to use the restroom during class, the student needed their teacher to sign a pass that they are expected to carry with them at all times. Then, they had to go to Mr. Gabel's office to sign a book. Then, they had to ask for someone to unlock the restroom because all of the restrooms in the building were kept locked most of the time.

The noise that rings through the hallways occupied by the institute brought both life and distraction to the halls of the school. There was a steady echoing of

student and teacher voices mixing in the hallways throughout the building. There were apparently no sound dampening devices installed.

On top of the normal din of the building, the halls were frequently filled with the sound of a teacher or director yelling at students. This remained, to me, one of the most chilling aspects of the school throughout my work there.

Attitudes in the School

New York is notorious for the attitudes people display. Thacker, like everywhere I visited in New York, was run on a New York attitude. This did not mean an uncaring or rude attitude, rather it was an attitude that the students are there to learn and very little nonsense was tolerated. The building principal and institute directors maintained a top-down control over the teachers and the students, and everyone was held accountable for everything. Added to this was a sense of urgency – everyone bustled from point to point throughout their day. No one had time to sit and think until the students left each day. Even if there were time, however, there was no space for thinking. Mr. Gabel's office doubled as the teachers' lounge in this very overcrowded school.

Dedication

What struck me most about Thacker was the incredible sense of dedication that the teachers and administrators there had to their students. They truly wanted to build a learning environment in which every child had a chance at being a successful student. The vision statement for the institute emphasized this dedication saying:

> It is our belief that every student has the ability to grow academically, emotionally, and socially. Our vision is to create an educational environment where all students, through continuous hard word work, diligence, and ongoing personal advancement are properly trained to meet demands of our ever-advancing society. (Vision Statement, c. 1998)

In my conversations with Mr. Gabel, he commented that the goal he has set forth for the school is to allow the students to succeed at whatever they do (Interview, 2/25/99).

Sense of Ownership

Thacker suffered from a lack of ownership on anyone's part. It was apparent in the students, many of the teachers, and Mr. Gabel. Often when things went wrong, the first response to any problem was, "I didn't do it." While it seemed that this was probably related to being within a very large school district in which the people at the school-level do not have much control over their worlds, the lack of

responsibility and blame-shifting was counter-productive to work being done. For instance, one day before our interview, Evelyn commented to Mr. Gabel that the computers were awful – they broke a lot and were not very reliable. Rather than looking for constructive workarounds they just hit a wall in the conversation:

> Evelyn: "This monitor is not working, that monitor is not working"
> Gabel: "I didn't buy them"
> Evelyn: "Huh?"
> Gabel: "I didn't buy them. I had nothing to do with it."
> Evelyn: "Yeah, but my kids gotta work on them and every time we go in there, we gotta change things and you know. It's terrible."
> Gabel: "I understand totally what you're saying" (Interview, 12/2/98).

Communication

Communication in the school was questionable. Of all the factors that I witnessed, this was the one that caused, it seemed, the most problems. Although Mr. Gabel kept several bulletin boards in his office up-to-date with happenings in the school and with their partner programs, it seemed that the teachers never knew about the things that affected their classrooms until class time or maybe the day before. This lack of communication had only negative affects on the work I was trying to do and the work the teachers were trying to do. For instance, I saw Ms. Collins use the simulation without preparing for it because guests were coming to the school (Observation, 11/5/98). I saw Ms. Murray do scenario-related activities on a day

when she had her class mixed with part of another class. This was due to a fieldtrip that took many of the students and teachers from the building requiring that the remaining students and teachers mix classes together (Observation, 12/16/99). She indicated to me that she did not know about the schedule changes necessitated by the fieldtrip until that morning. She chose to do the scenario-related activities because I was there and she did not want me to have wasted a trip.

My observation on November 12, 1998 offered one of the most striking situations in which communication broke down. The schools had chosen to have a disk protection program put on their computer system. The company came and installed their software with no advance warning, leaving the teachers, including Mr. Peachtree – the technical person for the magnet – completely stunned and unable to use the computers. The discussion that Mr. Peachtree had with Evelyn indicated that he was resigned to just taking these things as they came – perhaps a part of the problem that perpetuates the lack of communication:

> Mr. Peachtree entered and explained to Evelyn that the software people came in on Tuesday to install their software and now he can't even get to his own homepage. He told Evelyn, "Don't be upset. Go with the flow."
>
> Evelyn: "I have things to do."
> Peachtree: "Sweetheart, I have things to do, too. I can't get to my homepage. As of Tuesday, this was all working." (Observation, 11/12/98).

To make matters worse, when Ms. Murray is finally able to discuss the situation with Mr. Gabel, he not only offered no support or ideas for preventing further breakdowns, but added his own commentary laden with the idea that the situation could not improve:

> Mr. Gabel, the institute director, came in the room and told Ms. Murray that *Chelsea Bank* was not on the computers and it is supposed to put back on the computers next week. Evelyn looked surprised, as if no one had told her this previously.
>
> Evelyn: "Why didn't anyone tell us?"
> Gabel: "What do you expect, communication?"
> Evelyn: "Yes."
> Gabel: "Get real, Evelyn." (He sounded earnest here, not sarcastic – as if resigned to the fact that there is no communication in the school.) (Observation, 11/12/98).

The bitter irony of this communication fiasco was that even within the school, the information being communicated was apparently inaccurate. Not only was the program there, unlike the report Ms. Murray got, but the technical support people were able to get the students going on the scenario.

Good Teaching

More than perhaps any other factor in this study, the perception of what it means to be a good teacher told a lot about the school and its teachers. Three of the four teachers I interview agreed that questions were central to the learning process (Interview with Ms. Collins 11/18/98; Interview with Ms. Murray, 12/2/98;

Interview with Mr. Crane 1/14/99). While they all had different ideas about how the classroom should be run, as evidenced by the observations I made of each of the four teachers' classes, there was that underlying idea that the questions were related to learning.

Perhaps, unsurprisingly, the one exception to this was Mr. Deveneau. He was finishing his second full semester of teaching when I interviewed him, therefore he likely was not yet prepared with a theory of learning that went beyond the daily routine of the classroom. In fact, in my conversation with him, Mr. Deveneau indicated that to him a good classroom was one with a set structure (Interview, 1/14/99). Further, he identified other desirable teacher traits as being compassion and the ability to help the students that need it most. Certainly all of these features were important to the other three teachers, however, they were able to look past these fundamental details to paint a different kind of picture.

When I discussed what makes a good teacher with Mr. Gabel, I found further support for the notion of the teacher as a professional, for the teacher as a learner, and for the teacher as a reflective practitioner. He said that, first and foremost, what makes a good teacher is the intangible. Beyond that, however, he named traits such as being caring, being structured, being open to learning both about the subject and themselves, being dedicated without losing sight of other things in the world, and

being reflective. To him, his job was to "make each person better at what they do by whatever means it takes" (Interview, 2/25/99). While he came across, at times, as being abrasive and short-tempered, Mr. Gabel was, during my time at Thacker, always very supportive of the teachers and eager to help them out as needed.

The most promising aspect of the administration's view on teaching was the information I gained from Mr. Gable and from the few informal conversations I had with the Chief Education Officer. Through these conversations I was able to learn that there was a very strong commitment to supporting the teachers through feedback and through providing different avenues for learning (e.g., Observation, 11/5/98; Interview with Mr. Gabel, 2/25/99). To this end, I found that the teachers had access to a wide variety of professional journals within the building as well as some financial incentive for attending professional development workshops. Further demonstrating the commitment the administrators in the school had to developing a professional community, Mr. Gabel described the relationship that had been cultivated with Classroom, Inc., saying:

> Probably the primary reason for staying with them – the simulations aside and what the kids are getting out of it – is that they are such a supportive and professional organization that it's easy to work with them. They provide services, they provide follow-up materials, they're constantly assessing and re-evaluating the programs, and by programs, I don't just mean the simulations themselves, but how they're

> implemented and utilized within the schools. They're also nice in that they treat the people who are involved with them very, very well. They will take them out, offer them positive recognition in the form of dinners or receptions or other activities just as Thank-you's for being part of the program. (Interview, with Mr. Gabel, 2/25/99)

However, I also found teachers being required to attend workshops because the administration felt that they needed someone to go – whether that particular teacher might benefit from the workshop or not. For instance, Ms. Collins attended a workshop on using Classroom, Inc. simulations in classrooms with only three or four computers (Collegial group meeting, 12/10/98). Although the school was a member of the project that provided computers for the classrooms, the computers were not yet installed and there was no discussion in my presence of the teachers converting to using the simulations in their classrooms once the computers were in place. Essentially, the teacher was being trained completely out-of-context and likely will not be able to use what was covered in the workshop.

The Technology

The technology within the math and technology included the computer lab with 21 relatively new Pentium computers, all networked and able to access the Internet. These were the machines that had the CRI simulations on them. In addition to this lab, Ms. Murray had five or six older Macintosh computers in her room. There

was also a small cluster of machines in the library for students and teachers to use as well as another lab located in a different institute that was open to the entire school. The school was also in the process of installing four computers in each teacher's classroom as part of a large, externally-funded initiative. During my time at Thacker, several rooms were wired for these new computers almost overnight, however the computers had still not arrived by the time I left.

Technology was a strong focus of this institute. In fact, the institute's mission statement stated:

> Today, the world is changing at a faster pace than ever before due to rapid advancements in computer technology, mathematical competition and constant scientific discovery. We must now prepare children to be able to compete in this new world. The mission of the institute […] is to provide each student with an education in the skills essential to function in today's society. Through a concentration in mathematics, science and technology, the students will not only be prepared for tomorrow's world today, but they will be able to readily adapt to the continuous changes whenever they occur. (Mission Statement, c. 1998).

The institute's goals and objectives backed up this mission statement by including a statement of commitment to raise academic standards through the integration of technology into all subject areas (Goals and Objectives, c. 1998).

The documents were not the only sign of commitment on the part of the administration. In fact, Mr. Gabel not only expected students in every grade to use

the CRI simulation packages but also promoted other technology uses. For instance, when one of the teachers involved in the collegial group was having problems integrating math into the simulation he was using, Mr. Gabel suggested that he should develop a Webquest so that students could explore math as related to medical sciences (Collegial Group Meeting, 12/10/98)

The Simulations

Chelsea Bank

In this study, Ms. Murray used CRI's simulation, *The Chelsea Bank*[1] (See Figure 4.1). This simulation provided her eighth-grade math students with the opportunity to act as bank tellers for eight scenarios and customer service representatives for seven scenarios. The students work at the computer in groups of three students. They were given one problem per scenario, such as cashing some checks, opening an account, or dealing with a rude customer. The simulation provided scaled down, but authentic resources for the students in the form of a bank manual, a computer for checking account and credit information, and a glossary of terms. In addition to these tools, the program provided a memo each day that

[1] Copyright ©1993, Classroom, Inc.

contained a hint to help the students with the scenario. The students worked together to solve each problem, then choose from one of the multiple-choice answers for the specific problem. The students were also asked to reflect on what they learned about banking and to write about the consequences their decision would have on the bank, on the customer, and on themselves. According to the CRI literature (Classroom, Inc., 1998), this simulation is best used for grades 6-8 and uses "ethics, judgement, and decision-making skills to handle a variety of issues including check negotiability, potential fraud, bribery, loan approvals/denials, and credit." (Classroom, Inc., 1998, p. 5).

Figure 4.1: Screen capture from *The Chelsea Bank*

Green Mountain Paper Company

Ms. Thomas used *Green Mountain Paper Company*[2] (See Figure 4.2) with her seventh grade environmental science class. GMPC was also simulation designated for grades six through eight (Classroom, Inc., 1998). It was comprised of 12 episodes in which the students worked in groups of three to manage a paper company. Typically, the students were given two problems to solve during each episode, one problem involved a question from the employee comment box that the students had to answer with little research or knowledge. These questions included issues such as moving the company picnic to a different location, starting a daycare program for the employees, and allowing the employees to vote on whether Green Mountain should buy more land. Once a decision was made about this smaller issue, the students were faced with their primary problem for the day. These problems included determining how to schedule paper runs, choosing land to purchase, and deciding how to increase plant safety. The students were provided with a number of resources to use in making their decisions. These included resources books, telephone access to various employees, television news stories, faxes, meetings with the managers for each department, and papers provided by various people. In the

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[2] Copyright ©1997, Classroom, Inc.

simulations, students dealt “with issues that affect four broad environmental topics: land use and conservation, water use and pollution, air quality, and recycling while working to balance community and employee concerns.” (Classroom, Inc., 1998, p. 4).

Figure 4.2: Screen Shot of *Green Mountain Paper Company*

Summary

In summary, Thacker was a middle school in the midst of change. It had strong leadership and dedicated teachers who sought only to have their students succeed. While it was certainly riddled with many problems, it was also a place

where much progress was occurring. Perhaps because of the strong commitment the school held for professional development, or perhaps because of the commitment they had to making the Classroom, Inc. software as successful as possible, I was welcomed and supported in my efforts to learn more.