

## Chapter 3

### DESIGN OF STUDY

#### Focus of Inquiry

This study focused on the experiences of the staff and community of Kipps Elementary School as they implemented the framework proposed by Ernest Boyer in his Basic School research report. The study sought to answer the questions presented in Chapter 1. The process of implementing the Basic School research was the major target of focus, along with the reactions and interactions of the participants. After working to obtain a strong understanding of Boyer's framework, I used it as the lens to focus on the day-to-day activities in this particular school. In looking through this lens, I hoped to build a bridge between the Basic School research and our school setting. I looked for specific evidence in the language and actions of the participants that related to Boyer's four priorities.

#### Research Design

After analyzing the context and research findings detailed previously, I carried out a qualitative research study that is presented here as a case study of one school. This process allowed me to relate directly my ongoing experiences in a school with a field of research which was of great interest to me. The design of the research allowed me to be involved with participants so that I was able to have a "...deeper understanding of experience from the perspectives of the participants" (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p. 44).

In order to approach this study in a way that would allow me to discover features that I could not anticipate, I followed an emergent design, as described by Maykut and Morehouse. This design required that I begin the study with important ideas and questions that I wished to

pursue, but also allowed me to pursue other interesting and salient issues.

Since I had the dual roles of researcher and principal at Kipps Elementary, I realized that I would need to deal with issues of researcher bias or “provisions for trustworthiness” (p. 153), as Maykut and Morehouse refer to them. I realized that people would place confidence in the findings of this inquiry and might use them to begin or further other research activities.

Therefore, I constantly assessed my involvement as a participant in the process and was quick to deal with any aspects that were a result of my bias and not truly a part of the process the school was experiencing.

This case study is descriptive and narrative. My voice as researcher is obvious in that I constantly reflected and analyzed my observations and experiences. I asked “how” and “why” questions often, and, according to Yin, these questions “...are likely to favor the use of case studies...” (1994, p. 19). Therefore, the experiences of the staff of Kipps Elementary in implementing the Basic School framework will help other schools to deal with the “how” and “why” aspects of the process as our learning is recorded here.

## Methods

### Sampling Strategy

One of the first decisions to be made in qualitative research is the site of the research. Because of the ties between Basic School research and Kipps Elementary School, as detailed earlier, this site provided valuable information for my inquiry. Kipps is a K-5 elementary school with approximately 470 students. At the time of this study, the school had four sections of each of those grade levels with a pupil-teacher ratio of 19.6 to 1. The school serves a diverse community, receiving students from neighborhoods that range from university faculty homes to

graduate student apartment complexes to rural mobile home parks. This diversity, coupled with the school's strong belief in inclusion of students with disabilities in general classrooms, provides a rich environment in which to work and study. More information about the school can be found at the school's web site: [www.mcps.org/kipps/kipps.html](http://www.mcps.org/kipps/kipps.html) .

Because of the size of the school, most of my research was conducted using the entire school community as the population from which I collected data. There were times when I needed to propose a sample of fewer participants to focus on a particular aspect of my inquiry. For example, I asked representative faculty members to take part in interviews. Similarly, I attended smaller group meetings, such as grade-level and family meetings, and recorded information that was later analyzed.

Kipps Elementary School is identified in this final report as the setting for this study. However, individual participants' names have not been used; instead, each participant has been given a pseudonym. To insure confidentiality of participants, any tape-recorded information will be destroyed within six months after the completion of this study. Permission was granted from the Assistant Superintendent of Schools to conduct the study. Results of the study will then be shared with the school system.

#### Data Collection Procedures

The data collection began with a retrospective look at the development of Kipps Elementary School. This reflective analysis provided an account of the development of the school from its inception three years ago until the present time. Field notes kept from the earliest discussions about the design of the school were reviewed. The thoughts and actions of the staff and parents during that time of development and over the past three years were culled through

informal interviews and reviews of field notes kept by the researcher.

In addition to their thoughts on the school's development to this point, parents and teachers had been provided information about the Basic School and informally polled to gauge their interest. This information and opportunity for feedback had been provided through informational meetings, viewing of videotapes, and sharing of articles about the research. A number of meetings occurred as we discussed the research and made decisions on how we wished to implement it; thus, the minutes from these meetings were also a data source. My own observations and reflections in the form of a researcher's journal also became an essential part of data collection.

Thus, specific types of data which were collected include:

1. Field journal -- I wrote in a field journal regularly, recording my observations and reflections about the experiences taking place at Kipps Elementary. My approach to this journal was to record information related to the purpose of the study and the research questions, but I also recorded other information that I thought might emerge as important data later.
2. Field notes -- In addition to keeping a field journal, I also collected field notes as I went about experiencing this setting. Field notes differ from the field journal in that they tend to be more objective. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) stress that the "...qualitative researcher's field notes contain what has been said and heard by the researcher, without interpretation" ( p. 73). As events occurred, I made notes about the specifics of what occurred without giving my opinion or any subjective judgment about the event. If I felt an interpretation needed to be included, I included it in brackets to indicate it was commentary (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). These incidents were later categorized as I looked for underlying themes or explanations. I often chose

to write in my field journal about the notes that I had taken, another way to give interpretation to the event.

3. Participant observation -- This technique of being immersed in the setting allowed me "...to hear, see, and begin to experience the reality as the participants do" (Marshall and Rossman, p. 79). Already being a member of this community which I was observing had potential positive and negative influences. First, because I was familiar to participants, the situations I observed had to be real and not fabricated for an outsider. However, the negative influence I had to be aware of was that I might fail to recognize important data because it was a part of my ordinary experience. Thus, I had to try to maintain as much objectivity as possible in my observations.

4. Interviewing (structured and unstructured) -- As this study proceeded, I interviewed various participants regarding their thoughts about the implementation of the Basic School structure. I interviewed two teachers from each of the four families (groups of teachers from different grade levels and subject areas) we had developed at the school. One of these teachers had been chosen by the family to represent the group at monthly meetings with other family representatives. The second teacher was nominated to me by the family representative. I used both structured interview questions in which questions had been planned in order to find specific feedback as well as unstructured interview questions in which I encouraged the interviewee to provide information he or she considered important (Appendix B). Casual conversations with participants were recorded on field notes and in the field journal, but were not considered an interview. I also explored the possibility of conducting some group interviews of entire families, but decided that the size of the group (8-10 members) was not conducive to give participants ample opportunities to participate. Though I originally planned to interview several parents, I

decided not to do this since our involvement with Basic School during this first year did not involve parents as broadly as we originally had planned.

Whenever possible, the use of audio-taping occurred when applicable to the types of data collection above. For example, some meetings with the family representatives and any type of interview were taped. Each of the interviews with teachers was audio-taped. All of these tapes were then transcribed and analyzed.

5. Documents and Archives -- A large number of documents were gathered as part of this implementation process. Newsletters and articles that were sent to parents were collected. The school parent-teacher handbook and faculty handbook were reviewed. Memos, calendars, articles, and other types of communication to teachers were also collected. Minutes from meetings, especially faculty meetings and planning meetings, were likewise reviewed. Perhaps the most important part of this data collection was the archives kept by each family. Minutes of all their meetings, copies of flyers distributed, details of the planning for their activities, any correspondence, as well as related journal and newspaper articles were placed in each of these archives.

#### Procedures for Data Analysis

Data analysis procedures were somewhat emergent in design also. I began the analysis by using the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), a process which included coding data by category, comparing meanings across categories, refining categories, exploring relationships and patterns across categories, and integrating the data to develop "...an understanding of people and settings being studied" (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p. 135). Thus, pieces of data would often intersect to make meaningful connections and build categories

or themes of relevant information.

This process of data analysis developed by Maykut and Morehouse started as the major framework for analyzing the findings. However, I integrated other techniques and tools from other qualitative researchers if I felt they better fit the data I had collected. An example is a modified version of the contact summary sheet of Miles and Huberman (1994), which was an excellent way to organize information obtained through a field contact that could later be used as a field note (Appendix C). Using these techniques as the basis for the analysis helped me to begin a process, but also allowed me to alter that process as I began to “get my hands on” the data from my research. Then, I realized the importance of allowing the data to become the focus, rather than the process, as it emerged into a better understanding of our involvement with the Basic School.

Early in the analysis process, I found that I was struggling with the coding of data. Having not yet discovered any particular themes, I found that I had many categories with a few pieces of data. I then decided that I wanted to look more at the process through a narrative mode; therefore, I began arranging information in chronological order. Soon, I realized that I needed somehow to make more sense of the data. As I searched for an answer to this dilemma, I realized that Boyer’s work was the ideal place to look. Just as he determined that schools should focus on the four priorities of curriculum, climate, community, and character, I realized that was the focus I needed to take in my analysis. Thus, I began to look at each piece of data and how it related to Boyer’s priorities. I began going through the items, such as the archival documents and the field journal, and used different colored markers to code them according to priority. I also wrote specific comments in the margin as I began to see themes emerge. This process then

helped me to delve deeper into the data to find the specific areas I wished to analyze more closely, namely the themes discussed in Chapter 5.

### Personal Reflections

As I reflect on the process of data analysis, I recall many moments of frustration. A number of dilemmas arose: a decision on when to stop gathering data, at the end of the year or in the middle of the year; my frustrations with feeling a need to write, but not feeling ready and feeling a need to analyze, but not feeling ready; decisions to categorize data in different ways, first by date, then by family, then by priority, and then by theme; and the enormous query of how to deal with an overabundance of data that was sure to have important messages that needed to be included in my research report. Reflections in my field journal often revealed these experiences. An entry on January 7, 1998, showed my frustration with having spent time on my winter break dealing with some of these issues, as I wrote, “I feel so bogged down with this process. Already I have a lot of data – perhaps too much to deal with – and, yet, I know there will be lots more coming...I need to take some time to start writing, but I don’t know where to begin.” The evolution of my change in thinking from frustration to enthusiasm was chronicled over the next few months as I continued to gather and analyze data. This evolution climaxed as I wrote on June 10, 1998, “I absolutely cannot believe how the teacher interviews are giving me such deep insight into our involvement with the Basic School. Over and over again, I am hearing certain themes...I can’t wait to have the time this summer to delve into all the data I have collected.”

Certainly, the analysis of the data for this study was a learning experience. What began as a systematic way of coding and sorting and predicting emerged to a lot of time in thoughtful reflection. Occasional rereadings of journal entries began to show certain trends appearing.



These same trends showed up in conversations that became field notes. The epiphany of these trends came in the interviews with teachers. Again and again, comments were made about parts of our experience that had worked and parts that seemed to have problems. When the interviewees were asked to explain why these things worked or did not work, they gave very insightful reasons. Perhaps one of the most exciting events in my experience with this project came as I was transcribing these interviews and suddenly realized that I was hearing over and over some of the same ideas. I knew then that I would have information to share with other schools that might make their experience with the Basic School more meaningful – that they could truly learn from our experience.