

## Chapter 5

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Let me underscore one absolutely essential point. Every single proposal that we make in the Basic School is going on somewhere in schools across this country. This is not a top-down report. It's a bubble-up report. It's an attempt to summarize the best practices that we saw in schools all across this country. What we're proposing is that the best practices all be brought together in what we've called the Basic School, which is not a new institution, but an idea. With this idea we affirm the essentials of effective education while keeping the belief that every single school should still follow its own way and should develop its own distinctive mission. (Boyer, Address, 1995, p. 11)

"The Basic School philosophy has helped us to focus our programs and will continue to do so...It's good to know that we all believe in something." (Kathy Wilson, 24-26)

"I think the Basic School framework will lead us to organizing our school more effectively." (Marilyn Kline, 160-161)

"I think Basic School gives us a focus. It helps to make sense of it. It's given me a new way of looking at education." (Abby Franklin, 140-141)

"I think our involvement has been an innovative way to look at some things we were already doing and using it as sort of a guidepost to come up with some further things to do." (Bonnie Stewart, 22-25)

"There's no question that the Basic School framework has helped us to focus our school's programs...I don't think we would have done all those things if not for the conversation that started with Basic School." (Meredith Walters, 50-53)

An analysis of the findings described in Chapter 4 provides a number of insights into our year-long involvement with the Basic School philosophy. Generally, the experience with Basic School was perceived positively by most staff members, enthusiastically by some. The notes I

recorded in my field journal represented the range of emotions and attitudes I had as we worked through the process – ranging from great excitement to occasional discouragement. The many artifacts placed in the archives of each family relate the hours of discussion, planning, and implementation related to our involvement with Basic School.

On the surface, these pieces of data reveal one school's experience with the implementation of the Basic School research; however, upon closer examination, these data provide specific themes that other schools should consider as they begin working with the Basic School framework.

#### Interpretations

The data analysis process, as described in Chapter 3, enabled me to discover three broad themes or concepts that emerged from the process. Those themes can be generally defined as the need for continuous inquiry, dealing with change, and teacher choice.

### Need for Continuous Inquiry

The thing we didn't do as well was having that reading and discussion time. We need to take time to reread the book and talk about it. We need to study it. I think a lot of people won't buy into it until they know more about it, and just taking the book home and reading it doesn't work without discussing it. We know that from our experiences with our students in literature circle. You hear kids say, 'Oh, I didn't understand that part or I didn't know that's what the author was trying to get across. Well, you hear somebody else's point of view and you can talk about it.' (Abby Franklin, 62-71)

After analyzing the data gathered over the year of our involvement with Basic School, one idea that became evident was the need for continuous inquiry. The two main sources of this revelation were the teacher interviews and my field journal, supported by some references in field notes and archival data.

Several of the teachers pointed out (as exemplified in the quotation above) the need for us to be constantly inquiring about Boyer's research. "I think it's all going to fit together," commented Abby Franklin. "It's just that right now I need to study the book more. I've read it in pieces and I really need to get the whole picture by reading it again" (72-73). Kathy Wilson said she definitely felt a need to go back and read the book from "start to finish to get even more out of it" (148-149). Meredith Walters commented, "We definitely need to continue with revisiting the Basic School philosophy and purpose. I think people sometimes forget, so we need to constantly go back and continue the conversation about Basic School" (21-24). Rereading the book was important to Linda Goodwin, also. She said, "I think we should have had another book study throughout the year. Maybe the first book study was a little too pressed. You had to read quite a bit in a very short time. I think if we did it throughout the year and stretched it out so we

could focus on one chapter or one section at a time, it would be better” (48-52).

An entry in my field journal on October 28 revealed my realization that we needed to revisit the book. I wrote: “One teacher suggested that we start a focus group – a group that would meet and discuss and read about Basic Schools. Of course, attendance would be voluntary. I like the idea because I think there are some people who are very much into Basic Schools and there are some who are still trying to find their niches.” Again, on November 11, I wrote about the issue of inquiry. My entry said, “I see a need to get everyone to read the book I still think there are some who have not done so.”

The inquiry theme was also evidenced in comments made by Abby Franklin regarding parents’ perceptions of our work with Boyer’s research. “I think the parents see us as learners, as professionals wanting to make our school better, that we’re trying to take on a new idea that seems to fit with what we believe here...I had my Basic School book on my desk and a parent said, ‘What do you think?’ I said, ‘I’m learning about it. I’m taking time to understand it. It’s got wonderful ideas in it. I’m just learning’” (54-57). The theme of this inquiry mode may best be summed up by Betsy Martin who said, “And so I think the school has benefitted because we’re starting to question things we’ve always taken at face value” (32-33).

Several of the teachers felt the need for more inquiry through consultants. “I think once we’ve looked at those lenses for awhile, we’ll need someone to help us to go the next step. I don’t know as much as I thought,” (58-61) Tom Roberts commented. He continued, “Normally, we just base our references on the past, but it’s good to have someone stand up and talk about something that you think you already know a little bit about but then you realize that you don’t know so much after all” (62-66). Likewise, Bonnie Stewart said, “When I read the book and I

began to think about the four priorities, that kind of helped me focus some of my thinking, but then when I heard Mary Ellen Bafumo [Director of Basic School Network] speak about commonalities, that really helped me to understand” (82-85).

Another focus of this inquiry theme was on our visits to other Basic Schools. For many teachers, these trips appeared to be the highlight of their experience with Basic Schools. Marilyn Kline said, “Visiting the schools was great...Then we all came back and talked among ourselves. Having the Basic School focus helped us to organize what we were looking for and how to report it back to the faculty” (12-15). Bonnie Stewart agreed, saying, “The site visits were so powerful in influencing individuals as well as the whole school’s philosophy” (50-51). After commenting on the range of feelings of comfort about the Basic School framework, Betsy Martin added, “I think the people who have gone on trips to see other schools are the ones who are the most excited. Just putting people together in the same vehicle for the trip was such a great experience. I think anybody who went on a visit and came back, their students felt a difference in excitement the next day” (62-66). Linda Goodwin said, “Visiting the other schools was very informative and just gave us so many ideas and insights of how we could go about doing Basic School. Some people who didn’t get to go need to do so if we do the visits again” (75-77).

This excitement for the school visits aspect of inquiry was also evident in comments I made in my field journal. Though I was able to go on only two of the four visits, I sensed the same kind of professional growth as the teachers. After visiting one of the schools, I wrote, “I was so pleased to see the excitement of the teachers as they moved around the school visiting different areas. I would meet one in the hallway and she would say, ‘I just saw the greatest idea. I can’t wait to get back and talk about it.’ They were so excited to be out watching other

teachers in action” (4/18). I went on to write about the enthusiastic conversation we had over lunch after we had visited that school and how the conversation continued all the way home. Similarly, I recorded comments regarding a teacher who could not be at a faculty meeting at which the teachers who visited a particular school were to tell about their experiences. This teacher wrote two pages of comments that she asked me to share with the faculty because she was so excited about what she had observed at the school (5/18). In that same entry, I also commented on the overall enthusiasm of teachers about these visits and pondered how I might be able to continue to provide such opportunities to teachers.

### Dealing with Change

Change is scary for some people. They're afraid of change. Some of us have talked about this. It's just natural for some people to just internalize everything and just shut down. Those are the people we need to help through the process. (Kathy Wilson, 90-95)

Another theme that appeared in each teacher's interview was the notion of dealing with change. Though I had read about change theories and knew that some teachers had difficulty making changes, I did not realize the importance of this issue until I began to analyze the data. Over and over again, teachers talked about the importance of dealing with those who were not comfortable with change. Though most of their comments referred to other teachers dealing with change, these teachers occasionally included themselves in this issue. None of them specifically talked about how she or he dealt with change, pointing out a normal tendency of people finding it easy to see others' hesitancy to change but difficult to see their own cautious attitude.

"I think we have to come up with a way of bringing those people who are sort of resistant into the discussion," commented Bonnie Stewart. "We need to help them be comfortable with taking risks. I like the attitude of collaboration, consensus, and no-fault I heard in the school I visited. I think we just have to indoctrinate people to that no-fault concept" (90-93). Abby Franklin said, "Any time you tackle something new or you're going to change, it's hard. But, I think we've come together on it. This is good and we need to work and make it better" (22-24). She went on to say that she felt it was important to make changes ("I want to do something different every year" [25]), but realized that other people were not as comfortable with change. "We need to provide support for those people," (26) she added. Kathy Wilson also commented

on how difficult it is for some teachers to change their mind on topics such as parent involvement. “It takes a while to change that over. It takes a while to buy into it. You have to say let’s give it a try and if it fails, then we’ll do something different. I think it will take a while to change everybody’s feelings about parents” (65-68).

Betsy Martin expressed concern on moving slowly with change. She said, “I think we have so much we want to do and so much is out there we want to change, that if we don’t set a limited area and say this is what we want to concentrate on, we’re going to find ourselves just as frustrated next year” (81-83). Similarly, Marilyn Kline acknowledged that the issue of change was one we had to confront, but she felt it came from not being able to do more than we did. “We started and we learned a lot from it,” she said, “and we had a lot of frustrations which you always have when you make changes. I think a lot of frustrations came from thinking we would do more, but it was too much” (141-143). She also commented that it was frustrating for teachers to go through the process of change, commenting that it was important that we “start with planning and let the process work” (144) leading to the change we wanted. This same frustration was evident in Kathy Wilson’s comments, as she said, “The most frustrating part of it is you see where you want to be and you have to realize that it takes certain steps and time, but to see all those wonderful things we could be doing and can’t do until we have more time – that’s the frustrating part. You want to just snap your fingers and have it” (31-35).

The pace of change was also something on which Tom Roberts commented. “I would rather take a slow, slow process. People feel comfortable to make changes when they have the flexibility to move at their own pace” (123-124). He went on to say that there were some things we were doing that did not need to change.

Comments similar to these were found in various places in my field journal related to the issue of change. Very early in the process (6/19), I wrote “that some teachers are finding it difficult to break away from the old paradigm” of structuring our activities. I was concerned that at least two teachers seemed to be having a difficult time looking beyond their team to the entire school. “They seem to be so comfortable with each other that they don’t want to change their perspective to take in other grade levels,” I wrote.

As the year went on, I became more aware that some teachers were having a difficult time with change. When the Curriculum Family suggested an innovative way to present our traditional open house, some people questioned it. “I was surprised to hear today that several teachers are not pleased with the Academic Fair that the Curriculum Family has proposed,” I wrote on March 10. “I’m having a difficult time trying to determine why. One teacher said we should do it like we’ve always done it. I really can’t believe we’re experiencing this roadblock. I need to find out more.” Then, about a month later, on April 8, I revisited this topic and said, “I think the main problem people had with the Curriculum Fair was just they didn’t want to change. I have a feeling they are going to like this way of doing it so much better.” Similarly, a number of artifacts in the Curriculum Family’s archives related this hesitancy for change. The minutes from each of their planning meetings over the year revealed the evolution of the Academic Fair as they adjusted their thinking to deal with other people’s concerns about this change.

### Giving Choices

Having a choice is very important to kids. But, with adults it's even more so. They have to have choice. It empowers them and enables them to do their best work, just as it does with our students. (Bonnie Stewart, 101-104)

During our implementation of the Basic School framework, the issue of providing choices became evident in at least two ways. First, teachers felt that the proposal for assigning teachers to different families limited their choices on which family they could be on. Though it was presented as merely a proposal, teachers did not question the assignments and, thus, some spent the year in families that would not have been their first preference. Secondly, a number of teachers were unhappy with assigning the extra responsibilities of the school (committee assignments, sponsorships, etc.) to families rather than to individuals who had interest in them. The reason for making these assignments to families was to try to incorporate all aspects of the school into the four priorities and to try to limit the number of meetings teachers had to attend. These two issues of choice were cited several times in the data.

Linda Goodwin said, "I think a lot of people had problems with being on a committee without being given the opportunity to choose what they would like as we had normally done. Choice. I think with this faculty, probably any faculty, it's really important, but especially with this one" (123-127). Abby Franklin said we should give people more preferences for extra responsibilities. "Let's just make sure that everyone is working in a way that they feel they are contributing," she said, "and we're using their strengths and their interests. Let's don't make it so rigid that people feel they're being put into a slot where they don't fit" (86-90). Bonnie Stewart

agreed that teachers needed to be given more choice on extra responsibilities, though she added, “I realize you can’t please some of the people none of the time, I think we can come up with a system that will please more of the people more of the time” (54-56).

Similarly, the teachers saw a need for more choice in which family they would be assigned. “If we do the focus in families again, I would like people to have more choice on which one they end up,” (46-47) Marilyn Kline said. Betsy Martin felt that “some range of choice” (39) of families should be given to teachers. She added, “Perhaps if we had had more choice, we may have chosen to have done it differently. Though there may have been people on my family I would not have necessarily chosen to be with, in the end it was good because the more I got to know some of these people, the better I liked working with them” (40-43). Abby Franklin felt that if we gave teachers more choice as to which family they would be in, “it might just work itself out” that the staff would be more pleased with the family structure (114-115).

Interestingly, my first entry on families in my field journal was very optimistic. I wrote: “I had already sat down and put a suggested list of families together. Everyone appeared to buy into this idea. We then divided into these family groups and had people begin working together...The groups all seemed very excited about the ideas and went right to work. I feel good that we are off to a good start” (9/20). Then on November 5, I wrote about my frustrations that some teachers seemed to be having problems within their families. “I am very frustrated and actually quite angry that people seem not to be willing to open up and talk with others on other grade levels. One teacher told me she wished she were on a different family because she didn’t like the focus of hers. I’m concerned that others might feel the same way.” Finally, on March 10, I wrote about my realization that a number of teachers felt they had not been given a choice as

to which family they belonged. I wrote: “Though I told them the list of families I suggested was a proposed list, and I even had that written on the top, some teachers felt they wanted more choice. They wanted to choose the priority they would work with, and to some extent, the people they would work with. I need to be talking with teachers to see how we can develop our families next year so that people will feel they had more choice.”

I did not respond in my field journal specifically to the issue of choice in assigning extra responsibilities. However, as I looked through a folder of field notes, I found two notes I had written to myself related to this issue. The first was a note reminding me to “Rethink the process of assigning extra responsibilities before next year” (2/17), and the second was a version of the extra responsibilities list I had used in previous years with a note written at the top which read: “I will probably want to use this list next year” (4/18).

### Recommendations for Further Study

As Ernest Boyer’s Basic School research report becomes more widely distributed and more schools begin implementing the framework, a number of opportunities exist for further study.

1. Since the original network of Basic Schools chosen by Boyer have been involved in this research for several years, what are the results of their involvement?
2. Since this report is a case study of one school and since other schools are going through the process, what are the similarities and differences in the process each school has chosen to implement the Basic School philosophy?
3. Has other research shown that Boyer’s four priorities (community, curriculum, climate, and character) are sufficient to encompass all the aspects of an elementary school program? Are there

other priorities that need to be developed?

4. How does Boyer's Basic School research, its dissemination, and its practical application compare to other research models such as Lezotte's Effective Schools (1992), Zigler's School of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Zigler, 1989 & Finn-Stevenson, 1994), Comer's School Development Program (1980), the CoZi model (Finn-Stevenson and Stern, 1996), Levin's Accelerated Schools (1989), and Slavin's Success-for-All Program (1989)?
5. As a process for school renewal, how can the Basic Schools research help schools evaluate themselves and determine courses of action for improving?

Many other related issues are being discussed in elementary schools across the country. A general recommendation is that all schools continue to focus on a spirit of inquiry, constantly looking at research and best practices to determine the kind of program that best meets the needs of their students.

#### Conclusion and Personal Reflection: Making Connections

After completing our research, we concluded that the most essential ingredient of a successful school – the one idea that holds it all together – is best described by the simple word 'connections.' (Boyer, 1995, pp. 7)

In some ways, this report could be seen as a culminating activity to the graduate program in which I have been enrolled. Four and one-half years ago, I remember so clearly meeting together with a group of colleagues and university faculty members as we launched ourselves into a non-traditional, cohort-based doctoral program. In one of our first meetings, we planned together what we envisioned our learning experience should be; i.e., what we wanted to gain from this experience and the most effective way to achieve those goals. Using flip chart after flip chart,

we wrote our ideas individually, in small groups, in large groups, and in any other way we felt was needed. Then, we began to synthesize and organize those thoughts, again using every means we could imagine to come up with our goals for the next four years in our program. After two days of meetings filled with such conversation and deliberation, we honed our major goals down to three categories: inquiry, change, and leadership. These three areas encompassed our professional aspirations for, what would become known as, the School Leaders' Program.

As I began this research project, I struggled with the need to know how this inquiry process would lead me to specific findings I could forecast. I was told by a professor to "trust the process" to lead me to whatever findings there would be. I began hesitantly, concerned that I needed to have more specific goals in mind. As I experienced the process, I began to see that the process was indeed leading me to make new realizations almost every day. The epiphany in the process for me was when I realized that the three themes I had begun focusing on four years ago had remained a part of my attempt to renew myself and my setting. Inquiry had become a very natural part of my life as an educator. I constantly wanted to know more, and somehow I began to see the importance of inquiry among the teachers I work with. Change has often been a concept that made me feel uncomfortable; in many ways, I like constancy and routine. However, now I saw it as an opportunity to expand my thinking and to involve others. Though choice was not specifically a theme I had addressed when I began the program, it ties so closely with the leadership theme we had discussed. Through effective leadership, both on my part and the parts of the teachers, we were able to broaden our areas of choice, and through dialogue with each other, we learned the importance of empowering participants to be more fully involved in this project.

I hope that this case study of one school and its implementation of Boyer's Basic School framework will help other schools as they go about renewing and improving the services they provide for children. Thus, the connections I have made will continue to connect with other educators who dream of building better worlds for their students.

### Epilogue

After completing this study, our staff made a number of changes the following year as we continued to implement the Basic School framework. (A slide show detailing those changes can be found at <http://www.geocities.com/Paris/Metro/1242/basicschool/> .) These changes reflected our staff's consideration of dealing with change, giving choices, and the need for continuous inquiry. In consideration of dealing with change, we developed a plan for the next school year as well as a long-range plan so that staff members could realize what changes were occurring when. We also developed the goals on three levels: school-wide goals, grade-level goals, and personal, professional goals. This enabled teachers to proceed at a rate at which they felt comfortable. We also began inquiry groups called B.I.G. (Boyer Inquiry Group) Meetings which were held twice a month. At these meetings, we discussed sections of the book we read or reread, along with various research articles that we shared.

To deal with my findings on giving choices, we decided that family membership was entirely by choice and that each family would concentrate on activities they chose to consider rather than the four priorities of the Basic School. Interestingly, many faculty members chose to remain on the same family on which they had served the previous year. The extra responsibilities of the school were assigned individually rather than by families. Some teachers who chose to explore aspects of the Basic School other than those chosen for our goals were encouraged to do

so.

Finally, in dealing with the need for continuous inquiry, our major step was to start of B.I.G. Meetings as described earlier. We also decided to have more visits to other Basic Schools and to invite consultants to come to our school to share with us. We continued sharing research articles, we began searching for workshops and classes related to the Basic School, we began parent information meetings similar to the B.I.G. meetings, and we continued with our Parents as Partners Program.

All in all, we were able to use our findings from this research project to enhance our work as we continued to implement the Basic School framework in our school.