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Claire's School: An account of the Development of a One-Room School, as Recorded in Taped Interviews with Claire Oglesby

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CLAIRE'S SCHOOL

An Account of the Development of a One-Room School, as recorded in taped interviews with Claire Oglesby.

Barbara B. [illegible]

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This project by Barbara B. Pfeil is accepted in its present form.

Date Oct. 10, 1978 Principal Advisor Mary M. Clark

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Introduction

On a warm day in the Fall of 1977, three of the Candidates for the Master of Arts in Teaching Degree drove up to Westminster West to visit Claire Oglesby's one-room school. We had been reading a lot about humanistic education for our course in Issues in Contemporary Education, and one of the requirements of the course was to make some school visits. I think that most of us subscribed to the ideals of humanistic education but felt that they are often difficult to achieve. The attitudes of many administrators, fellow teachers, and parents are not helpful. The size of the classes in many public schools makes work with individual students extremely difficult. And the old philosophy of "teacher-centered" education still holds the fort in many of today's schools.

I knew that Claire was considered an unusually fine and successful teacher. She had twice received the award of Vermont Teacher of the Year. Articles had been written about her school and visitors passed through her door almost daily. So we were curious to see what went on within the walls of an "old-fashioned," one-room Vermont school.

The day's visit proved to be quite literally mind-expanding, and much time was required to absorb all the impressions we received. There it all was -- what we had been reading about: twenty-five busy, happy children in three different grades. They worked alone on individual projects, they helped each other solve problems, they asked to read aloud to the visitors, they struggled with math problems and reading difficulties, they talked over their exper-

iences and disciplinary measures in a class meeting and discussion. There was a constant hum of activity, yet never were the children out-of-control. If the noise level rose too high, Claire's voice quieted things down. An atmosphere of genuine love and support was ever present, but there were no "babies" or "spoiled brats" in evidence.

At the end of the course, I invited Claire to come down and talk to the class about her school. She generously agreed and talked for two hours, with only an occasional question from a graduate student. It was a fascinating experience, and I soon realized that I had been a fool not to bring a tape recorder with me. But that realization gave me an idea for my Independent Professional Project. I would ask Claire to put on tape the story of her school and how she succeeded in implementing her educational ideas. If I could organize the material in such a way as to make it interesting to future graduation students in education, so much the better. The idea was exciting, and there was even the possibility of some day getting the material together for a book.

When I took a Bilingualism and Bilingual Education course during the Spring Term, there were certain areas to be considered when visiting schools. I decided to use these areas (Community, Curriculum and Materials, Staffing, Testing and Evaluation) as a framework for Claire's recordings. These areas are preceded by a section on Background and followed by one on Class Meetings and Discussions. Although the tape recorder did not always perform

well, I am including the tapes in the Independent Professional Project folder to be filed in the Library of the School for International Training so that interested people can listen to parts, or all, of them. Claire is always happy to have visitors but appreciates knowing ahead of time that they are coming. The school may be reached by taking the Westminster West Road north out of Putney, and the telephone number is 387-5756.

Claire's School

Background

Claire:

When I came to the school twelve years ago, the Superintendent wanted to close the school. He felt small schools were not efficient and that he could have a better program if he had two teachers working in another school together, rather than having two small schools. But the whole community turned out at a meeting with the Board and with the Superintendent to demand that their school be kept, and that was very interesting. I went to that meeting and everybody spoke, whether they had children in the school, they were retired, or were young people without children. They all, I thought, wanted something different in the school. I didn't think they would ever agree on what -- which was not the point of the meeting -- but, I mean, just from hearing them talk, they all had different points of view. But they all wanted that school because it was their village school. They wanted it, they wanted the children to be in town, they wanted to know what was going on, and they would know if it was right there where they could see it and know what was happening. So the Superintendent decided to keep the school open, and it was right after that I was hired. The other thing was he felt that he probably couldn't get a teacher to teach in the school. It's harder and harder to get teachers to teach in a one-room school because they don't want to be there alone if you have to be the

janitor and the principal and answer the phone and make all the decisions and teach. Many teachers just won't do it, they feel they can't cope with that. After I was hired, I visited the school before I started. It was still in session. There were twelve children there then and four or five grades. The teacher had been there about five or six years. She was a very nice person. At that point, the school had been a choice. You could go there if you lived in that part of town, if you wanted to. You could also go to the larger consolidated school. I don't know what the percentage of children were that chose the smaller school over the larger -- I think the majority at that point were choosing the smaller school. They had no equipment, nothing -- just desks and chairs, an old piano that wasn't workable, a couple of tables and maybe five reading books for each grade level. The teacher had really been working with very few materials, with no support. She had no outside music teacher or gym teacher or anything like that. And the parents liked her and were pleased with what she was doing. She was very good with the children, and she knew the families well. She lived in town and, I thought, had done a lot for them. She had a hot lunch program which she prepared herself because she felt the kids needed it, and she was very helpful to me when I came in. When I started the next year, they told me I would have from twelve to fifteen children in four grades. But the next Fall I had twenty-four or twenty-five children in two grades. The Superintendent cut it down to two because of the numbers and the fact that I was new in the situation.

Interviewer:

How do you account for the change in the numbers?

Claire:

I don't know, ~~but~~ I think the area was just starting to build up at that point. I had the feeling that the majority of the children went to that school before I came. However, it could be that some were not going there and, therefore, that added to the numbers. I think that certainly, with the Superintendent wanting to close the school, it gave a lot of support to the school and maybe people who weren't interested before or not as involved suddenly decided that, yes, that was their school and they'd better have their child there if they wanted it open. But I think that the majority of children came from new homes -- people moving in -- or children who were suddenly old enough to be in first grade. There was a fairly large first grade because there were several large families in town whose children were just starting to school. For example, when I visited, there was one child from a family and there were seven more at home, so there were families with children just starting to be of school age. There was a combination of that kind of thing.

I started out, very slowly, with trying to set up the room the way I wanted it and starting to get some materials into the classroom, but keeping it basically the way it had been until I got to know the community. Even though I live in Westminster West and from my house to the school's three or three and a half miles, the road's impassable and I have to go down through Putney.

It doesn't make you a part of that community, unless you're involved in working there. They did have a little post office in Westminster West when I started that year, but I went to the post office in Putney. So I hadn't a lot of contact with the people there. But I just sort of tried slowly to get to know the people and start bringing in some materials of my own, setting things up, doing some individual work, but not a lot at first. I brought art classes and that kind of thing into the program. The parents were very cooperative. In fact, when I interviewed for that job I also interviewed for a job in Putney. I said, "Whoever finds the best babysitter, that will be the job that I will take." It was important to me, most important, where my children were, and that they whould be in a suitable situation. The parents in Westminster West and the School Board came up with an excellent baby-sitter. I would be having one of this woman's children in school -- she had a large family -- and she would be having my children at home. It was right down the street. Putney didn't come up with a baby-sitter, although they thought they had some names. So that was the final decision. I was really intrigued with taking that job because I liked the idea of the one-room school, but I first wanted my children to be happy, and then I would take the job after that. It worked out extremely well.

Interviewer:

Why do you think the former teacher had so few resources available?

Did she just not make an effort to get more? What do you think?

Claire:

There was a different Superintendent in charge then. I think that the budgets were very small. She had so few children, and over the years they weren't sure how many she was going to have. I don't know if they kept track of the per-pupil cost, but if you have twelve children, you're paying a teacher's salary and you're worried about costs, which they always have been. I would think that the allotment probably wasn't high, and that was also before they had some of the State programs, the Miller Formula, and other State funds that came into the school. You didn't have Title I money or any extra funds coming in, so that I think that there was a question of finances. Also, I think that she was comfortable with the way it was and I think she did a good job. She just had a different style than I did and approached the children in another way. She used other resources than material things and, from talking with parents and children, I think that it was a successful program. For the number of children that were there -- you see, she had only ten or twelve children -- it's like a family situation and it's quite different. For instance, there was no way that I could continue cooking lunch for twenty-four children. And that was one thing that the parents did miss and asked about. I just said that I couldn't prepare the lunch, that she was able to do that because she had a smaller number of children. They also had a program, at that point, where the first graders went home at noon, and it was very nice. The older children used to walk them

home and then would come back for the afternoons, so in the afternoons she had an even smaller number of children to deal with and therefore didn't need as many resources. The first two years I was there, we had that same program. The first graders went home at noon, but we only had it for a short time because there were a lot of changes happening at that point. One was that mothers were starting to work. When I came there that first year, there was one working mother out of the group, out of the twenty-four, and there was one separated family. That was it. The others were all strong family units. And then changes came about so quickly. Mothers going to work made it really a hardship to have a first grader coming home at noon. So, some time during the first few years somebody asked, you know, could their child stay because they were working, and the Board okayed a couple of people and then it became unfair that some were there all day and some weren't. It was also very hard to plan a program if some of the children were there for extra time and the others weren't, so finally that program was given up. I think it was a very nice thing and it used to go on till Christmas and it also gave you a chance to really work with the older students and have them well organized before the younger ones continued. It was nice for the younger ones because a full day is hard for many of them. Of course, now many of those children go to nursery school or day care or kindergarten, so they are used to being in school. Twelve years ago, very few of the children had ever been in school

before, so that a whole day was a long day for them. So that changed, but I think that the big thing was getting to know the community, not trying to push any type of program or to tear down the program that was there before I was there, because I thought it was a positive program. It was just a different approach than I would use, but I didn't spend any time trying to tell parents what I was going to do or what I thought should be done. I just tried to get to know the people in the community. We would often go down to the library, which was in the post office. The post office and the library were a combined unit and the older people in town were very conscious of how the kids acted when they were there. So it was just sort of slowly exposing yourself and the children to the community and also seeing the resources that were there, the people that were there, and finding out what was happening right there in the village. The parents seemed to be at a point where they were getting more and more interested in schools. Maybe it was because mothers, going back to work, or starting work for the first time, felt the need to keep in touch with the school. So they were very interested in what was happening. Before, they could easily drop in if they wanted to, but now they just didn't have that same opportunity. Today I find, with so many people used to working, that they don't have that same feeling that they should keep in touch with the schools. But the initial women going out to work really felt, "Now I've just got to keep in touch," and they made a big effort to. Today, for people

working, it's not as great a priority in their lives. I think their work has become more important to them. They still keep in touch, but I don't sense that same sort of commitment. You still get it from some people but, I think, not as much from the group as a whole. Some of it is now that people are used to both parents working, both parents being out of the home, where then it was a newer thing and so you wanted to make sure that you covered the things that you normally would do. Now the parents, never having normally been at home and covering school activities, seldom think about it.

So I gradually got materials. One of the things I did ask for -- maybe it was during the second year -- was to have a shop set up in the classroom. I felt that was really essential. It took some money and I didn't feel comfortable asking the School Board because it was something that I gathered the other teachers in town would not be interested in having. Well, one of the parents was a bus driver and he, I think, was very sceptical of the things I was trying to do in the school. He knew more about what was going on in the school because he drove the bus back and forth and he was in and out of the building. He used to come every afternoon about half an hour before the end of school and he would just sit in the back of the classroom. He had two girls in the school, one in first grade and the other in second. He certainly never interfered and he was perfectly pleasant. I know he was trying to figure out whether he liked what was happening or not. And he never said much. I never had a chance to

talk with him when school was over because everybody had to get on the bus and leave. But every day, for months, he came and sat in the back of the room. And then, when I brought this up at a meeting, that I would like to have a shop, and asked the parents if they would be willing to raise some money for getting tools for the children, he was there. He stood up and I didn't really know what he was going to say. But he said he thought that the parents should raise the money, if I wanted that. He backed up the idea because he was also a carpenter and he did have a good sense of using tools. He really spoke out for the project, for setting it up, and for raising the money. He was very supportive and very positive. I think that because of his support and because of the fact that people knew he had been there a lot, they agreed.

Before this time I had also showed the parents some ways they could raise money, such as going up to the Putney School Harvest Festival, things they'd never thought of. So we had done a few of those things and that was new for them. And before, they also hadn't asked for anything for their money. There wasn't anything that we were setting out to do except that the school has obligations to the community, like the Christmas Party, etc. So they did have some money that they needed to raise every year and that was really what it was for, for community events.

They did raise money for the shop. My husband bought and set up the tools and we still have the shop. I must say that the tools are in extremely good condition after ten or eleven years and the children haven't lost any. The only tools that

have been mislaid have been by adults who borrowed them or used them after hours. Otherwise, the tools are in excellent shape and they have been used a lot. So it was just sort of a lot of little things like that, asking for different things for the classroom, setting up projects, asking for materials, asking people to help. Then one of the grandmothers, who teaches at the Austine School in Brattleboro, came one day, and that was a very nice visit. She knows a lot about education in schools. She's also an extremely well-respected woman in town and I think that that helped when she came to visit and that it was a good situation for her grandchildren. So it's been little things like this that have made the community want to support our program. Not that they get involved in a whole philosophy, but more in individual projects -- what they would mean for the school, for their children, and for the group.

So I went on, trying to get materials from the administration and finding out about the school budget. It was just about the second year I was there that Title I funds started to come into the school and, again, most of the people in the district were not ready to use extra people in the classroom because most teachers had been working alone. They weren't used to having help, and you really have to know how to use somebody. Otherwise, it's just not worth it. I had always worked in situations before this where there were extra people around, where we had used parents a lot. So I got a lot of Title I help immediately because the money was there and the people were there

and nobody else wanted them. We had one mother as aide and I did some secretarial work one year while another aide came in for a few hours -- a parent. The first year I was there, I did ask the School Board whether somebody could come in at lunch time just so I could have about fifteen minutes to make phone calls or eat my sandwich by myself. They hired a parent to come in for an hour at lunch time. She would help me during the children's lunch. Then she would play the piano and sing with them or take them outdoors for a while so that I could do some other things. We started to get people into the school and I asked parents to come in and help with different projects.

I think one of the first things that I realized the second year I was there was that most of the children didn't know where their fathers worked. (They didn't have any working mothers at that point.) Some of them knew the name of the place, but they didn't have any idea what their fathers did or what happened. One tried to tell me his father went out and made money every day and he thought that the father actually made the money and brought it home, so I thought that would be a really good place for the children to start a project. I brought it up at a P.T.A. meeting.

Now the P.T.A. meetings were extremely well attended and this had also been a traditional thing. I'd say we had at least 90% of the parents there and it was also a social event. The people used to dress up, come, stay late and talk. They had nice refreshments and it was a very pleasant thing and important to the people in the

community.

So I approached the P.T.A. with this project of visiting the parents' work. And the way I had it set up was that each parent -- in this case it was mothers -- would contact her husband's work, either directly through her husband or by calling the president of the company. The mothers would set up the trip and would also drive. They would take about three or four children, including their own child, to visit the father's work and then come back and report to the rest of the class. So we had about twenty-five trips lined up. Each child would get to go on maybe four or five trips.

Some parents were very enthusiastic right away. But one mother whose husband worked in the paper mill, and several others, were very upset. They felt that I was trying to show them up, that I was preferring the college professor and that that would come out as the best job. But they were very open about it. I'm sure they grumbled around the town, but they also did bring it up publicly. I told them that that was not what I had in mimd, that I thought that the children really should know what their parents do and that they would find if we did do this that people had a very different feeling about people's jobs and weren't feeling that the person who worked in the paper mill was less important than the college professor. But I think they were very leary about how this was going to work and what my motives were. But I just kept pressing away that I felt it was an important experience.

My Superintendent -- I had to hand in the whole plan with the dates and times -- never said anything to me. Later, one of

the School Board members told me the Superintendent had presented it to the Board as a classroom without walls and he was very positive about it, although he never said anything positive or negative to me.

But through that project I think we established a really nice rapport among the parents. What happened was that the woman who first was upset about going to the paper mill called the president of the mill. She had never spoken to him, but he was really nice and said that he would certainly be happy to have the children arrive and he would conduct the tour and the husband could also have that time off to join the tour. This was the kind of response that everybody got. The only person who was negative was the college professor. He really did not want to have the kids there and wondered what they would do and so forth. He was not interested and not positive. But the other people were.

So we started the trips and we dressed like the people who had the jobs. For example, we were going to the Chamber of Commerce in Brattleboro where one boy's father worked. We found out he got dressed up every day. So the children dressed up to go to that job. Another father worked on a farm, so they went with clothes that would be appropriate for being wherever he was, and that was very interesting. It was fun, just to have them try to dress up. Then we made up questions as a class of what we wanted to know and the children signed up for the trips. That was fascinating because some children, if their father was a farmer, also wanted to see <u>other</u> farms. Some children, if their father was a farmer, <u>didn't</u> want

to see another farm. They wanted to see other types of occupations. Pretty much, I let them make their own choices. Occasionally, I would suggest to certain ones that they might enjoy seeing this or that. But mostly they decided, and the parents got very enthusiastic. It was a lot of fun. The groups were small and I was conscious of the need to have workable groups, not sending children who were hard to handle together. I made sure that when a parent left, she was leaving with three or four children who would be positive and get along well and be easy to handle, so that it worked out extremely well. Through that project, the parents started sharing a lot with each other at meetings about their trips -- what happened, and so forth. Also, they started seeing how interested the children were in their father's work, that there was no value judgment and that they were very unconcerned about how much money anyone made, or anything like that. What was important was, "What do you do?" The jobs the children found most interesting were the farmer's and those at the paper mill -- things that were active and where things were happening and where they could do things. The job that was the least interesting was the college professor's. (We finally did send some people to his class and I think it was the attitude of the person that the children found objectionable. They felt that was a job that nobody would want to do, one that was very unappealing.) So I think that was a very good start in knowing the community while working with it and having people feel good about taking kids on trips. We continued with little trips and I had a lot

of people I could ask to take kids. The School Board had an insurance policy that covered parents taking children on trips as long as they didn't do it every Tuesday on a regular basis -- as long as it was a trip that was taken occasionally, that was fine.

I also asked to have a student teacher. The first year I was there I was alone and the Superintendent didn't know me. After that, I did have a student teacher each year. It meant that there was another person -- a younger person who was a resource coming into the classroom. And of course you would have their supervisors and people they wanted to bring into the classroom. So we started having more people around and people started giving us things because they saw we would use them. For example, we were given little scraps of wood for the shop, and various things like that. Then we had a new Superintendent come in and also more Federal funds. Also, other funds, that wouldn't have to come directly from the town taxes, became available. These were things for the whole district, not just for our school. Material and equipment were being bought for the district. We were able to get things like a movie projector, which one classroom couldn't buy because it was too expensive and the town couldn't afford it.

About that time, we had a very sad thing happen in town. A child died, a two-year-old, and the family asked that all the money be sent to the school to start a library, although they did not have children in the school yet. So that made a tremendous

amount, seven or eight hundred dollars, and the family worked in the library, picking out the books. For several years after that, books were given in memory of the child so that that started us with a really excellent collection of books. As the four other children in that family came into the school, there was of course a lot of interest in the library. The mother acted as the librarian for quite a few years until she started working full time. She did a marvelous job of setting up an excellent collection. She knew a lot about children's books and cataloguing, and she had a child librarian there with her. We've never been able to replace her. When she went off to work we never got anyone with that interest. Although the library's used a lot and we've built it up and have a really nice collection, we still feel that we'd like to get back to that someday -- having a parent and a child who are librarians.

Community

When I first came to Westminster West, there must have been fifty households and they were all families that were together. It was a mixture of old and young. There were quite a few retired people who had lived in the area for a long time. Many were native Vermonters. We had, I think, eight going farms and several of the farms were run by families that had had that farm for generations. Others were newer farmers. We had only one family in town where there had been a divorce. Most of the people had lived there for quite a while. There weren't too many

made a difference in the community when the farms started closing. People worried about whether the land would be sold and what the physical difference in the community would be. Some of those farms have been sold and there has not been a big change and a physical difference where the farms were. And of course the farms that are going farms have maintained their really nice atmosphere and pleasant fields and so forth to look at as you drive by. But a lot of other land was cut up and sold and one large farm folded and was chopped up into many little parcels and houses. Then people started moving in and many of these were people who came from other states, out of New England, and were not country people. They just suddenly decided to come here to live and you started getting many more split families. Suddenly we started feeling what everyone in the country was feeling and that of course made a tremendous difference within the population.

Now the 4-H group suddenly became a very active group in town.

Interviewer:

Why did it suddenly become active?

Claire:

I think that several mothers felt it was an important thing. They did have Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts on the other side of town and some of the children had gone over there, but it's a trip on the bus, if you can arrange it, in the afternoon. Then you have to go get the children and it's a lot of transportation.

And there were some people whose background was more rural and they believed more in 4-H than they did in Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. So they initiated this and they worked hard on it and got a lot of support, and that's going on now. I see an interesting thing now. The children that are in the 4-H are probably from the strongest families in the town, in terms of being together and doing things together. Those children, I think, really need an activity and they get a lot out of it, whereas some of the other kids in town that aren't in 4-H and aren't interested often come from homes where there's much less supervision, much less family unity. I've been a 4-H Leader and I'm also on the University of Vermont Extension Board in Brattleboro. My role is from the 4-H point of view, and this is apparently happening in a lot of 4-H groups in Vermont. The group is suddenly supporting those strong family groups and people are saying, "Well, shouldn't we reach out more to the other kids who seem to need more? We want to open our group to as many children as possible." People say, "4-H!" like that's some strange thing to belong to, especially if you're in high school -- "It must really be strange to belong to a group like that," but I feel that they need that kind of support.

The Grange is not as active as it has been, but we have had some nice exchanges between the Grange and 4-H. The Ladies' Aid is very active and they have done a lot. In the last few years the church has suddenly picked up in membership, and one of the things that happened was that they formed a choir. They got lots of people in the community who really liked to sing and had been

people that had just moved in and most of the people had lived in Vermont, or certainly in the New England area, most of their lives. It's a small community. They have a small church and a house for either a minister or a retired minister. Since they usually share a minister with the Westminister church, he usually lives over there and we have a retired minister in our part of town. We had an active Ladies' Aid program and a fairly active Grange. There's a small grange hall which is also our town hall. The 4-H was not active at the time that I came into the school. I think that with the post office being in the town and the library in the post office, it was a center for a lot of gatherings, especially for older people coming in to get their mail and everybody mailing their mail. You sort of saw everybody a lot. When they took the post office away it was sad, I thought, because it took away the independence of handling their own mail and getting it there. And it took away most of that interaction, especially with the library being there also. Then slowly over the years, we saw families breaking up, new people moving in, lots of new construction and the closing of the farms. Suddenly, we were down to five farms, then two farms. One farm that closed has now been reopened by a family, but not on the same scale. It had been a large dairy farm. Now they have beef cattle and vegetables, but they <u>have</u> put it back into use as a farm. We still have two dairy farms that are being operated and another farm that has apples, potatoes, and pumpkins. That farm has been in the family for generations. But that

church members as younger people but had just lost interest and hadn't had any contact. Suddenly they came back into the church because of the choir which was a community project and provided more life and more interest.

Interviewer:

That seems to be going against the general trend, doesn't it? We think of our churches as falling off.

Claire:

I would say this is definitely getting much more support.

Interviewer:

Do you have a very active minister?

Claire:

We did have a marvelous woman minister for many years and she was an outstanding person. She visited the school a lot. She was a fine example of what you would call a truly Christian person who cared about other people and she was not interested in whether you went to church or what church you went to. She cared about everybody and she was marvelous. She would come to school at Christmas time to ask what children needed, extra things, and she had a way of making it comfortable for the family to accept a snowsuit, or whatever was needed. She always seemed to be able to find the funds for somebody who needed to go to camp and to be able to present it in a pleasant way. She was really an unusual person and I think that many people enjoyed going just to hear her talk because she was so sincere. Now they have a new minister, a young fellow. I don't know him well, although I've met him several times. He hasn't come

around to the schools yet, but he's new, you know. We'll see what happens. But I think it was mostly a group wanting to get together to sing, enjoying church music and sort of enjoying mixing in the community with different people -- older people, younger people, and so forth. The church had also gotten a new organ a few years ago and that of course encouraged people.

One of the obligations that the school had which related to the community was one I didn't know about until just a few weeks before Christmas the first year I was in the school. Somebody told me I was in charge of the Christmas Party for the town, which meant not only organizing it but buying a gift for each child individually. You also had to set up the grange hall. It has a wood furnace, so you had to have the wood to get that warm and you were in charge of the program and leading the singing. I found out all of this about two weeks before the party. But the parents helped get the presents and the teacher who had been there the year before told me, "Don't worry about the program. Just have a nice short one because everybody brings their babies and they're crying and there's a lot of noise and they don't even hear what people are saying." So I prepared my program and everybody was there just like she said, but when the program started there wasn't a sound. Not one baby cried, nobody did anything. They did hear what the children said.

We had that program in the grange hall for many years and then we decided to move it into the church because the building is such a lovely structure and we thought it was appropriate for

Christmas. We had to negotiate with the people in the church. They were concerned about how the children would behave and I was too. They gave us very clear rules as to how they wanted it set up. The children would sit with their families rather than sit as groups of kids, which I thought was a much nicer thing. And the church people were beginning to see that families were breaking up and that people were going to let their child off at the door and go home and not bother to be there. So I thought that the things that they asked for were fair and we've had it in the church for quite a few years and it's worked well. There have been years when I think that we've had to spend more time talking about how we were setting it up and how it was going to work and what the program would be and so forth. I think there's been a feeling among some people that the children shouldn't be given another present from the town, that that's too much, and -- on the other hand -- some people wanting to keep up the tradition. So far, we have kept it. We've cut down a little bit on the age because it's really hard in today's world to give a sixth grader a present that costs under a dollar and that has much meaning for him. But you can still find things that the younger children appreciate. When I first came to Vermont, most towns did this, but I think we're the only one left in this area that still does it; that is, having each child get a present bought especially for that child. It costs the P.T.A. at least one hundred and fifty dollars for presents and some years we've bought the church some wood because they also have a wood fire. Other years we've tried to have people bring wood,

but that wasn't very successful. We've tried to coordinate with the church when they have their wood-cutting bees, in order to help out. I think the people in the church like to have us work with them so that we see what's happening, and that's what we try to do. For instance, this last year we had a neighbors' night, sponsored by the Ladies' Aid and our P.T.A. at the church. We invited all the people who live in town and all the new people. Everybody brought food and it was very pleasant. The Ladies' Aid really worked hard and made a lot of food, and the retired minister's wife, who lived in town, ran the program. It was games and it was a lot of fun. But we did have some families arrive with lots of kids and no food and just expect to eat what everybody else brought. That caused some problems. So I think if we do it next year we will have to charge people money who don't bring food, because it isn't fair. Some of the older people in town were hurt. They should have been because they had worked hard preparing their part, and they were there cleaning beforehand and setting up. Then some people just came in! So now you have more diversity in how people think about community events and people who do take advantage of them and people who do send their children but don't have anything to do with helping out. I think more and more people are realizing that and addressing themselves to the problem. They realize that it isn't fair, especially for the older people in town, to support community events, to go out of their way and then be taken advantage of.

Interviewer:

Then you think that was deliberate on the part of those people? Not poor communication, for example?

Claire:

Yes, it's a deliberate thing. I think we are facing that, trying to handle some young people who feel that the system will take care of them, that there is a program for them and they don't have to contribute anything. They're also part of our community and we have to deal with the problem. It's certainly harder for the older people to understand. That night I felt that they were hurt and disappointed that people would do that, and it really was too bad. It was still a pleasant evening, but it certainly made you realize that you have to plan for another year. I do think that there has not been a lot of communication or going back and forth between some of the older, retired people in town. If they've lived in town all their lives, or for a large part of their lives, then they know more people, and they probably have relatives there. But some of the other people that have retired there or moved in are more apart from the rest of the community.

One year when we had a grant and I had some money for community activities, one of the things I tried to do was find something that older citizens would enjoy. We found they were doing "Amahl and the Night Visitors" up at Dartmouth, and we got tickets for that. And the way it worked was that if children wanted to go they had to invite an older member of the community to go as

their guest. They couldn't invite their grandfather or grandmother if they lived in the same community as the child. (There were exceptions, of course, for children who couldn't find an older person outside of their own family.) It was very interesting because the children that did it with their family's support found it very rewarding. One family told me how the children practised what their conversations would be about, trying to think of topics they would talk about on the way up, and all that. But other families were very annoyed because they didn't feel it was fair, that their child didn't know any older people in town, and why shouldn't they have a chance to go? And I couldn't get it across that that was the reason why we were doing it, because their children didn't know older people, and wouldn't it be nice if they did? And there were plenty of people to ask. But some people were really negative about it -- just a few. Most of them thought it was a nice idea.

Then we did try later on to have a grandmother and grandfather program where we contacted the older people in town and asked if they would like to adopt a younger child for the year, a child that didn't have a grandfather or a grandmother in the vicinity. A couple of parents helped me with that and we were very successful in many cases, but not totally. Several people got sick before we got started, so we just never got into the program with them. It worked out best when we had a one-to-one relationship. In one case, we sent a very shy boy with another boy, but the two boys just played with each other and didn't get involved with the older person, so that didn't work out well. In one

other case, two children got very involved with their "grandmother" and she really is a grandmother to them now. But I think that's something we should still try to do more of, to include older people in the community. There are a lot of school events, not only in our school but that go on in the high school, or the town of Westminster; such as, a concert for the whole town. I think a lot of people would enjoy going to them, but they don't know about them. If they were just invited and picked up, I think they would go along, so I think that's something we've got to work on.

The town itself is a small village and one of the nice things about it is that there are no sections. Many Vermont villages have a part where people with more money live and where there are nicer houses, but Westminster West is not like that. There isn't a section for one type of person. The farms are scattered in the community and there are various types of housing all together so that you can have a fairly large, expensive house next to a trailer or a small house. We have some trailers that people have lived in for many, many years and are very attractive properties. It's quite a variety, but you do not have the separation. You don't have children coming from a certain neighborhood into the school and sticking with those children. It's a very mixed neighborhood geographically, which is really nice. I think it's because of that that I've found, even when there've been community struggles or sore points or things to work through, that the people have always been good

neighbors to children in other families, so that I can always be sure that, if a child is sick in school and the parents are working or I can't get hold of them, I can always find somewhere for that child to go. It may be to an older person's house, somebody who's not connected with the school by having a child or grandchild in the school. People are very happy to help out when help is needed and there's a lot of just helping your neighbor out. You may not socialize at all with them or have a lot of the same interests, but there's always been a lot of community help. For example, one year one group of families -- I think there were four or five involved -- all met one Sunday at one house and did a project for that family and then the next Sunday they went to another house. They did things like putting in steps, large projects that need many people. There's been some of that, but for the most part the other people will help out if they know that there's a need. With my own children, I had a baby-sitter in the village. Then when they started school, in the afternoons there were so many houses that they could go to while I was working, and people knew that I might have to be at school until 5:00 or 6:00, that my girls had to have somewhere to go, and they were always very open about that. In fact, one mother who didn't like to come to meetings and didn't like to participate in some of the fund-raising things -- every time there was a teacher's workshop or a holiday or something involving an obligation for me, she would call and offer to take care of my girls. So she found another way of contributing to the community and to the school. There's a lot that goes on in the

community in the way of helping each other: driving children somewhere, taking a child into your house for several days because the mother or the father has to be away, and then exchanging. But sometimes people don't let you know that they need some help and then of course they don't get it. But there has been a good amount of cooperation between school-aged parents in the community. And I've always sensed a nice feeling at P.T.A.'s and a nice acceptance of different people's ways of living and different people's things that they value and feel are important. You know, you have the traditional differences, like the snowmobilers vs. the people who don't like it, but anyhow the kids talk about it and I've never seen any real animosity right in the village about this type of thing. People seem to be able to be pretty accepting, so that in the school I just don't see kids coming in from the community with a set concept of themselves, that they belong to the leadership group or they belong to the down group. As a result, the leadership in the school can come from any kind of child from any kind of background. You don't have the doctor's child who's always going to be the leader in the school, whereas I'm afraid that in many schools you have very traditional patterns where certain types of children are automatically given a part in the play or chosen cheerleader, or whatever it is. There's still too much of that in the schools, where certain children come in and have a role, on one end or the other. I think it's because this community doesn't pigeonhole people that kids don't come in with that sort

of feeling about themselves. Some of that is probably the smallness, so that you don't have to associate with just one group of people and that you do count on your neighbors for help during storms, or when you run out of water or electricity and so forth. You do need your neighbor and I think that that is a nice feeling.

As new people move in, you can lose track. I always think I know most everyone, but all of a sudden when I'm going over the Christmas list I find people that I didn't even know lived there. So you do have people coming in and we've also had some younger people moving in in groups, but we've never had much of that and it didn't last for very long. We do have quite a few single women in the community with children and sometimes single women with a single child. I think that a few years ago there was a point where some of the older people were worried about new, more aggressive people coming in and making decisions in the community. Many communities have experienced this. I think some of the people coming in now are not terribly interested in the community or in getting involved. That, I think, is again the minority of people, but I think that certain people moved in and when people approached them for different things they were not really interested in coming to the Neighbors' Night or helping out or anything. You know, they have other interests and, again, you usually have both parents working. But I think that, basically, I feel I can count on the community to help out with the kids, and they in turn expect us to support some of the things they do and help out there, and I think we still don't do enough

in that way. But I try to keep in touch with what's happening. For example, we have a couple who celebrated their sixty-fifth wedding anniversary, which I thought was amazing in today's world. We made them a cake and they made us some cookies. In another case, we had a child die in a fire, not in Vermont but in Virginia, and I had had that child in school. Many of the children knew the family and knew the child. We talked about it and I told them what people usually do when someone dies; for example, many times they bring food to the house. They decided to make a lemon meringue pie which to me wasn't what you bring to a funeral. But I felt it was a spontaneous thing from the children. They made the pie and we brought it down, and they wanted to know what they should say. I said, "You say whatever you want to say" and so they went in with the pie and they just said, "We're sorry," and that was all they said. But that kind of thing, I think, is very important for a child to experience -- to keep in touch with what's happening in the community, personally, and to respond to it. And so we've done as much of that as we can, but I think there's probably still more that we could do in the community. Some of the kids in my school are real small, but as they get a little bigger, they could be helping someone rake leaves and, you know, do some jobs around the town that I think people would appreciate having help with. It would be so much better for the kids than just hanging around the store for a long time. On Green Up Day we spent a lot of time in the village. It didn't look too bad because it's pretty well kept, but we did spend a

good amount of time picking up things. I think schools still ask a lot from the community, not only in taxes but to support extra programs and also to have a good attitude, and I still don't think schools do as much back for a community, as far as being interested in helping and in giving support. I think that that kind of involvement can insure that people do have a continued interest in supporting the school, and not just the people whose kids are involved. There should be a broader interest.

Interviewer:

Don't you think that far too many teachers quit at the end of the day and rush home, wanting to forget the community?

Claire:

Well, I live in the same community and although I'm physically isolated, it is my town and my Town Meeting. So I'm involved and I think that makes a difference. Too many teachers live outside the community. They say that they just don't like to have their personal lives scrutinized by the community and they don't want that kind of constant involvement. If you live someplace else, you can go away and forget the school. Certainly it was different in the old days when the teacher lived from house to house, always in the community. It's interesting to me that when I go to big conferences, like New England conferences, the groups that we always end up talking and relating to, are people from the Black Community. In the inner-city schools, where there are very different lifestyles and values and back-

grounds, they seem to have a common feeling for community. One of the things that they do is to insist that their teachers live in the community if they want to teach in these Black community schools. And I think that that makes a tremendous difference. Of course, there are some places in the country where they're requiring policemen, firemen, and so forth, to live in the community. And, in some places, there has been concern -- in New York and New Jersey -- about where teachers live. I think probably one of the problems with education is that the teacher can't leave and forget it and go home. It's hard, sure it's hard, to live in the community and be involved in Town Meeting, which also involves your salary and your working conditions, but I think that constantly running away from that and letting someone else do it is not healthy. Running away from people because you have conflicts just doesn't help in the long run, either. I've talked to a lot of teachers and they don't want to be friends with the people in the community whose children they have in school. They find that very hard to deal with, but I haven't found it a difficult situation. And they find it hard to work in an activity like 4-H, the grange, and so forth. There's obviously going to be community talk, and they'd rather be in another town organization and hear about somebody else and be less involved. I think that if they could do it, maybe a lot more problems would be solved by people being able to face each other more directly. We have just a few teachers in Westminster that live in town and those teachers have been very effective.

They are certainly more conscious of the total situation -- of the taxpayers' problems and what their finances are. I know that when my own children were in the school with me it was really helpful. There were some families that I didn't get to know easily and who didn't feel comfortable coming into the school and didn't feel comfortable with the teacher. But because my own children played with their children, I had to go and pick them up. We'd have a cup of coffee and we never talked about school. There were references to it, but nothing about whole grammar philosophy, or anything like that. We just sort of chatted as parents, and that made a whole difference in being able to relate to some families that initially didn't really want to have much to do with the teacher or the school because -- if I'd said that I'd like to come over and visit -- they'd have felt they had to clean their house before I came or do something special. But if I went to pick up my kid who was playing for the afternoon, then they looked at me in a different light. When my children got bigger, I thought, "Oh dear, what'll I do now?" But I've been able to maintain a contact with some of those families. However, it is harder with some new families coming in because it takes longer to build up a contact. It was much faster when my kids did go there to play. They had a different feeling about me because our kids were friends. Now that they're older, we don't have quite that same kind of rapport.

Over the years the P.T.A. has been very active, and the

meetings have been important. We have had a good turnout every meeting for quite a few years. And usually they've had some business meetings with community business and a few speakers. We tried to get people that everybody was interested in, and that was quite successful. Occasionally, we have a "doing" kind of thing that is fun -- a craft thing or something like that. But the last few years the P.T.A. meetings, as such, have not been as well attended and I think people are not as interested in hearing a speaker or they're not interested in a social aspect that used to be important. People used to come really dressed up to the P.T.A. and stay late. It was a very nice kind of social evening, and I think that what's happened during the last few years is that more and more parents are asking us about learning things themselves. Whenever we have a film-maker or poet or something, we usually have parents coming and joining in, writing poetry or making a film or doing whatever is happening. They want to learn things too, and that's been nice. What we see now is that more parents want to learn with their kids what they don't know, and they're also willing to share things with the school. A few years ago I sent out a little note, saying if any parent would like to teach anything in the school, please let us know. And we got just a tremendous response from people that wanted to teach crocheting or woodworking, or German -- all kinds of things. We had a lot of parents and community people and grandparents coming in to teach. We've kept that up over the years with different people at dif-

ferent times. We were talking the other day about re-working the P.T.A. so that it does have more learning experiences for the parents involved. Other problems have come up, too, like having a single parent and a single child. Those parents seem to want more support for themselves because they're having a hard time adjusting, especially living in the midst of a community that's very geared to family activities. So maybe the P.T.A. now has to be able to meet different needs -- giving emotional support and helping with family problems, as well as operating with the other people who want to learn things or teach things. So we're working on that.

We do have fund-raising, like raising money for the town Christmas Party. Also, we're always raising money for extra things, like the film-maker, so that we don't ask the School Board for anything that the other schools don't have. But, again, you can't get bogged down -- you have to have activities that are meaningful for the parents raising the money. Some are traditional bake sales and raffles, but we've tried to plan to have the kids involved so they could do good educational projects and still make money for the school. It's very important for parents who are raising money to have control over it, because it is their school. Then, when they raise the money, they make the decision as to what kind of program they want to use it for so that they don't have something in the school that they don't want. They can also introduce an idea and implement it because they have the money to do it. For example, they built

a loft in the school and made a little house out in back of the school with a sandbox underneath. That caught on at the other school and the same parent, when his child changed schools when she was older, made the same structure for the other school. I think the parents feel good about making the decisions and having the money to use. They own a lot of things in the school -- the refrigerator and all the tools in the shop. They've bought blocks and books and they've bought a climbing equipment for outdoors and a wooden structure outside. I think that this gives parents a different feeling about their school and a different involvement.

Most parents help out on money-raising activities. There are a few who don't help on anything, but most of them -- if they don't do the bake sale, they'll do the raffle or something like that, kind of switch off -- and there are a few, of course, who'll do everything, help with everything. The thing that we've been trying to get into the last few years is to have some meaningful activities for the children to raise money, which would be good educational activities as well. This year, the end-of-the-year trip was going to cost a couple of dollars for each child. We felt that for some families with several children in the school it would be quite an expense for a one-day trip, so we decided to have a flea market. It was in connection with the other school, Westminster Center School, because we were going with their first and second grade lower school. Together we had a flea market which was a good experience -- just collecting the things, labeling them, learning to make change, learning the money system. Also, they were matched up with a

child from Westminster Center School so they were working with a partner from another school in setting up their booth, and they were given time off to do their own shopping. It was quite an involved project and they made about one hundred and seventy dollars between the two groups. Not only did we pay for our end-of-the-year trip completely, but we have money to start out next year with another trip.

Then we had a calendar project that we did. We're very interested in working with the bigger community, like working with businesses and trying to find educational projects that are good for the business and good for us. It's most important that it be good for the children. We did a calendar for a new company in town, a shoe company that's recently made their headquarters here. It involved the P.T.A., all the children, and the teachers. It was a long, complicated project, but I thought it was tremendous for the children, as they did the art work. We decided to do the calendar around shoes -- that was not required by the company because they didn't make any requirements as to what topics we should use -- but we decided on that. Then we visited shoe stores, we visited shoe repair places, we wrote to places that made snowshoes, and all kinds of things related to footwear. Then we did the art work and we looked up Vermont history because we wanted to have it a Vermont calendar. We looked up Bennington Battle Day and so forth, and we put all the Vermont holidays on the calendar, plus the legal,

national holidays. There were a lot of negotiations that went on with the printer.

When the calendars came back, we hand-addressed almost 2,500 envelopes. It takes almost five minutes for a young child to address one envelope, but they did learn how. They also learned most of the States, since the calendars were sent mostly to the United States. We had a big map and put strings up from the different states when we got replies. (We had asked for responses on the calendar if people liked it, and we got over two hundred replies.) They were from all over the country, and we kept track of where we got answers from. That was a nice thing. Then, also, the local post office let us hand-cancel all the envelopes ourselves. So that meant that I usually took down around four children at a time and we were working in the post office in the morning, which is their busiest time. All of their workers were very busy and we were just as busy, and it was a really good experience for the children to work in a post office and be doing something real and not doing an imaginary thing. These were real stamps and real cancellations and so forth, and they were just so excited about that and they worked really well. They would work for about an hour and then I'd bring that group back to school and take another group down. So we did hand-cancel all the calendars and get them mailed out and we also of course had to buy the stamps and put them on. There was one little insert that went into each calendar, so we had to set up a production line inserting those. So the children learned a lot about how that kind of

thing works. At the end, they were paid fifty cents a calendar, so the P.T.A. and the kids made over $1,000 on that project. Those children felt they had really done something for the school, and they also knew it was a real thing. It was an excellent project for them, and for the company it was extremely well received. (They used these as Christmas cards for their customers.) So we're interested in trying to find more things to do with kids, with the bigger community.

For another project, a student teacher that I had last year was very interested in working with companies in recycling materials. She received a mini-grant from the Department of Education in Vermont, and she set up a recycling program with Vermont companies. She had a tremendous response. So often, people always use the traditional things. They go to the paper mill for paper, and so forth. But she was approaching companies that had materials that they just threw out because they didn't think of anyone being able to use them. The businesses were so nice to her. They were enthusiastic and couldn't give her enough things and were so interested in the project. After she got the materials from the different places, she took children from the class to make up projects that you could do with the scrap materials. She worked all summer, using children from the community. Finally, she made a booklet, and it's been sent to every elementary school in Vermont as well as to some 4-H leaders and Boy Scout leaders, and that has been a great resource for people. Again, it's a way of using the community, the bigger

community of Vermont, and we're continuing that project. The businesses keep sending us things. She has set up a little teacher center in the Saxtons River School because we don't have room in our school.

Interviewer:

What sort of things did they recycle?

Claire:

They had some of the traditional things -- paper, scraps of material, but there were other things. For instance, in a sweater company she got sleeves that were discards, and they made animals out of those -- stuffed animals. She got lots of different types of wood scraps. They made mazes and houses and little block families and villages. Then she got some plastic tubes and things, and they made terrariums and did some things with pressing wildflowers.

Materials

As I said, when I came to the school there was very little in the way of books, textbooks, library books, art materials, or any kind of math materials. The things that were there were very nice, but there was very little. And then when the population doubled, we really needed more. At that point there was a small budget in the school, but we used that quickly. I remember, the first year I was in the school we got a new student and I didn't have enough math books. The Assistant Superintendent told me I

should make a copy by hand of the other math book! I couldn't believe it because in the first and second math book, when you're learning about ten's and one's and the base ten, there are just pages of little dots and things that you have to circle and make into groups. It would be ridiculous to copy it. So I didn't do that. I started scrounging around, asking friends that are teachers if they had old books in their back closets that they weren't using. And we started getting things -- like books -- from neighbors. The next year we had a different Assistant Superintendent and he was able to get us some Title I funds and other special funds. So we got some materials into the whole district and we were able to get things that we couldn't afford. They started working more at that point on a per-pupil cost in the schools and dividing things up so that we began to get more money, as far as budget was concerned, in different categories so that we could cover the various parts of the curriculum in a different way. Also, they put into the budget fixing old equipment, buying new equipment -- things to be done over several years. It made much more sense the way it was set up and I thought we were given a very generous budget per-pupil cost. And then, the P.T.A., as I said, started to help out. They bought the shop, they got it set up, and they also gave me money at Teachers' Convention time, to buy a few things. Little by little, we started adding more things and getting donations. Soon after that, I was appointed as a Demonstration Teacher for the State of Vermont under the Vermont Design. Now the Vermont

Design had just been written by the Education Department. It had been given to all of the state as a model to start from. Each community was to take that model and decide whether they agreed with it or not, and then write their own design for their community, based on Vermont Design. Now some communities really liked the Vermont Design, and their own local design was very similar. Others did not and came up with something quite different. In our case, some parts of it were used and some we changed around.

When I was appointed Demonstration Teacher for three years, we were given three grants. A lot of that money could be used for materials and we bought a tremendous amount, not only for our school but for the other two schools in Westminster. We were able to buy things like movie projectors and carpet for the floor of the school under that grant, and I bought a lot of cuisenaire rods and other materials that I wanted to have. During that time, there were some years that we spent almost no money from the town and other years when we spent just a little bit. We bought almost all of our things under this grant. And then, because we were a Demonstration Center, a lot of publishers wanted to give us things so that their materials would be seen. We had over eight hundred visitors over a three-year period so that a lot of materials were seen by many, many people. We've also done some trading of things between schools. For instance, I have a teaching machine that I bought under that grant and I usually share it with another school.

We find that some of the more expensive equipment is better used when shared. If it sits in one classroom all year, the kids are not as excited about it and they don't use it as much. Many times it's better if you know you're going to have it for a certain length of time because you prepare to use it well and then you pass it on to somebody else.

The Mental Health Services run a center for retarded people in Bellows Falls, and they have been given many books over the years, for the people at their center. They're children's books, but those people don't want to read them. They're not interested in them. Their reading level may be low, but children's books are not what they want. So the books have just been sitting there. Finally, one of the parents in my school who works there, brought them down and donated them to the school. I would say there's a good three or four hundred dollars' worth of books there, beautiful books, and of course they're just perfect for the level that we work with. I think that because people know we will use things they do like to donate them. And they also know we have little flea markets where things will sell if we don't use them ourselves. So we've collected a lot of things in that way. Then I try to keep track of things we need. The younger children, a few years ago, didn't use an encyclopedia much, but more and more they are using it, looking up a lot of things, and ours is really out-dated. It's over twenty-five years old. So I saw that every once in a while World Book has a deal. If you hand in an old encyclopedia, you get quite a large discount

towards a new one. So we just got a new encyclopedia in that way. I also send for any free materials. The publishers now don't like to give us many free samples because, with so many people doing individual work, if they give you one copy of something, it's probably all you want. They used to like to give you one copy because, if you liked it, you bought thirty, but people don't buy in that way today. So the publishers do not give as many things out. Right now we're not officially a Demonstration Center, although we have a lot of visitors, so that we don't have as much coming in in that way. Another thing I try to do is to wait until I see what the group is like before I order my materials. Now, some things you have to have -- like pencils and erasers and so forth -- and it doesn't matter what the group is like. But as far as basic material is concerned, until you see the group and get an idea, you don't know what they're going to be interested in that year, what problems are going to come up, what things you're going to want to enlarge upon. So I've been able to save my money until the fall and see what the group is like. In many schools sometimes the teachers have to order in the Fall for the following year and that makes no sense because you're not responding to what the group or the teacher or the situation is like. The teacher might be moved to a different grade level or the room assignment might be changed. There are so many things that can happen that it's very discouraging. The teachers can't even remember what they ordered or what they wanted or anything else.

Another thing that happened this last year was that a school closed in our district. They moved the children to another classroom in the building, so the basic things were all moved out. But we went up after they had moved out and I said, "Do you have anything more?" We found just tons of things that were maybe not complete: science equipment that had a missing part which we could supply, or workbooks that were not completed. If we took off what another student had done, there was good material left. So we took a lot of things that nobody else wanted and, as a result, we placed no order this year through the town budget because we found we could use all these other things. It was just a question of putting a little work into it and reorganizing it a bit. I think that there are a lot of ways that you can get materials that don't have to cost the taxpayers extra money. Through Casey's recycling project we have all the art materials we want and there are a lot of things, of course, that we can make -- the kids like to make things. The parents, too, are helpful. We have one fellow that's a carpenter. We needed a better container for our cuisenaire rods, so he made that for us with his child. We try to add things where we see there's a need for that particular group or that particular project. For instance, we've built up a good group of materials on dinosaurs. We just loaned those out last year to another school, and I think we would like to have more cooperation in the district on that. It's silly, for example, for five schools to buy a lot of dinosaur material when probably all five of them

would use the same material if we could just distribute it among the schools at different times. That way, you wouldn't all be buying the same things. We spent a lot of money on library books, not -- as I say -- always from the town budget, but we do have gifts of books, too. There's one family that lives in New York City and their child comes up occasionally and visits the school, sometimes for a week at a time. They always donate several books. I think that in the Fall we'll apply for a mini-grant for next year to build up the library in some other ways because I think that the library should reflect your community. I know that we've had some women this year who've felt that we didn't have enough books from the women's movement. For Christmas, they gave the school about thirty paperback books put out by women's presses with stories for children of this age. Some are "My Mother, the Mailman" or something like that, but others are just very good stories or fairy tales. They're a wide collection of stories that represent the women's movement point of view, and those parents felt it was very important that those books be in the school. We need to do a little more of that, finding out other people's points of view and seeing that those things get represented in the school. We have one child whose aunt is a children's author and she came to school and read some of her things and also gave us eight of her books. And we have a very famous illustrator in Westminster West, a a children's book illustrator. We went to see her. She always gives us about five or six books, so we took our calendar and gave it to her. We keep constantly on the lookout for materials

that can be used in the school.

The children have kept excellent care of the materials we have. This summer I've gone through all of the things on every single shelf. So far we've found perhaps two puzzle pieces missing. That's the extent of what we've found missing from any of the things that we've bought or put together. I've brought in a lot of my children's puzzles, and some of those they've worn out, but everything was still all there. I think if you're going to use a lot of materials in the classroom, then part of your curriculum has to be how to use it, how to take care of it and maintain it, because it's silly to get things if they're just going to be ruined or lost or misused. And we are very strict about equipment. We have a primary typewriter for children, and I show them how to use it. If they misuse it, then they just don't use it, period. They're not given another chance. If a child has an accident -- fine -- if something breaks accidentally, but when they actually pound on a typewriter, that's not anything that should be allowed. Too many times kids are given another chance with expensive things and I don't think that the taxpayers should have to put up with that kind of attitude. I'm afraid that too many kids are allowed to damage things and then you buy them another one. They don't have the same feeling when they borrow something from somebody, the way people used to do. When you borrowed something you always returned it in the same condition. I think people in families are pretty casual about borrowing things and not worrying about

returning them. That's the attitude you face these days, so we have been very strict and the results have been good.

Curriculum

I've always worked in activities-centered classrooms since I started to teach. I first taught in New York City in private schools were everything was based on materials and experiences and working from the group. One was a community school and the community was people in the school, not necessarily just those around it. It was a little different concept of community, but I think very similar to what I find here, except that those people were spread throughout Brooklyn rather than living in one spot. They were drawn together around the school, but the curriculum in all of these places was activity-centered. But, also, in the two private schools where I worked we tended, because they were private schools, to get kids whose parents were interested in education and wanted that particular type of education for them. The children were very active and were exposed to a lot of intellectual materials and background in art and music and so forth. Many came from famous homes or talented homes and their parents had done a lot of things in the world. As a group they were highly motivated and very capable, too. I liked starting in those schools because it set your standards for what kids could do at a very high level. I had kids who taught themselves to read when they were young, or children who had been reading since they were three. You were able to do so many things with them and they performed at a very high level.

When I moved to public school, we had more diversity of ability and background. This was more interesting, more realistic. But I still had that background of very high achieving and standards, so that I expected all the kids to be able to do a lot of things well. When you talk about curriculum, you start with standards. What do you expect them to do? Do you expect them to do just what they're supposed to for that grade level, and that's fine? In all the curriculum areas, I expect the kids to move ahead at their pace, but to keep moving ahead and not at the first grade level or the second grade level. I think the majority of the kids in the school perform well above their grade level on tests. There are a few, of course, who may have particular learning problems, or a few who do not have the ability in the academic areas, but as a group the kids in school have shown high achievement in the academic areas. I think that is just from expecting them to do well and letting them keep reaching forward rather than staying at one level. Then, with our variety of materials, we're able to have kids move ahead and yet not cover the same materials that they might find when they change to another school. We try, if a child is very advanced, to deepen the experience or use other materials that they would not necessarily be exposed to the next year. Occasionally, you have to have a child skip a grade. Sometimes that works well and sometimes it's not a good situation. Now, with the children who struggle more with their schoolwork and find it harder, we try to see that the curriculum that they have

will fit into their next experience so that it will not be a hardship for them to move from one situation to the next. If the school they're going to uses a certain math series, then we would use that math series with those children so that they will not have a lot of experiences that will not be helpful to them in the next situation. Our focus will be different with them, because -- for the most part -- we do a lot of individual work. That doesn't mean that everyone does the same thing but at the individual's own pace. We do real individual work, so that different children are doing completely different programs. They may not cover the same materials as another child, but we do have group lessons for particular skills -- telling time, learning money, or whatever it is that people need and should have. We also, as the year goes on, do divide up into reading groups, but not in the traditional sense. We divide up around an interest. It may be cooking or rockets or dinosaurs. Then we try to integrate all the reading, language arts and as much math as we can around those topics. We will have kids who are just starting to read and kids who can read anything. Most of that work is still done individually, but with a focus that they're sharing. We find that that really motivates kids to have made some choice in what they're studying and to be responsible for the materials that they're using. I think that when you're handling a lot of kids on a lot of different levels the attitude that they have towards each other is an important thing. A child that is very quick and is able to produce really excellent

work at a very high level should not feel superior to the other kids or feel that he's doing something better. I think that very bright kids should be challenged and should be working and contributing so that they feel that they are doing as much as someone else but that their contribution is not better or more sought after than someone else's. I think that by keeping kids very involved, the attitude becomes more natural. Also, when you have a mixed group of children -- if you have a first grader who learns to read within a few days, which we always seem to have every year -- it doesn't look unusual when they're suddenly reading the second or third grade material. Nobody thinks too much about it because there are other people doing that. A child who comes in reading doesn't stand out as being unusual. That's fine if they can read -- so do a lot of people. But in a straight first grade these children might stand out. And the same is true on the other end, with a child who's having trouble with the academics. They don't stand out as much because, again, there's somebody to work with. They don't worry so much if it's a first grader and they're supposed to be a third grader. If they don't know the vowels and the other person doesn't and they're working with that other person, then they're going to learn together, regardless of age and ability. So, as I say, most of the curriculum is done individually. But we do have interest groups, and occasionally we will have a school project where we all focus on a particular topic or activity -- such as poetry or film-making or doing a calendar. And we try to integrate

as much of the academics as possible. Now you have to do a lot of basic learning in the beginning. Everybody has to learn to spell and read and write and do basic math. But we have, I guess, every kind of material as far as reading approach goes. We have phonetic materials, we have language-based materials, we have things we make up ourselves, we have sight materials. So we try to find out what way the child learns best and match the materials with the child. I know what is done traditionally in all these grades and what things are covered, and I think that we do cover those. We make sure that the child is a good reader and can handle the reading skills that are usually taught at those different grade levels. I feel that there are a lot of things that are taught that are unnecessary for children to learn. If you can figure out what things are unnecessary, you have more time to perfect their skills. So in the curriculum we try to concentrate on the basic skills that they need and then integrate them into the world. We introduce them to music and art and some of the beauty of the world so that they can not only use their basic skills, but start seeing what they can do with them. I find that you can simplify things by not chopping up the work. To me, spelling, language arts, and reading all go together and I think they go together in a child's mind. It's only when they go to school that it starts getting separated into little categories. Then as they get older it's supposed to be put back together again to approach something specific. In high school they don't expect spelling to be one thing and written language another, and so forth. A child has to have all those

skills together when he approaches a subject. We try to keep the subjects integrated as much as possible because I think that they learn faster that way. Some children need to go slower and some need different approaches. They need to have a lot of responsibility, so we try to give them choices, even if they're beginning readers and can only read two or three little books. If they have a choice of which book they want to read, then they have also made a different commitment than if they are constantly handed things. Some children you do have to counsel and plan for them and tell them which book is is going to be next. Later on, when they've reached a certain skill level, they're able to make some choices and then they really want to. One of the things I think a lot of curriculums don't do, especially with first and second grades, is that they don't give the child a chance to struggle with the material. We have a lot of teachers in Vermont who are excellent reading teachers, who teach reading in a systematic and organized way so that the children are successful, but I think that one of the things that gets left out is that a child should have to struggle. The teacher is almost too good, too organized and too able to determine the next step. I don't want to lose any children so that they get discouraged, but I think a child should be given different reading components and then have to struggle with it and work with it and want to do it. I think that that way they get to see how they learn and they get to have a different commitment. It's a pretty exciting thing when they realize that

there are certain things they can do. I think, too, that for the first time they are very conscious of their intellectual abilities if they struggle a little. If too much is given to them in little pieces every day, then they don't have that struggle. I have seen a beginning reader sit for over an hour, or even two hours, just trying so hard to sound out word after word. To me, those children who are working and trying to read a story have learned more, although some children do have to do it bit by bit. But, again, with a mixed age group, you have a lot of built-in curriculum help. For instance, every day everybody has to write. Now, when the first graders come in, that's a whole new idea, to write stories. But I don't have to introduce it to them because the second and third graders are all writing their stories and sharing them. So right away the first graders want to do what the second and third graders are doing. At first, they have to dictate it and copy it because they don't know how to write it, but that happens very quickly and they are suddenly doing those things without having even having to have them explained. In a class of straight first graders, which I've had, it takes much longer and it's much harder to introduce parts of the curriculum because they don't have any models, they don't have anything to reach up to. It's very different to see a child that's a year or two older than you doing something that you want to do, rather than the teacher. But it's a trick to take out the parts of the curriculum that are not necessary and to time things right. For example, so many people hate math

because they've usually spent the first six years doing arithmetic concepts over and over and over again. They still don't know the multiplication tables, so obviously something is wrong. Instead of drilling these things over and over, I think that the timing is important, that they should either be taught sooner or later. With the multiplication tables, I've had many second graders pretty much master them because they were interested and motivated. With other kids, I felt if we waited until fifth grade or sixth grade and said, "All right, now we're going to have multiplication tables," that, probably, within a few weeks, they would do it because it was new and they were asked to do it. But, to drag it out over the years -- everybody hates it and it just goes on and on and it's never new or fresh or exciting. That's true with several things that are introduced and then have to be re-introduced the next year. In math, a lot of things we used to have when I first started to teach, like borrowing and carrying, was done in fourth grade, and now it's done in second grade. And sometimes that's very beneficial, but for some second-graders, they learn the technique and then when third grade comes they've forgotten it completely. Not only have they forgotten it, they don't even remember having dealt with it! So I think much more should be done in looking at the curriculum as far as timing is concerned. In talking to people who went to Catholic school, they all learned the multiplication tables in the first and second grades and it was just a straight memory exercise. And they have it -- it's there.

So we try, as I say, to concentrate on the basic skills and to see when it's best to introduce them. Learning to tell time, that can go on for years and I know that now in Vermont, with the Basic Competencies, they find that many kids in high school cannot tell time. Now, telling time is another one of those things that has been dragged out. Usually, if children are motivated and want to learn to tell time, they will learn it very quickly, but if they're not interested and not motivated, they can do the forms and everything for years and still not grasp the actual thing. I know that a lot of people are shocked that high school kids can't tell time, but they can't and they don't need to and they're never going to learn it. When I was teaching in New York, every first grader had to learn to tell time and do money and make change. The children here don't handle money, they don't go to the store, and they don't use products, so that there's very little interest. Certainly the environment sets certain things into the curriculum that are natural for some kids and are harder for others, depending on the situation they're in.

The way we teach reading and writing is through writing. We usually start with writing and they can read what they can write. Most schools teach reading and then they add writing so that the child who can read fairly well can hardly write and it's very frustrating, I think, and discouraging. We teach them to write first and, in that way, we build the skills more evenly. Writing skills are poor in this country. They're not very well

developed, and people don't enjoy writing. A lot of the time, writing isn't even introduced until the fourth grade. Before then, the children write full sentences, but there's no real writing. Even in the fourth grade there is not a lot of writing. I know that with my own children they didn't start writing until they were in junior high school. Then it depends on what teacher you have, what you do. But in high school there's a lot of writing to be done in all courses, and most kids have not had that kind of preparation. It's not likely the high school can suddenly give them that kind of experience -- of expressing themselves, plus the grammar, punctuation, and so forth, which are very difficult. So we do spend a lot of time on creative writing, on learning to express oneself. We don't spend much time on the format. I feel that when they're in fourth grade and they can actually write easily, can sit down and write a poem or a story or a letter, then that's the time to start adding the punctuation, capitalization and so forth. That, too, is when they want to share their writing and they realize that people can't read it if it's not punctuated. They're much more ready and willing to see where that fits in rather than the kids who learn what a sentence is and practise it -- it starts with a capital and ends with a period. They copy sentences, but they couldn't write a poem and they couldn't write a story. They get hooked into the form and the content just isn't there. I try to do it the other way around. The content comes before, and then we add the other things. And over

the years it seems to have been pretty successful. Some years we do more with punctuation than other years. We do have the basic things, but that's certainly not the emphasis.

Interviewer:

Claire, when you start teaching them to write, do you teach them to write the letters as they will see them in printing later?

Claire:

Right.

Interviewer:

So they have no difficulty transferring?

Claire:

That's right. You know, education's so faddy with different things coming in. I always used to teach them the alphabet because it made sense to me. Now, all of a sudden, there's a whole new thing -- you don't teach them the alphabet. I've always figured that you have to know the alphabet and that kids like to learn it. The publishers really control the curriculum in most of the schools because people just buy from them and do whatever's in that book. Publishers got into the whole thing of trying to please everybody -- have the visual, the phonics and everything. So suddenly you just don't go through the alphabet because you're not supposed to learn the vowel sounds until second grade. In the first grade you skip around. It's true the kids have to be able to skip around and recognize the letters out of order and all that kind of thing, but it just seems to me that it's so silly. After a few years they just come back around to where they started, so you just keep your old books

and you'll be back to them eventually. I think that some of the things that have been added to the curriculum just waste more time. You can be more direct about learning these things and I can agree with a lot of the back-to-the-basics movement. If you learn some of these things and learn them well, then you can move off from there. I think one of the problems is that some people, when they get back to the basics, don't want to go any further. They just stay there. I certainly think that's a worthwhile place to be and start from as long as you keep moving out from there and don't get stuck.

The children in our school are required to do math, writing, reading, and language arts every day. Each child, as I say, has his individual program. Each will have a math book, which could be at any one of a variety of levels. There are different types of books: problem books, and then traditional math books that cover arithmetic skills. Then we have other materials and other activities that we use around the room. Again, we try to go through the basic skills that they're supposed to know at that age. Then, once they know them, they move out into other areas. With some children that doesn't work. Sometimes we have to get them interested in other things and then add the basic things, although most children can handle the basic manipulations and then move from there. In reading, everybody must read to himself every day, read to a teacher, and do some other language skills or reading skills, depending on his level and what he needs to work on. The children must do writing every day. It

It can be a letter or it can be a poem or it can be a story. We do require them to write a lot and every day. For instance, third graders must write four pages day every day. That's a lot of writing, but once they get into it, they do it easily. But if you skip a few days, they can't do it. It's certainly a skill that needs to be practised constantly. With different groups, sometimes we have to set a page limit. Sometimes we start with a number -- "You must write fifty words today and you must write seventy-five tomorrow," or whatever. It depends on the children, how you set those standards and how you motivate them, but it's been a very good thing for children to struggle with reading, to be able to write and then read what they have written and enjoy sharing each other's things. I had a very nice conference last year with a parent, a parent who came late into the school and the community. I didn't know the father at all, really. I'd never talked to him, although I'd talked to the mother quite a few times. They have two children -- very different -- one in first grade and one in second grade. The first thing the parents asked me was where the children's papers were. Now in most schools children bring home dittoed sheets or copied things, but we don't do a lot of that. The children have folders where they keep their creative work and they do have little books. We tend to take things home when they're completed, rather than a little bit every day, or take home a folder every so often with a lot of work. I've seen so many first and second grade papers that all look beautiful and

and all look the same. You know, my husband teaches fifth and sixth grades and I see terrible handwriting, yet when they're in first and second grade they all have beautiful handwriting. So something is wrong. They weren't really that involved. They were copying and copying, not only other people's letters but other people's standards, so that they never developed into their own standards. I think that the first and second graders' papers really should be more varied and that in the fifth and sixth they should look more similar -- it's the other way around -- and I feel that those little children should have to struggle. It should be their work and their struggle with how they're going to print and how they're going to write, not just copying something. With the creative writing, some parents are very excited about it, really honor it and are interested, but others think it's silly.

But to get back to the conference I had with the parent. I didn't know him and I didn't know what he thought. They were going to move -- he had joined the army and they were moving to an army base because he was having trouble getting a job in the area that would support his family. So when they first came into the school they asked me right away where the papers were. I explained to them, you know, how we put the work in the folders. The older boy just took to writing immediately. He was a good student. He had never written anything before and he just loved writing stories, but I didn't know what the parents made of that. At the conference it was really exciting. When we got to talking

about the kid's writing, the father said that when he started reading the stories, he thought it was really stupid. Why was the child spending all this time writing those little things? But then he said he saw how proud his child was of his stories and he himself realized that they were his child's own thing, that they weren't copies. They were not the teacher's idea, they were that child's. He told me that all of his life he had never believed in himself and that he had never stood up for what he thought. He said that just in the last few years he realized that if he doesn't stand up for what he thinks, nobody else is going to and also if he doesn't put himself forward, nobody else will do it for him. He suddenly realized, he said, that here was his son who's doing this writing. They were his ideas. Nobody could take them away from him and nobody could copy them. He hadn't copied them, he had created them, and he had something he wanted to share. I was just amazed that this man had pulled all this together and understood it. He thought it was terrific that we were doing this with the children and that they were learning to stand up and read their things to another person and be proud of them and know it was theirs, that they had created something. He said he was sorry that he hadn't had that in school because it had taken him all this time to realize that he had to do the same kind of thing. It was interesting because the parents had thought out their whole life, what the husband's skills were, and what the problems of living were. That's when he decided to go back into the army and finish

up so that he would retire at a pretty early age with a decent pension. Then he would not be under pressure and could do some of the things he wanted to do.

Now I don't think that all parents see that part of the curriculum in that way. It's very important to us and we do see it that way, and I think that the kids see it as very important. Every year we enter writing contests. And we enter those because I feel that that is a very important part of the curriculum, to enter contests of different types: snowmobile contests, growing contests, safety contests, writing contests. I feel that it's important to enter because children should be able to compete and understand what it means to enter a contest. They should know what it means to be judged and who the judges are. They are people, they're giving their opinions. You can disagree with their opinion. Should their opinion change the quality of your work? If you sent in what you considered a really good poem and you didn't win, does that mean that it isn't a really good poem? I think that that's something a lot of adults have trouble dealing with and they need to experience it. For a child to go through his folder and pick out what he considers his best story and his best poem, or his best three poems, have them mailed in, and then not win -- that's a real experience. When we talk about it afterwards, I tell him that if I was judging it, this is what I would pick. Or if you were judging, what would you pick? I tell him that the judges are just people who've made a decision. And I think that kind of thing is very important for them to cope with. Also, when they

win they must be able to cope with winning. Many times they say, "It wasn't even the one I liked the best!" Also, we've had a very nice response with the children to each other when someone's won -- they're really excited. We have entered this one creative writing contest, run by WCAX-TV and the Poetry Council of Vermont -- I think we've entered ten times -- and we've always had a winner every single year. This year we had eight winners, which was really amazing. We won all the first grade prizes for poetry and prose and in the second grade we won some prizes and had two honorable mentions. It's amazing because I have twenty-four or twenty-five kids competing with schools with five and six hundred where they're picking their best entries out of their whole school. I let the children pick their own entries and that's a very exciting thing. I think it encourages them to write more, and they've been so excited when the other person has won -- they've been really thrilled. It hasn't been, you know, sour grapes.

With the snowmobile contest, that was like a safety contest. Those were interesting contests because some of the families are very anti-snowmobiles and some families are very <u>for</u> it, but the emphasis in the snowmobile contest was safety, and I think everyone is for safety, whether or not you want someone to ride on the snowmobile. We did discuss these things and the kids were free to enter the contest or not. One year one mother really objected to kids entering contests because she thought they were competitive. I said, "Look, we live in a competitive society. The kids all have to learn to cope with

it and that's one of the reasons I want them to enter." But she didn't want her child to enter. Her child entered one contest, anyway, and won, and then she was completely different. So it was fantastic! As long as your child won, it was great! But she didn't want to risk the child's not winning. It was her fault and not the child's, but it had nothing to do with competitiveness. I told the kids that it's almost silly -- I mean, the only way you can judge some of these contests, like an art contest, is by what you like best. It can't be that that is the best thing because it's only the best in your opinion. So that's been a part of the curriculum, to enter the contests that we think are appropriate. Pretty much it's been done by those children who want to, although they have to have a very good reason why they don't want to. For some of the children -- for instance, for very capable kids who, I feel, have to be pushed to do more and more independent thinking because they have the ability -- they have to defend why they don't want to enter a contest. I had a boy this year who told me he wasn't entering the contest. I asked why and he said because he didn't want to enter it. I said that I wasn't going to accept that, that I would accept why he wasn't entering it if he thought it through and came up with a real reason. So he went off and he came back in a little while and said, "I don't like to win money." I said, "But there isn't any money in this contest. You just get your poem or your story published in a little book, which is a nice prize." So then he went off and he

came back a little while later, and he kept doing this. I felt that he had not really thought things through for himself. He was trying to think of what he had heard someone say or what he had heard his family say about contests, or anything, but he was not really trying to think why he did not want to enter it. He was really struggling with this, and I think this is another important part of the curriculum that most people don't even want to think about. You've got to put kids in the position where they're really using their heads on whatever problem it is and trying to figure out what it is they're thinking. Well, he worked and worked on it for two days and he was really getting upset because I couldn't accept any of his reasons. Finally, after the second day, I said, "Look through your folder. Read your things. See what you think." So he came up to me, and he said, "I'm not entering that contest because I've read through the things in my folder and I have very good starts, but I have terrible endings." And this is <u>exactly</u> the way he writes. He gets really excited and does a great job, and then he wants to go out to recess, or whatever, and he just puts <u>The End</u>. So that child had come to the conclusion by himself. I could have told him that, but it would have meant nothing to him. So I said, "Okay, fine. That I accept. It's true. I think your stories and your poems are all beginnings and no endings, so I can see that you don't want to send them in because they're not really finished. So what are you going to do?" He said, "I'd better start working on some of them some more." So he sat down and

finished a very nice thing. And it was interesting because I said to him, "Well now, do you want to enter this?" I should never have said that because he said, "We just finished talking about that and we said I'm going to enter next year." And I said, "Right." So we didn't enter this year. So I think this can be a very important part of the curriculum. Not just the actual work they do, but the whole background of how they see themselves in entering, or sharing, or exposing some of their things.

Those are the basic things they have to do every day: the reading, writing, and math. We do have a lot of materials and a lot of equipment, so they can have a lot of choices. They are also assigned things, and pretty much their program is worked out with them and with the parents so that the parents know what kinds of things we are doing, how we are doing them and what materials we are using. We had this year a third grade child who was having a lot of trouble keeping up with the third grade pace. He just couldn't produce as much as most third graders could.He did beautiful work, but it was very slowly and carefully done, and I felt he was under a lot of pressure to keep producing. So I talked with him because every day he was in at recess trying to finish his writing. This is a child who had been tested upon entering school. As a result, they felt he was not ready for first grade, so he entered a readiness group and did quite well. Afterwards, he then went directly into second grade and now is trying to cope with third grade. We had thought

that eventually this would catch up with him. He probably needed an extra year at some point, just because of his pace. But I talked it over with him and I said, "You talk it over at home and see how your parents feel about you doing the same amount of work as a second grader does but at a third grade level." He came back and said that his family had decided that he should stick right in there and if he doesn't have recess, then he won't have recess. So he stuck in there all year. That child did not have recess all year a nd he did not get to extra things, but it was important to him and to his family that he keep giving it a try. It's interesting because now we're at the point of trying to figure out what is best for him next year. He's too old to stay in our school any longer. Should he continue to be trying that hard and working at the bottom of the group because of the amount he can do, or should he be given a chance to have an extra year and be able to perform where I see it would be easier for him to perform? Now I feel he should probably have that extra year, but his family is not sure. They feel maybe he needs to work. So he's going to do some extra work this summer in a summer program, and then we're going to make the decision which seems to be best for him. I've had all four children from that family in school and the oldest child is a very bright, very quick boy. He was very advanced. But he was immediately turned off to school when he got into third and fourth grade because it was so easy for him. He was so bored and he became a high school dropout, and it's very sad. I think

this child does not have the same strength in academics as his brother, but the family -- after that experience -- is kind of leaning towards having a child really struggling, and I can see their point. I think the children are very different types, and I think that that has to be honored. So we do try, with the curriculum, to work with the parents and see their point of view. They know their child better than we do. We try to let them know what usually happens at these grade levels, how their child will fit in, and then try to come together on it as much as we can.

In our curriculum, we say that after the basic skills are learned, then when it comes to science or social studies or any of those things, what we try to do is see what's happening in the community or in the state or within the lives of somebody near at hand and base our study on something that is very important to somebody locally. For instance, when Randy Major was running for the legislature, it seemed almost silly not to follow his career. We didn't have his children in the school, but he lived right up the road and it was a natural thing. So that's what we did and a lot of work was based on learning something about the legislature. We ended up by going to visit him when he was elected, and that was a very meaningful thing. I don't think that with children that age I'd ever do that unless it was through a person. I mean, if I suddenly said we were going to study how people run for the legislature, I think it would make no sense, so we just did it that one year because one of our local people was involved. So we try, when it comes

to choosing a social studies or a science topic, to pick up something that has a lot of value right then im the community, something that has real meaning. I think that in the elementary school -- besides the basic skills -- it's the attitudes and the excitement that are important. I just can't see the third grade studying Mexico every year and the fourth grade studying whatever. it is they study and the fifth grade studying what the fifth grade always studies. I think the social studies teachers have a chance to do some really exciting things. I'm afraid that from what I've seen, from my children's experiences, that sometimes these are the least exciting teachers. But they have the most exciting materials around them and they also are not held accountable in the same way the math teachers or the reading teachers or the spelling teachers are. A lot of tests, standard tests, don't have much on social studies. The Basic Competencies don't have much, so that those people could really, I think, let go and have an exciting time. But they don't seem to. We try to have the social studies be something that has a lot of meaning within the school and within the community, although sometimes we don't have anything special going on. We're just concentrating on the basic skills and the other things we pick up. So it's different every year, what we are focusing on,and that's why we need to have some money available to get books or films, or take a trip around. A few years ago, the children got very interested in Calvin Coolidge. We went up to his birthplace and to the inn. One of the kids turned up Calvin Coolidge's pallbearer -- incredible! ---and he came and talked with them in the school, and

that was really exciting. The child found him and made the appointment with the man to come. He was just on his way to take some old things to the museum in Black River, so they saw them before they were taken up.

I do try in the curriculum, too, to use resource people in the community. Another year we had a father who is a lawyer. We did a tremendous amount of reports through that father because we went to hearings. I think, talking to a lot of people, that most of them don't remember what they learned in elementary school besides the basic things, unless there was some special thing that happened, a special event. And, talking with people in high school and middle school, they really feel that the attitudes, the research skills and excitement that a kid comes with are much more important than what you've studied in such and such a grade. In connection with this, one of my daughters went through studying trees in science two years in a row and she still does not know one tree from the next. It would have been much better to teach her the resources of how to find out about one tree, if she wanted to know -- what places you can go, what people you can ask, what parts of the tree you can use to help identify it -- the bark or the leaves, or whatever. If she had had some of these basic things, maybe some information about basic categories, she would have been much better off.

Staffing

When I first came to the school, I was the only person there. I did ask the Board after about half a year to give me a little

relief. I had to be there from quarter of eight until we finish school at three-thirty. And of course there are always after-school things. So they hired a parent to come in an hour a day at lunch time. I could leave the building if I wanted to, which I did occasionally, or just take a little time. There isn't really any place to hide when you have time off. You can go in the little kitchen, but it's hard, especially when the kids know you're there. But that was at least helpful. The next year I started having student teachers. I find student teachers are always helpful. Some of them are not as helpful as others and need a trememdous amount of help, so sometimes you end up giving more than you get. But I try to interview the people beforehand and try to pick people who would work out well in the situation. Over the years, the different colleges I've worked with tend to send me their better students, although occasionally they ask me to take a problem. Usually the problem students, if they're identified as such, tend to be creative people who are just on a little different wave length sometimes than the college. So it's been quite workable and I like to have young people because they bring new ideas. The kids like to have somebody younger there, although not all the students are younger. I've had several older women who have decided to go back into teaching or to college after their children were older. So we've had a variety of ages, but the majority are young students. Then we occasionally do have a student who comes back. That would be a seventh or eighth or ninth grader who's doing a project for

high school, and those students will come back for a week. That's just a sort of focus project. Sometimes they have something in mind, but sometimes it's just a normal helping in the classroom. Then we have parents that come into the classroom because we ask parents to come in and help. Sometimes we make an arrangement so that they come in regularly. We had a man who happens to be a child psychiatrist who was on a leave of absence last year, and he came every day for almost three months for two hours a day. He was teaching the children about the Kwakiutl Indian tribe. He was very interested in that. And then another time we get someone on call who will come in when we need help with cooking or a trip or whatever. It's a little harder now to plan because often both mother and father are working and they don't have as much free time. But we do plan ahead so that those people can come in and help out. We encourage everybody to visit and we have quite a few visitors, not only from the community of the school but from educational institutions in the area. Then a variety of other people call up or drop in -- either way is fine with us. I try not to have too many adults in the classroom at a time, but sometimes I forget which people I said could come, and we have too many. But it works out all right.

Then, as far as the School Board is concerned, when we started getting some federal money, I did get some help, some secretarial help one year for a couple of hours a week. Then I had an aide for a few hours a week. I think it was something

like five hours a week to start with -- not a lot of time, but it was helpful. That was a person I could choose, and I chose a woman from the community who had been my babysitter. Her children were big enough now for her to come into school (That was before she had a few more, so it was just in between children.) Then more schools were beginning to ask for aides. It seemed, I guess, that the schools were trying to do more individual work with every child. It used to be that people said, "Some children are just slow and they can't learn any more, so we'll bypass them and they'll just have to do the best they can." But now the schools are trying to handle each case, so therefore you really do need extra people. For instance, we now have a child with a hearing problem. He can not do many things in a group. He has to be taught individually because just the confusion of voices and sounds, if he's working with several children, are something that he cannot cope with. So you have various problems that I think all schools, now, are trying to handle. So the Boards were feeling that aides did belong in the school. At that point, we got a grant from the State Department of Education to be a Demonstration Center for the State of Vermont, and through that grant I asked for a full-time assistant. I hired one myself for three years and that was paid for through the State Department. Then we had two other grants from NEPTE and an assistant went with those grants, not full time, but half time.

Interviewer:

What does NEPTE stand for?

Claire:

NEPTE was the New England Program for Teacher Education. It was a regional New England consortium. They did at one point have a lot of money and were very active in education in New England. Thenthe Governors of the states cut back on that organization and it kind of disintegrated. I think it exists today, but it does very little. The reason why I was given an assistant in both cases was that they expected me to take visitors every day so that the children had to be covered, either by myself or the assistant. One person could be with the visitors, if necessary, and the other with the children. Then, when those grants ran out, the School Board decided that they would give me somebody four hours a day, since I was alone in a building. It was very easy to get someone with a Master's Degree in Education to be an aide because jobs are tight, so you get well-qualified people to take that position. Then some years we've had particular problems. One year there was a whole group of children that did not appear to be ready for first grade, but their families wanted them to be in first grade. We had no kindergarten in the town, so in both schools they hired extra people to help so that you had a sort of readiness group within the school. The extra person was the aide part of the day and an assistant teacher the other part, with this smaller group of children. And that was also covered by the town. The town feels obligated to give

me four hours a day, but every year the need is different. Last year I had a child who had been diagnosed as emotionally disturbed, and the Board didn't feel it would be fair for the children or me if I were there alone. If I had to handle him, who would handle the group, and so forth? So the town extended the aide allotment for a full time aide, so that we did have plenty of help. And the aide I've worked with now for quite a few years is excellent with the children. She has lots of ideas. I try to encourage the people who work in the school to be a real part. We do make a lot of decisions together and we talk things over. Also, they have a lot of responsibility if they want it, which they usually do. We really share the teaching. Although obviously I'm the head teacher, it's a shared decision-making and responsibility. I think the people enjoy the job more when they're doing things that they really are in charge of and that they can handle. I encourage everyone who works there to let us know what their interests are, what they want to know or learn, or want to share or teach. We plan some of the curriculum around the staff strengths or weaknesses -- one or the other. One year, the person I had working with me was very interested in making bread, and I think we made bread all year. We did many, many things with that -- science things, history things, and so forth. My own children were in the school then and they learned to make bread. She had everyone memorize the recipes, and it was a very successful project. Another year, we had someone interested in birds, so it just sort of depends

on the interest of the person. We've had people who wanted to learn something. I had a student teacher who was very interested in pottery and was just learning, so she wanted to do a unit with the children around pottery. She learned more than they did, but they all learned a lot.

This year the Superintendent felt that there were problems on the busses with younger children having to ride with high school students. He found that through CETA he could get a person to ride the busses and help supervise the younger children. And we had some problems on our playground with older children, who were waiting for their bus, teasing younger children. Sometimes there are over a hundred children there waiting in the morning for busses and changing busses, with no supervision. So the CETA person we hired -- I guess it was at the end of winter -- rode the bus in the morning and the afternoon, and she was free the rest of the day to stay in the school. I didn't want to get another person in the classroom because we don't need any other adults teaching academics, since we have plenty of help. Also, the children can become very dependent on adults if you have too many there. So what I wanted to do was to get someone who would add a different dimension to the classroom. I looked around and I found this young woman who was a potter and needed a job and was CETA-qualified. She got the job. She has put a pottery program into the school and poetry too, because she's very interested in both of them. We've used her more for enrichment and she's helped me with a lot of things

that we just haven't been able to do in quite a few years because of lack of help, like cataloguing the library. She can type and she's done a lot of that. Then we've tackled cleaning and organizing materials that have been sort of neglected for a year or so. I've also asked her to work with thefaster students. I think that too many times the slower student is given the extra help and the faster student is left out. Actually, if the faster students are challenged and have extra things to do, then I don't have to worry about them and I have more time for the slower students. So it works out to be a good situation for everyone. Also, I think it's better for me to work with the slower students because they know me. It's harder for a slower student toswitch between personalities. The faster student can usually switch easily and there's no problem for him with different ways of doing things. So that's the way we used the CETA person. Now she works all summer, so we have a little summer program at theschool that she's running and it goes through September. She's gotten really interested in education and she's hoping to get qualified as an art teacher since she has a master's in art.

Then we do have, from the town school district, a music teacher who comes two mornings a week. She works with the children for forty-five minutes usually and then for fifteen minutes more with the older children. She teaches recorder one day and just general music the other day. We have a gym teacher that comes once a week for forty-five minutes and he works with all

the children. He tries to do a broad movement kind of thing, not just games and exercises, but more physical development movement. He does a nice job. This year he also came one day a week to do science with the older children because I had quite a few older children this year. He won't do that next year because I don't expect to have many of that age. We do have an artist that came once a week and he found it very hard to work with a mixed age group. So we've worked out projects that work well with a mixed age group so that only a few children work at a time, like a hot air balloon or building a little house in back of the school. So we would end up doing the art, or some art-related project, while he took just a few, and that seemed to work out well. The town also sends us a speech therapist to screen the children the beginning of the year. Because of the distance of schools from other schools, she doesn't come on a regular basis. But she will come, like two weeks straight, every day, maybe twice a year. It depends on the problems. We haven't had too many severe speech problems. We've had some developmental problems, but she's been able to tell the class as a group what sound someone's working on, because we do a lot of verbal work, when the children have to speak in front of the class. And they're very open about problems. The kids have worked a lot with each other -- they're very helpful. So I think the speech therapist was extremely pleased with the progress, and most of the children were released from therapy at the end of the year, or never really needed it. Occasionally

you get a very severe problem, but we do have that resource available to us.

For general health, we have a nurse who checks on the health examinations that the children bring in from their doctor and arranges for children to have shots. We can contact her if necessary. The school district doesn't always have a doctor on call or a doctor as a consultant. Some years we have and some years we haven't. But I have an arrangement with John Trumper in Brattleboro to act as the school doctor for advice for me. He's been very helpful at no expense, and he's also done a lot of physicals for me when I've needed them for a particular child. Usually today when you want psychological testing, you have to have a physical first. Sometimes it's hard to get that, so he's been helpful and I've learned a lot from working with him. We do have to be aware of general first aid things because we are quite a ways from a hospital and rescue service -- it takes them a while to get there.

The administrative set-up of the school is that I'm the head teacher and I don't have a real principal over me. I really have to act that role in the school. But if I need extra support for one reason or another, the Assistant Superintendent will act as principal for me if I need that. I occasionally use him for a parent conference or something of that kind, but he's the one who directly supervises the program. In policy making or any important decision, I usually work through the Superintendent. The way it works is that if you're not happy with either the Assistant Superintendent or the Superintendent's

point of view, then you can go directly to the School Board. They have the final authority. We do have one School Board member from our section of town that we coordinate with. She checks with us before and after the meetings so that we do have a steady information exchange with the School Board. Then there is a business manager in the district. He does ordering and he takes care of general things. I check in with him about plumbing and gravel for the playground and all that kind of thing. A lot of that you do for yourself, but you check through the office just to let them know what's happening and what you're doing. Then we did have a career education woman who came in one day a week for three years -- sometimes she came twice a week. With her we could make any kind of program we wanted. One year we drew a five-mile radius around the school and we went to see what everybody did in that five miles. And we found people who were self-employed or had an involved hobby that was supporting itself or was just something the person enjoyed. But it was more extensive than someone doing something occasionally. That was a special grant to the school district, and the career education woman was allowed to pick out the teachers she wanted to work with in the district. She asked us and we were very happy. That was a nice program. We do look for special things in the district like that that are happening and try to get involved with them if they're something that will work well for the children. As far as psychological services go,

the School Board allows a certain amount of money for psychological testing. Usually you try, in anything like that, to have the parents pay on a sliding scale which they work out with the agency, so that there is some involvement for the parent and it isn't completely handled from the school. I think, especially with psychological things, that if the parent doesn't want to get involved or doesn't have any commitment, you don't usually get very far. Some years we've had a consultant come around from a mental health agency, but the Board felt the teachers didn't use that service enough and they would rather just have a certain amount of money that we could use when we needed it. I do do a lot of bartering with people for services. I have had in school one of the children of the man who's the head of Learning Disabilities at Keene State. He usually does testing for me and in exchange I take a lot of his students as observers. In that way, we have been able to get some very good testing done without cost to anyone.

The state runs a free milk program, so that children in the school can apply for milk, and there is a Title I program. The Title I is supposed to be for disadvantaged children. In Vermont the disadvantaged children are to be economically as well as culturally disadvantaged, not just one or the other. I think the definitions are decided locally. In Westminster the definition has been used more to mean the child economically, culturally, and educationally deprived -- a combination of those things. Now we haven't been getting Title I funds, although my

school has the highest percentage of low-income children in the district -- a much higher percentage than any of the other schools. That's based on the number of children taking free milk, which is based on their income per family. It still means I have fewer children because I only have twenty-four or five children, but I will have sometimes almost half of the children on a free milk program. Now that entitles us to Title I help, but the town has found it easier to administer if they put all the Title I into the other school and cover us with town funds so that we end up with the same amount of help. The only problem is that if people in town want to know your per-pupil cost, then we have a higher one. The other school doesn't have to count their Title I money because that comes from the Federal Government. But other than that it works out to be, I think, fair for all the children. Those are the main supports in the system and the main people that are in and out. The supervisors of the student teachers sometimes add a lot to the program, but sometimes they are just very ineffective. Some supervisors enjoy doing things themselves, and that's a nice thing at times.

Testing

Some years the district sets up a testing program, but it is generally flexible. We haven't had I.Q. tests for at least ten years. Most of the teachers use the achievement tests, though. I do it, not so much for what the results are, but because I feel that children should have the experience of taking a test. They're going to be judged by tests in American education. They should know how to take one and they should be relaxed

about it, and they should see how they work. It's interesting to watch them take the test and you can learn a lot. I usually write on the test if somebody just guessed or somebody worked very slowly and carefully, or however their style was. The kids love them -- they think they're terrific. They have a lot of fun with them, and I'd say that most of the kids tend to test extremely well. I think some of the slower ones test above where they really are. I think that's because they do have a good attitude and they do feel confident, and they will try. I've never seen anyone collapse or just decide they couldn't figure it out or they didn't know what to do. So it's been a positive experience. I think you can use those results as one part of a child's history, but in the lower grades there's still too much emphasis put on what a child's score is on the achievement test. I think that's one bit of information, but the child that guesses can sometimes score quite high. There are still children placed in reading groups in upper grades through just achievement scores, so I think they shouldn't be used as the only way of making a decision. The district hasn't used any kind of I.Q. test for years and years -- they don't do that at all unless there's a problem, and then that's usually part of the evaluation. It may not be a test that comes out with a particular number, but more a level where the child seems to be functioning at the moment. Then, we have the new Basic Competencies Test. The class of 1981, in order to graduate from high school, has to pass all the Basic Competencies

put out by the State of Vermont. Now, those competencies are pretty low level, as far as I'm concerned. There are very few kids that I would think couldn't pass them. In fact, I talked with the people in Special Ed., and they're figuring that most of the kids in Special Ed. can pass a lot of those. I feel myself I'm disappointed that they're that low -- I think they should be a little tougher than they are, especially to get a high school diploma. Now, actually, the way that they're set up is that you really complete them all by eighth grade. The high school should not have to deal with all these things, but at this point they do because it's a new program and they are finding kids in high school that can't tell time, and so forth. I think that it's a good thing, but it's a question of the way it's been presented in some districts and the way it's being administered, whether or not it makes any sense. I really hate to see the high school hiring another person just to teach basic competencies when the kids on the other end are getting nothing extra. Again, we're getting more and more concerned with children who have problems on a crisis level, rather than trying to build up the first few grades and not move them along until they are ready. The philosophy of the school system a few years ago was not to keep anybody back. We had social promotions. We've always kept people back and for many years we've been the only people in the district that kept anyone back. Many times boys, especially, are not ready and they need an extra year to accomplish the basic skills in the first few grades. If they

don't have them there's no point in their moving along, unless they're children that are designated as special problems. When those children are working with the basic competencies, you do identify the problems and they have to be identified by more than the teacher -- the teacher and the parents, some testing, and probably by a psychologist or a learning disabilities person. Then a special plan is written for those children so that they will accomplish as many of the basic competencies as seems possible within their ability range or their problem range. And that makes a lot of sense to me, except that I think it should be on the other end, too. Children who are very capable should have to do more in some way, but they don't. In the first few grades there are not too many basic competencies they expect you to master, so that -- looking through the list -- there wasn't anything there that we didn't already cover so that it wasn't any big thing we suddenly had to do. You do have to keep track, but at the end of every year we always have our own sort of little check where we see if the children know the twelve months, their telephone number and their address and their middle name and, well -- a whole list of things. Some included the same things as the basic competencies; a few items were different. We just incorporated that list into our list and we just checked them all together. A lot of the things were similar, but we had more. You can add more things, which is what we did. I don't know if they will be tallied on the state level, but they're supposed to be because, if we've added extra things, they're supposed

to be sent in. The pressure's certainly not, in the basic competencies, on the lower grades. But fifth and sixth grade teachers have a lot to do and then the seventh and eighth grades have a tremendous amount, especially these first years when they have to go through the entire competency list. They're finding things that should have been learned at a much earlier level and they're having to handle that. I think it's a good thing, but I just hate to see a whole year of an English class being spent because half the kids can't do certain skills and the other half are sitting there wasting their time, which I'm afraid will happen. As the lower grades work more into this, it should help out but, as I say, a lot of the help is concentrated on a crisis situation. The high school, for instance, has a large learning disabilities section with equipment and personnel. I realize that it's needed, but again you don't find that same amount of consideration given to the elementary school. I think a lot of these problems should be worked on, especially the first years.

For general evaluation, we have two conferences a year with parents, say about an hour's conference, where we sit down with the child's books and papers and go over what they're doing. I try to have other children's work there, not to make a competitive situation but to show them what other children their age are doing, if that's appropriate. Sometimes people don't realize that their children are very advanced, and it's important for them to realize that. I've had children who are obviously college

material and neither parent has finished college, so you have to start preparing them that this child really should move on ahead. One way, I think, of showing them this is: here's the kind of thing your child does. And here's what most children that age do. They can start to see it then. The same holds true with the slower child or a child who isn't functioning well at that point. Sometimes a parent doesn't realize how much further ahead other children are, so you try to show them. We try to work with the child, too, to make plans for weak areas, things we think should be worked on. We spend a lot of time on class discussions, just talking about people's handwriting or problems they're having with reading -- the kids are very open. They all think there's a lot of value in judging who can read the best, who's the best handwriter. They appreciate each other. They're very excited and they usually clap when somebody who's had trouble reading gets up and reads a story -- they congratulate each other, and so forth. So that sort of evaluation goes on all the time within the classroom. I find that conferences work well because you really have a chance to sit down with the parents. The children are very aware of this and they many times get their things organized for the parents to see. Sometimes we have the child there also for all or part of the conference -- that seems to be a good thing to do. I think as children get older it's a better thing. The younger children, I think, are not as interested in a whole conference.

Each child has a folder and we try to keep things throughout the year. In evaluating a young child, if you can keep stories from the beginning, then you can see the handwriting and the spelling and some math work. If you collect things about four times a year and at the end of the year look at those things, then that is a good way of seeing growth. And the child can see it, too. The first day of school usually everybody draws a picture and I put those away and then bring them out, sometimes even a year later, sometimes two years later. That's really interesting for them to look at their things. Or if they have tried to write the alphabet and they couldn't, then you bring it out much later. That's, I think, a very good way for children to evaluate their own progress, to see it in front of them. It's good for the parents to see it also.

Most textbooks and reading books have little series of tests. We don't usually use any of those at all. Once in a while we do things where we make up a series of little tests, like number facts, or a time test or something. But we don't use anything that sort of goes with a book, such as: you're going to do so much and then you have a test on it -- we tend not to do that kind of thing. I think that's one reason why they like the achievement tests -- it's something new and exciting and they have fun doing them because they haven't done that kind of thing before. With some groups we go through all the children's books, all their subjects with them, and we make

up a card with things that we feel they should be working on or accomplishing. Sometimes they like me to keep the card. This year a lot of them wanted to tape it on their desk. Then, as they completed things they checked them off -- they wanted to do that. So there's another way of keeping track of what's happening, but we spend a lot of time between the teachers every day, after school, going over what the children did that day, what's needed for the next day, what's happening, setting up little groups where we feel there's a weak area. One of the things I try to do to keep on top of what everyone's doing is that every day we have a discussion in the class meeting. We usually share what we wrote or what we learned and a lot of time is spent reading things they wrote. I try at that point to be able to either to say out loud or in my mind, looking around the room, what each person did that morning. So I keep in touch with someone who's working on multiplication by two numbers, somebody else who's working on spelling, so that I constantly try to make sure I know what each child is doing. I used to have to write all that down, but I don't have to do that any more. So I think those are the main ways that we do evaluate and use testing. There is some physical testing that the gym teacher does of fitness, and he usually goes through that at one point during the year. Sometimes, at the nurse's suggestion, more physical activities may be done with some children that need it. We have children tested for learning disabilities, but I very seldom have that done while they're in the school, unless we find that

we're really not getting anywhere and we know something is wrong. Is it the way we're approaching the child or is it problems that we haven't even seen? But generally I don't have them tested until they leave the school, if I think there's a problem, because the next school needs that information. So far, for the most part, we've been able to cope really well with the learning-disabled children. Last year, just a month before they were to leave to go on to another school, we had three children who tested as severe learning problems, but all were well above their grade level in every subject. The Learning Disabilities teacher at first, after the initial screening, said there was no point in the testing continuing because these children were all very advanced. I said, "Well, just keep testing because you're going to find that there are some problems there." And she was very amazed when she did find such severe problems. But I think that, because of the kind of program and the motivation, the children were able to cope with the problems, learn around them, and understand how they learned. We had a child who just could not learn to spell, but we were able to cope with that situation. The child is an extremely good writer. But now, going into the third and fourth grade level, she will need more help. She won't be able to cope and the situation will be different. The first few grades are pretty easy, if you have an active program that keeps kids really working, trying, and progressing. I think

that some kids get labeled too quickly as learning-disabled and then they just sit back and have a lot of excuses for things or do half of what they're supposed to and they don't really try as hard as they could.

Class Meetings and Discussions

We start out the day with a class meeting. It's a time when I make announcements about choices for that day, special things that are happening, reminding them what's going on, or giving somebody a book I brought. Then there's a general sharing. I think it's more than traditional show-and-tell. These children come from a small community, so when somebody gets up to tell about their grandmother's dog, everybody knows about the dog, so it's quite different. Where my niece goes to school, she goes every day and tells about the dog that she doesn't even own because she knows that people just won't know. They will never find out, and she says it's more interesting to make these things up. But, in our case, the kids do know and I think it makes a closer discussion and they're more involved. Also, when kids do make up things -- which they like to do at that age -- the children are very amused by it or pick it up. So there's a lot of nice sharing. Kids bring things in especially to share at that time and sometimes they show things or tell things. Occasionally a long discussion gets started from something that somebody brought up and that may last into the next hour. Then again, it may just be a quick

sharing. We do outlaw television shows and movies -- you can say you saw one or went to one or tell maybe one thing you liked, but there's no giving the entire plot of the show. But, other than that, they're pretty free. Some kids talk so easily in front of a group and they're very verbal and very interesting, but it is a real art to keep that thing going, to keep them listening to each other, and to choose them in an order that makes sense. You've got to put in kids that are very hard to listen to, that mumble and are boring, and then you have to put in other kids and kind of keep it going. Some kids have to wait until the end because they don't want to listen to anyone else. The general rule is that if you don't listen, then you lose your turn. The children get into it pretty quickly and enjoy sharing with each other. We've had some problems with children being late, not understanding just when school starts. It's been very hard on the child who comes in late on that discussion and doesn't know what's happening and also has missed out on signing up for a trip or whatever. We also have another time before lunch when we get together again, and at that point we try to share what work we've done. Then we read our poems to each other, or our stories, and maybe somebody will show something he's learned. We also may have to discuss something that came up in class. Then, in order to get your lunch, everybody does something around a theme, which is usually decided by a teacher. For example, everybody might have to spell the word, "Hallowe'en," something that's appropriate. And sometimes we

work on giving words that are opposites and we may do that for a whole week, just telling them or writing them. Perhaps it's a time that you use for introducing a skill. Or perhaps a child who's just learned a particular skill and wants to show it to the other children shows it, and they in turn have to do that, whatever it is. At the end of the day, we like to finish with a story. It's hard to do, with the busses coming and the parents coming. It's not as relaxing as I'd like it to be and during the last few years the problem has been that many children do not go home any more. Their parents are working and they go to a babysitter or sometimes home to an empty house. So there's a lot of tension at the end of the day. Sometimes people are worried about missing the bus. If they miss the bus, they have to walk. The ones who walk regularly are always very relaxed, but the ones that do have to go on the bus, if there is not someone at home or they have to go to a babysitter, they get very worried. So there's not a lot of time for discussion in the afternoons. But I think our most important discussions have occurred when something has happened or when something has been brought up. Then we just stop everything and talk over the situation. That can go on for an hour or more. The children very often come up with very helpful suggestions for solving the problem, and the solutions are always more acceptable because they come from the children themselves.