

Life History as a Key Factor in Understanding Teacher Collaboration and Classroom Practice

By Lorraine C. Smith

Much of the research conducted on teachers' lives focuses on individual teachers, and on teachers in elementary, junior high, and high schools. Furthermore, these studies often focus on young preservice or novice teachers. The research described here focuses on a different group of teachers: experienced, part-time, college-level teachers, who were in their late 40s at the time of the study. Although higher education depends increasingly on part-time teachers—their numbers reached 370,000 in 1993 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1997)—they have rarely been a topic of research. Part-time college teachers' work often involves teaching at two or more campuses and typically requires multiple course preparations and considerable travel time. Because college teachers are not usually discussed in the research, and because of the time constraints inherent in their work, it was especially important to learn how part-time teachers might develop a collaborative relationship, what form it would take, and how their work might impact on their students.

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This article describes a one-year study which documented the collaborative relationship of three part-

Life History as a Key Factor

time English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teachers and the teachers' reflections on their collaborative work, within the context of their lives. The teachers' life histories provide insights which help in understanding why each teacher believed that collaboration was important, how the teachers' collaboration developed, what each teacher contributed to and drew from their work together, and how their collaborative work extended to their students.

Life History

Teachers' beliefs develop throughout their lifetimes and are influenced by a variety of factors, including events, experiences, and other people in their lives (Knowles, 1992). Teachers' life experiences and background affect what they believe, and consequently, how they teach (Clark, 1992). Consequently, a life history approach enables us to understand a teacher's life and work in terms of the meaning they have for the individual teacher (Butt, Raymond, McCue & Yamagishi, 1992; Denicolo & Pope, 1990; Kelchtermans, 1993a; Woods, 1985). This approach helps researchers understand teachers' involvement in and commitment to their teaching and their students (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986). In fact, a number of researchers have employed a life history approach as a theoretical framework for understanding teachers and their work (Bullough, 1989, 1994; Day, 1993; Kelchtermans, 1993a, 1993b; Knowles, 1994; Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1994; Woods, 1985, 1987). The vital role of life history in understanding teacher beliefs, practice, and potential for growth has been demonstrated in research on professional development and teacher change (Butt, 1984; Denicolo & Pope, 1990; Goodson, 1992a, 1992b; Huberman, 1993; Pajak & Blase, 1989; Zeichner, Tabachnick, & Densmore, 1987). In several studies, the teachers' interpretation of *critical incidents* was of prime importance in understanding teacher thought and practice. The term *critical incident* has been similarly defined by a number of researchers (Day, 1993; Denicolo & Pope, 1990; Goodson, 1992a, 1992b; Kelchtermans, 1993a; Woods, 1993), who see a critical incident as an experience which, as defined by the respondent, results in a change of professional behavior.

Life history is particularly relevant to this study, which documents a year in the lives of three teachers, and describes how their collaborative relationship developed and how it affected their classroom practice. Clearly, learning about these three teachers' lives can provide insight into their beliefs and practices, as well as their relationship with each other and with their students.

Methodology

The research questions guiding this study were: (a) how does the collaborative relationship of a triad of teachers responsible for the same classes of students develop over one year? (b) in what ways does their collaborative relationship affect their classroom practice? (c) how do the teachers' life histories help explain their

beliefs and practice? In order to answer the first question, I needed to identify teachers who had never collaborated and invite them to participate in the study, then arrange for them to teach the same classes and document their relationship from the outset of their collaborative experience.

Participant Selection

The study (Smith, 1998) was conducted in an intensive English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) program which will be described shortly. Three basic criteria were used for selecting teachers to participate: (a) they had at least three years of teaching experience; (b) they had taught in the ESL program for at least one year, and so were familiar with it; and (c) they had never collaborated. After identifying 15 teachers who met these initial criteria, I approached each one and said that I was interested in studying how collaborative relationships develop among teachers who had never collaborated. I told the teachers that for one year three study participants would co-teach two classes, hold a weekly teacher meeting, keep a personal journal, provide me with an autobiography, and participate in group interviews at least twice a semester. Each teacher was asked whether she or he would be interested in participating. Because prior research clearly indicated that collaboration, by its nature, is voluntary (Cole, 1992; Bell & Gilbert, 1994; Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990), it was imperative that the teachers be willing participants.

Several of the 15 teachers expressed interest in the study, but were unable to make the commitment for a variety of reasons, which included graduate studies, pregnancy, small children, and a heavy teaching load. Three teachers, Claire, Faith, and Pat (not their real names), thought carefully about the commitment involved. Each teacher said she was willing to participate. At that point I brought the three teachers together, and they all agreed that for one year they would co-teach two classes, hold a weekly teacher meeting, participate in periodic off-campus reflection-on-collaboration interviews, and keep a written journal. Additionally, Claire, Faith, and Pat each provided her life history through an individual interview (see Appendix for interview questions). I then spoke with the Assistant Director of the ESL program, who scheduled Claire, Faith, and Pat to co-teach the same classes and who worked a common one-hour lunch break into their Friday schedules.

Study Design

In order to document the teachers' actions as well as their reflections on their work, data were collected from a variety of sources: transcribed audiotapes of the teachers' weekly meetings and periodic reflection-on-collaboration interviews, teacher journals, and teacher life histories. Transcripts of 28 weekly meetings documented the teachers' interactions with each other as they discussed their classes, planned future lessons, and evaluated the students' progress. The meetings took place between classes during the teachers' lunch hour on Friday, which was the only time during the week when all three teachers were able to meet to discuss

Life History as a Key Factor

their work; consequently, they had no time for reflection (daCosta, 1993; VanManen, 1990). The five periodic reflection-on-collaboration interviews, which were held over two semesters, and which took place off campus in the evenings or on weekends, provided an opportunity for the teachers to focus on themselves and their collaborative efforts, and to reflect together on their work and the changes they perceived over time. The teachers' journals served as a vehicle for the teachers to reflect privately on their collaboration. They wrote, on average, every two weeks throughout the two semesters of the study. The teachers' life histories, which they gave in individual oral interviews, provided background on each teacher's life, as well as on their reasons for becoming teachers and for collaborating.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis is an ongoing process which takes place both during and after data collection (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & McCormack Steinmetz, 1991; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Units of analysis consisted of segments of the teachers' conversations at meetings and interviews. In the case of the teachers' journal entries, a unit of analysis varied from one sentence to a paragraph.

Emerging patterns and themes in the teachers' conversations and journal entries were coded. Major categories included social factors such as isolation, support, and collegiality; professional factors included shared decision-making, shared materials, and coordination. In addition, the teachers themselves regularly spoke of their excitement, enthusiasm, focus, awareness, willingness to take risks and accept challenges, and feelings of support and encouragement. These emerging categories and recurring themes formed the basis for analysis and interpretation of the data. Because member checks are an integral component of qualitative research (Butt et al., 1992; Kelchtermans, 1993a; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Woods, 1985), the research design incorporated an ongoing process of communication between the researcher and the teachers in the interpretation of data.

The Teachers' Setting

The context for the study was the English Language Institute (ELI), an intensive ESL program located on the campus of a large urban college. Each semester, the program serves approximately 400 international students who plan to attend college in the United States and return to their countries upon graduation. When students enter the ELI, they take a placement test. Depending on their score, the students are placed into one of six English proficiency levels, from beginning to advanced.

Each class, which consists of approximately 20 students, has three ESL teachers: one for reading, one for writing, and one for listening/speaking. However, they do not teach the students at the same time. Each teacher usually teaches two classes per term, and meets with each class six hours a week. At the beginning of

every semester, the teachers who are scheduled to instruct the same two classes of students discuss which teacher will take the major responsibility for instruction in reading, in writing, and in listening/speaking. After this initial meeting, the teachers generally do not meet or coordinate their instruction. There tends to be little continuity in co-teaching partnerships because the teachers are usually assigned to different co-teachers each semester. As a result of these circumstances, collaboration among the teachers has rarely taken place.

The Research Participants

At the time of the study, Claire had been teaching in the program for five years, Faith for 17 years, and Pat for seven years. All three held Master's degrees, were married, and had three children ranging in age from 15 to 25. They all had family responsibilities, and Faith and Pat had at least one other teaching position, but they all believed they had the time and energy to commit to the study.

The Teachers' Collaborative Experience

When the teachers began their first semester together, they were assigned two advanced level ESL classes. The teachers were excited about the idea of collaborating, but had no set plan for doing so. Pat, Faith, and Claire decided that during their weekly teacher meetings they would keep each other informed as to what each of them was teaching in class, and discuss the students' progress and difficulties.

Semester One

Claire, Faith, and Pat agreed that Faith would teach listening/speaking, Pat would teach reading, and Claire would teach writing. They also decided to coordinate reading and writing. For example, Pat would work with the students on narrative reading when Claire was teaching narrative writing. Finally, they decided to focus their independently-taught classes around common themes such as *family*. During the first weeks of the semester, they continued to coordinate their work in their individually taught classes.

At the teacher meeting half way through the semester, the teachers made their first move towards interdependent work when they decided to have their two classes hold debates with each other. The debate project became the ongoing focus of Faith, Claire, and Pat's work together and strongly influenced the nature of their collaboration. The teachers recorded some of these effects in their journal entries. Pat wrote: "It is very comforting to know what 'the right hand' is doing. I think the students are responding well because there is a coordinated rationale behind what we do." Faith wrote: "We're a team. We work together for the good of the students. We share ideas and failures without feeling vulnerable."

At their next meeting, Pat, Faith, and Claire began working out their individual roles in the debate preparation. As the listening/speaking teacher, Faith said she

Life History as a Key Factor

would conduct smaller, in-class debates as practice prior to the actual debates. As the reading teacher, Pat planned to give the students a library assignment to research material for their debate topics, which included gun control and physician-assisted suicide. In this early stage of the debate process, Claire was not clear on her role as the writing teacher, but she did decide to have the students in the two classes become pen pals so they would have an interest in meeting each other on the day of the debates.

The teachers developed their debate project over several weeks. They divided each class into groups of four students, each of whom was assigned a specific role. As the writing teacher, Claire had the students keep personal journals in which they reflected on how their debate group was progressing. Claire read and responded to the students' entries every week. Pat and Faith depended on Claire to inform them of any problems within the debate groups which the students may have written about in their journals.

During subsequent weekly meetings, as the teachers continued finalizing their plans for the debates, they wrote their impressions in their journals. Faith described her excitement, and her own growth, in her journal:

When we started working together I felt like an experienced teacher taking on a new job. I knew what I was supposed to do because of my prior experience but at the same time there was an air of anxiety and excitement about this project. The anxiety has gone but the excitement hasn't. I feel that personally I've become more focused, more aware of long range goals for the students.

Pat, Claire, and Faith scheduled the last day of classes for the debates. During the meeting they held immediately afterward, they evaluated the debate process and planned revisions for the next term. For example, they decided to set up student groups and pen pals earlier in the term, and to make writing an integral component of the debate process.

Semester Two

Claire, Pat, and Faith's initial meeting of the second semester was focused and purposeful. The teachers planned out the debate project for the entire semester. Pat noted in her journal: "The collaborative process makes it easier to develop good ideas. I know that I can develop my own ideas but they can be even better with more input from another teacher."

At the first reflection-on-collaboration interview of the semester, Pat and Claire discussed their work together. Pat said, "Say I have a particular lesson that I want to do. I know I have two people that I can call, and say to them, 'What do you think?' I feel I have this wealth of knowledge and experience that I can turn to as a teacher." Claire reflected, "It keeps me focused, it makes me think long and hard about what I'm doing with the students: how it affects me, how it affects Pat's class, how it affects Faith's class."

As their second semester drew to a close, Pat, Faith, and Claire decided to

continue teaching together after the study officially ended. Claire would continue teaching writing in order to improve her skills. Pat and Faith switched skills, so that Pat would teach listening and speaking, and Faith would teach reading. In her journal entry a week later, Claire reflected on her increasing self-confidence, and on the students' responses to the debate process: "I feel more comfortable speaking to the students about the debate process. Also, they have been sharing their ideas and fears in their journals. It's interesting to do this (the debate) a second semester."

At the second reflection-on-collaboration interview of the semester, Pat suggested having the students complete a questionnaire in which they would be asked to evaluate the debate process, and Claire and Faith agreed. As they typically did after a reflection-on-collaboration interview, the teachers wrote about their work together in their journal entries. Claire wrote of her feelings about continuing to teach writing for a third semester: "I'm excited about doing the same skill. I really feel I've learned a lot this semester about how I want to pursue this 'wonderful' process of writing (hopefully not at the students' expense!)" Pat wrote: "I think that collaborating forces me to be more creative and not to slack off when I get tired. I don't want to let my 'comrades' down. These last two weeks I've been tired but meeting with Faith and Claire has refreshed and stimulated me. I'm getting back my enthusiasm."

Claire, Faith, and Pat held their final teacher meeting of the semester immediately after the last two debates. This meeting served as a debriefing on the debate process. The following Monday, the students completed the questionnaire, and Claire had the students write a reaction to the debate process.

The Life History Factor

In this section, Faith, Claire, and Pat's collaboration is revisited in light of each teacher's life history, which offers insight into the reasons why each teacher believed that collaboration was important, why she was interested in participating in a collaborative effort and made a commitment to it, what each teacher contributed to and drew from their work together (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986; Kelchtermans, 1993a), and how it affected the students.

At the time they were invited to participate in the study, Claire, Faith, and Pat were at a critical period in their teaching lives (Day, 1993; Denicolo & Pope, 1990; Goodson, 1992a; Kelchtermans, 1993a; Woods, 1993). In their individual interviews, Claire and Faith expressed a need for challenges in their teaching situation. Although Claire had only been teaching at the college level for five years, she was already beginning to consider leaving teaching because it had begun to lose its challenge. Faith felt that, after 17 years, her teaching had become a routine responsibility, one which she no longer fulfilled with enthusiasm. Pat was interested in a collaborative relationship with other teachers because at the point in time when she was invited to participate in the study, she felt isolated from interaction with other teachers.

Claire

Claire described herself as a social person, and she attributed her development in elementary and high school to having been socially active. The teachers' collaboration served Claire as an important social environment in which she felt comfortable enough to voice her concerns about her inexperience as a writing teacher and to seek help from her colleagues in order to improve her teaching skills.

In her autobiographical interview, Claire talked about loving learning, loving her teachers, and always loving school. At teacher meetings and reflection-on-collaboration interviews, and in her journal, Claire frequently referred to her ongoing learning (Kelchtermans, 1993a). She was determined to learn to teach writing well, and she persevered in teaching that skill for three consecutive semesters. During that time, Claire discussed her progress and concerns with Pat and Faith and developed her role in the debate process, beginning with the students' pen pal and journal assignments; she gradually became more directly involved in the debate process as she helped the students write their presentations and prepare summaries of their arguments.

When she was a student, Claire often looked to her teachers for support. Now she relied on Faith and Pat as supportive teachers (Knowles, 1992; Woods, 1993) who encouraged her, provided her with materials and ideas, and helped her define her role in the debate process.

Claire saw the students in socially interactive terms, too. Her social nature led her to implement the pen pals concept between students in the two classes each semester. When Claire was in school, she liked teachers who seemed to care about their students. Claire's work with her own students demonstrates a similar interest. For example, Claire engaged the students in writing personal journals, which she read and responded to as part of her teacher/student interaction with them, and to learn of any difficulties the students might have been experiencing as they worked with their debate group members. The students often wrote of their personal lives in their journals, and Claire wrote back, expressing her interest and support. These two examples of writing which Claire implemented in her class work exemplify a student focus that she felt had often been missing from her own school experiences, which she said had been very teacher-centered (Knowles, 1992).

Claire loves learning, and missed it, which was one of her reasons for wanting to engage in a collaborative relationship with other teachers. She was becoming bored, and felt that she was not experiencing any further growth as a teacher. As Claire expressed it, "I do most of my life by the seat of my pants. And in teaching." One of the challenges she experienced in her work with Faith and Pat involved her in the long process of changing her day-by-day approach to life and to teaching. Claire often spoke and wrote about this difficult process, and reported her progress in her journal.

Faith

Teachers' childhood experiences affect them in their adult lives, including their decision to become teachers (Knowles, 1992). In her autobiographical interview, Faith described how she learned her values from her maternal grandparents, who had raised her. Faith described them as very generous people who believed that "we are responsible for other people." When she was a child living on a farm, Faith observed how her grandparents had assisted their neighbors in need by sharing their milk and food with them. Faith believes that such values have influenced and guided her all her life (Pajak & Blase, 1989). For example, Faith described how she had helped a second-grade classmate with her schoolwork, and her foreign student classmates when she attended junior college. As a teacher, she tried to help her own foreign students with difficulties they experienced in the United States. For example, when one of the students had run out of money and had dropped out of class, Faith brought up her situation at a teacher meeting in order to discuss how to assist her.

Faith's empathy with her students stems from incidents in her life when she left a familiar environment and when she grappled with a new culture and language (Kelchtermans, 1993a; Woods, 1993). Faith had lived with her grandparents from the time she was born. When she was about 12 years old, Faith's mother took her to live with her and Faith's five younger brothers and sisters. Faith described this experience as having been very difficult for her. At that time, she had a teacher who seemed to understand the problems Faith was experiencing at home, and who had been very understanding and kind to her. When Faith was 17, she left the United States to study in Colombia. She did not speak Spanish, and knew only one person. Faith struggled to live and study in a new country and become familiar with an unknown language.

Faith also believes it is important to feel part of something—a group, a family. At the final reflection-on-collaboration interview, Faith talked about being actively aware of the other two teachers and of being involved as part of a group. She described it as being part of a family. Throughout the first two semesters, Faith helped Claire develop her skills as a writing teacher and her role in the debate process. During the third semester of their collaboration, Faith helped Pat as she taught listening and speaking for the first time.

Faith's belief that "we are responsible for other people" is also reflected in the way that she initially set up the debate groups. The four students in each debate team depended on each other to fulfill their part of the preparation and presentation of the debate. The students received a group grade as well as an individual grade, an evaluation which reflected their interdependence.

Faith's husband was an influential person in her life. Faith had stayed home while her children were small. However, she missed going to school. When her youngest child started school, her husband encouraged her to go back to college

Life History as a Key Factor

and supported her by taking care of the children while Faith attended classes to complete her B.A. degree. However, during that period she had another child and remained home to care for him. When he started school, Faith became a real estate agent, but the work did not satisfy her. Again her husband encouraged her to return to school, and he took care of the children while she attended college at night to earn her master's degree. At the points in Faith's life when she felt the desire to return to school, she received the support she needed from a key person in her life, who facilitated her making a change in her career (Denicolo & Pope, 1990; Knowles, 1992; Woods, 1993).

At the time of the study, Faith had been teaching for 17 years. She saw the invitation to participate in a collaborative relationship as an opportunity to liven up her teaching life, which she felt had become routine. Faith believed that she would learn from her experience working with Claire and Pat.

Pat

In her autobiographical interview, Pat described herself as a social person. Since her marriage, Pat has relocated seven times, as her husband's job required. Her constant moving meant meeting new people, finding new jobs, trying to finish her degree. Throughout her life, she has been involved with other people socially, for example, with a New Neighbors group. Knowledge of Pat's repeated moves provides a context for understanding her desire to overcome her feelings of isolation and to establish relationships with other people (Day, 1993; Kelchtermans, 1993b; Pajak & Blase, 1989).

Pat consistently talked and wrote about not being in a vacuum and not feeling isolated. Pat was looking for a way to end her feelings of isolation by collaborating with Faith and Claire (Day, 1993). Pat regularly interacted with Faith and Claire to exchange ideas and receive feedback from them. In fact, a recurring theme for Pat was the desire for professional exchange with her colleagues in order to improve her instruction. Pat often mentioned being able to take one of her ideas or lessons and, using Claire and Faith as "sounding boards," to make her lessons better. Pat frequently referred to work "the three of us" were doing. For instance, at one teacher meeting, Pat said, "Maybe with the three of us thinking about it, we'll come up with something." Faith and Claire served as important people in Pat's professional life (Knowles, 1992).

Pat spoke about loving to try new things. She likes to work with people and learn from people. Pat believes that good teachers are good learners. Pat was inexperienced with teaching listening and speaking and had never used the college's language lab. However, she suggested to Faith that they switch language skills for their third semester together so she could learn. She looked forward to teaching writing during one summer session because she would be able to use Claire as a resource and learn from her experience. Pat was interested in collaborating with Faith and Claire because she felt she could learn from them, and so become a better teacher (Kelchtermans, 1993a).

The Extension of the Teachers' Collaborative Culture to the Students

The collaborative culture which Claire, Faith, and Pat developed extended to the students in the type of work they asked the students to engage in, as well as in the collaborative relationship the students themselves developed through their class work. When the teachers decided to have their two classes hold debates, Claire suggested having the students in the two classes become pen pals because she believed that having pairs of students write letters to each other would help them get to know each other and would make them interested in meeting each other on the day of the debate. The teachers felt that, if the students knew they had pen pals in Faith, Pat, and Claire's co-taught class, the students would have a stronger sense of community outside their own class. The teachers' belief was confirmed at the end of the first semester, when the students expressed excitement about meeting their pen pals, sought them out to speak with them when the debates concluded, and continued to speak with each other during the summer session.

About mid-point in the teachers' second semester together, Faith, Claire, and Pat reached a point in their collaboration where they were interested in the students' impressions of their work together. The teachers also decided to have the students write reactions to the debate process. The teachers' practice is consistent with the findings of Cousins, Ross, and Maynes (1992) and Zeichner et al. (1987), who reported that teachers' collaboration and joint work led to an improved understanding of students. Pat, Faith, and Claire obtained their students' opinions of the debate process in order to understand it from the students' perspective, and to refine it the following semester in light of the insights they would gain.

In a manner analogous to their own collaborative work, the teachers set up the debate groups so that the students were dependent on each other in preparing for the debates. Each group member had a unique function; no one could participate in the debate without the support and interaction of his or her group members. The students' written reactions to the debate process illustrate that the students did develop a spirit of community. Students wrote of the unity and teamwork that had emerged among their debate group members: "It is a good experience for me to prepare for the debate. From the debate I understand what the teamwork is." "We solved many difficulties [in our group] one by one; because of these experiences, our team's unity became deeper and deeper." "Through this project, I have learned that if everyone takes part in a different job, the final result will be so great. Also, my teammates' co-operation is very important." It is clear from the students' responses that the teachers' collaboration had a positive impact on the students (van Loenen & Haley, 1993). It is noteworthy, too, that the ultimate goal of the debate project was the students' successful execution of the debate in English, their new

Life History as a Key Factor

language. There was no winning team, no losing team, and at the end of the process all the students congratulated each other on their hard work.

The Perception of the Teachers' Collaborative Relationship by the Students

That the students perceived the collaborative culture which the teachers developed was apparent in their journal writing to Claire, in their conversations with the teachers, and in their responses to the teachers' questionnaire. The students were asked: "Think about your teachers this semester. In what ways was their work with you helpful?" "How did your teachers' work together (i.e., their collaboration) help you?" Typical responses include: "Because they were very enthusiastic with all work they did together, my spirit got open to learning English in a wonderful way." "I think they worked together very well. They were separated in their work but it was related in work. So we learned as there were just one part." "Their collaboration was helpful for students, because they know about every one of the students. In addition, their good relationships affected the students." The teachers often referred to each other in their classes, for example to remind the students of a grammatical structure which another teacher had taught, or, as in Pat and Claire's case, to point out that main idea and supporting details in reading were connected to the other teacher's work in writing.

Conclusion

The three teachers in this study had busy, active personal lives, yet they dedicated considerable time and effort to their work together. They were motivated to engage in this collaborative work because each, in her individual way, was at a point in her life where she was seeking a challenge or a stimulating teaching environment which would help her to develop or renew her teaching career. Pat was looking for an opportunity to develop a relationship with other teachers and to exchange ideas in a professional environment, which would help her become a better teacher. Faith, who had come to feel that her teaching had become routine, found a source of renewed enthusiasm through their collaboration. Claire had reached a point in her life where she was considering leaving teaching for a new career. Her experiences with Faith and Pat helped her take on a new challenge and develop her teaching skills in an unfamiliar area, writing.

At the heart of the teachers' collaboration lay three basic factors. The first was their commonly held belief in collaboration as an ideal way for teachers to work together. Because of their conviction, they were all willing to put into their collaborative effort whatever time and effort were necessary in order to make it successful and rewarding. The second factor that they all agreed on was that they would have the opportunity to end the isolation they so often felt, and, in a social environment, talk with their co-teachers about their work, exchange ideas and

materials, and develop their lessons. As a result, the teachers believed they could maintain their enthusiasm throughout each semester, and could further improve their instruction. Finally, Faith, Pat and Claire all felt that they would be able to give support to and receive support from each other as they took on challenges in the form of teaching skills they were unfamiliar with and in implementing a new project—in their particular case, the student debates.

The teachers' life histories help us understand their involvement in their teaching and their students (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986). As Clark (1992) points out, teachers' life experiences affect what they believe and how they teach. Specifically, the debate format which Pat, Claire, and Faith developed, and the individual and group assessment they devised are a direct reflection of their values and beliefs. Their belief in collaboration as an ideal way to work together extended to their students in the way the teachers organized them into debate teams whose members became interdependent, and who thereby developed a social environment in which to work and exchange ideas. In a manner analogous to Pat, Faith, and Claire's relationship, the students gave and received encouragement and support from each other both in their debate groups and after the debates, when all the students congratulated each other on a job well done.

Without the teachers' life histories, Pat, Faith, and Claire's motivations for entering into a collaborative relationship at a particular point in her life and the nature of each teacher's contributions to that relationship would not have been apparent. The way each teacher's values and beliefs about teaching were reflected in her work with the other two teachers as well as with her students would not have been revealed. Perhaps most important, we would not have learned how even experienced teachers can renew themselves by finding a means—in these teachers' case, through collaboration—for meeting personal and professional needs at critical periods in their lives.

Appendix

Autobiographical Interview Questions

1. Talk about some of your childhood experiences. What people and events do you remember?
How did they affect you?
2. Describe your own experiences as a student in elementary school, in high school, and in college.
Probes: Describe how you were taught. Describe some of the teachers you had. What are some school experiences that stand out for you? Which were positive? In what ways? Which were negative? In what ways?
3. Tell me how you became a teacher. Who/what influenced you to become a teacher? Who were your role models? Describe them.
4. Why did you agree to participate in this study on teacher collaboration?
Probe: Why were you willing to become involved in a collaborative effort with two other teachers?

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