CASE STUDY 10.3
Melinda Grant

Melinda Grant sat down at Andrea's kitchen table and accepted the cup of coffee gratefully. It was a cold, wet day, and the warm kitchen and sharp aroma of coffee made Melinda feel good. She had been looking forward to this Thanksgiving break as a chance for professional reflection and for catching up with her friend and neighbor, Andrea Samson. Melinda had been teaching full-time at Conway Elementary School in Littleton since September, and the time demands of her new job prevented her from enjoying a long visit with Andrea until now.

"Mel, it's been so long! I feel like I never see you anymore." Andrea's welcoming smile erased the weeks since the friends had last spoken. "How many people did you have for dinner yesterday?"

"Ten!" replied Melinda. "And I didn't even start—I mean not even the shopping—until school was out on Wednesday afternoon. I can't believe how much time teaching takes." Melinda's smile belied the complaint in her words. "How about you? Did you feed a small army?"

"Just my family and my sister and her kids," answered Andrea. "But let's not talk about cooking. I want to hear all about your new career. Is it working out the way you expected?" Andrea passed Melinda the sugar and leaned forward expectantly. Melinda doctored her coffee and settled into her chair, pondering where to begin.

Melinda had entered her third-grade classroom sure of her methods and convinced about the kind of teacher she intended to be, but ten weeks of exposure to the way other teachers did things had made Melinda pause to reflect. She remained committed to her beliefs but had been looking forward to this discussion with her friend. As a parent, Andrea was familiar with the school district; Melinda had a family of her own, and she knew that Andrea shared most of her ideas about children, learning, and the role of schools. They had spent many Saturday mornings commiserating at this same table about their children's education, and now that her role had changed, Melinda needed some of Andrea's reassurance.

This change in her life began two years ago when Melinda, who had worked for twelve years as a part-time computer software designer, became dissatisfied with her position. Her company was acquired by a larger computer firm, and her job description was altered dramatically. She decided to change careers and returned to graduate school to become certified in elementary education. Melinda enjoyed being a student again and dealing with the theoretical problems of education, but after a year

attending full-time she was eager to put the theory into practice. She was delighted when Littleton offered her a teaching position. Melinda, her husband, and their daughter had lived in the community for the past nine years, and Melinda was familiar with many of the school district's personalities and philosophies, though the school in which she would be teaching was not the one her daughter attended.

Melinda spent most of August eagerly preparing for her first class. Knowing she wanted her classroom to be an interesting and exciting learning environment, she started to collect items she knew she would use: books, a fish tank, cushions, all kinds of art materials, even an old sand table rescued from a closing nursery school—"garage-sale material," her husband complained, only half kidding. Melinda justified the trouble she went to by asking herself, "How could I explain on the one line on Littleton's requisition form what a sand table would be used for?" She emptied her garage and brought everything to her classroom in the last week of August, and she and Shawna, her 11-year-old daughter, spent the week preparing the room for the beginning of school. At the end of the week, both agreed that the room looked great. Melinda valued Shawna's opinion and her input. After all, Shawna had experienced third grade more recently than Melinda had.

Her class was a normal one for Littleton: twenty-five students. Of the thirteen boys and twelve girls, ten were white students, eight black, five Hispanic, and two Asian. She found them an eager, active group of children, some intellectually more mature, some physically more mature, some emotionally more mature, and all with potential for success in school. That was Melinda's attitude toward education, formulated on her own but reinforced by her year of studying educational theory. She truly believed that every child could learn if motivated, challenged, and helped to develop his or her potential.

Melinda settled into her new position more easily than she ever imagined she would have. As it turned out, the children were more nervous and unsure of themselves than she was, and all her hard work in preparation, combined with her good sense and easy manner, made the job a pleasure. Melinda had strong ideas about how to approach her class. She wanted to focus on critical-thinking skills and to use an interdisciplinary approach to all the content subjects. She wanted to use lots of group work, especially cooperative learning groups, to channel the natural bent of 8-year-olds toward positive social activity. She also hoped to integrate artistic projects into the standard subject areas as much as she could. In her week of preparation she had arranged the room to accommodate her teaching strategy, with the desks forming groups of five students each, with tables for science and reading centers located at the periphery of the room, and with the sand table ready for a class project she was planning that would last for at least half the year. Melinda envisioned a classroom full of activity and movement, fun and learning.

On the first day of class, Melinda met Barbara Stratton, the third-grade teacher from the room next door, and quickly saw how differently two people could approach the same job. A friendly woman in her forties, Barbara had been teaching at Conway for almost twenty years, working mostly with the third grade. She was quick to offer her help and invited Melinda into her classroom at the end of the day. Barbara Stratton had arranged the desks in her room in four rows of six, with two desks placed several feet away from the others. "For the troublemakers," Barbara explained. "And, as usual, I have several of those," she chuckled. "I find this seating arrangement keeps them somewhat controlled." Melinda nodded, preferring not to get into a discussion of behavior management with a twenty-year veteran on her first day on the job. In that first meeting, Barbara seemed a curious mixture of tough and tender as she alternated between complaining about the bad behavior and low intelligence of her students and offering insightful ideas about who needed help and how to provide it. "All this in only six hours of observation," marveled Melinda to herself.

As the school year progressed, Melinda found that Barbara was always willing to extend help and advice; Barbara was happy to play the role of mentor as long as Melinda accepted the role of eager novice. She offered worksheets she used for basic math and language arts skills, suggested ideas for seatwork, and shared birds' eggs, hornets' nests, and other nature finds. Melinda appreciated Barbara's attention despite the fact that she and Barbara were as far apart as two teachers could be in regard to educational strategy. Shawna noticed it when she visited her mother's classroom in October. "You both teach third grade, but your rooms look so different. She has all those posters that kids hate, about good foods and good punctuation, and she hangs up those boring math tests, and only the ones with '100 percent' on them. Almost everything on your walls was made by your students, and your room is full of class projects. I love your room, especially the city of the future in the sand table. If I were in third grade, I'd want to be in your room. It looks like it would be more fun!"

Melinda accepted the praise even though she wasn't sure an 11-year-old's definition of fun would stand as an evaluation of teaching performance. Besides, she valued much of the advice Barbara Stratton so regularly dispensed. The day after Shawna had registered her performance appraisal, Barbara came into Melinda's room to share lunch with her. Between bites of tuna salad, Barbara asked, "Have you begun organizing your practice work for the Iowa test yet? I know it seems a long way off, but you need to get your kids ready. So much depends on their scores. You get measured right along with the children. I have some great workbooks you can borrow to begin making copies for practice for the class."

"Barbara, the test is months away. We're doing so many things in class right now. I'm starting a writing workshop, and the students will begin making animal habitats next week. I think I'll dampen their enthusiasm if

I introduce workbook drills. They'll get the skills some other way. I'm sure my class will do OK on the test."

"I hate to keep reminding you that you're new at this, Melinda, but there are parents out there who will measure *your* ability, not their children's, by how well the students score on standardized tests. Your job is to teach these children how to get the best scores they can. It will make them look good, and it will certainly help your position."

"But the kids need so much more, and school can give them so much more. The parents must know that the kind of work their kids bring home now is as important as standardized test scores."

Barbara smiled and patted Melinda's hand. "I'm only telling you this for your own good. Children need to master basic skills before they deserve special projects. Every year they give me the dullest students. The district claims it doesn't track at this age, but every year I get the worst kids. I spend all my time on skills with them—drill, drill, drill. Sometimes I get depressed because it's not much fun, for me or for them, but my students always have the highest scores in the entire district. If I let them spend their time building projects and drawing pictures and writing stories, they will score poorly on the Iowas. And I know my success as a teacher here depends on my students' scores on that test."

Melinda nodded her agreement and changed the subject. Later that week she began to do some checking. Barbara had not boasted idly. Her classes were, in fact, consistently among the highest in the district on the Iowa tests. And Barbara's class of third-graders this year did seem to have an overabundance of students with problems, at least in comparison to Melinda's class. Barbara regularly told her stories of the children's problems, both academic and behavioral, which Melinda was sure she wouldn't know how to handle. "A value-added comparison of teachers would make Barbara Stratton a candidate for 'Teacher of the Year,' " thought Melinda.

As she finished telling Andrea about her classroom and about the concerns that Barbara raised, Melinda leaned back in her chair and concluded, "So I can't argue with the results she gets, but I just can't bring myself to teach that way." It had taken Melinda an hour to summarize her situation for her friend, sharing her doubts about the efficacy of Barbara Stratton's approach and her own disdain for standardized tests. "I know my class learns basic skills through children's literature, creative writing, math projects, even activities like drawing pictures, creating masks, and building futuristic cities. Since I'm not drilling the students directly, as Barbara does, they probably won't show dramatic test scores, but the learning will last."

Melinda leaned forward again and spoke emphatically, confident that Andrea would be sympathetic to her position. "They'll be more critical and more creative thinkers; they'll be able to use their whole brains; they'll be able to see more around them; they'll be better citizens; they'll know how to

work cooperatively. Surely district administrators and parents must know that knowledge can't be measured just by standardized tests."

Melinda ended her speech with her hands open and extended, both to emphasize her point and to welcome Andrea's support. In spite of her confident delivery, Melinda was anxious for moral support from her friend.

But Andrea let a moment pass before replying, and while her tone was kind, her response was devastating. "Don't be naive about this school district, Mel. Littleton is a small city with some urban problems and a middle class that's worrying about becoming the minority. If we want to keep a strong middle class here and encourage other families like us to move in, we've got to maintain high test scores at all levels. You read the local paper. The test scores of each district in the county and of each school in each district are published every year. The school board receives tremendous pressure from local citizens to keep those scores high. People who own their own homes are particularly strident on this issue. You know that. All anyone talks about is property values in Littleton. And even though the papers don't publish individual class scores, everyone in the school knows which teachers' classes score the highest and which the lowest. Even parents know! I think your classroom sounds terrific, Mel, but you better cover all the bases. I hate to say this to you, but I think Barbara Stratton is right."