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From an Ecological Perspective

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Abstract

This study’s purpose was to explore the daily work lives of urban teachers to understand how they experienced career fit, and factors that helped them work in the environment. The ecological counseling model was used as the framework to understand the person-environment fit of five urban teachers, whose stories are revealed in this qualitative inquiry.

Teachers described an urban school as challenging, with poor funding, few supplies, disadvantaged low-achieving students, and little parental or administrative support. Students from violent neighborhoods came with family issues associated with poverty: substance abuse, poor health, domestic abuse, and broken families. Urban-dwelling students are at risk because of the emotional, psychological and intellectual problems that define the plight of poverty.

Initial coding created themes: sense of responsibility, personal rewards, caring, resourcefulness, flexibility, and autonomy. Teachers felt responsibility for students’ intellectual, moral and emotional development, using personal resources of flexibility, resourcefulness, and caring. Lacking support from parents or administrators, they felt autonomous, but despite challenges, teachers experienced personal rewards. Further analysis revealed three ecological principles of import: multiple contexts are considered, interactions between person and environment are particularly salient, and meaning making is the basis for how people perceive reality. Multiple contexts involved daily assessments of student interactions. Interactions between person and environment were also salient for teachers to define their life-career context. The principle of meaning making was how teachers perceived reality in relation to the urban setting, shaping their own experiences, values, attitudes, goals and purposes.

This study bridged two disciplines, counseling and education, to explore the career fit of urban teachers. Data supported use of the ecological counseling model to promote understanding
of the person-environment interactions of the teachers. The metatheoretical interdisciplinary
course of the model offers possible recommendations for urban teacher support. How teachers
made meaning of their careers in an urban setting highlighted how they developed coping
abilities in negotiation and resolution of personal and environmental factors. Retention may be
enhanced by understanding their motivations and reinforcing their personal rewards. By their
own report, teachers understood urban school challenges, and still made the career choice.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Urban schools are considered by most education professionals to be challenging environments in which to work (Bullough, 2001; Lippman, Burns, & McArthur, 1996; Prince, 2002; Quartz, 2003; Renfro, 2003; Ringeisen, Henderson, & Hoagwood, 2003). Teachers in these schools encounter many troubling issues such as lack of funding, lack of resource materials, disadvantaged and low-performing students, little control over their curriculum, and little parental or administrative support. In addition, environmental stressors outside the school building include increasing violence in urban neighborhoods (Brinson, Kottler, & Fisher, 2004), too few community supports and issues of poverty (Quartz, 2003; Ringeisen et al., 2003), problems with substance abuse and poor health, and domestic violence and broken families (Bullough, 2001; Lippman et al., 1996). Within this type of environment teachers are expected to educate children and children are expected to learn skills necessary to be contributing members of society, even though the challenges are substantial.

The emotional, psychological and intellectual problems of urban-dwelling children, especially low-income children of color, are bound together in environmental circumstances that define the plight of poverty, including poor housing, inadequate transportation systems, insufficient and/or inadequate diets, unsafe and unhealthy communities, and unstable, inconsistent relationships (Bullough, 2001; Henry, 2000; Payne, 2001). Herr (1999) states that chronic poverty “cripples or stifles social mobility, educational achievement, and skill development” (p. 207). Urban youth come from homes and neighborhoods without adequate preparation for a structured school setting and without the skills to deal with interpersonal relationships necessary to work in classrooms, the cafeteria or the gymnasium (Lippman et al.,
Additionally, many children in urban school settings suffer learning problems related to their economic disadvantages (Goldenberg, Kunz, Hamburger, & Stevenson, 2003; Ringeisen et al., 2003).

In one study, administrators of urban schools found it more difficult to recruit teachers into these settings than into suburban settings (Lippman et al., 1996). The report showed that in terms of experience and diversity, urban teachers were as experienced or more experienced, and often were more ethnically diverse than their rural or suburban counterparts. Financially, urban teachers were paid as well, and sometimes better, than their counterparts. However, according to a survey conducted with more than 5000 teachers, the ability to “thrive” in the classroom requires more than financial remuneration (Holloway, 2003). Specific types of support that foster such sustainability include professional development, ongoing mentoring, and empowerment as external supports, and resiliency and coping resources as internal supports. Deficiencies in these areas can be demoralizing, so if career persistence is influenced by the degree of support an individual receives in his or her career behavior, the problem is how to provide such necessary support (Phillips-Miller, Campbell, & Morrison, 2000).

Teachers understand the culture of the urban environment in which they work through their interactions within that environment. Furthermore, teachers’ career satisfaction is understood through their personal experience of work, which is rooted in this social context. An urban school setting provides a rich environment in which teachers and students are influenced by factors that can be understood by investigating their person-environment interactions (Conyne & Cook, 2004). How they achieve a person-environment fit in order to do their work varies according to the degree to which they find a balance between supports and challenges, or the ecological understanding of concordance.
Social scientists, such as counselors, psychologists, behaviorists and social workers, have agreed that there are multiple internal influences (P - person variables) and external influences (E - environment variables) on human behavior (B), and the consequences of those interactions is translated into individuals’ actions. This study will use the formula provided by Lewin (1936) for the ecological model:

\[ B = f(P \times E) \]

Behavior is a function of the person interacting with the environment. This is the basis of the ecological counseling perspective supporting the research in this study to explore how teachers in an urban school identify and utilize their internal and external resources to perform their work of educating young people.

Additionally, a goal of the study is to identify ways in which teachers make meaning of their careers within a challenging environment, eventually offering recommendations to teacher educators and counseling professionals. Teachers function within a school system and within a specific school, with competing demands for their time, energy and professional expertise. By examining the person-environment interactions of teachers in an urban teaching environment - in an urban school where teachers work with low-functioning students, low financial resources and low staff morale - this study aims to understand the “myriad factors influencing and shaping the career path” of these teachers (Cook, Heppner & O’Brien, 2002), which would further their opportunities for growth and development.

**Research Questions**

This study is a qualitative inquiry conducted within the framework of the ecological counseling model, specifically in terms of the person-environment fit for teachers in an urban teaching environment. The purpose of the study is basic research in which the everyday work
lives of urban teachers will be explored to understand how they experience their careers on a day by day basis, and what factors help them to continue their work in this particular environment. These factors will be described by teachers in their personal stories through qualitative methodology. In this study, the concepts of the ecological model were used to:

(a) understand the “ecological niche” shared by teachers in an urban school,

(b) understand how teachers behave as education professionals within the setting, and

(c) understand the career fit of teachers in an urban school.

The importance of support for urban teachers is critical. Teacher retention in these schools is difficult due in part to what Williams (2003) reported as “public disillusionment with education and increasing demands on teachers” (p. 74). Brown (2003) reports that the “personalized care children need is sometimes missing from urban students’ homes … so that care must be met at school” (p. 279). However, it is not enough for teachers to be caring or to feel a sense of satisfaction from student relationships. They are often confronted with moral professional decisions to make, about which students need help and how much time teachers can give to those students (Bullough, 2001). So, what are the factors within teachers’ ecological niches that provide sufficient internal and external support to outweigh the ecosystem challenges? Focusing on teachers’ sense of satisfaction with their urban careers is just one mechanism for improving the overall educational environment for urban teachers and children.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to discover if the concepts in the ecological counseling model promote understanding of the person-environment interactions of teachers in an urban school. In an effort to offer recommendations for the support and retention of high quality teachers in challenging environments, it is hoped that teachers’ perceptions of their person-
environment interactions will be revealed, and how they have developed coping abilities in an ongoing dynamic negotiation and resolution of personal and environmental factors. In particular, the study will contribute knowledge that will help educators and professional counselors to understand how to support teachers in their urban career development.

**Significance and Limitations of the Study**

This study should offer extensive insights to teacher educators, education administrators, career counselors, school counselors, mental health counselors (particularly those working in school settings), and counselor educators, to assist with understanding more about how urban teachers make meaning of their work. An ecological analysis will explore teachers’ motivations for working in an urban setting. Perhaps most importantly, teacher educators can learn how to support qualified and effective teachers in school environments that are perceived as challenging, and inform education administrators who can make attempts to support them in order to retain them. In addition, counselor educators who are preparing school and mental health counselors for their roles in the schools can benefit by learning about the ways that counselors can interact with teachers in various contexts.

Through careful research design and intensive data collection, the study is intended to contribute to outcome literature in both educational and counseling fields by elucidating the complexity of factors in teacher career development in urban settings. Teaching and learning are complex phenomena, as are teacher – student relationships. It is important to note that the study is limited to a particular setting with a very specific context. The sample size is small and all five teachers work in the same urban school. Though the amount of data collected was substantial, the findings are not generalizable.
The instruments used in this study contain categories based on ecological principles and teacher observation guides. Classroom observations using frequency charts, or counting measures, means that the instruments define in an a priori manner what was recorded about classroom events (Borich, 1999). Observations recorded in this way are what research says should be happening in classrooms and not on what is actually happening in classrooms. The use of numerous instruments, and research journal notes, however, provided multiple perspectives from which data were obtained in order to capture the most thorough understanding possible with a small sample and limited time in the field. Triangulation is also achieved with the use of multiple data methods, sources, and researchers (including two ecological counselors’ profiles), aimed at choosing sources that complement each other, yet may have different strengths or biases (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Definitions**

In order to fully understand the meaning of the narrative to follow, definitions of some terms are provided here. These definitions rely heavily on the model of ecological counseling as described by Conyne and Cook (2004).

*Career* - the course of events which constitutes a life; the sequence of occupations and other life roles which combine to express one’s commitment to work in his or her total pattern of self-development. Careers are unique to each person and created by what an individual chooses or does not choose, and are dynamic and unfold throughout life. The construct of career includes not only occupations but pre-vocational and post-vocational concerns, as well as integration of work with other roles: family, community, leisure (Herr, Cramer, & Niles, 2004). Career is thus both a phenomenological concept and a behavioral concept. It is the link
between what a person does and how that person sees himself or herself (Raynor & Entin, 1982). A career is the sequence of a person’s work experience evolving over time (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989).

**Career -** the total constellation of psychological, sociological, educational, physical, economic, and chance factors that combine to shape the career of any given individual over the life span (Sears, 1982). It is the lifelong behavioral processes and the influences on them that lead to one’s work values, choice of occupation(s), creation of a career pattern, decision-making style, role integration, self-identity, and career identity, educational literacy, and related phenomena (Herr et al., 2004).

**Concordance-** refers to a number of concepts known as balance, synergy, congruence and harmony, or “a state allowing for and encouraging growth”, which is understood to be imperfect, yet “taking advantage of strengths and supports” (Conyne & Cook, 2004, p. 24).

**Ecological-** is defined as “contextualized help-giving that is dependent on the meaning clients derive from their environmental interactions, yielding an improved ecological concordance” (Conyne & Cook, 2004, p. 6).

**Ecological-** identifies the influential segments, both animate and inanimate, of the individual’s ecosystem in his or her daily life. These include people who are encountered on a regular basis, features of the home and workplace, and even the weather in the community. Willi and associates theorized that people create and maintain their psychological equilibrium by constantly responding to their environment challenges, thereby creating a unique personal niche (Willi, Toygar-
Zurmühle, & Frei, 1999).

Ecosystem- "the sum total of interacting influences operating in a person’s life, including such diverse factors as his or her biological makeup, interpersonal relationships, the physical environment, and broader socio-cultural context” (Willi et al., 1999, p. 11).

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized according to University of Cincinnati guidelines and is divided into five chapters as follows: Chapter One is the Introduction; Chapter Two is the Review of the Literature; Chapter Three is the Research Methodology; Chapter Four is the Narrative of Findings and Data Analysis; and Chapter Five is the Discussion, Recommendations for Future Research, and Limitations of the Study.
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Introduction

Ecological counseling is a framework, one model through which we might understand the nature of the work within the counseling profession (Conyne & Cook, 2004). Counseling from this perspective is considered to be providing “contextualized” help to people in their place in the “human web of life” (p. 7). The reciprocity of interactions between people and their environments creates a central focus to the ecological counseling model. The perspective gained from this model offers counselors the ability to enhance their understanding of the influences that affect individuals’ behavior. In turn, there also are expanded options for interventions.

This chapter has two major parts: (1) discussion of the ecological model in general, and (2) its application to the work of teachers in an urban setting. The first part of the chapter will provide background information into the development of the ecological counseling framework, while the second part includes an exploration into understanding teaching careers in urban settings through the model.

The Ecological Model

The ecological model is a systems model positing that all individuals live in dynamic interaction within their environment. There is a bidirectional influence within the transactions of the systems in which the individual exists and the individual’s life (Shinn & Toohey, 2003). Influential interactions occur within subsystems at various levels of complexity and proximity to the individual. Influences at any one level of context are possible, but constraints are also possible at any level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The mixture of contexts, then, can be thought of as the “sum total of interacting influences operating in a person’s life” (Conyne & Cook, 2004, p. 11). In essence, this is the ecological framework, the fact that everything is actually part of an
individual’s ecosystem in some way, and that everything ultimately has influence on the individual’s behavior.

In systems theory, behavior and its effects from any single part of a system’s whole are interconnected with behavior and its effects from any other part of the system, and so forth. Any change in a part of the system modifies the entire system as well as that part. Systems theorists posit, then, that one cannot understand the whole by interacting with only part of the system. Unlike systems theory, the ecological model focuses on the relationships between persons and their environments, rather than how the system as a whole entity functions. Herr (1999) states that “a major premise confronting counselors is that people are in dynamic interaction with their environment” (p. 11). The ecological model states that there is interdependence between persons and environments, claiming the reciprocity of influence from each to the other. Rather than a systems model’s focus on the system as a gestalt, analyses and the subsequent interventions from an ecological perspective are focused on the individual within a specific set of contextual influences.

Human ecology is analogous to ecology within the physical world around us. Capra (1996) speaks about the “web of life” (p. 2) in describing the interaction and interdependence of living and nonliving systems as a network of influences. Rogoff (1982) asserts that “human behaviour is embedded in context, that context is not so much a set of stimuli that impinge upon a person as it is a web of relations interwoven to form the fabric of meaning” (p. 149). Changes in one system affect all other systems, particularly those from which an organism derives nourishment and support. If a system is threatened, its ability to withstand changes is dependent upon its degree of resiliency: the organism itself may be changed, or another system may
compensate. Adaptability is crucial to sustaining life within the dynamic processes of interaction of the organism and its environment.

The critical skill of sociocultural adaptation is necessary for humans. As humans respond to their life contexts, opportunities for flexibility and sustainability exist in the reciprocity of interactions of the person with the environment. What makes humans special and unique beyond the physical world is the fact that humans have the capacity to create meaning about their life experiences based upon their understanding of those experiences. Smith (2006) proposes that people have a “self-righting tendency” and that the way people make meaning of their experiences is more important than the experiences themselves. This coincides with the ecological understanding of concordance, or the balance between challenge and support. If people have the ability to adapt and grow, their levels of resiliency change in order for them to meet their needs.

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977) is often cited for his foundational model for human ecology (e.g., Arthur & McMahon, 2005; Betz, 2002; Conyne & Cook, 2004; Cook et al., 2002; Herr, 1999; Woodd, 2000). As described by Conyne and Cook (2004), Bronfenbrenner’s model identified four major subsystems that have an impact on human behavior: the microsystem, which consists of contexts that include face-to-face contact with significant others, including family, and peers at work or school; the mesosystem, which consists of connections where microsystems interrelate, such as school and home, or family and friends, or work and family; the exosystem, which consists of contexts in which individuals do not necessarily participate directly, but influence their actions or decisions, such as social institutions at a local level (e.g. health care, media, religious institutions); and the macrosystem, which consists of contexts that
are broad influences but exert important defining ideologies, such as laws, customs, abstract ideas and unwritten societal rules.

The conceptual work by Bronfenbrenner (1979) is presented as nested concentric circles representing various levels of contextual influence. The work prompted many social scientists to explore the interdependence of multiple systems on the individual. Within the ecological model, behavior is complexly determined by multiple contexts that may complement or challenge each other. For example, a parent who is distancing himself or herself emotionally from his or her family may be responding to poor job performance, due to frustration or poor self-esteem based upon negative feedback received from a work evaluation. In this example, the mesosystem representing the connection between family and work is influenced by two microsystems that do not correspond well. To expand the analogy, if the parent in this home is vulnerable to becoming unemployed, the children may begin to experience poor academic performance due to the stress experienced by members in the family. Though the children in this example are not directly involved in the parent’s work system (the system in which the children are not directly involved, but influences their actions), the effects of this exosystem level problem are seen in the children’s schoolwork. Likewise, the macrosystem (opportunity structure, expectations, and traditions) exerts influence when the national economy reflects increasing unemployment, pressuring the parent in this family to respond with significant concern to the threat of being unable to provide for the family’s needs. Herr (1999) stresses that these systems affect an individual’s psychological growth, particularly the “major importance of the dyadic relationships in the family system... and the larger systems of interactions in a total family unit or a peer group” (p. 21).
In their theory, Lofquist and Dawis (1991) state that changes in P-E fit can be affected by the environment, which may include changing one’s values or actions on the environment, further prompting change in the individual’s perception of the environment. For example, if the social context within a community or its school is not supportive of academic achievement, then students may not value academic achievement. In effect, students who do not value academic achievement experience a higher P-E fit in this community or school. Similarly, measures for evaluating school context benefit from examining the accommodation between individual students and the influences of teachers, classmates, and the physical and social environment.

The ecological model also is based on person-environment (P-E) fit theory which is presented in numerous ways and multiple theoretical perspectives (Caplan, 1987; Conway, Vickers, & French, 1992; Conyne & Cook, 2004; Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Herr, 2004; Holland, 1997; Lofquist & Dawis, 1991; Moos, 1987; Moos, 1991; O’Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991), which conceive the concordance between persons and environmental traits as the measure of fit. Willi (1999) purported that people shape their environments to create and maintain a personal niche. In response to challenges in the environment the individual’s personal niche is what develops effective behaviors in order to experience psychic well-being. The degree to which an individual achieves effective personal development depends upon the successful formation of a personal niche (Willi et al., 1999).

Lewin (1936) succinctly represented Behavior is a function of a Person interacting with his or her Environment:

$$B = f (P \times E)$$

This interactional paradigm is more complex than most current paradigms, many of which make a good case for centering attention on the within-person variables in assessment: Behavior equals
the function of the Person variables or \( B = f(P) \). Personal factors, such as genetic makeup and emotions influence the individual’s behavior when counseling focuses on person-centered interventions. However, it is clear that there are many external variables that must also be considered: Behavior also involves the function of Environmental variables or \( B = f(E) \) (Caplan, 1987; Conway et al., 1992; Holland, 1997; Lewin, 1936; Lofquist & Dawis, 1991; Moos, 1987; Neufeld, Rasmussen, Lopez, Ryder, Magyar-Moe, Ford, Edwards, & Bouwkamp, 2006; Roberts & Robins, 2004; Shinn & Toohey, 2003; & Trickett, Barone, & Watts, 2000). An example of focusing mainly on environmental issues is when a counselor works with an immigrant client who experiences racism in the host culture. The counselor may determine that the client’s difficulties stem from environmental sources, mainly its dominant cultural influences, offering interventions that focus on extrinsic factors without fully understanding how the client is internalizing the impact of those dominant cultural influences.

An exclusive focus on either the person or the environment overlooks the important element of the complex interaction between both person and environment. In that interaction each individual has a unique experience of the world, depending upon how he or she understands what is happening both internally and externally. The emphasis on the interaction \( P \times E \) in the ecological counseling model is an important distinction from other conceptual models. Understanding the nature of the relationship between persons and environment is particularly valuable to counseling professionals, providing assistance to persons who are seeking to understand what is happening in their lives.

In his sociological (and anthropological) perspective of the ecological model, Herr (2004) attends to diversity and cultural pluralism, which illuminates the unique context of individuals within the society. Consideration of socioeconomic status, race, gender and even the age of an
individual are factors that can be considered filters through which an individual makes meaning of his or her experiences. The behavioral expectations of different cultures are easily misunderstood and misinterpreted by those from a different set of norms, customs and behavioral expectations. Counseling professionals who embrace the ecological perspective increase their sensitivity to work more effectively with diverse individuals by examining the reciprocal interactions of the contexts in which individuals live and create meaning for their lives. With increasing cultural pluralism in our society, such explorations enhance the degree of understanding that counselors and their clients discover in their collaborations.

*Ecological Counseling*

Principles of the ecological counseling model provide a holistic framework through which a client’s person – environment interaction is examined for fit. In this study, the “client” is identified as a group of five teachers in an urban school. In this section the principles of the model will be expanded, as shown in the following table (Table 2.1). The principles as outlined by Conyne and Cook (2004) serve as a foundation for exploring the interaction of teachers in an urban school setting. These principles are relevant to understanding the theoretical framework used to guide data collection.

*Interdisciplinary Approach.*

The ecological counseling model has been drawn from various disciplines, such as biology and psychology. Scientists from multiple disciplines have elaborated variables that influence human behavior, such as biochemical processes and sociopolitical phases in history. Physicians have increasingly recognized the mind-body connection, both in diagnosis and treatment. Educators and school psychologists increasingly identify ecological influences as researchers look at bullying and school violence (Rodkin & Hodges, 2003), multiculturalism
Table 2.1 Ecological Counseling Principles

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and educational leadership (Pena, 1996), and risk and resilience factors (Stoiber & Good, 1998).

**Metatheoretical Perspective.**

Considered a metatheoretical perspective, ecological counseling seeks to intervene with the best fit of approaches that most directly addresses the multiple contexts within which individuals interact. For example, systems theory assists in examining the myriad layers of environmental influences in order to gain a sense of the whole context. Constructivist theory lends understanding of how people create their reality based upon the meaning they attach to life events and circumstances. The ecological counseling model provides a broad understanding of person and environmental factors to apply to behavioral dynamics. Conyne and Cook (2004) call this a “metamap” (p. 9), whereby the counselor acts as a “travel agent” (p. 10), to assist the client in finding resources to reach a destination and to provide expertise in helping to strategize the “journey” (p. 10).

**Multiple Contexts are Considered.**

A thorough ecological analysis provides a broad understanding of the client’s situation, including systems and individual factors (see Appendix H for a broad ecological profile, used as an instrument in this study). An ecological counselor strives to understand the conditions surrounding the client’s presenting state, including real, imagined and even symbolic contexts. All are relevant, can be proximal to or distal from the client, and contribute to the interactions between person and environment in obvious or subtle ways.

Consideration of a broad view of contexts enables a counselor and a client to unravel the complex and interconnected layers of influence resonating from systems such as the family, the church, school and work. Bronfenbrenner (1992) stated the importance of looking at the “developmental forces” (p. 11) at one level and the impact of those forces on any other level.
Events in the global environment also influence human behavior, according to some experts (e.g. Kasambira & Edwards, 2000; Maton, 2000). One example is the AIDS pandemic worldwide and its effects on human rights issues, poverty issues, and the immigration policies of this country and others. A most recent example of this world system is the war in Iraq, where American soldiers serve far from home and families. Other countries and cultures hold differing viewpoints about the American government’s decisions, which affects the relationships of people all over the world. Millions of people around the world have had their lives transformed by such political decisions. For the levels of influence as identified by Bronfenbrenner, adapted to illustrate the interplay between systems like those identified in this study, see figure 2.1.

The most potent influence on behavior is what immediately and most closely affects the choices a person makes, whether they are people, places, or things. Ecological niche refers to the portion of influences that directly affect a person’s daily life. It defines the immediate surroundings where the person lives, by taking into account the fit between the “capacities of the individual and the corresponding properties of the environment” (Willi, 1999, p.5). Every person is influenced by the people they interact with most closely, the available resources for sustaining life and health, and even the weather. As people interact, they develop their own personal niches. Whereas the ecological niche provides an objective and observable picture of a person’s daily life, the life pattern is the subjective experience of how the person makes meaning of his or her person-environment interactions over time. Life pattern represents the salient meaning of influences on a person’s behavior, demonstrated outwardly as the choices a person makes over time (Conyne & Cook, 2004). It is possible that some of the influences are outside of the person’s awareness, but still affect his or her behavior by the meaning the person ascribes to them.
Figure 2.1 Bronfenbrenner’s Levels of Influence, Adapted

(Conyne and Cook, 2004)
The combination of ecological niche (objective) and life pattern (subjective) is termed life space (Conyne & Cook, 2004). It is composed of (1) what can be described by an observer (external), (2) “elements not obvious to others” (internal) (p. 19), and (3) the meanings attached to all of the elements by the person over time. Individuals have the capacity to construct new meanings or reconstruct old ones. The fusion of contexts with experience and meaningful perceptions in his or her life space in sum total over time is the individual’s life course. These multiple contexts combined provide an individual’s story of behaving in the world, a story constantly modified by what is observable to others, and what is perceived by the individual.

*Full Range of Targets is Considered.*

The ecological counselor is able to consider a full range of targets for intervention. Working closely with the client to enhance his or her understanding of the life context, the counselor helps the individual to also consider more options for understanding the situation and possible ways of dealing with it. Targets include the individual, the family, and/or the school setting (including the primary teacher and the security officer or school social worker, all of whom may interact with the student on a daily basis in an urban school).

For example, an ill child in middle school may be suffering from depression, both due to personal factors (experiencing the parents’ divorce) and environmental factors (poor housing conditions and untreated allergies to seasonal pollen). The student makes a poor behavior choice by reacting angrily to a teacher’s requests for cooperation, and is eventually taken out of the classroom by the security officer. The principal responds, as he does to all security requests, and questions the student before a parent is called to school. The mother storms into school, angry about being awakened since she has no job. The student now faces the wrath of a parent, a principal charged with maintaining discipline, and a teacher who has many other students who
need his or her attention. The school social worker never spoke to the student because she was dealing with a truancy officer about another issue. An ecological school counselor may be able to help by providing in-school support, whereby the counselor and social worker collaborate to simultaneously target intervention with the student and the family, and school personnel. Though overly simplified, this complicated scenario is not an uncommon one, and would benefit significantly from an ecological assessment and intervention.

*Individuals are a Part of an Ecosystem.*

Humans live in a dynamic relationship with the natural world as well as with other humans as part of an ecosystem. Conyne and Cook (2004) define an ecosystem as “the sum total of interacting influences in a person’s life” (p. 11). Ecological counselors are able to think broadly and consider relational factors influencing behavior that are not easily identified. Those influences that are proximal to the client are potentially easier to recognize and address, e.g., relatives serving in the war overseas, or the death of a grandparent. Influences that are more distal also may be more difficult to identify, such as the condition of housing in the community, or local or national politics. One form of valuable assistance by the counselor is to help a client focus on those influences which are amenable to adaptation.

*Interactional in Nature.*

Focusing on the interactional processes between people and their environments, the ecological counseling model provides for examination of various processes and systems in which a person is engaged. People are a part of a family, their neighborhood, as well as the immediate community and the city. The interactions of people to others, or to their environments, are the focus of ecological counselors, and permit many possible representations of people in relationship. This view predisposes psychology based on the view that humans are independent
beings “with clear boundaries between self and the world around them” (Conyne & Cook, 2004, p. 13). Essentially, if a person responds to another person, the response causes a change in both. This is the interactional nature of ecological counseling.

Concordance is Sought.

In the ecological perspective, harmony and balance are experienced as ecological concordance when the elements of challenge and support are in balance. People experience challenges to personal development on a regular basis. If a person has strengths and supports in place from which to draw, the effects of challenges from other persons or the environment can be mediated successfully. Positive psychology, or strengths-based psychology, represents a paradigm shift in the field, from the medical model that focused on pathology to a model that stresses developing competencies (Smith, 2006). Positive psychology addresses interventions as finding and nurturing the best within each individual. Since there is a constant and dynamic relationship between persons and their contexts, concordance is always being reevaluated. Concordance is a goal, however, and emphasizes individuals’ ability to respond to internal and external stimuli.

Individual is an Integrated Being.

An important aspect of conceptualizing an individual’s ecosystem is perceiving the individual as an integrated being. Rather than looking at one domain of influence (e.g., thinking, feeling or behaving), an ecological counselor is sensitive to understanding multiple domains and considering multiple levels of intervention possibilities. Each person’s ecosystem is unique, according to the dynamics of any one relationship, or mixture of relationships, at a given time. Likewise, in negotiating or choosing interventions with a client, an ecological counselor finds
ways to discover the salient relationships at the time. For instance, a parent who has just been laid off from a job has different needs and priorities than when previously employed full time.

*Time is Important.*

The importance of time as a factor in assessment and intervention makes the ecological counseling framework stand out among other potential counseling paradigms. Historic events which surround people’s lives are just one example. If an individual lived during the 1950’s, social expectations for women’s roles in the workplace were different than they are for young women in the year 2006. Fewer opportunities existed for women to have a career fifty years ago (Herr et al., 2004). Another example of time is the consideration of developmental life stages. The value of leisure time in relation to work is possibly more important for a man in his late fifties who has already worked for thirty years, than for a young man in his thirties with two young children and a wife at home, and is considering his potential for advancement. Placing a client within the context of his life in either of these examples may call for very different interventions.

Consideration of developmental stages is also valuable in understanding careers, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Emphasis on time and life stages is evident in several career counseling theories. For example, Super outlined a complex and thorough “rainbow” of stages in an individual’s career development, including movement through “the life span and the life space, with the course of life, and with the major life roles” (Herr et al., 2004, p. 225). Super gave considerable attention to how psychological, social and physical factors of the individual and the environment varied as a function of timing in the life cycle. As noted by Herr et al., “workers must know as well as be able to do” (p. 76). In addition, workers must be learners throughout their careers.
Meaning Making.

Meaning making is a fundamental component of constructivism and its individualistic perspective of humans’ abilities to interpret and understand their interaction with environmental and social catalysts. Young and Collin (2003) describe the construct as, “meaning is constructed in a social, historical, and cultural context, through action and discourse in which we form relationships and community” (p. 378). A person cognitively constructs his or her own reality through the acquisition of knowledge, which explains how two people who share the same experience come away with different explanations about the meaning of that experience. Constructivism is particularly important to understanding situational responses through the ecological model because it highlights how individuals make sense of their environment and its impact on their lives.

In assessing an individual’s situation and planning treatment, an ecological counselor examines how the individual makes meaning of contexts. An individual perceives the importance of a given element in his or her surroundings, be it people, places, cultural norms or social expectations, which determine his or her behavior. An example of meaning making is a teacher who struggles with self-efficacy in terms of teaching strengths when students score poorly on standardized tests. Problems with academic performance are multidimensional so there is a danger for the teacher to connect poor academic performance with his or her professional abilities, not considering many other influences which created the context for poor academics in the first place.

Collaboration.

Collaborative efforts can increase the likelihood of successful interventions. The counselor’s knowledge and skills are but one part of a complex equation that also must include
the real world expertise and ongoing influences surrounding the client - those who constitute the immediate environment. The challenge to counseling professionals is to explore a variety of potential roles, such as advocate, group leader and consultant. Doing so enables those counselors who typically work in direct service delivery to see the value of working in other areas and with other disciplines. However, the ecological counselor’s skills in collaboration are essential in creating a relationship with the client in order to fully understand his or her needs, along with the potential resources available for intervention. The collaborative nature of the counseling relationship itself sets the ecological counseling model apart from other types of counseling interventions.

_Empowerment._

Empowerment refers to increasing the _spiritual, social_ or _economic_ strength of individuals, and involves developing successful capacities for personal and environmental stress relief. The collaborative nature of ecological counseling focuses on assisting clients to develop competencies for growth, while doing their own work in the counseling relationship. Assisting clients to improve their capabilities to accurately assess life contexts is a major step toward competency in managing their life situations. Ecological counseling facilitates multiple conceptualizations of clients’ situations and advocates for creative interventions. Simply having choices often creates a feeling in clients that they have power and control over what they are experiencing. In either case, growth and change are possible through empowerment, or successfully creating opportunities within the environment for personal growth (Conyne & Cook, 2004).
Interdependence.

Ecological counselors have awareness that there is an interdependence, or interconnectedness, of people and environments. Trickett et al. (2000) assert that changes in one realm may affect others, creating a type of chain reaction. Circular patterns of influence from person to environment and vice versa, are repeatedly emphasized in ecological literature in order to stress the importance of the principle of interdependence. As an ecological counselor works with a client, this principle highlights the interdependence of the client’s systems, but also must be a variable in consideration of the development of the client in relationship with each counseling intervention.

Parsimonious.

Ecological counselors are encouraged to make choices that are parsimonious (doing the most with the least). In these days of managed care, it is likely that clients are limited to the amount of time or number of visits for mental health services. In schools, for example, counselors are often unable to meet the needs of all students, especially when one school counselor may be servicing multiple schools. The school counselor, however, may be able to make links to other resources, creating collaborative engagements. Collaborating with community resources and other professionals provides more comprehensive support, which is often efficient and effective.

Summary of Ecological Principles

In summary, the ecological counseling model offers a comprehensive assessment and intervention framework through which counselors assist clients in understanding and mediating their life experiences. How individuals perceive interactions with the people and settings within their ecological contexts becomes what is real and “normal”, or their frame of reference. Thus,
meaning-making is an essential part of how people respond to life experiences. The unique meaning an individual derives from interacting with various ecological contexts becomes integrated into his or her repertoire of behavioral responses.

A constructivist approach, and the principle of meaning making, adds to the ecological framework what other person-environment theories omit: gaining an understanding about how clients attempt to understand their life events. Constructivism is an educational theory that states that people make interpretations of experience to make sense of their lives. This type of approach provides counselors with a way to help individuals uncover their personal stories. In this manner individuals learn about themselves in an integrative and holistic way by understanding the origins of attitudes, learning their strengths and weaknesses, and discover their preferred way of behaving.

Understanding Careers through Ecological Counseling

Efforts given to perceiving the physical, social and cultural environments in which individuals find meaningful work and life purpose define a broad range of possibilities utilizing the ecological counseling model. Individuals find ways to negotiate multiple contexts, thereby creating their “personal identity, belief systems and life course” (Herr, 2004, p. 5). Then Herr et al. (2004) state that “the ingredients of this confrontation yield satisfaction or dissatisfaction, feelings of competence or inferiority, and motivation to be productive or to experience work alienation” (p. 87). Like all aspects of human behavior and understanding, it is apparent that the term career satisfaction is a complex one.

Individuals’ understanding of the nature and value of work shapes their career patterns over time. Their personal goals and past experiences combined with their career possibilities define what is feasible for their work futures. Ecological counselors can help individuals to see
possibilities and affirm their strengths, while also assisting them to construct meaning in choices available to them (Savickas, 1997). Ecological counselors also assist individuals to recognize environmental influences that are creatively promoting concordance or creating barriers that must be challenged or overcome. Identifying such forces is just one feature of using the ecological model in career counseling.

Theory of Work Adjustment

Lofquist and Dawis (1969) offered the theory of work adjustment as a model to address the issues of job satisfaction. Much in line with the ecological perspective, their theory incorporated the idea of fit between individual needs and abilities and the job requirements. Their theory also emphasized that work includes human interaction and psychological reinforcement, rather than technical tasks alone. The notion of fit enters the equation when the individual and the work environment correspond, meaning that the individual fulfills the work requirements and the work environment fulfills the individual’s requirements (Herr et al., 2004). This view is similar in many ways to the work of Holland in identifying the congruence of the individual and work, as described in trait and factor career theory.

Trait and Factor Career Theory

Consistent with the ecological model, Trait-and-Factor career theory views a person – occupation match as essentially a person – environment match. It conceives of an individual with a set of traits, e.g., interests, aptitudes, and personality characteristics, which can be measured and matched with an occupation, also composed of certain traits (Herr et al., 2004). Holland’s (1973) theory is the best known application of person – environment fit to career issues. The basis of Holland’s theory is a personality typology, which identifies preferred work based upon a fit between how a person’s category of personality matches with the category of work
environment. Holland’s theory stresses the interaction between the personalities of both the person and the environment, as categorized into six types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional.

Holland later refined his theory to include several clarifying assumptions: consistency, differentiation, congruence, and identity. Consistency relates to the degree of relationship of persons and environments that affect the individual’s vocational preference. Differentiation describes the degree to which persons or environments are well-defined. Congruence is the degree of match between a personality type and different environments. Finally, identity is the degree to which an individual has a clear and stable understanding of his or her interests and goals. Applied to both persons and environments, these assumptions add further depth to his dynamic theory. Herr et al. (2004) sum up Holland’s assumptions this way:

Congruent interactions of people and environments belonging to the same type or model, in contrast to incongruent interactions, are conducive to more stable vocational choice, higher vocational achievement, higher academic achievement, better maintenance of personal stability, and greater satisfaction (p. 212).

Holland’s hypotheses have been researched and assessed widely. Spokane (1985) reviewed the best empirical support for the construct of congruence and determined that there were positive relationships between congruence and job satisfaction, stability of choice, and ego strength, or personality. His conclusion was that “incongruence can be resolved by a change in the person, a change in job, or both” (p. 336). Other research points to variables that can be explored to determine the satisfactoriness of an individual’s work: aptitudes and abilities, needs and interests, values, stereotypes and expectations, adjustment, risk taking, and aspirations (Herr et al., 2004).
Trait-and-Factor theory continues to stimulate research into areas of instrumentation and construct validity. Herr et al. (2004) point out that though Holland’s theory is premised on person – environment fit, it also stresses that as individuals identify and understand their preferences, they will make effective choices as an expression of their personality. This research lends support to the ecological construct of concordance, especially in terms of factors that either challenge or support the individual. Too much challenge can drain an individual of internal resources, such as emotional well-being, career satisfaction, religious commitment, or physical exhaustion. Too much support can deprive an individual of decision-making freedom or prevent creativity. Though such classification systems are useful, Schultheiss (2003) states, “they have been limited in the degree to which they incorporate context (i.e., cultural, social, economic, and relational) within which careers are created” (p. 302).

Life-Career Rainbow Theory

The rainbow of life roles theory by Super (1980) points out developmental stages as important considerations for contextual understanding. A teacher in the school system who began his career right after graduation from college and has taught five years has different needs and expectations than a teacher who has been working in the classroom for fifteen years or more. Developmentally the younger teacher has different career goals than the more mature teacher. The younger teacher is in the establishment phase of his career, considering what choices and experiences fulfill his personal goals and what is satisfying to his self-concept. The fifteen-year veteran is more likely in the maintenance phase of his or her career, with a focus perhaps on continuing his or her employment, with less experimentation and more emphasis on those parts that have proven to be pleasant aspects of his or her career (Brown, 2003). Super’s theory acknowledged the static nature of vocational preferences and competencies as experience and
time create new opportunities for development. Individuals’ living and working situations change over time, along with their self-concepts. The important impact of this theory on an ecological career assessment is to see the influence of time on an individual’s career satisfaction and how the individual makes meaning of it with respect to all domains of his life experience.

**Career Human Agency**

The construct of career human agency seems to fit appropriately into the vocational and career psychology background from which the examination of person-environment fit will be drawn. Chen (2006) posits that there is “human potential… [for each person] presenting a very dynamic, complex and unique quality… in constructing a fruitful and satisfying life course” (p. 131). Referring to Bandura’s (2001) definition of human agency:

… a combination of human capacity and potential that assists a person to exercise some control over the nature and quality of his or her own life, including aspects such as forethought; self-regulation of motivation; affect; and action through self-influence, self-awareness, meaning and purpose in life (p. 131).

Walsh (2006) interpreted Bandura to say that people act on the environment and transform it as “producers of their life circumstances and not just products of them” (p. 446).

Chen (2006) provided a thorough overview of the construct of human agency, noting that it was Betz and her colleagues who provided significant research on the subject. He explained that it was Betz and Hackett who purported that the aspects “proaction, initiative, assertiveness, and persistence” constitute agency (p. 132). The construct of agency is tied closely to the concept of self-efficacy, particularly in relation to Bandura’s social cognitive theory. A core element of human agency is self-directedness, according to Bandura, which includes contextual and environmental dynamics in the individual’s functioning (Chen, 2006). Bandura also emphasized
the importance of meaning making by claiming that people use their cognitive system as tools as they pursue goals through various tasks that help provide for life satisfaction (Bandura, 2004). Bandura’s social cognitive theory and social constructivist thinking (Betz, 2001; Lent, Brown & Hackett, 2002) increase the possibilities for broadening the understanding of an individual as he or she understands himself or herself in relation to the career choices made, and the degree to which there is satisfaction in such.

**Ecological Career Theory**

Why a person has certain preferences or how consistent the choices are with the person’s values is part of the ecological principle of meaning making. From a career standpoint, the meaning identified with the career process may be a form of experience coupled with the person’s goals and perceptions of experiences in the past. Plomin (1994) adds that a person develops within an ecological environment involving the interpretation of the variables and systems, which are also affected by the person’s genetic makeup. His premise is that it is not the amount of influence of nature or nurture that affects behavior, but how individuals translate the environmental context, and what they do with the genes they have inherited.

Consistent with ecological theory, Person-Organization (P-O) fit was defined by Kristof (1996) to focus on the fit between a person and an entire organization, not just an occupation (Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003). Simply stated, the individual and the organization are in an interdependent relationship, each fulfilling the needs of the other to some degree. To the degree that there is congruence, there is also a degree of satisfaction. Too much dissatisfaction and there is incongruence. Ecological theory describes such a balance as concordance. Interdependence is also an ecological construct, which influences other variables, such as the meaning made from the work, or the degree of empowerment felt by the worker in his or her position. If the work
organization is one which embraces collaboration with its workers, the interactional nature of the relationship is improved.

Ecological concordance is uniquely defined as the individual goal of intervention for career specialists, who strive to help workers make meaning of their various life contexts, consider options for growth, development and/or change, and empower workers to cope more effectively by utilizing their available resources (both internal and external). Expanding further, Moos’ (1991) social climate theory emphasized strengths as well as the challenges of the negotiation of person-environment concordance beyond the notion of fit. The concept of concordance includes the qualities of balance, synergy, and improvisation (Conyne & Cook, 2004). Balance is a delicate and unstable process in living systems, always reacting to changes, or the lack of change. Synergy denotes connection between related elements, in actions combined to sustain and enhance the life of the system. Improvisation comes from people responding to the environment by anticipating and responding to change. The “optimal mismatch” described by Conyne and Cook (2004, p. 24) points out the need for both personal challenges and environmental supports, or vice versa.

Constructivist literature (e.g., Brott, 2004; Peavy, 1996; Forster, 1992; Goldman, 1992; Neimeyer, 1992) on career counseling has tended to focus on discovery of the individual’s personal life story and its meanings. In line with the ecological counseling model, techniques in constructivist career assessment attempt to help the individual gain awareness into his or her own set of constructs identify the relationship of these constructs to each other, and to develop an action plan for future movement (Brott, 2004).
The ecological principle of meaning making will be a significant focus of this study of teachers and their careers in an urban school. In a casual conversation around a copy machine, several teachers were asked why they worked in an urban school. They offered these statements:

“I don’t want to work in the suburbs with parents telling me how to do my job.”

“I feel needed by these kids.”

“City schools pay well.”

“I’m too close to retirement to change now.”

“I get an occasional kid who I really make a difference with and then find myself waiting for the next one.”

From these comments, a school counselor may understand one teacher to be speaking from her understanding of the vocation of teaching, while another may be focused on the practical aspect of monetary rewards. Exploring the meaning making component of career is part of an ecological perspective to discover what attitudes, behaviors and positions within the workplace held by workers are linked to their life contexts. How individuals make meaning of the interaction of the (P-E) fit determines to what degree he or she can thrive within his or her career context.

*Gender and Culture in Careers*

Cook et al. (2002) point out that the traditional paradigm for career counseling is not enough for many people who do not have a wide range of options because of their relevant life circumstances. This possibility would include those who are confined by various life roles, such as single parents, or by those who lack vocational skills and training. Herr (1996) described multiple variables within the ecological context, including physical, social, political, economic, interpersonal and cultural environments, which influence “how gender and family roles are
conceived, the achievement images likely to be nurtured, the resources available, and the accuracy and forms of knowledge provided about opportunities” (p. 7). Literature has shown that gender and culture are important factors, in particular for women, who still retain the major responsibility for home and family (Cook et al., 2002; Herr, 1996).

An often implicit expectation in career counseling has been that of neutralizing deficits experienced by the client (Herr, 1996). Society often characterizes people in terms of their ecological contexts, such as gender, culture, race and social status, which vary significantly across socioeconomic levels in any society. In a culturally and sexually segregated society the career aspirations for an African American woman are often perceived as limited due to sexism and racism, depending on her perceptions of the two as related to career choices (Evans & Herr, 1991). In the case that she also may be characterized as poor, she faces even more limitations in her educational and occupational opportunities. An individual’s career behavior is understood, then, through analysis of the individual interacting within his or her environment in a dynamic and active way.

As the social sciences continue to attempt to understand human developmental processes, Schultheiss (2003) asserts that relatedness and interconnection are “central to human growth and development and that relatedness serves as a context for the experience of the self” (p. 301). Incorporating this line of thought into career services helps the counselor and client to incorporate the relationship context into their careers. Considering relational factors assists the process of increasing the client’s awareness of the multidimensional aspects of his or her support system. Likewise, the reciprocal interaction of those relationships on the client’s decision-making may inform the client and counselor about commitment to his or her career.
Men and women have struggled with changing gender roles for several decades, including finding ways to perform various life roles, mainly work and family. Recent research reported by Perrone, Webb, and Blalock (2005) show that there is no significant difference in gender when it comes to what men and women identify as their ideal role participation. Though men and women both report the parent role as their most rewarding role, women reported the parent role as most stressful, whereas men reported the career role as most stressful. Women perceive more parental overload than men, largely due to cultural factors and social norms. Females continue to show lower occupational expectations than males, influenced in some degree to stereotyping in the educational system and through the media (Brown, 2002; Coltrane & Adams, 1997). In addition to sex role stereotyping, some women of color may experience pressure to be role models for others, compounding the difficulty women have with effective management of multiple role demands (Cook et al., 2002).

Particularly for women, the self as a relational being is an important factor in discovering the context for how she understands her identity and over time, her development and growth (Schultheiss, 2003). Over the last 30 years women have entered the labor market in large-scale numbers. Niles and Goodenough (1996) report that women tend to be concentrated in low-paying occupations than men and are still the main person responsible for care of the home and family. Perrone et al. (2005) also discovered that women were more involved in home and family care, while men were more involved in career and leisure activities, creating possible dissatisfaction in marital relationships. Most women report that they work out of necessity, but similar to their male counterparts, they also work for other reasons in addition to necessity (Cook et al., 2002). Even with many advances for gender equity in the work force, sexual stereotyping for careers remains.
The following Table 2.2 enumerates some changes that affect career development (Arthur & McMahon, 2005; Bloch & Richmond, 1997; Hansen, 2001; Herr, 1996). Some of the changes include important ecological considerations. Super emphasized the relationship of life roles to the individual’s needs in their work roles. Counselors who understand that people tend to be more satisfied with their lives when time spent in various roles is congruent with what is most important to them (Perrone et al., 2005).

*Teachers in the Workplace*

Teaching is by nature an interactive process between the teacher and students, involving many factors within both the populations. The process can be thought of as the interrelationship between the individuals (teachers and students), and the individual’s systems (e.g., work and family). This process requires teachers to be aware of many ecological factors that may affect student achievement. Johnson (1990) posits that some factors that contribute to or detract from teachers’ job satisfaction are physical elements (e.g., space, equipment, and safety) and organizational structures (e.g., teaching load, schedules and the degree to which teachers are permitted autonomy in teaching matters). Teachers often need to identify family factors that are affecting academic achievement, or encourage positive social relationships among students in the classroom; alternatively, teachers may be dealing with their own personal responsibilities at home or with colleagues. There is a geometric complexity that increases as the contextual layers are added.

Any workplace is more than just the physical space and equipment needed to perform the work. A school is a complex place where there are many individual teachers in separate classrooms all occupying one larger space, in efforts to provide education for students coming from many different backgrounds. Johnson (1990) describes the work of teaching as an
Table 2.2 Changes Affecting Career Development

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“interdependent enterprise”; there are so many variables in the workplace that the work of any one teacher cannot compare to that of any other teacher. The school as a workplace is a conglomeration of multiple and unique systems (individual classrooms), contained within one larger system (the school), nested within a larger system (the city school system), and answerable to an even larger system (the state Department of Education), and eventually to the large national system (the Department of Education in the federal government). Each sub-system has its own culture, or set of operational norms that dictate acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Each teacher has his or her own set of expectations, which translates into externally observable behavior, talking patterns and interactions with students and other staff. What is not as easily identified is what is not visible, which are the thoughts, perceptions, feelings and level of satisfaction that teachers have in response to their professional setting – the school – and its inhabitants – the students, other staff, and the community.

An ecological understanding of teachers in the workplace includes attention to many components within the school setting, which together influence the teachers and staff who work there. These components include the physical space and resources; the expectations of the job itself; the interconnections of teachers’ roles in relationship to other colleagues, students, parents and administrators; the collaborative nature of the teachers’ position and whether or not they have influence on decision-making; the economic factors teachers face, such as salary and benefits; the school’s culture; the psychological dimensions of the school as a workplace, such as the stress level; and even the spiritual dimension, and the meaning making that teachers have for their work (Conyne & Cook, 2004; Johnson, 1990). There are important external resources needed in the school environment to support the work of teachers (Johnson, 1990; Prince, 2002), such as classroom supplies, books, and materials to create bulletin boards, posters and other
room decorations, which are used to reinforce the curriculum. There also is a need to understand more about the internal resources of these professionals, such as the ability to deal with stress, and their degree of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

Holloway (2003) reports in a survey conducted with more than 5000 teachers that there is a link between the amount of support received by teachers and their ability to “thrive” in the classroom. He points out specific types of support that foster such sustainability: professional development, ongoing mentoring, and empowerment as external supports, and resiliency and coping resources as internal supports. The workplace that contains deficiencies in these areas is a demoralizing experience that inhibits teachers from doing the important work that they are prepared to do (Johnson, 1990). It is widely understood that career persistence is influenced by the degree of support an individual receives in his or her career behavior (Phillips-Miller et al., 2000). This is true for teachers as well.

Research has not always adequately defined a thorough understanding of how teachers derive satisfaction from their work (Quaglia, Marion, & McIntire, 1991). Moore (1987) posits that there are individual differences that relate to teacher satisfaction, such as gender, ethnicity, differences in education, socio-economic status, age and the degree to which a teacher is dedicated to his or her profession. One such measure of satisfaction involves the degree to which a teacher emphasizes extrinsic rewards, such as salary or status, as compared to intrinsic rewards, such as relationships with students. This difference in personal values is a significant variable in understanding the teacher’s ecological concordance or congruence experienced within a particular school setting.

Ma and MacMillan’s (1999) study discovered that teachers often described job satisfaction in terms of their degree of success in relating to students in ways that promoted
instructional objectives and students achieved learning. In terms of professional competence, however, it was commonly understood that “there is effective discipline or classroom management” (Ma and MacMillan, 1999, p. 40). Teachers develop specific skills useful in specific settings, but find themselves dealing with problems for which they are not adequately prepared. These novel situations often occur in urban schools. School counselors, on the other hand, are trained to identify and intervene with problematic student behaviors, and can support teachers and students with various interventions to create an environment that aids the education process.

Lortie (1975) emphasized school culture as important to teachers’ job satisfaction. Similar to the ecological component of meaning making, teachers have a self-image of contributing something unique to the school they serve as a whole. There is an interrelationship between teachers’ perceived professional competence and the influence they have on their school’s culture, and ultimately the students. School cultures are characterized with various descriptors, some more supportive than others. By exploring factors that contribute to the retention of teachers in settings considered unsupportive and unattractive, strategies need to be developed to improve the physical, emotional, social and career environments of these professionals. In short, teachers who choose to serve urban schools, often considered unattractive or unsupportive, could be supported in ways that benefit them and their students.

Urban Schools

Urban schools are considered challenging environments, primarily because of lack of funding and material resources, disadvantaged and low-performing students, and little parental or administrative support (Bullough, 2001; Lippman et al. 1996; Prince, 2002; Quartz, 2003; Renfro, 2003). Likewise, urban teachers often encounter students who come from violent
neighborhoods (Brinson et al., 2004), and students who enter the setting with family issues associated with poverty, such as substance abuse, poor health, domestic violence and abuse, and broken families (Bullough, 2001; Lippman et al., 1996; Quartz, 2003).

Urban-dwelling children are considered “students at risk” according to Herr (1999) because of their emotional, psychological and intellectual problems that define the plight of poverty. Herr (1999) asserts that many of these children “run the risk of not acquiring the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to become successful adults” (p.183). Herr also states that:

… wherever poverty exists, it breeds frustration and stress…causing family fights, drinking and depression, feelings of being hemmed in and not in control of one’s destiny, limited prospects for youngsters, functional illiteracy, high rates of teen pregnancies, intellectual stunting, and narrow horizons (pp. 208-209).

A study for the Department of Education (Panel on High-Risk Youth, 1993) enumerates multiple challenge factors that face urban-dwelling students, their families, and ultimately the school staff in high poverty areas:

- neighborhoods with high proportions of welfare recipients have lower chances of finding well-paying jobs,
- parents in these neighborhoods are less likely to be employed or married, and community ties are weaker, negatively affecting parent involvement in the school,
- there is a lack of positive role models and social institutions in these communities to support and encourage positive behaviors in children,
- urban children are more likely to be exposed to risks that place their health and well-being in jeopardy, with less access to regular medical care,
• urban children are more likely to engage in risk-taking behavior that can lead to undesirable outcomes, such as teenage pregnancy,

• urban children are more likely to be victimized by crimes of violence and crimes of theft.

Contextual stressors can have long-lasting consequences for urban youth. For example, teenage motherhood can have direct negative consequences on girls’ educational attainment and lifelong earnings potential. Herr (1999) suggests that “seeds of personal vulnerability are first planted in childhood and adolescence” (p. 203), which then carry over into adulthood.

Compounding the challenges in urban schools for urban teachers, reform efforts are focusing on teacher quality and raising requirements for certification. Sachs (2004) reported that “urban districts lose nearly half of their newly hired teachers within the first five years” (p. 177). Teachers who demonstrate the quality of sociocultural awareness are likely to be most successful in such an environment (Gay, 1995). Effective teachers in an urban environment are able to utilize this awareness to create a lens of trust and respect for all students, regardless of their cultural identity (Zimpher & Ashburn, 1992). Their ability to collaborate and develop interpersonal skills adds to the sense of interconnection with students and their communities.

Teachers who work in challenging environments, like urban schools, are faced with making decisions about how to thrive when confronted with systems that often lack resources. Accommodating challenges, then, requires drawing from their personal resources, both internal and external. The ability to do so is nearly impossible to predict, knowing that the delicate balance of the person and environment variables are in constant flux. Many factors influence this delicate balance, yet little is known about the processes that are so critical to understanding the career development of teachers, and teachers in urban schools. By addressing the influence of the
setting at multiple levels on the career of urban teachers, it is hoped that this study will help illuminate potential interventions to increase and then sustain the job satisfaction of those who provide such an important service to our communities.

**Summary of the Literature Review**

A key issue in this study is understanding the ability of teachers in urban school settings to be sustained in a stressful and challenging environment, and to maximize both their success with a challenging student population and their career satisfaction and maintenance. The social context of an urban school provides a rich environment in which teachers and students are influenced by factors in a dynamic and reciprocal interrelationship. How they achieve a person-environment fit in order to do their work varies according to the degree to which they find a balance between supports and challenges. This ecological concept of considering multiple contexts is based upon an understanding of challenges and supports within human systems and the environment. In order to maximize his or her ability to find a beneficial existence in the environment, a person needs to be able to respond to life’s challenges in a life-giving way by identifying and using resources, making decisions that help him or her to thrive.

Accommodating challenges that threaten concordance within the person-environment fit determines an individual’s behavior by strongly influencing his or her decision-making process. Therefore, interactions between person and environment are particularly salient in determining those intentions and actions that, for this study’s participants, define their life-career context (Chen, 2006). By understanding the motivation and self-awareness of the study participants, aspects of their work challenges and life-career issues might surface.

With so many changes in the workplace, work and work patterns are also shifting which requires increasing awareness about the contexts of people’s lives in relation to their work.
Many variables define work and the workplace, such as the tasks involved, technology and tools needed, and the character of the work itself. For example, counselors require space that provides confidentiality, while an artist may need only an easel, paint, paintbrushes, and no specific setting. The context, therefore, is a fit when persons are equipped with appropriate expertise, and environments that are suitable to the necessary tasks involved. To summarize, the combination of intrapersonal, interpersonal, contextual and environmental dynamics creates the individual’s belief in how he or she chooses to follow a course that leads to life-career satisfaction (Schultheiss, 2003).

The ecological principle most influential in studying the career behavior of urban teachers is that of meaning making. It is the basis for how people perceive reality, a combination of a person’s experiences, values, attitudes, goals and purpose. This study’s attempts to capture teachers’ own words in describing their work contexts will invariably emphasize the principle of meaning making for the study participants, as well as meaning that can be derived from an analysis of research data and review of the literature.

This study intends to utilize literature and expertise from two disciplines, counseling and education, to explore the experiences of five teachers in an urban school, using the ecological counseling theoretical model as a framework to understand their experiences. The purpose is to discover if the concepts in the ecological model promote understanding of the person-environment interactions of these urban teachers. Of the fourteen principles identified in the ecological counseling model, those deemed most salient in guiding the data collection and analysis for this study were: concordance is sought, people make meaning of their interactions with others and their environment, multiple contexts are considered, and interactions between person and environment are particularly significant. The metatheoretical and interdisciplinary
nature of the ecological framework offers an excellent opportunity to probe for understanding the
nature of fit for urban teachers from more than one perspective. In an effort to offer
recommendations for the support and retention of high quality teachers in challenging
environments, it is hoped that teachers’ perceptions of their person-environment interactions will
be revealed, and how they have developed coping abilities in an ongoing dynamic negotiation
and resolution of personal and environmental factors.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Research Design

This study is a qualitative inquiry conducted within the framework of the ecological counseling model, specifically in terms of the person-environment fit for teachers in an urban teaching environment. The purpose of the study is basic research in which the everyday work lives of urban teachers will be explored to understand how they experience their careers on a daily basis and what factors help them to continue their work in this particular environment. Patton (2002) suggests that research through a naturalistic inductive or discovery approach is a “strategy for generating and confirming theory that emerges from close involvement and direct contact with the empirical world” (pp. 215 - 216), in this case, the target school and its participants. By operating from a qualitative approach, this study will explore a real world phenomenon in one discipline to see if it can be understood by theory in another discipline.

A qualitative design was chosen for several reasons. Qualitative studies present information gathered about people or events in as real a situation as possible. Leedy and Ormrod (1997) describe it as “understanding what a specific experience is like by describing it… as it appears to the people who are living it” (p.161). An important qualitative framework is constructivism, in which researchers strive to “capture the different perspectives through open-ended interviews and observations, and then examine the implications of different perceptions…” (Patton, 2002, p. 98). Questions were developed with an understanding offered by Lincoln and Guba (1985), that “phenomena can only be understood within the context in which they are studied” (pp. 44-45). In this type of constructivist inquiry there is not an underlying reality in truth, but rather the data speak through the language of individuals and their experiences.
A qualitative design also offers sensitivity to the component of meaning making by capturing data that permit assessment of expression by teachers in their own words and in their own settings. In the ecological framework, meaning making is the principle that explains how individuals interpret and choose to act in response to environmental influences. The intended strategy was to complete a naturalistic inquiry, gather qualitative data, and then perform content analysis to identify patterns and themes of the experiences of the participants.

The active and involved role of the researcher is fundamental to qualitative research, and offers an opportunity to achieve empathy. Empathy is a significant concept in the practice of the counseling profession. Similarly, Patton (2002) states that in terms of qualitative research, “empathy develops from personal contact with the people interviewed and observed during fieldwork” (p. 52). The ability to understand participants in this study, from cognitive understanding of meaning in teachers’ perceptions of their students and the local context, to the emotional influences of teachers’ life-career fit. My position as school counselor in the target school during the year prior to this study influenced my capacity to know the teachers and students, and to understand their behaviors. As an investigator, I was cognizant that my own history of interaction within the setting created a unique filter through which I collected and analyzed data, yet every attempt was made to report the social context of this study as participants experienced it. This was important in order to balance my voice with those of the participants.

Though labor and time intensive in working with data, qualitative analysis provides depth and insights, perhaps even expanding the inquiry, while providing a realistic picture of the subject. Typically, small samples are used, so one limitation is that conclusions will not be definitive or generalizable. The opportunity to participate in the study was offered to all teachers
in the target setting, and from those who volunteered, five were chosen with regards to their gender, race, and length of time working in the school. These factors were important in providing depth and breadth in the data by obtaining a representative sample of the teacher population. Purposeful sampling was done to identify teachers who could provide salient data about the target school and their fit within it. Data described a sample of a single school’s teachers to provide a frame of reference for examining their person-environment fit in a particular setting, as well as to compare differences in their individual perspectives.

*Reflexivity.*

Reflexive questions as proposed by Patton (2002) offer one way to triangulate the research data. Questions for the researcher include: “How do I know what I know? What shapes and has shaped my views?” (Patton, 2002, p. 66). Also, throughout data analysis the researcher is prompted to think about how the audience of the report will make sense of what is given to them. As the researcher and the instrument in this qualitative study, I include statements about my participation in the target setting, and my relationships with the teachers interviewed and observed. As the school’s counselor during the previous year, I had worked with students and teachers of all grade levels. My interactions at that time were preventive in scope, as well as collaborative with teachers, including those in this study, and administration in dealing with struggling students. Through reflexivity my own interpretation is provided in a form that offers an enhanced meaning to the awareness of others. By doing so, this study provided information that reveals the full scope and nature of teachers’ person-environment fit in their careers in an urban school.
Method

Methods for gathering data for this study included semi-structured interviews with five teachers, field observations of the same five teachers, a focus group with the five teachers, my personal research journal, and the analysis of ecological profiles of the school setting by two licensed counselors. A significant attempt was made to gather data in multiple formats in order to provide a broader perspective, and to provide a form of triangulation of data. Awareness of and attention to my own ideology and perspectives were considered with obtaining all forms of data. My prior counseling position in the target school assisted me in focusing my data discovery on the perceptions of the participants rather than my own reactions to people or events in the setting.

Research Participants

Participants were recruited by invitation in an urban Kindergarten through eight grade school within a large city public school system. Convenient access existed because of my prior professional relationship as a school counselor, and the school’s link to the university through a multi-site grant in conjunction with the public school system. An informed consent was presented to participants in duplicate, one of which the participants retained for their own purpose and one which was signed and held securely at the university. The study was described, including the expectations of the teachers’ commitment of time. All written materials were provided with my identity and affiliation with the university, the purpose of the study, a confidentiality statement, and the phone numbers and email addresses of me, my advisers, and the university’s Institutional Review Board. There was a concerted effort to depict the study as voluntary, without any statements to suggest special benefits to participants. Institutional Review Board permission was obtained per the university’s policies for research.
Selection criteria.

The selection of participants was influenced by two needs for the study: (1) to choose among those who demonstrated willingness and availability to participate in the research, and (2) to provide a range of experience and other diverse components. Participants were selected by the following criteria:

- length of time teaching at the school site
- length of time teaching as a career
- diversity of gender, and
- diversity in racial/ethnic/cultural background.

Teacher selection was limited under the first criterion (time length at the site) due to an almost complete staff turnover three years prior. Four teachers were retained, two of whom volunteered to participate - one male and one female. Their voices offered perspectives over an extended length of time. Including their impressions gave insight into at least two different administrators and relationships with families and community resources. Subsequently, participants were selected to provide diversity, attempting to represent the teacher population in the target school.

Description of the Research Site

Demographics about the research site are presented. Data are also included to depict both the community and target school environment. One way to organize information used to define the community and its participants is offered by Chaskin (1998). Community, or neighborhood as defined in this study, was developed from one perspective which Chaskin identified as prominent in social science literature, that of the neighborhood as a spatial unit. This includes (a) geographical boundaries, (b) people, (c) facilities, and (d) organizations.
The spatial unit of the neighborhood surrounding the target school began with a description of the geography. The school was located within one of the city’s largest geographic areas, in an area where homes were in disrepair and few businesses were viable. The school was an historic building, which sat near the top of a steep incline surrounded by heavy stands of trees and thickets on three sides. Roads in the area were relatively high traffic in nature and divided the neighborhood into sectors.

To describe people in the neighborhood, demographic data were collected. The neighborhood population consisted primarily of low-income African American households, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (2000). Single mothers under the age of 24 years constituted 25% of the heads of family households. Only one-third of the residents 25 years or older had graduated from high school. No one reported being in the military forces in the 2000 census. Jobless persons were 59% of the population in the surrounding community. The median household income in 2000 was $15,559, and 45% of the residents lived below the poverty level (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000).

With regard to facilities in the neighborhood, housing had aged to the point that many rental units in the area had become less desirable in the real estate market (City Planning Commission, 2002). A large historic Catholic church had closed, which was purchased by a charter school to open the following year. Another small Catholic church within a block of the target school was also inactive, except for a weekly mass held by a priest from a neighboring parish. There were other small churches (Nazarene and Church of God) in the neighborhood, and a homeless shelter, which included a residence for women and their children who had experienced domestic violence. A small city-operated recreation facility and a medical facility were available for service, but were not easily accessible for those with poor transportation.
because of high traffic roads. City buses were the critical transportation access for many of the neighborhood’s residents.

Finally, organizations connected to the neighborhood included a small active community council. There was also a monthly meeting of local providers, which included parish nurses from a nearby Catholic church, the city-operated recreation facility director, and representatives from social service and mental health agencies. The aforementioned churches were instrumental in providing a food pantry, clothing assistance and other help as needed.

Chaskin (1998) pointed out that “neighborhoods are best seen as open systems” (p. 1), connected to and influenced by other systems. City crime statistics included a significant number of Part One crimes (murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, and auto theft) in the area. Based on these statistics, 2.7% of violent crimes (murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, and larceny) in the city occurred in this neighborhood. Ten percent of the city’s murders and 6% of the rapes occurred in the area as well (City of Cincinnati, 2004). Hence, personal safety was a significant concern for the community surrounding the school. Law enforcement maintained high visibility in the neighborhood, including a school resource officer who visited school periodically to check on students involved in judicial matters.

“Individuals are members of several systems at once”, according to Chaskin (1998, p. 1). He also stated that development of interpersonal relationships among neighbors was fostered by residential stability. Without stability, individuals are less likely to hold community attachments. Students and their families in this study were reported as highly transient due to economic factors, family relationship changes, and poor housing conditions. Transience commonly involved moving in with relatives, thereby creating large extended families living in small
spaces. Such changes in affiliations disrupted the education of students, who may have attended several different schools within a single school year. Likewise, family relationships may have been strained by overcrowding and role confusion about authority and responsibility.

It has long been noted that social contexts, such as family and peer influences, are the most significant factors in fostering positive or negative outcomes that put children at risk for school failure (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The target school fit the description of a challenging urban school environment based upon factors identified by Henry (2000): “aggression, poor impulse control, antisocial behavior, neighborhood violence, drug use, deviant peers, and teen pregnancy” (p. 97). Additionally factors such as the percentage of low-income students (as estimated by the percentage eligible for subsidized lunch), average student scores, and the school’s proficiency ratings are identifiers used often to indicate what constitutes a challenging urban school.

The target school was located within a large Midwestern city school district, with a student population of approximately 400. The student racial composition was 71.2% African American, 24.2% White, 3.1% Biracial, and 1.5% Native American, Asian, or Hispanic. The school served a considerable number of students from families who lived in poverty, so that 80.8% of its students received free or reduced price lunches. Rated “under academic watch” by the state’s Proficiency standards, the target school had just completed its third year of redesign. In addition, the public school system began to promote choices for parents to send their students to a school of their choice. These factors together with population shifts prompted declining school enrollment. The school was designed to accommodate 500-550 students, though enrollment had declined to the point that the school was being considered for closure. The
enrollment decline prompted a teacher reduction, which in turn disrupted the grade level teams, and challenged any sense of internal stability created over the previous years of redesign.

Payne (2001) described numerous commonalities of families living in poverty, such as those in the target community. She asserts that the economic system in the United States operates from a system of middle class norms and rules. For instance, a middle class norm is emphasis on being self-sufficient, whereas in poverty, “the clear understanding is that one will never get ahead, so when extra money is available, it is either shared or immediately spent” (Payne, 2001, p. 37). She also explained how the hidden rules of socioeconomic classes include certain patterns of thought and social interactions. In poverty for example, the noise level is high and an important value for individuals is the ability to entertain. Also, in generational poverty, “organized society is viewed with distrust” (Payne, 2001, p. 36).

Generational poverty is when the family has been in poverty for two generations or more, and situational poverty is caused by circumstances (i.e., death in the family or illness). In either case, individuals maintain many of the thought patterns of the class in which he or she was raised, even if their socioeconomic status changes. Payne (2001) promotes the dictate that educators must teach the appropriate rules for success, rather than make excuses for students who need support and expectations. Children in poverty are more likely to be delayed developmentally, too, which poses additional educator concerns.

Instruments

The instruments for this study were designed to collect data relevant to various aspects of the person (teacher) - environment interaction within the specific context. They included a setting description guide (Appendix B) for contextual data; a narrative observation guide (Appendix C) for interaction data; a classroom observation chart noting the teacher’s
organization, interaction and presentation (Appendix D) for interaction data; a teacher observation behavior frequency chart (Appendix E) for interaction data; an interview guide (Appendix F) for contextual and meaning making data; a focus group guide (Appendix G) for contextual and meaning making data; and a broad ecological profile of the school site (Appendix H) for contextual and interaction data.

Environmental assessment can be conducted in various ways, and was achieved by reviewing how the environment affected its inhabitants: through its physical components, its social components, its institutional components, and an ecological climate dimension (Conyne & Clack, 1981). The instruments listed were conceptualized to focus on specific components of the assessment, as identified in each of the following.

*Setting Description Guide.*

This guide focused on the physical and social components in the target school environment. The purpose of the setting description guide was to capture narrative data not addressed in other instruments, such as the material culture (school banners or student work displayed). It provided an overall view of the school site in terms of visual representations of the condition of the school buildings and the atmosphere as I experienced it upon entering the site. Items expanded upon the information gathered through the broad ecological profile of the site, which were helpful in more fully understanding the school climate. Since time was a factor to help understand the context of the site, this guide offered a snapshot of the site at the time the research began. These data provided information for the question of the ecological niche of teachers, which identified influential segments of the environment in this urban school setting.

*Observation Guide (of Teachers in Their Classrooms).*
This narrative guide was designed to focus on the physical components in the school’s environmental assessment through classroom descriptions, classroom attendance for that day broken down by gender and race, and a sketch of each classroom. Focus on the social components in the classroom environment was conceptualized as the pedagogical interventions of teachers, including questions about the teachers’ management of classroom issues, such as planning and discipline. The guide questions were derived from a review of literature on teacher observation, ecological counseling theory, and personal experience and observations.

The research question to understand the ecological niche of teachers in an urban school setting required obtaining data on the socio-cultural context of the classroom, which aided the understanding of each teacher’s ecosystem, including interpersonal relationships with students. In developing the guide items, an attempt was made to translate ecological concepts into teacher behaviors. For example, the interactional nature of processes between people and their environments was addressed in the question: “how does the teacher begin the class period to focus the attention of all students?” and the question: “how does the teacher establish a positive instructional learning environment?” The concept of teachers stressing empowerment was addressed in the question: “what does the teacher do that reflects his or her level of caring for teaching and students?” Similarly, the importance of time was addressed in the question: “How would you describe the overall pace of the class?”

*Classroom Observation Chart of Organization, Interaction and Presentation.*

The social components of the environment were the focus of this chart, in which a simple tally was utilized for the presence or absence of various behaviors regarding teachers’ organization, interaction among students, and presentation of academic material. These observational behaviors were also developed by attempting to translate the ecological concepts
into teacher behaviors. Items were adapted for use in this study from a set of skills for peer
observations of teachers (Parrett & Kerns, 1988).

In Parrett and Kerns (1988) peer review form, six topic areas were identified for teacher
observations. Three best representing the teaching process for this study were organization,
presentation, and interaction. (See Appendix I.) From these extensive lists of observable
phenomena, the chart was condensed into a manageable number of items for observation. The
three sets included in this chart also seemed to be most salient with the ecological concepts of
context, interpersonal interaction and meaning making.

*Teacher Observation – Behavior Frequency Chart.*

The purpose of the frequency chart was to capture observable teacher behaviors which
would enhance the environmental assessment of social components in each classroom. The chart
was designed to tally behaviors noted within five-minute segments over an hour’s length of time.
The observable behaviors were categorized into sections using ecological concepts as
descriptors, again attempting to use research of student teacher observation guides in attempting
to translate teacher behaviors into ecological concepts as they fit in the classroom setting (see
The Social Networks Research Group, Coding Scheme).

Group training materials were also reviewed to identify behaviors pertinent to how
classrooms operate as groups, with the role of group leader assigned to each teacher in their
classroom. By seeking to understand the ways in which teachers manage their classrooms,
attention to group leader behaviors (Conyne, Crowell, & Newmeyer, in press; Hansen, 2001;
Trotzer, 1999; Schmuck & Schmuck, 2001) seemed salient to understanding the teacher as the
one who leads the class (the “group”) towards their goals. Systems theory enlightens the notion
of a classroom as a group, considered by Schmuck and Schmuck (2001) to be an “open system
contained within a school, constantly influencing and being influenced by its members and the surrounding organization” (p. 33).

Further review to conceptualize teacher leadership behavior in the classroom included Hersey and Blanchard’s Theory of Situational Leadership (Johnson & Johnson, 2003). According to Hersey and Blanchard (1977), there are two behavioral dimensions to classify most leader activities: the initiation of structure (task actions) and the consideration of group members’ relationships (maintenance actions). Task behaviors are described as: “The extent to which a leader engages in one-way communication by explaining what each follower is to do, as well as when, where, and how tasks are to be accomplished” (Johnson & Johnson, 2003, p. 206). Examples of task behaviors in the chart are identified as: “setting rules and goals” and “giving directions”. Relationship behavior (maintenance actions) is described as: “The extent to which a leader engages in two-way communication by providing emotional support and facilitation behaviors” (Johnson & Johnson, 2003, p. 206). Examples of maintenance behaviors in the chart are identified as: “facilitating communication” and “acknowledging established rules and goals”. These two dimensions define a two by two matrix describing teacher management of the classroom (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977), with axes represented as low versus high relationship behavior and low versus high task behavior. Items representing such relationship behavior are contained in both the Classroom Observation Chart of Organization, Interaction and Presentation and the Teacher Observation – Behavior Frequency Chart, reflecting the importance of obtaining data on interpersonal interactions within the classrooms observed.

*Interview Guide.*

The semi-structured interview guide provided the means through which teachers described their work and their career, the setting and its impact upon their interactions with
students and fellow employees, as well as important factual information which distinguished the teachers from one another. The interview questions were the primary form of data collection to achieve and preserve naturalistic research. Remaining true to the qualitative nature of the study, gathering the participants’ own descriptions and the meaning they derived from their daily interactions, lent authority to the data.

Teachers were asked certain factual information: age (offered in five-year ranges if they preferred not to give their exact age), number of years teaching in total, number of years teaching at the target school, highest degree earned, and additional certifications (asked to be specific in identifying them if applicable). The remaining nineteen interview questions were open-ended inquiries exploring the teachers’ perceptions about their jobs as a teacher, the place in which they worked and interacted, their constituents in the setting, and how they described their career fit in an urban school. By the end of the first interview, however, a question was added to the interview: “If there were no limitations, money was not an object, what would support your teaching in an urban school?” The “miracle question” is a counseling technique used at times to encourage a client to see possibilities for themselves. The last item was a rating scale for teachers to describe their satisfaction with their jobs and then satisfaction with their careers, with one = very dissatisfied and seven = very satisfied.

As informal discussions evolved, participants were encouraged to elaborate upon the interview questions. For instance, the question, “what contributes to a good day of teaching?” was designed so that teachers would explore what was meaningful to them in their interactions with students or their ability to proceed with their daily planning. The question, “Imagine that a person from … a very different culture followed you … How would he or she describe your
life?” was an effort to see what a stranger to the setting might see. A qualitative design allowed for further clarification as participants responded.

**Focus Group Guide.**

A focus group interview was conducted for the purpose of elaborating on individual meaning making; how they perceived the context, the challenges and resources, and career growth opportunities. The group was a form of member checking of themes and to capture data left out of the individual interviews, and allowed triangulation of data by checking my interpretations with those of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The guide posed four questions:

- Overall, how would you describe the environment in which you teach?
- What is your biggest challenge each day?
- The “miracle” question: what would support your teaching in an urban school?
- In what ways have you allowed for or experienced growth in your career?

Participants had the opportunity to elaborate on data previously reported with general questions, such as describing the environment. The last question was specifically asked because participants had not spoken about their career growth and development in individual interviews. The participants also were given a chance to reflect upon their current careers and future goals.

**Broad Ecological Profile of the Site.**

The broad ecological profile was developed by Conyne to provide an analysis using the concepts of the ecological model as outlined in Conyne and Cook (2004); see also Conyne, Crowell, and Newmeyer (in press). The purpose of the profile was to assess a school setting and the form was initially used to collect data for a collaborative federal grant project with the
university to provide school counselors in inner city schools. The target school was one of the three schools in the grant project, but the original ecological profile was not used for this study, since I was the school counselor working in the target school who had completed it.

Environmental assessment in this instrument was achieved by reviewing all components of the environmental effects on inhabitants: through its physical components, its social components, its institutional components, and an ecological climate dimension, according to Conyne and Clack (1981). Items in the profile include the mission/philosophy/vision of the school; how it was and was not being realized; demographics; assets of the school, administration, teachers, parents and students, programs and services; limitations of the school, administration, teachers, parents, students, and the community; discipline and the types of interpersonal conflicts that existed on site; and a school climate section divided into the dimensions of relationship, personal growth, system maintenance and system change, and overall climate. The profile concluded with a request to describe the social climate in a Likert-scale format, in order to look at the dimensions of relationship, personal growth, system maintenance and system change, and the overall climate of the school. On the profile there were spaces for comments and examples, as well as a request for a 100-word summary, in which the profiler synthesized all of the information obtained.

Two ecological profiles were completed by two different counselors, both of whom were trained in concepts of the ecological counseling model within the same graduate program as me. One was a trained school counselor, and the other was completing doctoral level training in both school and mental health counseling training. It is important to note that two significant changes occurred in the school, however, from the first profile in one school year, to the second profile completed in the next school year. During that time, student enrollment declined significantly.
which led to a staff reduction of ten teachers. These incidents affected the information provided in the profiles, particularly in the demographic reporting, and are analyzed with sensitivity to this fact.

Procedure

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained prior to contacting the school and the teachers. Entrée into the school setting was then established by speaking with the school’s principal. Once approval was obtained, all teachers within the target school were approached individually on site and invited to participate in the study. Five teachers were selected from those who volunteered, and were identified as representing a diverse group of participants with regards to the aforementioned criteria: length of time teaching as a career, length of time teaching at the school site, diversity of gender, and diversity in racial/ethnic/cultural background. Once continued interest was established, each teacher was visited on site to set up an interview and a day for classroom observation.

The initial visits to the teachers ranged from twenty to thirty minutes in duration, in order to answer questions about the research study and to obtain written consent. Participants were informed of the study’s purpose, and a description of the instruments was given. They were informed that they would participate in an interview and be observed in their classroom for a day in order to obtain data on the context of the classrooms, and the interpersonal interactions of teachers with their students. They were told that the interviews would be audiotaped and the audiotapes would be erased once they were transcribed. Each teacher was given an Informed Consent (Appendix A), and signed two copies, one which they held for his or her own purposes.

Teacher interviews were held at a mutually agreed upon site, at the school after school hours or in a local coffee shop, keeping in mind the need for confidentiality. Consideration was
also given to the amount of immediate noise interference and distraction, since the interviews
were audiotaped. Privacy was established in both sites for ease of recording on audiotape and for
the participants to experience comfort in the activity.

Interviews were transcribed and coded by hand in electronic format. Each line of the
transcribed interviews from individual teachers was numbered. As the manuscripts were read and
re-read, items were coded to note meaning in the units of data. Items included sentences, words
or phrases that depicted particular references to how the participants made meaning of their job,
their career or their interaction as a whole with the environment of the target school and its
students. The audiotapes were erased after transcription and interview notes were kept in a
locked cabinet in my home office until the study was completed, at which time the notes were
destroyed by shredding.

Classroom observations were conducted with each teacher in his or her daily activities for
one full school day over a period of three months, in order to gather data on the social and
cultural context of the environment and the nature of teacher-student interactions. Upon
completion all observation charts and descriptions were coded and analyzed and then
summarized from individual documents into one synopsis per instrument. These observations
provided a description of the setting and the participants.

Observations were done with as little disruption of the classroom processes as possible. I
entered the classrooms prior to times when students entered, such as changing from another
room to their own classroom, or at the beginning of the school day. A station at the side of each
room provided a clear view of the teacher and the students as they interacted, without being
obviously positioned in students’ direct line of sight to their teachers. In the middle school
classrooms, students changed classes twice during the day, so during part of each observation,
teachers were working with a different group of students. During breaks, notes about specific interactions were recorded in my research journal in detail. Several personal questions also arose that prompted further reading in a qualitative research text about reflexivity and triangulation of data.

According to Davis and Wagner (2003) it is recommended that a minimum of three observations be done in order to provide assurance that the observations shared are representative of the local setting. Since all five teachers were in the same school, there were sufficient data collected in five days of observation with regards to the overall school setting. However, three days or more of observation for each teacher would have greatly strengthened the study by providing further ethnographic data on each teacher and their interactions within the target school environment.

Finally, a focus group was held at the end of data collection to share coding themes with participants, as an opportunity to review themes for clarity and validity. It was also important to thank them for their time and input. Each line of the transcribed focus group interview was numbered, and then coded to note meaning in the units of data. Items depicted particular references to how the participants made meaning of their job, their career or their fit with the environment of the target school and its students. The audiotape was erased after transcription and the group interview notes were kept in a locked cabinet in my home office until the study was completed. This group also served to provide a form of member checking of data, which strengthened the study methods (Patton, 2002).

Available documentation included the school’s One Plan Study, which was a document intended by the district to describe each public school in detail. Data gleaned from this document
were minimal; the mission and vision, teacher and student demographics, though the statistical information was out of date.

Data were coded several times throughout the study, as is common in qualitative research. Once all data were compiled, initial coding was done by reviewing data for patterns, strengths or weaknesses, and similarities or differences, as Patton (2002) says, in order to “get a sense of the whole” (p. 440). This pattern analysis identified a classification system which was organized according to the research questions, and identified themes from the literature and ecological constructs. These patterns were organized to reveal a “constellation” of shared experiences (Patton, 2002). Data were then coded in themes that emerged from the teachers’ narratives.

Data coding, according to Patton (2002), must address the challenge of convergence, or identifying patterns derived from units of data that recurred regularly, and how patterns were judged to “hold together in a meaningful way” (p.465), which describes internal homogeneity. Data were also judged by the degree in which differences were clear, avoiding too much overlapping to gain a consistent and complete picture, or external heterogeneity. Once convergence was addressed, Patton (2002) states that the researcher must examine divergence, or the processes of “extension (building on items of information already known), bridging (making connections among different items), and surfacing (proposing new information that ought to fit and then verifying its existence)” (p. 466). Data which did not appear to fit at all were analyzed within the examination of divergence. A summary of data coding was created and is presented in Appendix J.

Analysis proceeded by assigning meaning to words and phrases from the interviews and profiles, and from descriptive data from the teacher observations. Data were clustered into
themes that emerged from literature, reading the narrative transcripts, and constructs of the ecological counseling perspective. Initial themes included teacher behaviors and personal characteristics. They were: responsibility, personal rewards, caring, resourcefulness, flexibility, and autonomy. Further coding elicited the identification of three broader ecological principles. The aforementioned attributes were then organized into three ecological principles: multiple contexts are considered, interactions between person and environment are particularly salient, and meaning making is the basis for how people perceive reality.

Validity and Reliability

There were no statistics for validity, reliability or norming because the instruments were created specifically for this study. Qualitative research uses triangulation to ensure reliability and validity, or what is called trustworthiness. Instruments were developed, reviewed and revised under the advisement of my doctoral committee. Charts and questions on the interview and observation guides were pilot-tested with two other counselors in different school settings, in order to ascertain whether the tools were of utility to other settings and use by other researchers. It was determined that the data provided from those tests were consistent with that of this study.

Validity was created by choosing an appropriate site that fit the description of the subject being studied (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002) - an urban school. Four strategies were used to ensure internal validity: (1) triangulation of data; (2) member checks; (3) examination by colleagues and other professionals with supervision; and (4) an examination of researcher bias. In order to obtain data that provided information that would answer the research questions, the soundness and effectiveness of the research instruments were taken into consideration with review and advisement by professionals in both counseling and education disciplines. Significant preparation and expert reviews of the tools for observation and interviews were done to eliminate
some subjectivity. Careful descriptions of the study’s goals and methods of data collection were discussed with the participants before and during data collection. Several colleagues were asked to respond to various sample questions and determined that the questions would obtain data that would satisfy the criterion they were meant to represent.

To increase the trustworthiness of the study, methodological triangulation was achieved by drawing data from multiple methods, i.e. individual interviews, teacher observations, counselors’ ecological profiles, and the focus group interview, in order to gain a clear understanding of competing underlying factors (Patton, 2002).

Member checking was essential to maintaining objectivity to the degree possible, due to my participation with the research participants in a professional relationship as the school counselor in the target school the previous year. The focus group offered the opportunity to share coding themes with the participants for the appropriate interpretation of results. Using member checks created a feedback loop which allowed participants to validate the research findings.

Examination by colleagues and other professionals with supervision was provided by professional counseling colleagues. During the study, my role with the university grant changed from school counselor in the target school to general oversight responsibilities and budgeting for programming, which took place on the university campus. One dissertation committee member was also involved in the grant project. He provided supervision and served as an expert reviewer at several points in the data collection and analysis. My challenge was to maintain objectivity. Moreover, ongoing collaboration with participants, counselors and the dissertation committee members provided checking of emergent themes and clarification of the research questions.

By its nature, qualitative research is gathered from the researcher’s perspective, with the researcher as an instrument. Researcher bias must be addressed for internal validity, and is
expanded upon in the following section. The issue was addressed by remarking about it with the participants to prompt their thought processes about potential problems in my depiction of the data obtained. In addition, objectivity was addressed by my careful reflexive analysis in order to maintain freedom from as much bias as possible (Leedy & Ormrod, 1997).

Interpretation of data began with what I knew was familiar and was generally understood about the people and places in the study on an everyday basis. This is what Packer and Addison (as cited in Patton, 2002) calls “practical understanding” (p. 498). My expertise and training afforded credibility with the teachers in this setting upon entree, as well as during classroom observations. Their experiences with me as the school counselor in the previous school year was a positive one, having been experienced by them as a caring professional, who was well educated in both counseling and educational settings. Personal experience as a parent and teacher also afforded confidence by the teachers that I would use a broad lens in depicting the context and their behaviors.

As suggested by other qualitative experts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002), providing thick rich descriptions enhances the transferability, or external validity, of the study. Detailed descriptions of the methods and findings provided a source of validation for the thoroughness of my fieldwork. This rigor in obtaining data enhances the veracity of the research (Leedy & Ormrod, 1997; Patton, 2002). Use in future research would determine to what degree the instruments would consistently provide similar results (Leedy & Ormrod, 1997).

**Researcher Reflections on Data Collection**

Examination of researcher bias was essential to present a research product that is true to the data as observed and recorded. It was an ever-present consideration during data collection, maintaining focus on interacting with the study’s participants as objectively as possible in the
methods of inquiry. My personal bias about teachers who choose to work in an urban school is that of admiration and respect for their career choice, including the realization that the environment produces obstacles to learning. I learned that teachers in urban settings encounter more personal stress, and have more challenges in keeping classroom order than do their suburban counterparts. Urban teachers’ roles are broader in scope than teachers in suburban schools, who have more parental and other forms of support.

Entrée into the site was uncomplicated, since relationships with the teachers had been established in the previous school year. My reputation had been established as a professional who was knowledgeable about working in a school setting and was willing to collaborate with school staff in order to provide the most benefit to students and staff. This relationship was important to gaining the detailed reports from the participants with a willingness to elaborate openly on their experiences and perceptions. In the past, my experience included a daily substitute teaching position in two suburban high schools and one middle school, and counseling with families and children in a center that served a population of low socioeconomic status. These experiences informed my knowledge of teachers’ roles within school settings and contextual influences on families living in poverty external to school settings. My counseling client population in the family center was typically Appalachian in origin, which was reported to be prevalent in the target school community as well, but not well documented.

Within my research notes, I was able to capture my emotional responses to the context or interactions at any given time during data collection and analysis. Particularly after the first round of coding, the fusion of two disciplines came into focus as my focus changed. In essence, my own personal and career growth was noted. Throughout this study the ecological climate was described, as stated by Conyne and Clack (1981), through “the shared perceptions of and
reactions to all aspects of the environment”, and through which “individuals both experience and create their environment” (pp. 2 – 3).
Chapter Four: Narrative of Findings

*Introduction*

This chapter will present the findings of this study in which the everyday work lives of urban teachers were explored to understand how they experience their careers, and what factors contribute to their person-environment fit in an urban teaching environment. These factors were described by teachers in their personal stories. The concepts of the ecological model were used as a conceptual framework to analyze the data with relation to the research questions, which were stated as: what is the “ecological niche” shared by teachers in an urban school; how do teachers behave as education professionals within the setting; and what is the career fit of teachers in an urban school.

First, the demographic description of the participants is presented, followed by the demographic and descriptive data of the setting, i.e., the community, the target school, and the classrooms in which these teachers practiced their profession. In this way, the sociocultural context of the community and the target school were defined. Descriptive data of the school also provided the background for the qualitative analysis of person–environment fit and interpersonal interactions in accordance with the ecological principles set forth in this study. Next, initial coding themes are introduced and then finally, an ecological analysis is presented, which evolved from multiple attempts of data coding. Three ecological principles were identified in the analysis: (1) multiple contexts are considered, (2) interactions between person and environment are particularly salient, and (3) meaning making is the basis for how people perceive reality (Cook, in review). A summary concludes this chapter, in an attempt to provide an integrated descriptive analysis of the substantial amounts of data collected.
Demographic Summary of the Participants

The participants in the study were five teachers from an urban school in a large Midwestern public school system. The pertinent demographic information is presented in Table 4.1, including age, race, gender, length of time teaching, length of time teaching in the target school, educational status, and additional certifications. The researcher assigned nicknames to the teachers, which included two males and three females, three White and two Black teachers. (Note: Black teachers self-identified as “Black” rather than “Afro-American”). The mean age was 42.4 years. The average length of time teaching was 13.3 years and the average length of time teaching in the target school was 7.2 years. Four of the teachers taught pre-adolescents to adolescents, and the other teacher taught Kindergarten. Only two held Master’s degrees, but the other three had obtained Master’s coursework of varying amounts. This was important to note, because the state teacher licensing board had recently changed criteria for licensure in line with the federal “No Child Left Behind” mandate to have all teachers designated as “highly qualified” (Ohio Department of Education, 2004). In the public school system incentives were given to teachers holding Master’s degrees, which explained why all five teachers had advanced coursework.

Demographic Summary of the Community

The target school was located near the downtown area of a large Midwestern city, in a community separated from the city by an industrial rail yard and a major highway. Two large housing complexes had operated under the city’s Housing Authority since World War II, and 74% of all area residences were renter-occupied. There was a great deal of population transience reported by school personnel. The median household income of residents in 2000 was $15,500. Eighty-one percent of the school’s students received free or reduced price lunches. About two
Table 4.1 Demographic Summary of the Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant/grade</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Total Time Teaching</th>
<th>Time at Target School</th>
<th>Education Status</th>
<th>Additional Certification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7th/8th Mr. Coach</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6.5 yrs</td>
<td>4 yrs</td>
<td>BS, Grades 1-8, some Master’s</td>
<td>Working on Education Administration degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th/8th Mrs. Green</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13 yrs</td>
<td>2 yrs</td>
<td>MS, Grades 1-8, Speech pathology</td>
<td>Lead teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th Mrs. Web</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17 yrs</td>
<td>4 yrs</td>
<td>BA/BS, Grades 1-8, some Master’s</td>
<td>English as 2nd language (ESL), Special Ed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th/7th Special Education Mr. Shepherd</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13 yrs.</td>
<td>12 yrs</td>
<td>BA, Grades 1-8, K-12 Special Education, some Master’s</td>
<td>Special Ed for Severely Emotionally Disturbed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten Mrs. Mater</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17 yrs</td>
<td>14 yrs</td>
<td>MS, Grades 1-8</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Teachers were given nicknames to maintain their anonymity, which were derived from personal characteristics. Degrees in Education Status are usual abbreviations for Bachelor of Arts or Master's in Science, etc.
thirds of the households were family households, and of those, about two thirds were headed by single mothers with children under the age of 18 years (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). The area was considered one with high crime, described as plagued by drugs, violent crimes, and prostitution (City of Cincinnati, 2004).

Demographic Summary of the Target School.

The school’s student population was approximately 400, which had decreased by 70 to 75 students from the previous year. In response to declining enrollment, the school system reassigned ten teachers and a security officer, which significantly changed the racial composition of teachers from 22% African American, 75% White and 3% Asian American teachers, to a racial balance of 45% African American and 55% White teachers. An effort was made to elicit data on the school’s Appalachian population, since the area was considered to be one with a high percentage of families of this culture, but little information was available.

Descriptive Summary of the Target School.

The target school was structurally massive, built of large stone blocks. School doors were locked, requiring an intercom announcement of visitors’ identity and purpose. The buildings were identified as Tudor style architecture with diamond-paned windows and stone and brick facades. A building addition was described as plain brick, but unlike the design of the original school building. The walls and floors inside were dark wood, except for tile on the lower half of the walls in the main hallway, which included a Rookwood water fountain. The only play area outside the building was on the parking lot, except for a small area of plastic turf with plastic playground equipment for the Pre-kindergarten and Kindergarten classes. Numerous potholes in the parking lot emphasized the need for significant asphalt repair. References to the condition of the buildings included “aging” and “worn”.
Student artwork was observed in the entry hallway, which housed the Kindergarten and elementary grades. Little color and decoration appeared beyond the entry, however. The material culture of the building (e.g., school-related symbols or banners) was described as lacking. Three banners hung in the main hallway near the office, which represented community/school partnerships.

The school’s atmosphere was described by counselors in ecological profiles as noisy, hostile, and oppressive, largely due to reports of yelling by adults and students, much of which came from the downstairs tunnel - the connector between the old and new school buildings. The tunnel housed the in-school-suspension (ISS) room, from which a loud female adult voice emanated. The high ceilings and dark colors in the buildings presented a rather melancholy atmosphere, and high noise levels negatively impacted the environment. Also, pervasive throughout the buildings was an odor of cleaning products.

The ecological profiles, completed separately by two counselors working in the target school during the study, included their perceptions about specific aspects of the school’s environment. In order to compare the data between the two reports, the profiles were summarized into a table of two columns to identify similarities or differences. In the profiles, the school’s mission and vision were identified: “to provide instruction promoting academic, social and emotional growth, and to provide a respectful, safe and nurturing environment”, and “to educate students to become responsible members of society”. The counselors reported that there was instruction for academic growth, but no apparent instruction for social and emotional growth. In describing how the mission was not realized, counselors used references such as “chaotic” and “disrespectful”. They reported teachers “spent too much time on discipline”, and
the “environment was loud and disrespectful on the part of both teachers and students”, “with a lot of yelling”. The school’s vision was not addressed as realized or not.

A social climate rating consisting of 16 statements was included in the ecological profiles, using a scale of one to five (one = very little, two = some, three = average amount, four = quite a bit, and five = very much). These scores were compiled, averaged and reported in Table 4.2. Data illustrate that most social climate items were rated at the low end of the continuum by the counselors. One item in the personal growth dimension was rated at the scale’s midpoint – academic achievement was promoted. All other items were rated low, indicating some or very little evidence of the dimensions of relationship, system maintenance and system change. From these data, the school was experienced by these counselors as lacking many notable ecological resources.

Demographic Summary of Classrooms.

The Observation Guide (of Teachers in Their Classrooms) was used to report classroom demographics, in addition to teachers’ behavior. The five separate guides were condensed into one document using teachers’ nicknames assigned previously in the demographic table. Since the 6th grade and 7th/8th grade classes moved to another class halfway through the observation, two groups were observed with each of those three teachers. Class sizes reported were: for Mr. Coach: eleven Black females and eight Black males in one section and seven Black females and seven Black males in the other; for Mrs. Green: two White males, one White female, eleven Black males and nine Black females in one section and one White female, ten Black females, and twelve Black males in the other; for Mrs. Web: two White females, four Black females, and five Black males in one section and five White females, one White male, six Black females, and seven Black males in the other; for Mr. Shepherd: four Black males; and for Mrs. Mater:
Table 4.2 Counselors’ Ratings for Social Climate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements from the ecological profile: 1= very little and 5= very much</th>
<th>Counselor 1 report</th>
<th>Counselor 2 report</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship dimension:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. There is a sense of cohesion and connectedness.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. People can express themselves.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Help, caring, and support are present.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. People respect each other.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal growth dimension:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Independence is fostered.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Task orientation is promoted.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Self-discovery is valued.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Academic achievement is promoted.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social maintenance and system change:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Order and organization are appropriately maintained.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Rules and expectations are clear.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Change, diversity, and innovation are facilitated.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall climate:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. There is a sense of pride in this school.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. This school is a hopeful place.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. People work together well at this school.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. The school is supported by parents and families.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. The school is connected with its community.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n = 2 counselors; Range scale: 1=very little; 5=very much
seven Black males, and five Black females.

A sketch of the furniture arrangement in each classroom was drawn to discover if a connection existed between the physical environments and teachers’ methods of instruction. There was no consistent classroom arrangement, and only two rooms were similar in overall design. The small special education classroom was situated under a staircase at one end of the tunnel, and the Kindergarten classroom was the only one (in this study) in the original school building, situated near the main entrance. The sixth grade classroom was on the first floor of the new building, near the gymnasium. Directly above it was an identical 7th/8th grade classroom. The 7th/8th grade Science classroom was at the end of the second floor hallway, also in the new building.

All of the classrooms had one or more computers in various stages of utility. Only the 7th/8th grade Science room was brightly lit, though all of the classrooms had windows. In all classrooms teachers’ desks faced the rooms’ entry. This was the only significant finding about classroom sketches; teachers remained cognizant of anyone leaving or entering their classroom doors. Otherwise, teacher behavior in the classrooms did not appear to be affected by the physical environment.

Race did not emerge as a factor in teachers’ perceptions about their students or their peers. Descriptions about teachers’ personal career choice were different, though. When asked to reflect on the meaning of their career choice, White teachers used the language of “calling”, or vocation, where the two Black teachers did not. Further research would look at racial identity development.

On the other hand, gender seemed to have an impact on classroom management and presentation styles. The male teachers described an authoritarian classroom role. Mr. Coach and
Mr. Shepherd talked about discipline, respect, and their lessons about the real world and planning for work in the future. The female teachers, Mrs. Green, Mrs. Web, and Mrs. Mater, described interactions on a more personal interaction level, to help students understand why education was so important. In addition, the female teachers were deemed adept at assessing students’ needs.

Initial Coding Summary of Teacher Reporting

The first round of data coding examined teachers’ narratives and observations in order to address the research questions, which are: what is the “ecological niche” shared by teachers in an urban school; how do teachers behave as education professionals within the setting; and what is the career fit of teachers in an urban school. Initial coding revealed themes: responsibility, personal rewards, caring, resourcefulness, flexibility, and autonomy. Teachers were given nicknames in coding and analysis that were suggested from each of their interviews.

Responsibility.

People create and maintain their psychological equilibrium by constantly responding to their environmental challenges, which in this study were many. These five teachers perceived their careers to be more difficult and challenging than their suburban counterparts, to the point that suburban schools were idealized as lacking any challenges, including those regarding parental support and material resources. This kind of thinking led to a strong theme of these teachers feeling responsibility for educating urban children about life as well as academics.

In comparison to teaching in the suburbs, Mr. Shepherd reported that “the big difference between urban and suburban schools is the way parents participate, the way they are involved in their children’s lives.” Mr. Coach added, “Fortunately for the suburbs they have both parents alive, too. The parents here are either the dad or mom, you know – either or.”
Teachers cited multiple roles beyond what might typically be expected of them. Interview data were thick with descriptions about teachers who performed their jobs “above and beyond the call of duty”. They described the multiple roles as: “counselor, social worker, mother, doctor, and clergy.” Mrs. Mater described a situation in which she intervened with city utilities for a family who had water service cut off due to the father’s inability to work after an accident. She called this her “social worker hat”. She also described her “medical hat” in her attempt to obtain services for a child who had difficulty walking flat-footed. Mr. Coach likened his role to that of a parent, saying, “Once you say you are going to do something, like give a detention, then you have to do it because they remember you saying it.” He explained that it was important to follow through so students could learn to trust him.

Along a somewhat different line, Mrs. Web described her responsibility to “teach a child to think”. She stated that,

If I can show them how to get from Point A to Point B, they’re leading me through the question. And I’m leading them there with mine, so when they get there, they have a solid base for being there.

Mrs. Web gave detailed behavioral directives to her students so they would understand why certain behaviors were appropriate in the learning environment. As one of her self-identified responsibilities, she believed that she would help students learn to make better behavior choices on their own. All teachers reported that students needed frequent reminders about behavior choices, whether it was in the classroom, the cafetorium, or outside the building. Mr. Shepherd also described what he perceived as a significant and perhaps, unique, responsibility to his special needs students. He was actively involved in the lives of several students and their families because, by his report, “It’s what I feel my job is.”

*Personal Rewards.*
Balancing challenges with personal rewards was how teachers were perceived to optimize fit between people and their environment. A sense of personal reward was how teachers described their abilities to sustain their careers in an urban school. Mrs. Green said, “People trust me with their children all day - trust me to help. It’s pretty meaningful”, and Mrs. Mater added, “Here you see that you’ve helped a child or family, and made an impact.” Mr. Coach said that he “wanted to feel like I’m working towards something”. Mrs. Web said, “I want to give back to the community” and “I see it as an opportunity to share myself with children … and I can be a part of their growing up.” For that reason, she was drawn to a teaching career in the first place.

How teachers made meaning of their experiences was relevant to the relationships which helped to define their ecological niche as well as their values and belief systems. Finding personal rewards in her work was described by Mrs. Web this way, “I was told by a lady at church that I was going to ‘walk with the children’ and it was the events after that which led me right into teaching.” This sense of vocation, or “calling”, was shared by Mr. Shepherd. He said, “I just connect with children, and it’s a combination of a religious thing and also a lay thing. I know the reason I’m a teacher is because that’s where I’m supposed to be.”

Teachers reported a longing for feedback about what impact they were making through teaching. They appeared to be waiting for the moment “when the light bulbs go on” for students, “when their faces light up, and all of a sudden you can tell this is finally making sense”, and “if they get excited about what you’re teaching, and it’s something they understand”. Teachers described the importance for students to learn how to “build upon something they already know and then share it with you”. Mr. Shepherd said, “I see a lot of talent these kids have and sometimes it goes unused because they don’t reach their potential. I want to help with that.”
There were several stories from teachers about how students navigated their environment, some successfully, suggesting that they held an optimistic or hopeful view.

*Caring.*

Caring was demonstrated in teacher - student interactions, as well as discussed in teachers’ interviews. There were many interactions described, and numerous ones observed, through which teachers demonstrated caring and compassion. For example, Mrs. Green remarked to one student, “I don’t know if you did or didn’t do it, because it would break my heart.” In this exchange, she conveyed a genuine desire for relationship with the student by asking the student to alter his behavior to please her because she cared about his personal integrity. Another example of how a teacher demonstrated her attitude towards students was Mrs. Mater giving specific instructions, and adding words like, “Lovie” and “Sweet child”, in lieu of the students’ names. She was also observed lightly rubbing a student’s arm while listening to him.

Numerous items on the observation charts detailed teacher behavior as relational, and were categorized as interactional in nature, including listening actively, praising and encouraging. In their efforts to demonstrate caring, teachers also reported that they believed it was important to be honest, because “students know who cares”. Mrs. Web said, “Your children need to know their boundaries, because it tells them that you care.” She added that she worked extra hard at finding “one minute that they’re displaying appropriate behavior, so you can, and must, say the most wonderful thing.”

Teacher behaviors coded as caring included, for example, Mrs. Mater bending down to students’ eye level, offering her full attention while listening to the student’s needs. Mr. Shepherd encouraged students using affirming comments, such as, “You are smart. You can do this.” Mrs. Web used nonverbal affirmations, such as moving away from the front of the room
and sitting next to a new girl as she offered her assistance. Mrs. Web also smiled periodically and checked for the girl’s understanding during the class lessons.

Teachers described how they had learned over time to be careful when interpreting students’ behaviors. What appeared as a lack of caring on the student’s part elicited an empathic report by Mrs. Green. She said, “[The students] say they’re not going to do it. That’s when the [bad] language and behaviors start. Isn’t it better to be rude and to act like you don’t care than it is to admit that you don’t know what you’re doing?” Not uncommon were Mrs. Green’s caring responses, which demonstrated collaboration with the student. For example, rather than stating that there was something wrong with the student’s response, Mrs. Green said, “Let me read it back to you. How does that sound?” Teachers were observed for many examples of collaborative behavior as an effective way of inviting students to engage in their learning processes and into relationship. Similarly, Mr. Shepherd’s comment to a student, “You can do it!” expressed encouragement, in an effort to express his belief that the student was capable of coming up with a correct answer.

Resourcefulness.

Lack of resources was a problem noted by all teachers. Mrs. Green said, “Can’t we just have a textbook? [We have to] do it without a teacher’s manual, a textbook, without anything.” Mrs. Web added,

You just make do with what you have. They give us these books with questions in them, no answer keys, no nothing. In the middle school curriculum, one of the standards is how to use a reference book. They have to know when to use an encyclopedia or an atlas… We don’t have an example of those books in our school, so how in the world are they supposed to know that?
Still, these teachers managed to obtain information to teach from a variety of alternative sources, such as the Internet. In other words, teachers learned to use ingenuity to make do.

Several teachers reported that their peers were often valuable resources, such as “reinforcing” lessons from one grade level teacher to another. Mrs. Web and Mrs. Mater talked about working with other teachers by asking – “if they had the student before, and what worked. You do that because you find out about the parents and siblings. You’re also asking what kind of day they are having or what kind of behaviors they have displayed.” Mr. Shepherd reported himself as a special kind of resource, since he allowed “time-outs” in his room for students from other classrooms who were having trouble. He emphasized, however, that it was only for teachers he perceived “were not taking advantage [of him]”.

Data obtained in the miracle question highlighted how desperately the teachers needed basic school resources one would expect to find in a school, like textbooks. Teachers responded by naming things: textbooks, computers that worked regularly, athletic equipment, music and art instruction and instruments, a library, field trips, and Science kits that did not have to be returned. The teachers’ list also identified other sources of assistance that would impact their students and students’ families, thereby creating a more desirable work experience for themselves:

- A parenting center to teach skills and get parents to take more responsibility for their children
- Opportunities for parents to take GED classes while their children are in school
- Day care centers in which mothers/fathers could work, alternating with other parents who are attending GED or parenting classes
• A more experienced person in the ISS room who knew the community well, so it could be a place of learning, and not just a “holding cell”

• A strong Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) that could raise funds to provide field trips.

  However, this organization could not exist without parental involvement. When asked about a PTO, one teacher commented, “The PTO? We have one parent versus [in the suburbs] the teachers have to say ‘No, please, I’ve got enough help.’”

  *Flexibility.*

  Teachers reported how often they had to deal with unpredictable interactions with students. They reported a need to be flexible with their class work, and an ability to make adaptations for students. Mrs. Mater’s report was, “I just go with the flow. You never know from one day to the next when the light bulb is going to go on and reading is going to take three hours that day.” She suggested that time was flexible and needed to be understood within the immediate context of the classroom experience. For example, all five teachers indicated that their teaching, though planned, was directly related to the moods and behaviors of their students on a daily basis, responding to “the here and now”.

  Similarly, Mr. Coach and Mrs. Green reported that how the time was spent at the beginning of class often determined how the rest of the day went. Mrs. Green said, I have goals for the week of what I need to teach with the standards. But how they get taught really depends on the kids - their moods, how long they’re in a hard-working mode, if they’re distracted, or if something has happened…

  Mr. Shepherd reported that his strategy for dealing with volatile students most often included offering students choices. He reported,

  These students, when they come in, they know if there’s any problem they’ve had before
they come to school or if anything is bothering them, they certainly have the freedom to
come to me and talk to me about it. I mean, I don’t push it… because if a student comes
in with a problem and something isn’t done to satisfy him or to take care of that need,
then that student could be a problem all day, which affects the rest of the class.

Teachers reported their methods of dealing with what they termed “challenging students”
by “regrouping, re-doing lesson plans”, and doing “self-assessment on how to do things
differently, or how to group the kids differently”. Likewise, observation data showed that
teachers handled classroom incidences by pointing out inappropriate behavior and then offering
choices, which is how an individual can be empowered to alter or continue his or her behavior.
Payne (2001) states that education in the culture of poverty must include teaching students about options.

Autonomy.

In Mrs. Green’s interview, the concept of teacher autonomy was broached. She
experienced personal empowerment in her ability, and freedom, to choose how to present her
lessons, without “someone looking over my shoulder”. Since the general atmosphere among the
teachers, staff and administration was described as “cool and unpleasant”, it did not seem likely
that anyone was looking over her shoulder. The impression was that most teachers worked in
isolation, experiencing few social supports through their work.

Teachers’ motivations were perceived to be internal and self-determined. Self-confidence
was expressed by the teachers when asked how they negotiated challenges in their work lives.
Mr. Shepherd described being ready for anything, saying, “I don’t know of an unexpected
situation” in his classroom. Most teachers felt little administrative support, compounding their
feelings of isolation when dealing with students’ issues.
From their reports, the teachers had diverse relationships with the principal, some more positive than others. The assistant principal was unavailable most of the school year due to serious health problems, which meant that discipline normally handled by her often fell to the teachers, increasing their responsibilities for overall student management.

**Summary of Initial Coding**

Teachers in this study had developed an understanding of the limitations and assets of their students and the urban school context. Personal characteristics teachers deemed essential for working in such an environment were flexibility and resourcefulness. All of the teachers expressed a strong sense of responsibility for students’ intellectual, moral and emotional development, which they viewed as essential to becoming a successful adult. Parental support was nonexistent for all but one of the teachers. Hence, suburban schools were idealized in terms of comparing family support, student abilities, and resources. Teachers also reported little administrative support, so teachers viewed themselves as isolated, except for support experienced among grade level teams.

Teachers described personal rewards when they saw success for students who demonstrated academic and personal growth. Despite numerous challenges, teachers reported a sense of caring for students, which was validated in what several described as a mission to work in an urban setting. Ultimately, all five teachers chose to work in an urban school, and expressed confidence in their abilities to do so.

**Ecological Analysis**

During further data review, it became apparent that interpretation and analysis were hampered by focusing primarily on gathering themes and attempting to fit them into the ecological principles. Applying an external model over the data was unsuccessful in identifying
salient ecological concepts. Therefore, in order to address the research questions, content analysis was substantially transformed by allowing themes to arise from the data. Coding was then repeated to allow intrinsic ecological concepts to emerge. In essence, I moved from a deductive approach in laying theory over the data, to an inductive approach whereby themes emerged from the data to determine what was important in understanding the interrelationships of the participants and the environment.

Upon further review, three ecological principles were identified: (1) multiple contexts are considered, (2) interactions between person and environment are particularly salient, and (3) meaning making is the basis for how people perceive reality (Cook, in review). Data from the interviews, observations and focus group are presented with narrative pieces (words, phrases or statements) chosen to highlight the three ecological principles as themes.

Multiple Contexts are Considered

Contextual levels in the environment were examined to see if the analysis would be enhanced through verification of what Patton (2002) calls “the extent to which the emergent analysis fits the phenomenon and works to explain what has been observed” (p. 67). The levels of contextual influence fit best with Conyne and Cook’s (2004) presentation, which differed somewhat from Bronfenbrenner’s model. For example, parental influence was determined to be more at a community or exosystem level than a microsystem level, due in large part to the lack of their involvement in their individual children’s school experiences. What would typically be experienced from parents at the closest level to students were experienced as distal influences for most teachers.

Teachers remarked upon their knowledge of their students’ home environments, or external contextual influences. Mrs. Mater said, “My teaching is based on the kids. I mean, they
come in and if something’s happened at home, or if something has happened in the community, my lesson plan often just goes flying out the window.” Conversely, teachers perceived that the larger community believed that “everything is the teacher’s fault”, or at least everything that was deemed negative. Blame for the lack of students’ academic achievement raised negative teacher reactions, such as Mrs. Mater’s expression, “parents have to have responsibility for raising their children.” Teachers’ descriptions of the urban community presented bleak possibilities for students. However, counselors reported in the ecological profiles that if the school’s mission and vision were fully realized, the school would be a positive influence within the community.

*Environmental Influences External to the School.*

Context was identified as environmental influences external to and internal to the school. Much of what was working in the school’s ecosystem was external to the school. Counselors and teachers reported positive collaborations with several community agencies, an agency specifically serving homeless families, a school counselor on site through a university grant, and several prevention programs also linked to the university. A community board existed, which included the principal and three teachers, but only two families had participated in three years. This board was influential, however, in obtaining musical instruments for the school’s Music classes. The school system provided a social worker and a school psychologist, and families had access to community support services to address issues coinciding with low socioeconomic status. Counselors, however, reported missing or inadequate services, such as “a counseling center for students and their families”, “educational testing”, and “medical services on a daily basis”. The prevalence of homelessness at the school was of particular concern for teachers.

In teacher interviews, there were frequent references to external influences, though few were considered positive. Mrs. Mater described dealing with “crack babies” and a large and
impersonal school system. As one of the few teachers who had worked in the target school for a long period of time, Mrs. Mater understood community contextual factors better than many others. She reported assisting one family in getting their utilities turned on, and helping another family obtain medical services for one of her students. Still, she stated that her biggest challenge was “getting services for these kids”, largely because of a referral system which required a “stack of forms that needed to be filled out and signed by the parents”. In such a case, she added, “it takes the teacher to go out, pound the door and say, will you please sign this?”

Mrs. Mater reported numerous challenges in teaching in an urban school, saying that students “bring to school enormous baggage. How are you going to expect them to learn? Whether it be ADHD, the crack babies - we have so many issues that suburban schools really aren’t dealing with.” Mrs. Web also spoke about “all the issues of the children – it is so overwhelming”.

The impact of students’ external influences necessitated teachers doing daily assessments of students upon arrival in an effort to discover what to expect throughout the day. Mrs. Mater described her first morning routine was “a problem-solving time. You never know what kind of crisis has happened through the night”. She added that she checked what students were wearing, “if they’ve been wearing the same clothes for three days straight, if the child hasn’t had a bath, and you can see there are other factors influencing their behavior.” Several other teachers also reported daily student assessments, such as Mrs. Web, who said,

We have about ten minutes before …reading. So for those ten minutes… I try to see who has come to school and how they look – if they look hungry or if they’re tired or whatever…if they’ve had breakfast. If they haven’t had any, I send them down to breakfast.
Mrs. Web had also determined through years of experience that she could choose to respond to students’ behaviors or not. She said,

And you also understand that dad just beat the crap out of mom last night. So if he wants to sit there for a few minutes and draw a picture, that’s OK with me as long as he gets his work done”.

Instead of daily assessment, Mr. Coach perceived that his students always needed time to change focus from external influences to school. He said, “I believe it is important to talk about how you’re feeling before you get started on your day.” His students wrote in journals, which they could choose to share with him or not. Mrs. Green, however, said that her first encounter with students each day was to “try to extinguish small fires, because they happen almost every day.”

Counselors reported in the ecological profiles that even though there were “attempts to be sure the children made it to school”, there was the “possibility that some [parents] do not know how to get involved”. Families were described as “too involved in survival”, leaving “nothing left for volunteer work at school, or even help with children’s homework”. In Mr. Coach’s opinion, “the parents here either appear to be extremely busy or they’re just flat out not involved.” Mrs. Web said that parents “are frustrated themselves… they don’t know what to do.” Meanwhile, for Mr. Shepherd urban teaching required, “…getting to know the children, and get to know them through the family they’re with.” For this reason he added, “I see the importance of communicating with parents, not only by phone but making home visits, no matter what the situation is.”

Sensitivity to the culture of poverty helped Mrs. Mater understand parents’ lack of follow-through on recommendations and their priorities. She said, “One of the things in poverty
is going to an appointment and being on time – it’s not a priority to them. They miss it and go back on the [waiting] list.” She added, “I didn’t know that the culture is light years away from the suburban experience. The language, just understanding the children, the dialect, how they dress, understanding about gangs…” Had she worked in a suburban school, she reported that she “would not have been concerned about what happened in students’ homes”. The community context was described by Mr. Coach through his personal experience as a young Black male growing up in an urban neighborhood. He reported talking to students when he heard they were “selling drugs up on the floor or whatever. I pulled [a student] aside and told him, ‘Getting all that money is great… but it destroys families and also you’ll either be locked up for a long time or you’ll be dead.’” Mrs. Mater described the school’s response to a dangerous neighborhood, saying, “we don’t have any evening programs because a couple of years ago there was a drive-by shooting at the apartments right in front of the school.” Actually, the absence of time commitments after school was an appealing part of an urban school position for Mrs. Mater.

Mr. Coach described how students were not “thinking about education if [they] are not eating breakfast”, and because of “all the stuff they got going on”. Some of his students “have been up all night… are the grown-ups at their house… telling their siblings what to do…” He said urban children, who have “a lot of stuff to get into out in the inner city”, need to be taught what it means to be respectful and disciplined. Mr. Coach said, “if you don’t have discipline in your life then you’re in a lot of trouble.” On the other hand, he added that there was a lot of “bad press that [urban children] get from other people, trying to say that they’re not really going to amount to anything.” His opinion was that such attitudes were defeatist and some students shared those attitudes.
External influences affecting school teachers also included the central school system. Support from the school system for new teachers did not exist, according to Mrs. Mater’s report. For example, she said, “Here are the standards, and you figure out how to go teach it. Sometimes we’ll give you the manuals and sometimes we won’t.” Even the college preparation for teachers who wanted to work in urban schools was negligible according to these teachers. Mr. Shepherd laughed when he stated that “a lot of things that [a new teacher] probably learned in school may be beneficial but not realistic.” Mr. Coach reported that a new teacher would not “be using this classroom management stuff that you were taught in college. It doesn’t work… or I should say some of it doesn’t work.”

As a teacher with a multifaceted background, Mrs. Web was observed teaching with a variety of methods, empowering students to be successful, and utilizing realistic applications in her curriculum. She explained that the curriculum was classist, meaning that it favored middle class values and experiences (cf. Payne, 2001). One example of how Mrs. Web used her cultural training was to help students understand concepts by combining sources of information. In one case, she used a movie about an Alaskan dog sled trek to help the students gain some perspective about climate and culture. Making connections from curricular material in the standards to practical application in the students’ lives also was the result of Mrs. Web’s years of teaching experience in a variety of settings, all of which were described as challenging. For example, she taught in Maine with students from a rural poverty culture rather than an urban poverty culture. Resources there were lacking too. She also taught at a military installation in Cuba, which was very multicultural in nature, but hampered a teacher’s creativity.
Environmental Influences Internal to the School.

The social climate in the target school was described by counselors as regimented, with a lack of respect demonstrated by both teachers and students. In the ecological profiles, counselors commented on the “highly qualified teaching staff”, though they observed “there appeared to be low staff morale”, reportedly due to “leadership that was lacking from the administration”. By all reports, the principal’s personal life spilled over into his professional life, causing problems. Most poignant was one teacher comment, “our school revolves around the personality of the principal”, who was perceived as “always in crisis mode”. Mrs. Web expressed a need for administrative support in discipline issues, rather than having students returned to class with no interventions.

Mr. Shepherd reported a feeling of personal authority influenced his work in this urban school, much like what he had experienced in his previous career as a police officer. He described the internal environment of the school this way,

This is definitely a tough situation. The people who choose to be [here] really choose to be here. They are dedicated professional people who sometimes may or may not be aware what they’re getting themselves into, and need support from those of us who have been here in this type of situation.

Then, Mr. Shepherd described the students as “kids with a lot of talent… that goes unused because they don’t reach their potential.”

In their classrooms, teachers often found it difficult to follow through on lesson planning. Mrs. Mater reportedly tried to follow her daily plans, but “that rarely happens.” Instead, her goals were long-term, such as, “I try to get books into their hands as much as I can… work on fine motor skills… try to get them to think for themselves and to express themselves.” When
confronted with unexpected situations, Mrs. Mater’s response was, “I go with the flow… You never know from one day to the next when the light bulb is going to go on and reading is going to take three hours that day.” She explained that one lesson she tried to give her students was that “sometimes things happen, there are changes, and it’s OK.”

Class routine was disrupted regularly for Mr. Shepherd, since he assisted other teachers with uncooperative students. When confronted with unexpected situations, Mrs. Green said, “I move on to the next thing or try to backtrack and go into a review mode.” In particular, a situation that always disrupted her planning was a substitute in the 7th/8th grades. Mrs. Green explained,

When we have subs in the building, we have to split one of those classes up into our classes, things like that. A lot of [substitutes] don’t like to come to us, so I usually find myself trying to accommodate for that. So what I’ve tried to do is make sure that something in the course of the day… is something that everybody, both 7th and 8th can do together.

The reported lack of materials in urban schools was not uncommon. It was a significant challenge for teachers. For example, Mrs. Green was assigned to teach the 7th/8th grade Social Studies curriculum without a textbook. Mrs. Web also needed textbooks, reference materials, maps, and paper supplies. Mr. Shepherd needed textbooks and materials, but added that he wanted the school to also have athletic equipment and musical instruments, “to tap these kids who have a lot of potential.” Mr. Coach reported the need for textbooks, but also wanted money for field trips, and Science kits to keep in his classroom. Mr. Coach added that he thought it was also important to have student lockers for their coats and personal items.
Counselors reported the school’s limitations were primarily about lack of respect and lack of discipline, with comments such as, “the atmosphere seems chaotic, with teachers unable to control classrooms”, and the “ambience of the school was like a prison, with yelling and attempts to impose stringent controls”. Students’ were described as “loud and disrespectful, with little regard for school property”, and “having the same behavior issues coming up repeatedly”. Inconsistent discipline was identified as a major issue and the administration was described as operating in crisis mode, predominantly evidenced by shouting and frequent patrolling of the buildings.

Behavior expectations and classroom rules were posted in the Kindergarten and sixth grade classrooms, while the other rooms had posters called, School Behavioral Expectations. There was also a 7th/8th grade discipline plan posted in the 7th/8th grade Science room. None of the classrooms had a posting of the Positive Behavior Support code in sight, though it was observed in the tunnel hallway. It was interesting to note that few postings of the program code were observed, since the target school was promoted by the central school system as a model for the program. Reportedly, efforts to teach and enforce the program were poor.

In response to numerous external and internal influences, consistency in the structure of class work and teaching practices were deemed important. Mrs. Web said, “Routine is pretty important. They have to know what to expect in your room… Structure is important, but you can’t be a Gestapo.” Mrs. Green said, “In our environment those kids have to be involved in something every minute or you are going to lose control.” The culture of poverty is often experienced as lacking order and organization and thus teachers implemented structure in working with students (Payne, 2001).
Interactions Between Person and Environment are Particularly Salient

Observation instruments for this study were designed to report interpersonal interactions of teachers with their students and with other teachers and school staff. Little interaction between teachers was observed, and in those cases where there was interaction, it appeared to be superficial, lacking personal interchanges. Few smiles were reported in teachers’ interactions with their colleagues, though they were talkative in the lunchroom. Discussion lessened, however, when an administrative issue was interjected. At the end of the school day teachers remained alone in their classrooms, or left the premises within approximately twenty minutes.

Mrs. Green’s unruffled style of interpersonal contact elicited a role that she described as “an empathic listener for students as well as teachers.” In dealing with classroom incidents, she said, “I make my way over to the person and we kind of just talk about what they did. And I’ll ask them, ‘Are you sure that’s what you’re supposed to be doing now?’” She said, “If they do something that’s so terribly wrong, then I give it back to them and say, ‘What can you do to make it better? Let’s make it better.’ I try real hard not to allow them to fail.” Mrs. Green taught self-prescribed lessons about a world view that consisted of “learning to do the right things - to be well-behaved kids”. Lessons were meant to teach students to treat other people the way you want to be treated.

In contrast to Mrs. Green’s demonstrated patience and encouragement with students, Mr. Coach emphasized order and discipline. Reportedly, he never went a day without a lecture on character, values, or getting along with others. He said,

They (students) need to learn in society they have to respect people, and they have to learn how to treat other people. Because nine times out of ten, the top job you’re going to have you’ll be working with people. And people aren’t putting up with disrespect –
especially your boss - and you won’t have a job.

Mr. Coach expressed his classroom management style in an urban school as, “let them know that I wasn’t playing around… here, you have to be bold.” Follow-through was important for urban teachers, who “cannot make idle threats”. Many of Mr. Coach’s comments focused on discipline - either self-discipline or the need to impose discipline.

A good day of teaching for Mr. Coach was interaction with students, “when students “give me feedback on what they’ve learned, and they actually know it, they’re not memorizing it”. He also reported that he enjoyed interacting with students outside of the classroom. As a school coach and ex-football player, he often used athletic references, such as “be part of a team and work together” when telling students how to behave in the classroom. His explanation to students about his manner of interaction was, “Yes, [he was] strict. People that aren’t concerned about you don’t say anything to you.” Though Mr. Coach’s self-description included, “I’m a strong individual with a lot of confidence, but I’m humble too. Of course, I’m not perfect. I have a sense of humor”. What was most important to him was that students “don’t just give up. It’s too easy to give up.” Mr. Coach also reported saying, “[Students] respect you a lot more when you’re honest.” He believed that being able to admit when he made a mistake was the most important factor in gaining student respect.

Mrs. Web likened her classroom style to a coach, “because [students] can relate to that. Now the coach can’t do it for you, but he can show you how.” She considered teaching interrelational, not something done to students. For her, a good day of teaching was “when the kids respond to what you’re doing in a positive way - when you get feedback from them that it’s something they can relate to and understand.” She reported “[Students’] responses to what you’re doing can change a whole lesson.” She described student feedback in this way,
You think this is really going to be the best lesson you’ve ever taught… Everything is just great… then your interactions with them are telling you that this is the worst thing that you’ve probably ever done… they’re not paying attention, they’re throwing something across the room… they just don’t care.

At times serious behaviors interrupted the learning process. Then Mrs. Web reported,

If I catch the escalated kids, then I need help with that. I don’t want anyone else to get hurt… If they’re threatening me or threatening somebody in that room… threatening so the kids won’t be able to learn…If they are really violent with somebody else, then they need to be removed.

Mr. Shepherd stated that it was difficult to separate interaction with his students from interaction with their families. He reported daily contact with families “not only as a corrective measure, but also a positive one.” He perceived parents to “really care about their children and want their best, so that gives me motivation to do what I can to help that situation.” As teacher for students who were labeled severely emotionally disturbed (SED), Mr. Shepherd asserted that his students were “not in this class because they’re deficient when it comes to academics, mentally or whatever… it’s just because their behaviors are taking over their work.” He stressed the importance of students gaining a sense of accomplishment in school, and learning about respect. As mentor to a boy on the basketball team, Mr. Shepherd said, “I stay after school with him, to make sure he is behaving… make sure he keeps himself focused on what he needs to do. And if he has problems I’m there to talk to him, pull him aside.”

Student discipline was addressed on several instruments. Counselors reported 60 in-school suspensions for one year and an average of 65 interpersonal conflicts per month. They also reported that students’ interpersonal incidents were generally about misunderstandings or
misperceptions (e.g., “He looked at me.”) and disrespect. Conflicts were dealt with by “yelling and humiliation; students were removed from class and put in the ISS room; and eventually a parent was called”. One counselor stated that teachers spent too much time with disciplinary matters. Evidence for this perception was the emphasis on maintenance and task behaviors reported from teacher observations. Behaviors such as reprimanding, giving directions, explaining, and acknowledging rules related to teachers’ role responsibilities in system maintenance (classroom management).

How each teacher positively or negatively reinforced behavior in their classrooms was reported through verbal and nonverbal communication. Mrs. Mater bent down to the child’s eye level, offered an explanation, listened to the student’s explanation, and then gave corrections or praise. Verbal cues used by Mr. Shepherd included, “Quit playin’ around!”, and “What are you supposed to be doing?” Mrs. Web was observed lecturing her class about inappropriate behavior and how they needed to learn to behave well in class so they would in turn behave well outside of class. Nonverbal techniques were used by Mrs. Green, who stood silently in the front of the classroom with her hands on her hips, and then tilted her head to side as she sighed when students were talking while she was talking. Mr. Shepherd also used a nonverbal technique, by stopping and sitting still until his students became aware of him and stopped their talking, which allowed him to finish what he wanted to say.

Even with all of the discipline needs, teachers established a positive learning environment, according to the criteria of observable behaviors coded as encouraging, listening, empowering, praising, or providing positive reinforcement. Empowering behaviors reported for all five teachers were giving specific directions and asking for anyone who did not understand what they were supposed to do. Mrs. Mater spoke often to kindergarten children using visual and
verbal connections. Of particular note, Mrs. Web gave her class directions with clear behavior cues, such as, “Please put your books under your seat and sit in your seat now.” She complimented students numerous times in observation, positively reinforcing that they were doing what they were told to do. To one student she added, “Let’s try this”, collaborating with the student. Mr. Shepherd believed that he needed to “get these kids to understand that if something goes wrong, instead of denying or making excuses, we’ll see what we can do to correct the situation in the best possible way for everyone involved.” Though Mrs. Green described students with phrases like, “They’re so mean. A lot of these kids are just so mean and angry. Some of them are just nasty”, she added, “I try to let them know they have an opinion and it counts for something.”

Each teacher observation included one hour during which specific behaviors were tallied for five-minute intervals. This provided convenient counting periods and the opportunity to see if time period (e.g., beginning, constant, peaked) during the observation was significant. No pattern was seen in time periods. Interpersonal behaviors showed high frequencies, with 25 instances of smiling for Mrs. Mater and 31 instances of encouraging for Mrs. Mater. Low numbers were zero instances of joking for Mrs. Mater and zero instances of praising for Mrs. Green. An example of encouragement was when Mr. Shepherd gave a student a “high five” while saying, “You can do this”.

Interconnected behaviors ranged from a high frequency of 28 instances of listening actively, to a low of two instances of reinforcing positive student behavior for Mr. Coach. An example of reinforced positive student behavior was Mrs. Web saying, “Thank you for doing what you are supposed to be doing”. Collaborative behaviors were also frequently noted, with 32 instances of questioning for Mrs. Green. Low numbers were two instances of offering alternative
learning methods for Mr. Coach and Mrs. Green. Empowering behaviors were tallied as 10 instances of promoting optimism for Mrs. Web and 10 instances of using students’ ideas to build upon for Mrs. Web. The low number was zero instances of promoting optimism for Mrs. Green. A category of clarifying was added when Mr. Coach responded to a student’s question during a Science experiment to clarify the assignment and appropriate safety measures.

The data also showed concentrations of instances of behaviors that appeared to be appropriate to the teachers’ grade level, such as a high number of instances for interpersonal behaviors (smiling, praising and encouraging) for Mrs. Mater, the Kindergarten teacher, as well as a high number for task behaviors (giving directions and explaining). Also, teachers of younger students (Mrs. Mater and Mrs. Web) used physical touching, but not teachers of older students. Overall, behaviors that were classified as maintenance or task behaviors received the highest numbers of tallies, such as reprimanding, acknowledging established rules, giving directions, and explaining. This pattern of behaviors reflected similarities with Payne’s (2001) work on the culture of poverty.

Maintenance behaviors included facilitating communication, acknowledging established rules and goals, reprimanding, raising the voice, and criticizing. There were zero instances of raising voice for Mr. Shepherd and zero instances of criticizing for Mr. Coach, Mrs. Green, Mrs. Web, and Mrs. Mater. Task behaviors included setting rules or goals, explaining, giving directions, lecturing, and clarifying. The highest number reported for any behavior frequency was 61 instances of giving directions, attributed to Mrs. Mater.

Other teacher observation items focused on three aspects of classroom teaching - organization, interaction and presentation (see Appendix D). All teachers were reported to be organized and prepared for the lessons observed. Mr. Coach had equipment for a Science
experiment ready when the students entered. Mr. Shepherd’s class appeared structured with
timing for specific subjects. Mrs. Web also appeared organized with assignments, transitioning
smoothly from one topic to the next. Mrs. Mater’s students demonstrated a routine of expected
behaviors, observable by students’ abilities to change behaviors depending upon Mrs. Mater’s
cues. For example, when Mrs. Mater had finished reading a story to the students, who were
seated in an organized formation on the floor in front of her, she closed the book and the students
moved directly to their assigned seats where coloring pages and crayons were available for each
child.

Observation items that aligned with maintenance behaviors were identified under the
heading of organization skills: acknowledged established rules and goals was shown very well
by all five teachers. Under interaction skills: facilitates discussion and maintained eye contact
was shown very well by four teachers. Under presentation skills: answered questions completely
and used understandable language was shown very well by all five teachers. Examples of task
behaviors included strategies used to keep classes on task, such as strong voice projection,
nonverbal communication, and eye contact. For example, Mrs. Green’s voice was constant at a
moderate volume level despite the occasional loud students. She maintained eye contact on the
entire classroom even as she moved from one student to another. Mrs. Mater also maintained eye
contact with her students, and leaned down to listen closely at each child’s eye level.

Ignoring behaviors was added as an observable teacher behavior once data collection
began. Mr. Shepherd dealt with one apparently unmotivated or disinterested student by ignoring
him and allowing him to sleep at his desk. Another example of ignoring behaviors was when
Mrs. Green did not respond to a student, who entered the classroom, dropped her books, clicked
her pen several times, and walked back across the middle of the room. Other means of handling
misbehavior by all five teachers was pointing out improper behavior and telling students to make a better choice. Four of the teachers raised their voices to gain attention at several points during observation. Two of the teachers lectured to their classes when one student spoke out using inappropriate remarks. Finally, there were only minor instances of misbehavior noted in the Kindergarten classroom, such as talking out of turn.

Specifically, the tone, content, modes of communication, and strategies of establishing and maintaining contact with students were noted during observations. Teachers were also observed for the pacing or timing of the class. All teachers allowed some time for students to answer questions, and Mr. Coach and Mrs. Green probed with additional questions to get acceptable answers. Mr. Shepherd was particularly flexible, where one student responded slower than the other boys, but no comments were made about it by the teacher or the other students. It was also noted in Mrs. Green’s class that movement through the same material was slower for the second group of students than for the first group.

The same closure technique was used by all five teachers. They reported a warning to their classes five minutes before the end. Reminders about assignments and homework were given, and in one class, a permission slip that was due the next day. Prior to closure in the sixth grade classroom, Mrs. Web restated the lesson objective and asked the students if they had achieved their objective for the day. Students affirmed her loudly, to which Mrs. Web provided positive feedback for participation, such as, “Good!” and “Thank you for that!”

Summarily, the five teachers used different styles of management and instruction in their interactions within the classroom environments. Teachers’ personalities came through in glimpses as they interacted with students and other professionals. They also discussed different
personal perspectives about teaching methods, but all were aware of contextual influences which often determined their daily agenda.

All of the observed classes remained largely on task, though several student disruptions gave opportunities to observe disciplinary steps taken by three of the teachers. Structure was evidenced by teacher preparedness with materials. Students’ expectations about class routines were apparent in how they anticipated the class pacing and flow. In all five classrooms students quickly reverted to talking to each other if any teacher paused for more than a minute or two. Even so, positive reinforcements were used regularly by teachers attempting to keep students engaged in learning activities. Mrs. Mater pointed out that there were “teaching opportunities ongoing, but it required teachers to give positive reinforcement and catch kids making good choices.” These teacher behaviors were seen as collaborative, empowering, and promoting optimism, which recognized teachers’ abilities to see opportunities for growth and change, and therefore, better possible environmental conformity.

*Meaning Making is the Basis for How People Perceive Reality*

In the ecological profiles teachers were described as “well educated and experienced”, with “most committed to quality instruction”, while “being willing to go ‘above and beyond’ to show support to their students outside of class”. These are just a few descriptors of teachers’ perceived person-environment fit with respect to the meanings attached to various aspects of their jobs and careers in an urban environment. From the first round of coding, flexibility, caring and a sense of personal reward particularly related closely to the ecological principle of meaning making. Urban teachers face certain realities with their students, their colleagues, and their work environment, all of which are perceived individually and acted upon accordingly.
Flexibility in classroom techniques was described as an important skill for the five urban teachers, as described in their abilities to accommodate various students’ needs and interests, sometimes evidenced in curricular adjustments. Mrs. Web demonstrated her understanding about how to make a modification on an assignment for one child who experienced significant school-related anxiety. Her simple technique was to break down the assignment into small portions so as not to overwhelm him. Such an example portrayed her ability to identify a students’ learning style, while punctuating her cognizance of a student’s special needs.

Caring was also reflected in numerous teacher reports about working with students. For instance, Mrs. Web reported her philosophy “boils down to one thing. Students] know I care, and [they] know I’m not going to put up with their crap. Children need to know their boundaries.” As one of the two teachers who spoke about teaching as a mission, Mrs. Web described her daily accomplishment as making sure the students understood why she was teaching what she was teaching. She also attempted to help students set daily goals, individually and as a class, and to learn appropriate behavior. Long-term familiarity with the target community enhanced her knowledge of the challenges and supports available to students and their families, and drove her to remain constantly well-prepared to provide guidance, care, empathy and patience. The meaning given to developing relationships with students and with their colleagues facilitated an improved ecological niche for the teachers.

Mrs. Web described meaning in her work by explaining her personal motivation. She said, “I go in there every single day and really just look at my kids and be happy that they are there, and be enthusiastic. That’s the only thing that keeps me going – my own drive.” Mrs. Web reported that she had always wanted to teach and believed that “I just connect with children. It’s a combination of a religious thing and also a lay thing… If you can teach a child to think, you
can give them a great gift.” She also said “it was important to give [students] something…
important to give to the community.” In particular she reported an important experience when a
woman at her church said that “she would walk with the children.” Her desire for personal and
academic development included her own, and was described by saying others “would probably
see me going through some books and sort of assessing myself to myself”.

Mrs. Web expressed a sense of personal reward teaching in an urban school. She paused
before saying that the meaning teaching had for her as a career was the opportunity to “share
myself with these children and the community and I try to do the best I can to give them a sense
of curiosity… to just find things out - help them learn to think.” She added the importance of
developing self-confidence in students “in order to ask questions and to feel good about
themselves”. She also touted a strong desire for students to develop insight, and the ability to ask
questions. Mrs. Web added, “One thing they learn from me, though, is every day is a new day
and it amazes them. I can just come in the next day like nothing ever happened the day before”,
to which Mrs. Green said, “Come in every day and start fresh. What direction you are going in is
up to you.”

Mrs. Green described meaning in her daily work by explaining the lessons she interjected
about caring. In order to talk to students about life management skills in her classes, she chose
readings to reflect them. She described these choices as her attempts to try “to get them to
understand you treat people how you want to be treated.” She actually modified the Direct
Instruction (DI) reading program in order to engage her students, because of “their ability level
and their reluctance to participate.” In an attempt to be sensitive to students’ needs, Mrs. Green
included reading comprehension strategies with what she considered more appropriate stories
than the DI program offered her students.
By Mrs. Green’s report she worked in an urban school because, “I think I’m just drawn to those kids.” She experienced personal rewards in daily “teachable moments where somebody makes a statement or something and we can expound on it and everyone seems to understand… if the majority understands, then I think that’s a good day for me.” She also said that she wanted her students to have,

an understanding between the real world and this illusionary school world that they have created in their minds. And I try to get them to give each other at least one social grace in this room. They have to say something nice to each other.

Mrs. Green explained that the illusionary school world included few rules and more student empowerment than was realistic.

In response to a question about the meaning of her career, Mrs. Green said, “I just like to feel as if I’m working towards something. It’s more important that [students] understand that school is more so about adaptation and how you get along with others, and are you trainable?” After conceding that she had thoughts about quitting her job, she said, “Something keeps drawing me back.” When she reported feeling frustrated with students’ lack of motivation, she said she focused on her goals for the year. She stated that, “I try to meet at least 75% of the goals… I try to make sure they get something out of it.”

When asked what meaning teaching had for him as a career, Mr. Coach reported that it was to make sure that students were getting an education so that they could have professional jobs. He said, “Success isn’t just about grades, either, it’s about being the right kind of person.” An important aspect of Mr. Coach’s teaching philosophy was his reported desire to see bright students achieve both academic and personal success. He believed that he was “sent here to make sure they get an education and [let them know] that [he] cared about them.” He explained that his
goal was simple: to have students learn something from the standards. Mr. Coach described his strategy of straight talk to students about life after school, such as “getting a job that you’ll be proud of.” He repeatedly told students “You need to have education…” He described feeling frustrated trying to understand why students in “this generation think it’s cool to be dumb”, and offered a story about a female student who was offered a test leading to a college scholarship. She chose not to take it, “because she doesn’t want to look smart in front of her peers.” Unfortunately, this story was not surprising since respondents predicted as many as 50% of the eighth grade students would not move on to high school.

Though Mr. Coach recognized students’ contextual difficulties, he expected their best work and behavior in the school setting. His concerns were teaching “skills to learn how to talk to people. I tell them you just can’t talk to people any type of way. You need to learn to do respect.” He said, “I’m not saying that what you’re going through is no big deal, but you still have to handle your business here.” He stated that “these kids need direction, self-discipline, and they need to take responsibility for themselves”.

Discipline, direction, and respect were repeatedly used in Mr. Coach’s description of his role as authoritarian within the school building. His classroom lectures often included reprimands for misbehavior and he pointed out students’ needs to develop respectful behavior and life plans. However, Mr. Coach expressed dismay at students’ perceived expectations to allow inappropriate behaviors in class. He expressed feelings of impatience with what he termed “ghetto stuff”, such as inappropriate dress, bad language, talking back to adults, and intimidating attitudes. He added, “I hang in there is because I know somebody will do well. A lot of them will do well and I know they will do well.” Having come from a similar background, he told students, “If I can do this, you can.”
When discussing his career choice, Mr. Shepherd reported that a professor had told him that “kids in the city don’t get good teachers”, which he found motivating. While describing himself, Mr. Shepherd said, “I’m involved. I do a little preaching as well as teaching… I am a particularly caring person… they would see me as supportive – demanding – knowing what their capabilities are and setting expectations for them.” He listed personal resources such as, an ability to see potential in students, the ability to communicate with students and their families, the ability to go to the housing projects without fear, and his belief in “God, directing me to this calling.”

When asked what meaning teaching had for him as a career, Mr. Shepherd spoke about his career as a “calling”, adding that he believed “my nature and my purpose on earth is to work with children like I work with.” He said,

It gives me a chance to give to these students what other teachers have given me. That I have to use my natural God-given talents, and to desire to help these kids, to believe in themselves and find themselves successful.

Mr. Shepherd’s story was particularly poignant with his personal experience as a special needs child now teaching special needs children. He said, “Someone cared and acted upon it”, and “I’m able to encourage someone else”. Drawing from his personal experience as a challenging student who was encouraged rather than criticized, Mr. Shepherd was intent on helping his students gain a sense of accomplishment. One comment, in particular, highlighted Mr. Shepherd’s perspective: “Kids find it safe to be in [my] room because, whether it’s right or wrong, they know that I understand them and will protect them.”

Meaning for teachers was affected by interactions with students and their families, requiring what was described as “above and beyond” efforts on the part of the teachers to make
those connections. With the redesign plan of the target school, almost the entire school staff was replaced. It was Mrs. Mater who said that families “perceived broken relationships” because of the redesign. Even though she was aware of resources within the community and the school system, she reported feeling compelled to perform roles other than teaching in her efforts to determine students’ needs and assist families in identifying and obtaining services. “It’s so hard teaching now. It’s everything – you’re a counselor, you’re a mother, you’re a father, you’re the clergy … a lot of times.” Mrs. Mater reported that she loved kids and had “always wanted to be a mommy when I grew up.” She reported, however, that she had accomplished the goals she set in high school, noting that the traditional career worked well for her in order to be home with her own children when they were home, and still maintain a career.

Mrs. Mater was perceived as a teacher with an eye for the outward appearance of respect, success and accountability. One description of her was “the go-to teacher”, because so many people in the school and community were reported to rely on her knowledge and her professionalism. In her first urban teaching post Mrs. Mater had been told by a principal that she would be successful if 80% of her class “got through”. She said, “The whole concept of letting kids fall through the cracks was just so unacceptable to me.” Reporting an experience that overall had been personally fulfilling, her perspective on urban teaching was, “in the suburban schools you are taken for granted. There is a lot more satisfaction [here] where you can see that you’ve really helped a child or his family and made an impact.”

Clear boundaries between her work and personal lives were detailed in Mrs. Mater’s description of her personal and professional lives. She said, “I lead two different lives” as she expressed a sense of embarrassment should her friends see how disrespectful students and staff from the target school were. Her home life was described as calm and organized, with no crises.
Upon entering the target school, though, she said, “it’s just entering a whole different world where there’s people running around and being disrespectful to each other.” Her nurturing manner of classroom management belied her frustration with the central school system. In response to a good day of teaching, Mrs. Mater responded with, “Oh! When the light bulbs go on! The kids get so excited! Their faces light up, and all of a sudden you can tell this is finally making sense.”

Mrs. Mater said if a person wanted to be a teacher, he or she should volunteer in an urban school to “really experience it”. Mrs. Web addressed the idealism of young new teachers who hoped for personally rewarding experiences in an urban school. She said, “They come into it and they’re going to save the world and they’re excited, and about a month in here and they’re questioning whether they made the right decision.” She then enumerated teaching maxims for new teachers. These were:

“They must know what you expect.”

“You have to be consistent.”

“You are not there to be their friend, but to make sure they get an education.”

Mrs. Green added, a new teacher should “pick up on what’s going on and not have to act on it immediately.” Similarly, Mr. Shepherd reported a list of recommendations to new teachers. His were:

“Patience means a lot.”

“Show kids that you’re human, and just like them you have problems.”

“You can’t take students’ failures to heart.”

“If you’re not in tune with these kids you may as well not go to work. If they don’t trust you, forget it.”
“Know that there are things that [you] can change and other things [you] have no control over changing.”

Teachers described their work environment as relatively unpleasant with regards to the level of camaraderie among teaching staff. Mrs. Mater said her strongest desire was to work with a supportive group of colleagues. She described her ideal as “having teachers who enjoy what they’re doing and are there for the same reasons I am.” In the target school she described her workmates as “overwhelmed” and “just putting in their time”. She also reported, “We have a lot of grumpy people. We have a lot of teachers that I think are really overwhelmed.” Mrs. Green later offered, “Everyone here seems to have a yoke of burden. People are not happy. People are burdened with their own dissatisfaction with life. There is nothing left to give.” Then, she described her interactions with other teachers in the school as, “Everybody comes to me. A lot of people come to me to vent.”

Teachers were asked what they knew about themselves that enabled them to work in the urban school environment. After Mr. Coach jokingly said, “Run”, Mrs. Web said, “I’m an optimist”. Mrs. Green said, “every day is not going to be a good day, but not every day is not going to be a bad day either.” She said that teachers in this setting were able to “bounce back”. She also said,

I don’t have a defeatist attitude. I think you have to be a real determined person to work in an environment like this because otherwise you would run out of the building screaming ... you have to be determined to come back every day.

Teachers reported influences from their own teachers, which were perceived as either the inspiration to choose teaching as a career or specifically teaching in an urban setting. Comments from teachers about what it meant to work in an urban school included Mr. Coach saying, “I’m
not a quitter”, and Mrs. Mater saying, “we all love children”. Mr. Shepherd said that he knew he was “doing what I want to do”. Serving as the teachers’ union representative for the school, he also said he had a “mission to inspire others”.

Despite the lack of parental or family support for students in the target school, teachers reported feelings of hope. Two of the five teachers were in long-term mentoring relationships with students, which required spending considerable amounts of time with students outside of school hours. Though all teachers believed that students were below par in academic skills, they believed that if supported, students could overcome their challenges.

The range of possibilities for the teachers’ careers was explored. Mrs. Web said, With downsizing, this opportunity may cease to exist. I would enjoy working at the children’s hospital, teaching on the psychiatric ward, do private tutoring, or possibly write for textbooks. I would also like to be trained to become a child advocate in the courts.

Mr. Shepherd said, “I would like to be an advocate or liaison between home and school.” Mr. Coach said, “I want to be a principal and I want more money too, so I need my Master’s… it’s important because my three children can see I have my Master’s degree and I’m trying to better myself in education.” Mrs. Green added “I need to get a principal license in order to get a curriculum job.” Finally, Mrs. Mater responded:

I got my Master’s in administration because when I can’t get down on the floor anymore with these kids, it’s time for me to get out of the classroom. I wanted to position myself to be one of the dream team, to tell other teachers how to teach.

Teachers were asked what individuals and settings were important to their everyday lives. Mrs. Web said it was her family, but her friends were the key to her emotional health. She
described it this way, “when you do what we do, in the environment we do it in – you have to have someone to vent to”. Mrs. Mater reported that she waited each afternoon for a phone call from her children, and that her “life after school revolves around that telephone call.” She added that when she left the target school each day, she left all the problems behind her. Mrs. Green described herself as “boring”, because “the highlight of her day was to play with my baby and watch television.” She described her family to include not only her husband and baby, but also her mother, sister, and her husband’s parents, or as she reported, “the clan.” The individuals and settings important to her everyday life centered on her “family first.” Mr. Coach reported that 45% of his day was work, which allowed for time with his two young children and girlfriend. Though individuals and settings important to his everyday life included his children most importantly, he also reported that when he went home, he thought about his students and his desire to help them with education and life.

In the focus group, teachers were asked what they liked best about being a teacher. Mrs. Mater responded by saying that she liked having a job so she could still have time for her family. Mrs. Green reported a sense of pride when one of her students received an award for “going from a horrible writer to a good one.” Mrs. Web said that she liked the challenge of teaching and the diversity of daily activity, including her multiple roles – mentor, teacher, listener, and mother. She added a sense of pride when her class voted to allow a student to borrow class money for a field trip, which the teacher considered “generous, when they are usually so selfish.” Meaning making included reporting assets, which for students were “eagerness for sincere relationships with caring adults”, and many “are loving, and resilient in the face of their troubles”.

Teachers’ Job and Career Satisfaction Ratings

One interview item was included to obtain teachers’ self-report about their satisfaction with their jobs and their careers on a scale from one to seven, with one = very dissatisfied and seven = very satisfied. Table 4.3 presents the teachers’ responses, as well as averages for each teacher, and for all five teachers for job and career satisfaction. Data show high levels of satisfaction with both teachers’ jobs and careers. Mr. Shepherd rated his satisfaction for both items at the highest level, which was consistent with his comment, “Completely satisfied. I can tell you that for 13 years I have come to work every day without having any doubts about coming.” Somewhat higher were the ratings of career satisfaction for all teachers over their ratings for job satisfaction, suggesting that the target school environment was somewhat less satisfactory than their chosen profession.

A question that was designed to elicit ways teachers had experienced growth in their careers received varied responses. Mrs. Green described her lack of enthusiasm at the beginning of the school year, but added,

This year made me stronger. I thought about leaving… but why would I leave? This year made me realize that I like being a teacher, and I like the kids even though I swore up and down I couldn’t stand them.

Mrs. Web said that she realized that her diversity of teaching experiences had made her a better teacher than one who taught the same grade level for their entire career. Mrs. Mater reported that though she had taught the same thing for 18 years, she did not feel stagnant, but continually exchanged ideas with her peers to maintain enthusiasm. Mr. Coach shared his belief that “each year seems a little more challenging.” He added that his personal challenge was to not give up on students, so growth was his ability to sustain energy and commitment to teach his students about
Table 4.3 Teachers’ Satisfaction Ratings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant/grade</th>
<th>Satisfied with job</th>
<th>Satisfied with career</th>
<th>Overall satisfaction (Average)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A/ 7th / 8th “Mr. Coach”</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>B/ 7th / 8th “Mrs. Green”</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>4.25</td>
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<td>C/ 6th grade “Mrs. Web”</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D/ Middle school Special education “Mr. Shepherd”</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E/ Kindergarten “Mrs. Mater”</td>
<td>5-6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Averages</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6.2</td>
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Rating scale: 1 = very dissatisfied to 7 = very satisfied
living and working in the real world. With respect to an urban school, several of the teachers reported feeling overwhelmed at times by students’ contextual influences. Teachers also talked about the need for flexibility working in an urban environment, and a need for optimism and the belief that teachers could make a difference in their students’ lives.

Data Analysis

Five teachers in an urban school were interviewed and observed in order to understand their “ecological niches”, how they perceived their work environment, and how they made meaning of their career fit in an urban setting. The data were examined to illuminate how, “People live within cultures; establish their own social environments, or social ecosystems, in which people develop their sense of self and … view reality and behave accordingly”, stated by Neufeldt and Nelson (2004, p. 89).

Three ecological principles stood out in analysis to address the research questions. Multiple contexts contributed to the ecological niche of the five urban teachers, as they identified social, cultural, and institutional factors which were perceived as relevant to daily proximal influences of people and places (Conyne & Cook, 2004). Interactions between persons and environment were particularly salient in understanding how teachers behaved as professionals in the urban school setting. Their descriptions of teaching methods and reciprocal processes in and out of the classrooms were rich with examples of dynamic and reciprocal behaviors between teachers and students. Finally, meaning making was the basis for how teachers perceived reality, which greatly influenced their perception of career fit. As teachers interpreted their life experiences, they were able to articulate their philosophies of life and work and how their life missions evolved.
The teachers in this study talked about their social ecosystems as determinants in their career choice. Table 4.4 shows the top three influences reported by teachers about what made them go into the career of teaching. The areas of influence included support from others, such as mentors, teachers and parents; childhood experiences; a special ability in working with children; and a sense of responsibility for others. Many such determinants emphasize the principle of meaning making.

A key finding from the interview data was teachers’ reporting that their college experiences were insufficient preparation for working in an urban school. Mr. Shepherd said, “things learned in college don’t apply here”. Mr. Coach said, “If you plan to work urban, you’re not going to be using this classroom management stuff taught in college. It doesn’t work.” Mrs. Mater shared that “no matter how well the universities prepared you, it’s deer in the headlights. Student teaching doesn’t help, because the teacher helps set up the room, helps with issues and supplies.” In this way student teachers are not prepared to be self-sufficient.

Summary

As a group, the participants represented committed educational professionals who were keenly aware of the multiple contexts within which their students lived and learned. Adept at assessing students’ moods daily, these teachers had become flexible enough to adjust or modify curricular agendas in order to accommodate students’ needs. Teachers’ interactions with students likewise demonstrated an interconnectedness, which determined how teaching and learning was going to be reinforced on any given day.

There were many notable moments in which these five teachers demonstrated important relational facets that buffered the problems for their students who suffer poverty, poor parenting, lack of safety in their homes and neighborhoods, and disruptive transience (Bullough, 2001).
Table 4.4 Influences on Teachers’ Career Choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Influence #1</th>
<th>Influence #2</th>
<th>Influence #3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A “Mr. Coach”</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Connect with children</td>
<td>Black students happy to see a Black male teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B “Mrs. Green”</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Support from friends</td>
<td>Wanted to learn about how children learn</td>
<td>Went where the money was</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C “Mrs. Web”</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Childhood teachers</td>
<td>Religious calling</td>
<td>Wanted to make a difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D “Mr. Shepherd”</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Support from mentor and friends</td>
<td>Religious calling</td>
<td>Wanted to see more teachers follow up on student problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E “Mrs. Mater”</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Convenience</td>
<td>Love children</td>
<td>Felt like I make an impact on children and families</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Their caring and attention to the students’ needs presented ongoing opportunities to perform multiple roles beyond that of teaching.

The themes and ecological principles previously outlined provided a way to organize the findings of this study. Three principles were identified to be of primary importance after reviewing the teacher narratives: multiple contexts are considered, interactions between person and environment are particularly salient, and meaning making is the basis for how people perceive reality (Cook, in review). The ecological principles translated easily into an analysis of person-environment interaction within an urban school. Ripe with multiple challenges, teachers and students engaged in dynamic and generally effective relationships. The three identified principles used to contextualize client data within the ecological framework may also be helpful for teachers to conceptualize their work performance.

Though effectiveness of their teaching abilities was not a research question in this study, it is apparent that many of the personal strengths identified with these teachers are consistent with high effectiveness in a professional evaluation. Sachs (2004) described self-efficacy as a predictor of teacher success. Characteristics discovered in this study, such as high expectations for self and students, and a sense of responsibility for student learning and motivation are analogous to Sachs emphasis on self-efficacy. The necessity to confront low achieving students, low parental involvement and lack of discipline presents extraordinary challenges for urban teachers every day, yet these teachers enact their careers with faith, hope and respect. In addition, these teachers were self-aware and often self-sustaining, which are necessary skills to be developed to work in such an environment. Teachers either attain such skills or find that they are unable to be effective, which impacts the system’s ability to retain effective teachers in urban settings.
Teachers in this study were intentional about developing an understanding of the limitations and assets of their students and the urban school context. They expressed a strong sense of responsibility for students’ intellectual development, as well as their moral and emotional development, which they viewed as essential to becoming a successful adult. They saw their jobs as requiring specific personal resources to meet urban students’ needs. Primary resources were identified as flexibility, resourcefulness, and caring for their students. Since little support came from the school’s administration or other teachers, they viewed themselves as autonomous, and often working alone. Parental support in the school was nonexistent and lacked importance to most of the teachers. The idealization of suburban schools seemed to be a focus in comparing resources, students and families. Despite the challenges, though, these teachers experienced personal rewards as those times when “the lights went on” and when they saw academic success for students who demonstrated personal and academic growth. These rewards validated for the teachers’ expressed mission to continue to work in an urban setting.

By their own report, the teachers understood the challenges of teaching in an urban school, and made the choice to do so. They met those challenges by calling on personal resources and their families and friends for moral support. Even though there was diversity among the teachers’ styles of presentation, all were considered effective in their work in the classroom. Through interviews, teachers talked about their perceptions of their work environment, which set the backdrop for understanding teachers career fit in an urban school. Classroom observations offered validation for many of expected teacher behaviors. The teachers provided glimpses into effective teaching practices in an urban school. Their stories gave voice to the needs of teachers and students, who work in relationship to overcome many challenges, but have significant needs that are not being addressed by the public school system.
My interpretation of some of the teachers’ comments was presented for member checking: “You have a strong belief in students’ abilities to develop skills” and “I hear encouragement and nurturing for students as people” and,

You start with respect and then maybe you don’t deserve it after some point, but even so you still maintain the belief that [students] can be influenced and perhaps you all are a significant part of that influence.

These comments were verified for accuracy and just as Brown (2003) stated, “effective urban teachers play the role of… coaches who assume responsibility for their students’ academic development” (p. 277). The needs of urban schools are great, and even greater for urban children who live in poverty. Teachers, like the ones in this study, make a difference in children’s lives every day by believing in their potential, and maintaining their own positive engagements in daily person-environment interactions within this unique context.
Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to discover if the concepts in the ecological counseling model promote better understanding of the person-environment fit of teachers in an urban school. By exploring ways that urban teachers make meaning of the ecological components in their daily work, counselors and teacher educators can determine how those components fit with teachers’ sense of congruence or concordance with their work environment and with their career choice. The everyday work lives of urban teachers were explored to understand how they experience their careers on a daily basis, and what factors help them continue their work in an urban environment. These factors were described by teachers in their personal stories through qualitative methodology.

The ecological counseling model as described by Conyne and Cook (2004) was used as the meta-framework for the design of this study. Principles of the ecological counseling model were used to guide this research by (1) developing the research questions, (2) developing the instruments and interview questions, and (3) attempting to understand the person-environment interactions of teachers in an urban school setting. The research questions addressed in this study were intended to explore what Cook et al. (2004) labeled the “myriad of individual, contextual, and interactional factors that shape the career development” of urban teachers (p. 297). Through interviews and observations five teachers in an urban school environment told their stories, describing factors and influences that helped them manage their person-environment fit, despite many difficulties, in order to educate urban-dwelling children. The nature of \((P \times E) = B\) in this setting was explored through participants’ narratives about their perceptions of the context and how they made meaning of their interactions within it.
Analysis created emergent themes in initial coding: sense of responsibility, personal rewards, caring, resourcefulness, flexibility, and autonomy. Teachers expressed a strong sense of responsibility for students’ intellectual development, as well as their moral and emotional development. Primary personal resources were flexibility, resourcefulness, and caring. They viewed themselves as autonomous, with little administrative support. Parental support was nonexistent and lacked influence on teachers’ behavior. Despite challenges, these teachers experienced personal rewards, which validated what they expressed as a mission to work in an urban school.

Upon further analysis, three ecological principles were identified as particularly salient: (1) multiple contexts are considered, (2) interactions between person and environment are particularly salient, and (3) meaning making is the basis for how people perceive reality, providing a framework for research analysis (Cook, in review). In this study, the concepts of the ecological model facilitated:

(a) understanding the “ecological niche” shared by teachers in an urban school,
(b) understanding how teachers behave as education professionals within the setting, and
(c) understanding the career fit of teachers in an urban school.

Teachers demonstrated sensitive awareness of the urban context, and were adept at assessing students daily in order to accommodate students’ needs. Their interactions with students, families and their colleagues were at times precarious, but comprised a significant portion of their ecological niches. Interpretation of those interactions within the specific contexts of an urban school setting determined meaning for the teachers about themselves and others. Not only is each person’s life unique but there are broader influences affecting each person’s behavior choices. This matched Conyne and Cook’s (2004) definition of an ecosystem, or “the
sum total of interacting influences operating in a person’s life” (p. 11). Teachers’ abilities to maintain their psychological stability was discovered to be dynamic and ongoing responses to understand and manage their interpersonal relationships, and contact with the physical setting and the broader socio-cultural context.

The ecology of one urban school was realized through the interview narratives of five teachers within it. Ecological counseling principles provided the basis to explore how teachers identified and utilized their internal and external resources to perform their work. What has resulted is an increased understanding of the personal and environmental contextual influences in the daily lives of urban teachers.

Discussion

Gaining knowledge of the setting in which the teachers and students in this study interacted was an essential part of utilizing the ecological model to study the environment, that is, gathering data needed to define the variables \((P \times E) = B\). According to Patton (2002), setting descriptions should provide the reader with a mental image of the place in order to better understand what happens there and why. Hence, the ecological niche of urban teachers took shape. Participants \((P)\) described the study’s environment \((E)\) with the primary focus on interactions \((x)\) within their classrooms \((= B)\). Teachers often encountered students in unpredictable ways, yet their classroom interactions were in direct response to their individual interpretations of the students and the contextual influences. Teachers’ behaviors were also mediated by how they made meaning of their self-prescribed roles beyond that of teacher, such as doctor, clergy, social worker, and parent.

Ingersoll (2001) identified what is called a “revolving door in urban schools, where large numbers of teachers leave for reasons other than retirement” (p.5). In one study, Hanushek et al.
(2003) identified categories of job-related reasons why teachers remained at a school. They conjectured that teachers moved from a school when they had an opportunity to work with non-minority students, who were high achievers, and potentially of high income status. Patterns showed that teachers moved to schools with fewer academically and economically disadvantaged students, while new teachers tended to begin their careers in the most difficult schools. In the target school, the “revolving door” was caused by the central school system when almost the entire staff and all but four teachers were reassigned and replaced, creating disconnect between established community relationships and the school’s personnel.

Urban schools suffer from their inability to attract experienced teachers, since many teachers use their seniority to move into what Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin (2003) labeled as less stressful situations. Administrators have found it difficult to recruit teachers into urban schools, even though teachers there are paid as well, and sometimes better, than their rural or suburban counterparts (Lippman et al., 1996). Experienced teachers have reported feeling overwhelmed when confronted with the multiple challenges of an urban school (Prince, 2002), and expressed a lack of preparation for such an environment.

This study explored the meaning of the contexts of work and the workplace. Work is usually associated with the place in which it happens. For instance, plumbers work in kitchens, bathrooms, boiler rooms, and other places that house water equipment. A flight attendant works on airplanes. Professors and teachers work in educational institutions. Johnson (1990) describes the workplace as a constellation of features, which includes the physical setting, but it also includes the social context of the work. According to Moos’s (1991) model, teachers experienced the environment within three dimensions: relationship, personal growth, and system maintenance and change. As Moos stated, student morale increases “when student involvement and supportive
relationships with teachers and peers were present (relationship domain) within task-oriented classes with specific academic goals (personal growth domain) in well-organized, clearly structured, innovative classrooms (system maintenance domain)” (Neufeld et al., 2006, p. 249).

Data in this study highlighted teachers’ abilities to exhibit characteristics of support through their relationships with students in their classrooms, and through their involvement in the lives of some of their students and their own families (relationship dimension).

In this study, teachers’ perceptions of the environment were identified through their descriptions of the context, reporting high noise levels and tension in the school building, a lack of material resources, low teacher morale, and the issues students presented daily. One teacher described students’ issues, “Oh, I would say 80% is frustration and 20% is whatever is going on at home, and a little percentage is mental health issues. And I have some kids with serious mental health issues!” Students in the target school came from a poverty-stricken, risk-ridden urban culture. Two of the teachers used the term “baggage” when referring to students’ contextual influences:

It’s the baggage they come with. There was a drug bust and ‘they took daddy away in handcuffs’, or there was a fight … that’s part of their world. You never know what kind of crisis has happened through the night … Homelessness is a part of life here. There are kids who … don’t know where they’re going to be sleeping or where their next meal is coming from … asking them to learn their letters or walk in a straight line is kind of last on their priority list.

Likewise, the degree to which children in the target school had experienced major life crises was significant. One report was,

I have one (student) whose mother was murdered in front of him when he was a little kid,
and he lives in a family with twelve children. He’s not really related to the foster parents—
he just lives there. I mean these kids are living lives that I have not one clue how they
live, or how they survive.

Despite such harmful external environmental factors, teachers were able to create a school
environment that was relatively safe and secure, similar to Bullough’s (2001) description of “a
place where children can and will learn if they attend regularly and if they work” (p. 41).

From an ecological perspective, the influential segments of teachers’ ecosystems in daily
life included people encountered on a regular basis, and features of their workplace. Within their
ecological niches in the target setting, teachers had to negotiate students’ highly emotional, often
disrespectful, reactions to events within the school day, which were influential workplace
conditions. Discipline issues were time-consuming for teachers and administrators, and required
a great deal of empathy and understanding on their parts. Unfortunately, discipline was
inconsistent. Children’s immature emotions erupted with little or no warnings, prompting
teachers and other adults to engage in a form of counseling in order to reestablish a sense of
order. Children often could not state the catalyst for an emotion or the impetus for the resulting
behavior. For many urban children in poverty, and those living in abusive or neglectful
situations, predictability is needed in order to provide children with a sense of stability. Teachers
responded to the need for such consistency and order with organized classrooms, which provided
predictability in students’ lives, at least at school.

Teachers’ jobs are relational, especially in relationship with their students. Their
vocational identity is constructed within their understanding of those relationships (Blustein,
Schultheiss, & Flum, 2002). Urban teachers work in places that are poorly resourced in terms of
supplies and support persons within the school system. In this study, the interactional nature of
teachers’ work promoted a sense of personal satisfaction when synergy existed between various life roles, with peers, students and their families (Flores, Scott, Wang, Yakushko, McCloskey, Spencer, & Logan, 2003).

The target school, families, students and teachers had few material resources, but demonstrated a richness of personal resources. Teachers attempted to promote personal growth for students, realizing that “reinforcement to be positive” was essential in their “ongoing teaching opportunities”, in and out of the classrooms. The comment, “you have to catch kids making good choices” was a way of describing the empowerment of students to take control of their behavior, but also let students know that they could indeed change, and be rewarded. Comments like, “these kids need direction, they need self-discipline, and need to learn to take responsibility”, and “I want to get these kids to believe in themselves”, or “it’s a good day when students feel like they’ve accomplished something”, described teachers beliefs that they could positively impact students’ lives. In turn, these beliefs provided meaning making to the teachers’ own careers.

Johnson (2003) proposed that social interdependence theory directly affects psychological health by promoting accountability, personal responsibility and interaction. This conceptualization describes much of what teachers desired in their work environment in order to sustain them despite the contextual challenges. Quartz (2003) analyzed teacher retention by trying to “understand what explains the survival of highly-qualified teachers in urban schools over time” (p. 105). Her descriptions of the work of Center X in Los Angeles are replete with information pointing to important measures needed to support teachers in schools similar to the target school. Her analysis promoted a strengths-based understanding and a social justice focus.
Many of her insights suggested developing a deeper understanding of sociological context and the needs of teachers.

The more recent saturation of context-focused career literature encourages multiple views of the same environment and working experience. Five teachers shared their insights about their work experiences, including the personal strengths and resources needed for career sustenance. One such personal quality was hopefulness. How teachers fit with their careers was negotiated often, perhaps daily, but satisfactorily based upon the hopefulness they shared when describing what was possible for them and for their students. Even without traditional educational and material resources, these urban teachers drew from experience and creativity to enhance the environment for their students. Their statements were indicative of a deep level of reflexive meaning making, where the teachers reflected on their experiences in order to share them for the benefit of other teachers and for counselors.

Hopefulness is often associated with surviving adversity. Bullough (2001) described how the students he interviewed survived by living in the present only, withholding dreams, and lacking “a sense of tomorrow connected to today, of future” (p. 34). Sadly, without a future there is a risk of losing hope, which is anticipatory, aspiring and ambitious. Students unable to grasp such concepts fail to develop clear boundaries of acceptable social behavior. The perspective assumes that with few expectations for the future, there are few disappointments. The sense of hopefulness, however, penetrated the overwhelming risk factors. Teachers offered hope for their students, who, if supported, could overcome their challenges.

Through teachers’ perceptions, the ecological niches of students were also indirectly explored. In a poverty culture stress reduction is emphasized by Bullough (2001) as an imperative for creating stable and caring environments in which the process of education can
occur. Students and their families were too involved in survival, negatively impacting the children’s abilities to learn. Teachers spent considerable amounts of time daily dealing with tough student issues in order to proceed with the educational process. Particularly difficult are situations when teachers must confront the issues of child maltreatment and neglect. They must do so as mandated reporters, but also because they demonstrate concern for children’s social and emotional growth, as well as their academic growth.

An overriding aspect of meaning making in determining teachers’ motivations was described in their personal missions and calling to an urban school setting. Discussions of religious influences demonstrated teachers’ sense of personal reward, even hope, as an important personal factor for them. Comments about “purpose on earth”, and “sent here to make sure they get an education and (let them know) that I care about them”, were phrases that stood out, highlighting the concept of meaning making, as a factor in sustaining teachers in the target environment. In addition, Sachs (2004) acknowledged that some teachers choose to work in urban settings, and negotiate the settings rather effectively.

The key outcome of this study is the use of ecological counseling concepts as they enhanced understanding of the career fit of urban teachers. Teachers utilized ecological principles in their work practices similar to way that they counselors do – to know the student (client) through interactions, with an understanding of the multiple contexts in which students (clients) live, and to what degree students (clients) experience fit and concordance. Social constructionism influences ecological counseling by exploring interpersonal relationships with meaning making, and then how those conceptualizations impact career and work (Blustein et al., 2002). How these teachers made meaning of their careers in an urban setting highlights the importance of retaining high quality teachers by understanding their motivations and personal
rewards. By giving a voice to those within the work context, the meanings they ascribed to interactions increase the understanding of how to evaluate success and satisfaction relative to their perceptions.

**Career Fit of Teachers**

Current literature on teacher career satisfaction tends to focus on the negative aspects of teaching and how the profession might be changed to increase teachers' career satisfaction (Phillips-Miller et al., 2000). This study responds to the challenge outlined by leaders in the field to report joys, opportunities, and the rewards of teaching. This study used in-depth interviews and phenomenological data analysis as primary methods to examine and describe the work-experience of five teachers in an urban sample. In a challenging environment with few material resources and many student needs, teacher career satisfaction emerged in this study as a subjective, personal experience of work. The respondents differed with respect to the ways common factors interact to create their individual patterns of career satisfaction.

Sachs (2004) research focused on effective urban teachers, and thus illuminated possible reflection on such ecological principles as sociocultural awareness (multiple contexts are considered), strong contextual interpersonal skills (interconnectedness, nature of teaching is interactional), and self-understanding (meaning making). Similar to this study, her research addressed personal attributes of teachers in urban settings, as well as identified teacher effectiveness. The study represented corroboration of similar concepts to ecological counseling principles, and expanded on the needs of urban teachers for career support.

Teachers conceptualized their career fit in terms of the meaning they assigned to interactions with students and their families, other teachers, and the people important in their personal lives. For each participant, becoming a teacher was woven into their sense of identity.
and their understanding of their life purpose, but the development of that identity and purpose differed significantly among them. Teachers in this study shaped their own experiences into a fitting career. Constructing a career is a long-term process, and our understanding of the process is enhanced through an ecological perspective. Young and Collin (2003) describe such a construction of meaning in people’s lives described “in a social, historical, and cultural context, through action and discourse in which we form relationships and community” (p. 378). To the degree that individuals gain awareness of this process, they also gain awareness of a sense of self, self-agency, purpose and self-definition.

According to Lofquist and Dawis (1969), job satisfaction is derived from congruence between person and environment, similarly distinctive to the ecological counseling model. Teachers’ career satisfaction was understood through their personal experience of work, which was rooted in the urban sociological context of an urban environment. This research study has shown that certain teacher characteristics enhanced their motivation to work in the setting. Teachers talked about a life calling, a mission to serve urban children, and personal rewards derived from seeing children overcome contextual barriers, which were experienced as the realization of personal congruence. Mr. Shepherd provided a statement about a broader life mission:

I guess it gives me a chance to give to these students what other teachers have given me… a desire to help these kids to believe in themselves and find themselves successful. I can tell you that for thirteen years I have come to work every day without having any doubts about coming, and when I leave I have no issues that I bring home. I just think… that, you know, my nature and my purpose on earth is to work with children like I work with.
Concordance, which Conyne and Cook (2004) define as “a mutually beneficial interaction between person and environment” (p. 24), was mediated by teachers’ individual supports, namely their families. Concordance is of primary significance when thinking about balancing challenges and supports, either within the environment, or intrapersonally. The teachers talked about personal factors which mediate concordance: empathy, insight, direction or mission, determination, and perseverance (Kumpfer & Hopkins, 1993).

Donohue (2006) says that a number of studies found that congruence was a significant factor in differentiating career changers and persisters (Bruch & Krieshok, 1981; Gottfredson & Holland, 1990; Meir, 1989; Rose & Elton, 1982. The difference between a career and a job was identified by Moore (1987) as the difference between a long-term perspective and present employment. Job satisfaction develops over time, depending on the meanings attached to various aspects of the work. “Job satisfaction is a complex term incorporating matters of job context and job content, overall satisfaction, and facet satisfaction” (Herr et al., 2004, p. 70). While teachers overall were satisfied with their careers, their job satisfaction was rated lower, possibly due to facet satisfaction. Facets could be pay level, coworkers, administration and leadership, working conditions, to name a few. These facets were, in fact, identified as weak within teachers’ current workplace conditions.

Support was missing in many ways, and could be enhanced through the use of ecological principles (italicized in the following): Regular meetings for teacher collaboration to discuss pedagogical issues and student concerns would provide for more interconnectedness of the teachers (Dearman & Alber, 2005), offering support and resource sharing. More professional development opportunities should be available (Holloway, 2003), such as the culture of poverty training (Payne, 2001), including topics like dealing with anger management, and understanding
family systems. Discovery of hidden rules that are influential in a culture assist individuals in their meaning making of events in the setting. The ongoing and dynamic process of seeking concordance is evident in classrooms and hallways as students develop their sense of ‘self’, and as teachers respond to behaviors as they interact with their students. The perception of fit with the environment, with interpersonal relationships, with a career, and with one’s life goals determines to what degree an individual experiences life satisfaction.

**Implications**

Lewin (1951) proffers that theory should always be applied in research that is as near to real life as possible. Research in this study was focused on one urban school, replete with challenges experienced by many other urban schools. Ringeisen et al. (2003) state that “education systems have fixed resources that must be allocated across multiple needs with a necessitated priority on student achievement” (p. 155). Teachers constantly negotiate the focus on outcomes for achievement and instruction deemed academic. Research shows that appropriate supports enhance a school’s ability to create a caring environment, which affects intervention success (Ringeisen et al., 2003). Interventions in schools must focus on real world assessments of resource needs in relation to resource availability. Through a dynamic and reciprocal negotiation and resolution of personal and environmental factors, which is the essence of the ecological counseling framework, five urban teachers in this study expressed insight about teaching urban students with significant awareness of contextual factors that aided or inhibited positive interventions.

**Implications for Counseling**

Career counseling theories provide valuable concepts to help workers identify a fitting career. Teachers’ clarity about their attraction to teaching as a career is likened to Holland’s
(1997) theory of congruence, as his theory proposed that individuals experienced congruence when their work environments were in line with their personalities. In a good fit, reinforcement is experienced from the environment, which sustains the individual in persisting in that career. Individuals make meaning of information from the environment, gather insight and assimilate the knowledge of specific personal interests or factors. From then on, individuals can embrace what they have learned to make decisions about how their careers will develop. Traditional career counseling follows such a decision-making process, but the assumption that knowledge will be the key to career change may not be sufficient (Cook et al., 2002). Other experiences in the environment provide other forms of feedback, such as impressions and feelings. Full congruence or concordance from an ecological perspective would also include awareness of these other forms of feedback.

Teachers’ experiences in urban schools are stressful. Children present to school with difficult personal and family issues, which critically extends teachers’ personal and professional resources to meet those issues. Bullough (2001) stated that “teachers cannot make up for disengaged parents” (p. 41), who lack the ability or resources to meet children’s needs. In ecological counseling, family members would ideally be included in the process, since they are part of the ecosystem in which the need for counseling exists. Counselors assisting parents to participate in their children’s lives, particularly through the school experience, bolsters teachers’ roles as partners. Such commitment on families’ parts improves students’ outcomes (Ringeisen et al., 2003).

Bullough (2001) also iterated the need for prevention, because, “despite some improvements… the overwhelming emphasis of programs and funding for at-risk students remains on remediation” (p. 26). Urban students are at risk for many problems, as previously
discussed, so focus on “prevention is the key” (Bullough, 2001, p. 56). Particularly with the need for school counseling in many parts of the country, prevention is appropriate to expand services while preferably collaborating with those in the field of education. In addition, early intervention is particularly important. Otherwise, by the time students arrive in their classrooms, many negative conceptualizations have already been internalized.

People and environments are in constant transaction, and any assessment of the person is incomplete without some assessment of the environment in which they exist, and their ecological niches (Walsh, 2006). Those living in poverty have negotiated their survival through thought processes that ease their understandings of harsh situations, disillusionment, and failures. Herr (1999) identified guidelines for cross-cultural counseling, emphasizing the need for counselors to recognize frames of reference. First and foremost is the importance of sufficient knowledge about the culture of the client, in order to provide appropriate reflections and interventions. A counselor’s self-awareness in dealing with certain cultures is an important part of developing her counseling identity. Culturally relevant training is essential in the best practices of counseling individuals and families.

Best practices require counselors to be ethically responsible for maintaining an awareness of the social, political, or economic environmental changes in society (Herr, 1999). O’Brien (2001) described social change work as “advocate for equal access to resources for marginalized or less fortunate individuals in society” (p. 66). Social change advocacy is a counselor role to help clients by promoting changes in the social and economic environments, thereby potentially improving career satisfaction for teachers, or school performance standards and compliance for students and their families. Students’ and families’ receptivity to interventions within a school setting, however, are impacted by many factors. Ringeisen et al. (2003) determined that delivery
of preventive mental health interventions, therefore, must be “relevant to the contextual needs of a dynamic education system” (p. 165).

Counselors and clients are effective in collaborating on intervention goals when a broad-based understanding is developed. Holcomb-McCoy (2005) states that “if counselors are to be a meaningful force … they must recognize and deal with the current and emerging issues that most directly affect urban schools and students” (p. 182). Bullough (2001) described teachers in his research as counselors at times, partly because counseling is not available in many of America’s schools. The need for professional intervention with children and families in poverty is great, providing emotional support, opportunities for increased understanding and self-awareness, identification of personal strengths, improving access to resources, and more.

Efforts have been made to identify important factors that help individuals to compensate for challenges, but more research needs to be done. Ungar (2004) presented an ecological understanding of resilience, describing how protective factors interact with risk factors in intricate relationships that are as unique and individual as each student and family who present in an urban school. Counselor collaboration with educators in school settings could facilitate improved personal competence for teachers and help to build skills with knowledge for students. Herr (1999) describes counseling in the future as “maximizing opportunity” (p. 230), empowering clients to gain competence and skills, and perhaps most importantly, self-awareness of protective factors which can be utilized to address potential risks. Similarly, preventive counseling is especially important for counselor training and practice, so that professional counselors in and out of the school setting are prepared to assist individuals in maximizing their resources (Conyne, 2004; Herr, 1999).
Counselor training is enriched by career theories, such as the ecological counseling model, which provide a broad-based understanding of the person-environment fit within people’s careers. Flores et al. (2003) suggest that such approaches add to counselors’ techniques and potential interventions for a “more integrated, contextually based career counseling approach” (p. 116). Holistic frameworks like ecological counseling derive insight from internal and external contextual issues, and multicultural issues, such as gender and class issues. Training counselors with sensitivity to these issues benefits their skill development as they develop required competencies in these areas.

Currently, graduate counselor training programs mandate multicultural and diversity training. Specialized urban counseling programs expand training, however, by incorporating an urban perspective into all courses. Green, Conley, and Barnett (2005) suggest that counseling students develop specialized competencies unique to working in urban settings. From practicums in urban schools to supervision by urban school counselors, they promote a comprehensive approach to training students to collaborate with teachers, special educators, school administrators and community leaders to address critical urban issues. Their recommendation for transforming the profession of school counseling includes principles for counselor programs, originally purported by Green and Keys (2001). They recommend that programs (a) promote self and contextual awareness, (b) utilize an ecological framework for problem solving, (c) utilize indirect service models, (d) use collaboration to achieve comprehensive program objectives, (e) align school counseling goals with local reform and improvement strategies, (f) use evidence-based test practices, and (g) use outcome-based evaluation strategies.

Abrams, Theberge, and Karan (2005) also support an ecological approach “to understand the diverse factors that can impact a student’s life” (p. 284), and recommend that through this
framework, counselors can identify appropriate interventions that may include family, peers, and relationships within children’s communities. In this way, interventions are broadly conceived so that help may be sought at more than one level or system. At the foundation of the ecological counseling model is the strength of identifying a wide range of possibilities, developed and applied through collaboration - in this case, with teachers.

Implications for Teacher Education

One goal of this study was to identify ways in which teachers can be supported within challenging environments in order to further their opportunities for growth and development, along with their retention. Teachers in this study commented on how little their educational backgrounds helped to prepare them for urban classrooms. Responding to training received about the effects of poverty on students developmentally, the study’s teachers attempted to make their classrooms predictable, orderly, and caring. Repeatedly, these characteristics have been named as essential in schools serving children in poverty, many of which are in urban settings. Bullough (2001) pointed to numerous psychological and developmental issues under attack in urban environments that oppose stability, cause stress, are perceived as unpredictable and disorganized, and fail to fulfill children’s basic human needs. Teachers are compelled to discover such issues in order to perform effectively in their classrooms.

Education systems face significant decisions in order to positively affect urban education. Lee (2005) identified urban issues that correspond with the findings of this study. For example, drop out rates are higher in urban schools, urban students are twice as likely to attend high-poverty schools, and urban districts lack books and supplies. Green and Keys (2001) describe urban areas as pluralistic societies made up of multiple cultural conceptual frameworks, some of which are competing, through which individuals must navigate successfully. Diverse societies
also must deal with contradiction and inconsistency between multiple cultural contexts, so specific personal competencies are required to accurately make decisions and adapt to the social environment. The political reality is that these inherent challenges in urban schools require remediation of the social and institutional impediments to educating urban children.

Social justice training for teacher education programs has been recommended and described by Quartz (2003), in much the same way that social advocacy has been influential in counseling literature in recent years. In many ways, teachers are counselors in the classrooms, particularly in urban settings. Yet, they are not trained as counselors, nor do they have time for much individual student attention, which is often needed by urban school children. Teachers can be supported by developing a multidimensional understanding of those with whom they will interact in their work environment. Such reflective teaching practices may enable teachers to discover hidden biases, or help them to conceptualize their teaching orientation in response to the population they serve (Denton, Hasbrouck, & Sekaquaptewa, 2003). Likewise, teachers may need assistance to make meaning of their person-environment fit by gaining understanding of their internal resources and how those match with external characteristics. More practice in exploring ecological principles in the profession of teaching may also enhance teachers’ insights into identifying supports for themselves and for their students.

Of particular concern is what Musheno and Talbert (2002) reported; that teachers often “do not see school counselors as relevant to the school’s mission” (p. 186). Teachers must accept counselors’ professional abilities in order to partner in addressing the complex problems in urban communities. Increasingly, students are reported with more social and emotional problems and need counseling services. Cutting through bureaucratic red tape and supporting counselor interventions is needed by education administrators, as well, rather than asking counselors to be
disciplinarians or substitute teachers. Teachers can team with counselors who can assist in collecting and assessing student data, advocate with community agencies for resources, and create programming to provide support and learning opportunities for all students.

Teacher support is essential during their career development. Rogers and Babinski (2002) described a model centered on counseling skills where first year teachers participate in groups to discuss problems. Experienced teachers and counselors could facilitate such groups, which are based on problem-solving and communication skills, and include evaluation of their group processes. Similarly, Dearman and Alber (2005) reported on the practice of reflective teaching, whereby teachers collaborate and reflect upon their work with students and with each other. Dearman and Alber’s (2005) study describes how Mississippi teachers collaborate at all levels of their teaching experience to support one another by addressing such major legislative mandates and public demands.

An important but often overlooked problem is that of student mobility rates. Goldenberg et al. (2003) used an example: “When 60% of a school’s students who start the year have left a school by the end of the year it is unlikely that using standardized testing as appropriate to measure the achievement of most of the students in that school” (p. 629). Teachers in urban schools constantly face this issue which is common for families living in poverty. Students who move often suffer emotionally, socially and academically, while teachers are constantly adapting their teaching to their students’ foundations of understanding. Just as Mrs. Mater suggested, field work in urban schools is essential for teacher training to ensure appropriate attention to contextual influences upon the reality of teaching in a classroom.

Accountability across the United States is an important but difficult concept in which teachers are assessed and often criticized for student underachievement. The future must focus
on effective teaching for teachers and effective learning for students, though change within educational systems is complex. Positivism is especially helpful in affecting change for educators and educational administrators as they continue to meet the diversity of students’ needs and yet satisfy their own professional development.

Limitations

The generalizability of findings from this study to other settings is not appropriate. I acknowledge my own role in interpreting and telling the story of five urban teachers, emphasizing my meaning making of the data. My prior professional relationship with the study participants cannot be duplicated. Even if a counselor (like myself) worked in a school for a year prior to such research with its teachers, relationships and meaning making would vary significantly depending upon the individuals involved. The teachers who participated in this study volunteered, but were then selected based upon criteria intended to provide some representation of the population, which actually prevented the study sample from being completely random in design.

Five teachers in a school set within an impoverished community navigated challenges and supports in order to create their successful resolution of concordance as described in their own words. The narratives of the teachers were their subjective experiences and interpretations. Though the research was focused on one school and one group of teachers, their work practices were not unusual as compared to reports from other school counselors in similar settings. Teachers in the target urban school may or may not fully represent typical teachers in an urban setting, however. No examination was done with regards to teachers’ orientation besides what was observed and then extrapolated. The data collected was not intended to identify whether teachers were judged as effective or proficient educators.
There is a significant amount of data which was generated from multiple research instruments. The quantity of instruments did not overcome possible quality issues. Instruments were created for the study and have no norming data for support, and were modified based upon the researcher’s understanding of the ecological counseling model. Though extensive in some ways, my understanding of the perspective is limited in its scope to the counseling profession, suggesting more collaboration in designing instruments with other ecological counselors, and with teacher educators. This would preclude unintentional and unidentified biases on the researcher’s part.

Data obtained through observations were effectively only a single day’s glimpse into the work lives of each of the five teachers in this study. Multiple observations would have provided a more complete panorama into the teachers’ and students’ interactions in the classrooms. I was able to enter classrooms without disruption since I had worked as a school counselor in the target school the year prior to the study, and was familiar to students and teachers. Even so, students were affected by their understanding that the teacher was being observed. More days of observation would have eliminated some problems with reliability of the student – teacher interactions over time.

**Recommendations for future research**

Despite limitations, this research bridges a separate distinction between two professional practices, that of teachers and counselors. Recommendations for future research include additional studies in multiple urban settings. School districts need to identify teachers who prefer urban settings, and discover ways in which they can be supported in their careers. Hanushek et al. (2003) offered one recommendation, that teachers in an urban school receive as much as 25% to 40% salary increases as “combat pay” (p. 9) in order to retain teachers in low-achieving, high
minority schools, such as the target school. Otherwise, attention should be given to the quality of the work conditions of these teachers. More than material considerations are important and need to be considered.

As Holloway (2003) reported, teachers need support through professional development as well as mentoring, not just when they begin their teaching careers, but on an ongoing basis. In a survey conducted with more than 5000 teachers (Holloway, 2003), specific types of support that foster such sustainability include professional development, ongoing mentoring, and empowerment as external supports, and resiliency and coping resources as internal supports. Deficiencies in these areas can be a demoralizing experience, so if career persistence is influenced by the degree of support an individual receives in his or her career tenure, the problem is how to provide such necessary support (Phillips-Miller et al., 2000).

This research discovered an ease of translation of ecological principles to the analysis of teachers’ career practices and ultimately to explore their career fit. The concepts of the ecological counseling model were easily tailored to emphasize prevention, holistic interventions, and the wide application of interdisciplinary research and consultations. As suggested by Quartz (2003), a set of Best Practices for urban teaching may be particularly relevant in developing appropriate person-environment assessments and aids to support teachers in these settings.

Blustein et al. (2002) suggested that research needs to examine cultural, economic, and political contextual influences on the meaning of personality and career fit. They noted that interdisciplinary collaboration would be an asset and a natural outcome of such efforts. Mischel (1977) noted that we cannot take the person out of personality, nor can we ignore the fact that environments, like people, have personalities and influence behavior. For example, culture may have significant influence on the type of goals or behaviors that are valued as important, within
the context in which the person and the environment are understood (Payne, 2001; Walsh, 2006). Research in additional urban sites would enhance the knowledge base in diversity both geographically and culturally.

Additional studies would also benefit from further incorporation of resilience literature into examining options for different settings (Bryan, 2005). Resilience studies, such as that by Ungar (2004), have provided hope in offering possibilities for “inoculating children against personal, familial, and environmental acute and chronic stressors” (p. 343). He defines resilience as “the outcome of negotiations between individuals and their environments to maintain a self-definition as healthy” (p. 352). He also encourages further qualitative studies, which offer thicker descriptions and individual perspectives when researchers try to make meaning of their data. Applying an inductive approach allows data to speak in order for researchers to make discoveries, rather than a deductive approach, which verifies what is already known. Qualitative research is considered to be preferable in providing rich descriptions in participants’ own words, and from such explorations, participants’ voices will surface. This may belie pre-conceived notions about the population of the setting, reducing bias.

Additional knowledge offering the positive aspects of teaching is also needed to assist teachers in their development of career satisfaction. Positive psychology has provided helpful insights to helping professionals, focusing on strengths-based approaches in working with clients. Many professionals emphasize a deficit orientation, identified as the deficit paradigm by Weiner (2003), which serves to address limitations, whereas positive psychology emphasizes building strengths (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2005). The deficit paradigm views students, their families, the culture and community as lacking necessary resources or abilities, so the educational approach is to correct what is deficient. This framework limits the ecological
evaluation to identifying “malfunctions in human ecosystems” (Brendtro et al., 2005, p. 135), a broad realistic assessment can be drawn from multiple perspectives, focusing on what works, discovered through collaboration with those who have been judged to be successful.

Ringeisen et al. (2003) suggest that mental health research should focus attention on interventions targeting school personnel. Efforts to reduce truancy or discipline referrals are preventive measures that could contribute to increasing teacher morale with consistent interventions. Collaboration with school professionals would enhance mental health programming implementation and sustainability in the school setting, including professional training and ongoing support. Delivery of mental health services within school settings has been recommended because compliance is more likely. Access for children and families could be improved simply because of logistics.

Conclusions

Educational achievement is significantly impacted by the child poverty rate, which is higher in the United States than any other industrialized nation (Goldenberg et al., 2003). Teachers alone cannot make considerable changes in the negative effects of poverty on their students, but together with counselors, have collaborative resources to do so. Together, teachers and counselors can identify learning and social issues, which impair children’s academic achievement, and create opportunities for children and their families to obtain necessary assistance (Abrams et al., 2005). Counselors are adept at training teachers and students in problem-solving and decision-making skills, teamwork through group experiences, and communication skills. Goldenberg et al. reported that these skills are ranked highest in today’s work force, but such skills also assist teachers to collaborate with peers and other professionals
on behalf of their students. Such skills also enhance impoverished students mediate the challenges of their urban plight.

Increased expenditures in services for disabled students and nutritional programs are examples of rising education costs, yet, schools with the poorest students are still lacking basic textbooks and supplies. Urban ecosystems need organizational and administrative leadership to provide necessary resources outside of the school system, so that schools can focus on educational attainment. For instance, family counseling may be appropriate in the schools, but parental job training may not be. Both endeavors, however, support students and families in person-environment fit.

In an effort to offer recommendations for the support and retention of high quality teachers in challenging environments, this study contributes knowledge that will help professional educators and counselors understand the problems of supporting teachers in urban environments. Similarly, knowledge has been offered to help teachers discover how to exert some control over their environment (Bullough, 2001; Patton, 2002), thus enhancing their concordance. I propose that both counseling and education disciplines utilize an ecological framework to understand behaviors resulting from person-environment interactions, enhancing the abilities of education professionals to perceive reality based upon well-informed meaning making. O’Brien (2001) asserted that from the beginning of the counseling profession, education was thought to be the “key to social change” (p. 68). Other recent literature provides examples of efforts in urban schools to provide vocational guidance and career programming for students, utilizing the expertise of teachers, community members, business leaders, and university students. Working together and partnering with those who share the local environment affords improved outcomes and potential effectiveness.
References


Cook, E. P. (in review). *Sheela’s story from an ecological perspective*.


Counseling Association.


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First of all, I want to thank you for agreeing to participate in this study! Before agreeing to participate, however, it is important that the following explanation of the proposed procedures be read and understood. It describes the purpose, procedures, risks and benefits of the study. It also describes the right to withdraw from the study at any time. It is important to understand that no guarantee or assurance can be made as to the results of the study.

**Title of Study:** Exploring the Ecological Model with Teachers in Urban Schools

**Purpose of Study:** The purpose of this research is to explore the person – environment fit (ecology) of teachers in urban schools. It is a qualitative study in which you will be one of five participants taking part. My interest is in knowing about the multiple factors that influence teachers’ career choices to work and stay in urban settings.

**Duration:** Your participation in this study will last for approximately two months, including one day of observation in your school setting, an interview of one and a half to two hours in length, and participation in a focus group of one and a half to two hours in length.

**Procedures:** First, I will observe your class and any other activity necessary to perform your role as a teacher for one day. After the observation, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured audiotaped interview that will last an hour and a half to two hours, where you will be asked questions about your career and role as a teacher, and the environment in which you teach. There will be a focus group held at the end of the study during which I will share data narrative for your checking and offer you an opportunity to expand any previous input. The focus group, which will last about an hour and a half will also be audiotaped, and conducted at a time and location most convenient to you.

**Risks:** There are no anticipated risks associated with this study. There is a slight possibility that you may experience an emotional response to the recounting of your personal experiences. Should discomfort or unforeseen risks arise, you have the right to decide whether or not to answer a question or to remain in the study. You also may discuss this with the researcher, Jeri Goodman at 556-9584, or my advisors, Dr. Robert Conyne at 556-3344 or Dr. Ellen Cook at 556-3343.

**Benefits:** The benefits to you for participating in this study may be an increased personal understanding of your career choice and how that fits with your personal growth and development as a professional educator. In addition, the experience of sharing your story with the researcher, and your colleagues in the focus groups, may increase your support system within your school environment.

**Confidentiality:** Every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality of your records. To ensure confidentiality of your research data, all identifying information will be removed. To provide data security all field notes and interview transcripts will be stored in a locked cabinet in the investigator’s office at the university for three years after the completion of this study, and then will be destroyed by shredding. No data will be stored at the school site, and only the investigator and her supervisor will have access to your data. No school employees will have access to data, including administrators. After audiotapes of interviews have been transcribed the tapes will be erased. No identifying names or
locations will be revealed in reporting study findings, as the research may be published and presented at conferences. Your identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law, such as mandatory reporting of child abuse, elder abuse, or immediate danger to self or others.

**Payments to Participants:** There is no plan for payments to participants.

**Right to refuse or withdraw:** Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate, or may discontinue participation AT ANY TIME, without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. I also have the right to withdraw you from the study AT ANY TIME. Your withdrawal from the study may be for reasons related solely to you (for example, not following study-related directions from the investigator, etc.) or because the entire study has been terminated.

**Offer to answer questions:** If you have any questions about this study you may call Jeri Goodman at 556-9584, or Dr. Robert Conyne at 556-3344, or Dr. Ellen Cook at 556-3343. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call Dr. Margaret Miller, Chair of the Institutional Review Board – Social and Behavioral Sciences, at 558-5784.

**Legal Rights:** Nothing in this form waives any legal right you may have nor does it release the investigator, the institution, or its agents from liability for negligence.

I HAVE READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE. I VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY. I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM FOR MY INFORMATION.

_______________________________________ Signed ________________ Date

_______________________________________ _____________________ Date

Signatures and Title of Person Obtaining Consent

Identification of Role in the Study
APPENDIX B

SETTING DESCRIPTION GUIDE

Describe the size (incl. # of students and staff), architectural style, and condition of the school buildings.

Material culture: What school-related symbols are evident? (Any flags, posters, banners?)

To what degree is student work displayed throughout school?

What is the atmosphere throughout the school?

Describe social interaction between teachers before, during, and after classes. Do teachers appear to know each other personally? For example, do teachers seem confident, comfortable, or defensive?
APPENDIX C

OBSERVATION GUIDE (for teachers in classroom)

Name ______________________________ Date and time attended ________________

Approximate total classroom attendance (estimate breakdown of total by gender, race, or ethnicity).

How is the furniture arranged? Does it facilitate discussion, listening? (sketch on separate sheet)

How does the teacher begin the class period to focus the attention of all students?

What strategies did the teacher use to keep the class on task? (eye contact, voice projection, use of humor, etc.)

How would you describe the overall pace of the class? The timing?

Describe the classroom climate. Do students seem to be working hard? Do they seem to be enjoying themselves? Do you notice any students who seem afraid to ask or answer questions, or participate in other ways? How do students treat each other?

What is your impression of the teacher’s planning and curriculum materials? (For example: Did the teacher seem to know what he or she was planning to do next? Did materials seem interesting to students? Did the students and/or teacher appear to finish a lesson or assignment sooner than the teacher had expected, or later?)

Did any discussions of ethical values occur during your observation period? (Such conversations might occur during subject-matter lessons, for example if, while discussing a story, the teacher asked children if they thought a character’s actions were right or wrong.) If so, describe them.

Are classroom rules posted in the room? Did the teacher seem to have well-established rules?

How does the teacher handle misbehavior or rule breaking? What strategies are implemented for managing students who consistently display inappropriate behavior?

How does the teacher establish a positive instructional learning environment? What do you observe in the classroom that either helps students with the learning process, or helps create an interesting learning environment?

What positive/negative reinforcements does the teacher use during class?

What verbal/nonverbal classroom control techniques does the teacher use?

What does the teacher do that reflects the level of caring he or she has for teaching and students? (For example, does the teacher give her full attention to student questions and answer them seriously, or respond with sarcasm? What other behavior do you notice that reflects either a high or low level of caring?)
Describe ways the teacher showed his or her attitude toward students. (For example, did the teacher seem to enjoy a positive working relationship with his or her students?)

How does the teacher monitor independent and group work during class?

How does the teacher bring closure to a class or the last period of the day?
# APPENDIX D
## CLASSROOM OBSERVATION (teacher frequencies)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher __________________________________</th>
<th>Date ______________________</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ORGANIZATION</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Arrives early</td>
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<tr>
<td>Begins on time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clearly states objectives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reviews prior class material</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adapts smoothly to backup plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frequently checks understanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Summarizes main points</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ends on time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acknowledges established rules and goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Setting rules or goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giving directions</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>INTERACTION</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Builds on student answers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Refrains from answering own questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Praises students’ work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respects differing views</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provides frequent feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shows sensitivity to different learners</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facilitates discussion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Listens closely to students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Smiles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uses positive touch</td>
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<tr>
<td>Responds to student confusion respectfully</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encourages students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accessible to students outside of class</td>
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<tr>
<td>Offers students choices</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acknowledges students’ external challenges/supports</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expresses feelings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Responds to feelings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maintains eye contact</td>
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<td><strong>PRESENTATION</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Speaks with expression</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shows appropriate humor</td>
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<td>Appears relaxed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Answers questions completely</td>
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<tr>
<td>Describes concepts in more than one way</td>
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<tr>
<td>Repeats challenging info</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clearly explains new material</td>
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<td>Speaks at appropriate pace</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uses understandable language</td>
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## APPENDIX E

### Teacher Observation - Behavior Frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Behavior</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>15</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>25</th>
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<th>45</th>
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<th>55</th>
<th>60</th>
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<td><strong>Interpersonal</strong></td>
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<td>Smiling</td>
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<td>Joking</td>
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<td>Positive physical touching</td>
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<td>Encouraging</td>
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<td>Praising</td>
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<td><strong>Interconnected</strong></td>
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<td>Listening actively</td>
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<td>Reinforcing positive student behavior</td>
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<td><strong>Collaborative</strong></td>
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APPENDIX F
Interview Guide

How old are you? ______

AGE RANGES:
25-30 __ 31-35 __ 36-40 __ 41-45 __ 46-50 __ 51-55 __ 56-60 __ More __

How many years have you been teaching in total? _____ at this school? _____

What is your highest degree earned? ________________________________

Do you have any other certifications? ______ If so, what are they? __________________

I am interested in learning more about you as a person and as a teacher. What made you go into the profession of teaching?

Other people sometimes influence what we do and how we do it. What other people, if any, have played a role in your career as a teacher in an urban school?

What do you think is unique or special about teaching in an urban school?

Suppose that I was in your classroom at the beginning of the day – at no special time, like a holiday or during proficiency testing. What would I see happening as your day begins? What are you doing? What are the students doing? Take me into your classroom and let me see what happens.

What contributes to a good day of teaching?

Imagine that a person from a foreign country and a very different culture followed you around to learn about your daily life. How would he or she describe your life?

What individuals and settings would seem to be an important part of your everyday life?

How is your teaching affected by your interactions with students in your school?

How is your teaching affected by your interactions with parents?

How is your teaching affected by your interactions with other teachers in your school?

Some aspects of being a teacher can only be learned on the job. What could this new teacher learn from observing you in the classroom?

Teaching involves planning and being intentional in the classroom. What do you try to accomplish each day?

What goals or plans do you have for your class over the course of a year?

What are your resources and challenges?

How do you deal with unexpected situations that arise in the classroom, things you did not plan for?

Can you describe anything that you do in your work now that you did not do before you came to an urban school?
If I ask you what it means to be a teacher, how would you describe the meaning that your career has for you?

How would you describe the range of possibilities open to you in your career?

In what ways are you active in local, community or state/national organizations?

On a scale from 1 to 7 please describe the degree to which you are experiencing satisfaction from your job, with 1 being very dissatisfied and 7 being very satisfied____

On a scale from 1 to 7 please rank yourself by describing the degree to which you are experiencing satisfaction from your career as a teacher, with 1 being very dissatisfied and 7 being very satisfied____
“Let’s go around and tell us what you like best about being a teacher.”

In what ways have you experienced growth in your career?

What is your biggest challenge in your career development?

Now, how would you describe the environment of Central Fairmount School?

What do you know about yourself that enables you to work in this environment?

What career advice do you have for a teacher who wants to work in a school like this?

Finally, how would you describe your understanding of your relationship with a school counselor?
APPENDIX H

Broad Ecological Profile of School Site by Robert K. Conyne, Ph.D.

Name of School: ________________
Name of Principal: ______________
Describer: _________________
Date: _______________

A. What is the stated mission/philosophy/vision of this School?

How is this mission being realized?

How is this mission not being realized?

B. Demographics

1. Number of students (total): __________

2. Number of students at each grade level:

3. Number of teachers:

4. Other staff (list title and numbers in titles):

5. Racial/ethnic composition of students by %:
   - AfAm ___%  AsAm ___%  L/H ___%  NA ___%  W ___%  Other ___%

6. Appalachian identification of students by %
   - % of total _____  % of AfAm _____  % of W ______

7. Racial/ethnic composition of teachers/administration/staff by %:
   - AfAm ___%  AsAm ___%  L/H ___%  NA ___%  W ___%  Other ___%

8. “Appalachian identification” of teachers/administration/staff by %:
   - AfAm ___%  AsAm ___%  L/H ___%  NA ___%  W ___%  Other ___%

9. % of special needs children: _______

10. % of students not moving from 8th grade to high school: __________

C. Assets of the School

1. What is working, in general?

2. Describe what positive collaborations are occurring in the school?
3. Describe what positive collaborations are occurring between the school and community?

4. What about students are assets?

5. What about teachers are assets?

6. What about principal and administration are assets?

7. What programs and services are assets?

8. What about parents/families are assets?

9. What about the community are assets?

D. Limitations of the School:
1. What is not working, in general?

2. What attempts at collaboration are not working in the school?

3. What attempts at collaborations are not working between the school and community?

4. What about students is not working?

5. What about teachers is not working?

6. What about principal and administration are not working?

7. What programs and services are missing?

8. What about parents/families are not working?

9. What about community is not working?

E. School Discipline
1. Describe discipline policy

2. Describe school discipline program

3. Suspensions: ave. # per week: _________

4. Expulsions: ave. # per month: _________

5. Interpersonal Conflicts: ave. # per month: _________
   a. When do most tend to occur?
b. What are most about?

c. How do the conflicts tend to get handled?

**F. Social Climate**

CIRCLE ONE FOR EACH ITEM. PROVIDE SPECIFIC DESCRIPTIVE COMMENTS FOLLOWING EACH RATING.

1 = Very little
2 = Some
3 = Average amount
4 = Quite a bit
5 = Very Much

**Relationship dimension:**
1. There is a sense of cohesion and connectedness   1 2 3 4 5
2. People can express themselves   1 2 3 4 5
3. Help, caring, and support are present   1 2 3 4 5
4. People respect each other   1 2 3 4 5

**Personal growth dimension:**
5. Independence is fostered   1 2 3 4 5
6. Task orientation is promoted   1 2 3 4 5
7. Self-discovery is valued   1 2 3 4 5
8. Academic achievement is promoted   1 2 3 4 5

**System maintenance and System change:**
9. Order and organization are appropriately maintained   1 2 3 4 5
10. Rules and expectations are clear   1 2 3 4 5
11. Change, diversity, and innovation are facilitated   1 2 3 4 5

**Overall climate:**
12. There is a sense of pride in this school   1 2 3 4 5
13. This school is a hopeful place   1 2 3 4 5
14. People work together well at this school   1 2 3 4 5
15. The school is supported by parents and families   1 2 3 4 5
G. Open Comments:

H. Ecological Profile Summary
Write a 100-word “Ecological Profile Summary” of your school, based on the information you have developed, drawing from: Philosophy in action; Demographics; Assets; Limitations; Discipline; Social climate; Other):
APPENDIX I

A Made-to-Order Form for Instructional Observation

Check the relevant items during your peer review.

ORGANIZATION
- Begins class on time in an orderly, organized fashion
- Previews lecture/discussion content
- Clearly states the goal or objective for the period
- Reviews prior class material to prepare students for the content to be covered
- Provides internal summaries and transitions
- Does not digress often from the main topic
- Summarizes and distills main points at the end of class
- Appears well-prepared for class

PRESENTATION
- Incorporates various instructional supports like slides, films, diagrams, etc.
- Uses instructional support effectively
- Responds to changes in student attentiveness
- Uses a variety of spaces in the classroom from which to present material (i.e., does not "hide" behind the podium)
- Blackboard writing is large and legible
- Speech fillers, (for example, "OK, ahm") are not distracting
- Speaks audibly and clearly
- Uses gestures to enhance meaning and not to release nervous tension (repetitive gestures tend to do the latter)
- Communicates a sense of enthusiasm and excitement toward the content
- Use of humor is positive and appropriate
- Presentation style facilitates note-taking
- Speech is neither too formal not too casual
- Establishes and maintains eye contact with students
- Talks to the students, not the board or windows
- Varies the pace to keep students alert
- Selects teaching methods appropriate for the content

RAPPORT
- Praises students for contributions that deserve commendation
- Solicits student feedback
- Requires student thought and participation
- Responds constructively to student opinions
- Knows and uses student names
- Does not deprecate student ignorance or misunderstanding
- Responds to students as individuals
- Treats class members equitably
- Listens carefully to student comments and questions
- Tailors the course to help many kinds of students
- Recognizes when students do not understand
- Encourages mutual respect among students
- Credibility and control
- Responds to distractions effectively yet constructively
- Uses authority in classroom to create an environment conducive to learning
- Speaks about course content with confidence and authority
- Is able to admit error and/or insufficient knowledge
• Respects constructive criticism

CONTENT
• Includes illustrations
• Selects examples relevant to student experiences and course content
• Integrates text material into class presentations
• Relates current course content to what’s gone before and will come after
• Relates current course content to students’ general education
• Makes course content relevant with references to “real world” applications
• Presents views other than own when appropriate
• Seeks to apply theory to problem-solving
• Explicitly states relationships among various topics and facts/theory
• Explains difficult terms, concepts, or problems in more than one way
• Presents background of ideas and concepts
• Presents pertinent facts and concepts from related fields
• Presents up-to-date developments in the field
• Relates assignments to course content
• Clearly organizes assignments
• Carefully explains assignments

INTERACTION
• Encourages student questions, involvement, and debate
• Answers student questions clearly and directly
• Uses rhetorical questions to gain student attention
• Gives students enough time to respond to questions
• Refrains from answering own questions
• Responds to wrong answers constructively
• Allows ample time for questions
• Encourages students to respond to each other’s questions
• Encourages students to answer difficult questions by providing cues and encouragement
• Allows relevant student discussion to proceed uninterrupted
• Presents challenging questions to stimulate discussion
• Respects diverse points of view

ACTIVE LEARNING (LABS, PE ACTIVITIES, ETC.)
• Clearly explains directions or procedures
• Clearly explains the goal of the activity
• Has readily available materials and equipment necessary to complete the activity
• Allows opportunity for individual expression
• Provides practice time
• Gives prompt attention to individual problems
• Provides individuals constructive verbal feedback
• Careful safety supervision is obvious
• Allows sufficient time for completion
• Provides enough demonstrations
• Demonstrations are clearly visible to all students
• If the discovery method is employed, schedules time for discussion of results
• Required skills are not beyond reasonable expectations for the course and/or students
• Provides opportunities for dialogue about the activity with peers and/or the instructor
• Allocates sufficient clean-up time within the class session
CODING TREE

Considers Multiple Contexts

Setting Description Guide
Aging buildings, mottled floors, dark colors, architecturally massive stone

Ecological profiles
No parent support
Parents lack education, in poverty, homeless, helpless
Single parent homes
Students’ behavior not reinforced at home
Community suffers from poverty, poor communication from school
Family assets - strength of maternal households, strive for good attendance
Material culture: Banners of collaboration with agencies, university
Student displays not prevalent
Academics promoted, emphasize attendance, support services
Disrespectful, chaotic, yelling students and staff
Low teacher morale (lost 10 teachers from previous year)
Difficult students in building - ISS full daily and very loud.
Loud aggressive punitive environment creates stress
Low staff morale, little camaraderie, poor communication
Besieged by unruly students
Teachers well educated, caring, committed to good instruction
Teachers overwhelmed, grumpy, have beyond the call of duty jobs
Collaboration not working with PTA - only 2 parents involved

Social Climate Scales

High Scores
3.67/5 for Academic achievement promoted.
2.67/5 for Help, caring and support are present.
2.67/5 for Rules and expectations are clear.
2.67/5 for People work well together.

Low scores
1/5 for There is a sense of cohesion and connectedness.
1/5 for People respect each other.
1.33/5 for The school is supported by parents and families.

Teacher interviews
Parents fear authority - had bad experiences in school
Families no help with homework, too involved in survival
At a babysitter kid finds gun underneath couch - he’s a toddler
Five year old stays home and takes care of a three year old.
If parents have many negatives - they put kids in another school
Baggage students bring to school is enormous -they have a lot going on
Some kids are raising themselves
When the kids have issues, the parents have issues, too.
Parents feel, “Why should they get to go? I don’t get to go.”
Parents are too busy or not involved.
In suburbs kids get education regardless of teacher, have opportunity, computers,
parents who care and involved, access to libraries
Students come hungry - no breakfast, I send them to have breakfast
If it requires the parent, half the kids won’t get services. *(I have a little guy who had a bad accident because he walks on his toes, tendons too tight. Sent home notes from the nurse, ‘take this child to doctor’. Refuses. You do the best you can in classroom and know he’s going to fall through cracks because legally teacher can’t take him to doctor. It’s not a priority.)*
ADHD, crack babies, issues suburbs aren’t dealing with
Challenges: food, clothing, shelter they don’t have. How can they learn?
Homelessness part of life here - don’t know where they sleep or next meal is –
   Learn letters or walk in a line is last priority
Parents who engage come, ask questions, offer help, go on field trips.
Have 3 homeless students, one’s mother was murdered in front of him, now lives with family of twelve children, not related.
These kids live lives - I have no clue how they survive
Classroom - depressing (stains on walls, no shades work, no desks fit kids)
Everyone here seems to have a yoke of burden
People are not happy, burdened with their own dissatisfaction with life
Kids need services - speech, OT, PT, testing.
One standard is use a reference book -we don’t have those books
New teachers get leftovers of who was there before you
Do it without a teacher’s manual, textbook, no answer keys
You just make do with what you have
Missing are counseling services, fine arts
Here is a different world - people being disrespectful to others
In our environment kids have to be involved every minute or lose control
You never know when light bulb goes on and reading takes 3 hours
Routine is important
Students come, take seats, get books, ready to do DI - regimented
Start writing in journals to talk about feelings or what’s on your mind
Right into work - no talking unless doing an experiment
Students come, have time to finish conversations - a real immature bunch
Lose time with break in middle of 8th grade class - cause for down time
I move on to next thing, backtrack, go into review mode, go with the flow
Here you have to be stern because in urban part they’re seeing more out there than
   The kids in the suburbs
Big difference is way parents participate in suburbs, but kids are kids
Suburbs get more support, didn’t have to repeat myself, here I have to be bold

*Interactional in Nature*

*Setting Description Guide*
  Few teachers interacted in hallways

*Ecological Profiles*
  Teachers greet others, conversations are academic focus, nothing personal
  Teacher lunchroom discussion is guarded
  Counselors reported 60-70 interpersonal conflicts a month
  Students have no regard for school property, street culture *(not cool in school)*
Students resilient, coping, upper grades no enthusiasm for academics
Students respond well to nurturing attention
Regimentation attempted, try to force students to learn

Observation Guide (of Teachers in Their Classrooms)
Mrs. Web spoke to shy new student privately
Mrs. Green maintained eye contact at all times
Mrs. Web collaborated with class, saying, “Let’s try this”
Mr. Shepherd used students’ names to focus their attention
Mrs. Mater greeted students, moved right into instructions
Mrs. Mater leaned down to listen closely
Teachers handled misbehavior by pointing out wrongs, offered choices
All teachers noted to ask for understanding
Mr. Shepherd commented to a student with, “You can do it”

Classroom Observation Chart of Organization, Interaction and Presentation
Five teachers noted for acknowledged established rules and goals
Four teachers noted for smiling and maintained eye contact
Five teachers noted for answered questions completely, spoke at appropriate pace, and used understandable language

Teacher Observations – Behavior Frequency

Individuals in an ecosystem
High Acknowledging students’ external challenges: 4 – Mrs. Web
Low Acknowledging students’ external challenges: 0 – Mr. Coach, Mrs. Green

Interpersonal
High Praising: 28 – Mrs. Mater, 25 – Mrs. Web
Encouraging: 25 – Mrs. Web
Low Positive Physical Touching: 0 – Mr. Coach, Mrs. Green
Praising: 0 – Mrs. Web

Interconnected
High Listening actively: 28 – Mrs. Mater
Low Reinforcing positive student behavior: 2 – Mr. Coach

Behaviors
High Reprimanding: 24 – Mrs. Mater, 14 – Mrs. Web
Low Raising voice: 0 – Mr. Shepherd
Criticizing: 0 – Mr. Coach, Mrs. Green, Mrs. Web, Mrs. Mater

Task Behaviors
High Giving directions: 61 – Mrs. Mater, 47 – Mr. Shepherd
Explaining: 47 – Mrs. Mater, 28 – Mrs. Green, 26 – Mrs. Web,
22 – Mr. Coach, 21 – Mr. Shepherd
Low Ignoring behavior: 0 – Mr. Coach, Mrs. Web, Mr. Shepherd, Mrs. Mater
Clarifying: 0 – Mrs. Web, Mrs. Mater
Setting rules or goals: 0 – Mrs. Mater, 1 – Mr. Coach

Collaborative
High Questioning: 36 – Mrs. Mater, 32 – Mr. Shepherd
Low Offering alternative learning methods: 2 – Mr. Coach, Mrs. Green

Empowering
High Promoting optimism: 10 – Mrs. Web
Using students’ ideas to build upon: 10 – Mrs. Web, 9 – Mrs. Green
Low Promoting optimism: 0 – Mrs. Green
Expressing feelings: 0 – Mrs. Green
Using silence: 0 – Mr. Shepherd

Teacher interviews
Structure important but you can’t be Gestapo, have to be consistent
Almost every kid wrote a story - start out happy, midway someone was either
Getting bludgeoned, robbed or shot. (Is this all you know? Do
everybody die or suffer in your stories?)
Follow through, be flexible so if they need to talk, you talk to them
As Union representative I feel responsible to teachers, trying to inspire others
Not a bowl of cherries - you have to vent - if internalize stuff, you’ll blow
When child sent to principal, he needs to help resolve behavior instead of
throwing it back, has to be consequence when you are out of control
I extinguish small fires because they happen every day
When teachers are frustrated with administration, kids pick up on nonverbals,
attitudes, know us better than we know them, they focus on one, we focus on
many. My kids can tell you what kind of mood I’m in
Our school completely revolves around personality of the principal
Other teachers are resources, like to help others to talk, do time-outs for some
(ones who don’t take advantage of me.)
Work habits, expectations, attitude are awful, somebody owes them – they’re
mad, don’t care, an angry bunch.
Have to give a detention - they remember it
Interaction means involved with families. -corrective and positive
Give 10 minutes before reading, kids say hi to others, get ready for school, I see
Who is there, how they look – if hungry, tired or not in good mood
These kids are just mean and nasty
Most interactions with parents positive – they want to see their kids do better
I greet them. They tell me what’s going on. I’m problem-solving - you never
know what crisis happened in night - a time when I check if they are
dressed appropriately. (A lot of times kids come in without coats or they’re
wearing same things for three days. You can see there might be other
factors influencing their behavior.)
Life application lessons, get them to understand how you want to be treated, if
you don’t listen to people they don’t have to listen to you
They get frustrated, say they’re not going to - that’s when language, behaviors
start
They have to know what to expect in your room and what you expect of them
Children need to know their boundaries, because it tells them that you care
They need a lot more discipline but they have self-confidence
Students seek positive attention, many loving/resilient, desire relationships
If child has responsibilities in home, I give homework, but not penalized
Don’t need a script because kid tells me where to go with next question (They
don’t get past concrete thinking. If I can show them how to get from point
A to point B, they’re leading me there through their question. And I’m leading them there with mine, when they get there, they have a solid base for being there. It’s not me reading a script to them.)

Principal gets me science kits, never says no
Talk to others: if they had student, what worked. (You do that because you find Out about parents and siblings, you’re asking what kind of day are they having or what kind of behaviors have they displayed?)

Parents welcome in the room - have to do what we’re doing
Tell student, “You can do it!”

You have to remind students often - making the best choice right now?
Teaching opportunities ongoing – reinforcement, be positive, catch kids making Good choices
These kids need direction – self-discipline, and take responsibility
Not saying what you go through is no big deal but take care of your business here
Student knows if he’s having a bad day, I will overlook things
Give them choices, understand repercussions of not doing assignments
They feel safe, understand I expect best. Try not to allow failure, (if they do something wrong I give it back to them and say “What can you do to make it better?”)

If students have more need one day, we do one-on-one versus group, or they tell me they are having bad day - if they want to talk, I don’t push
Look to students for feedback: no response try another way, ask for example, or Give me educated guess. Ask another student - talk to each other (You might have part of answer, can put it together)

Students have to know you’re serious, show respect, not be mean, but stern and Let them know you’re not a joke, not playing with them
You never know what’s coming in the door
Students up all night, no grown-ups home, take care of siblings, but “you are not the grown-up in the classroom”
Probably spending more time daily with kids than their parents
This is angriest bunch of kids I’ve ever worked with
Need counseling so kids think about what they do, offer things we learned at home
Work with other teachers to reinforce
I can admit I’m wrong
Goals for week - what to teach with standards, how it’s taught depends on kids,
Their moods, how long they work hard, if distracted, if something happened – I can relate letters to anything

My teaching is based ON the kids. (they come in and if something’s happened at home or in community, my lesson plan goes flying out the window.)

Meaning Making

Ecological profiles
Teachers do have strong belief in students
Community committed to school: local council, active church groups
Nurse from the city health department important
Administration not in good relationship with teachers or families, crisis mode
Outside collaborations successful: for homeless, from university, counseling
Teams work well at grade levels, special needs classes work well together
Some mentoring with teachers and individual students
Discipline inconsistent

*Observation Guide (of Teachers in Their Classrooms)*
Mr. Coach and Mrs. Green said, “You know better than that”
Mrs. Web talked to class about behavior appropriate to learning
Mr. Shepherd discussed cheating with student who looked for game tips

*Teacher interviews*
We all want control over a situation. We don’t like to feel that
Students don’t have control of anything
New teachers come in, going to save world, and in month here they’re
Questioning whether they made the right decision
Speech teacher here, who works with you to help kids and bug the parents
Redesign seen by community as broken relationships
It will still take a whole year of fighting to get services for kids
Kids have talent goes unused - don’t reach potential
Student doesn’t want to look smart to peers – they think she’ll be different
Poor or not, they still have to do X amount of things
If has a problem, something not done, he is problem whole day, affects class
I talk about social skills because it’s important to learn how to talk to people
Students need to learn respect, determines if you get a job or not
Talk to guys - hear things they’re not supposed to do, like selling drugs
If parents feel you are a benefit to the child, they are supportive
Emphasis away from ‘everything teacher’s fault’ parents have responsibility
Call utilities to get water, gas, electric for families that didn’t understand
Go beyond the call to get glasses for a kid
Call parents too often they won’t answer phone - can’t reach them, don’t want to
hear, don’t know what to do, frustrated themselves
Students respect you a lot more when you’re honest
All the bad press says these kids won’t amount to anything
The language, dialect, understanding dress, about gangs and parental roles
System looking at teacher to see if kids are prepared
I have a large social worker hat, and large medical hat
I stay after to give kids a ride after basketball, make sure my student behaves (*Not in job description but I feel that’s my job. If he has problems I am there to talk to him and pull him aside.*)
I’m growing, trying to learn culture, how they learn; how to teach acceptable behaviors in different environments, not expect them to know (*Expect them to know when we go somewhere the need to stand in line and be quiet, and no need to touch everything.*)
Later do advocacy work in courts, kids who just aren’t going to make it. I want to help them too
More fun when teachers enjoy what they’re doing, here for same reasons I am
You can change behaviors through praise quicker than through criticism
I help with 7/8 grade, be seen you prevent things (goes back to being police)
Professor said kids in city don’t get good teachers to deal with the problems
If you’re in tune with these kids you may as well not go if they don’t trust you
Parent - To walk in building where I was failure, fear my child will be same
   failure, not knowing how to fix it, how to help
More willing to help kids struggling when parent is willing to work with me
Families want best for children - makes me want to help the situation
Family first, leave problems here, thank God for two good kids of own
Have to watch what’s going on but not act on it immediately. (If you acted on
   everything you’d never teach, get anything done.)
Teachers have impact on self-esteem, what direction you’re going
Things they learned in college don’t apply here
Have somebody to help you through, first two years are overwhelming
Have to help new teachers, teach sense of humor
If you plan to work urban, not going to be using classroom management stuff
   Taught in college. It doesn’t work. (I don’t care what anyone says, it
doesn’t work. Or I should say some of it doesn’t work, because they’re
trying to joke around with students and trying to be their buddy – here in
the urban part of town that does not work.)
Find experienced teacher, make friends and latch on, first year on-the-job training
No matter how well universities prepare you, it’s ‘deer in the headlight’. Student
teaching doesn’t help: teacher sets up ideal environment to be successful, Teacher
helps with issues, and supplies
In poverty appointment, be on time is not priority, miss taking child to doctor for
testing, go back on the list, have different priorities
My day revolves around afternoon phone call from my children
My family: baby, husband, mother, sister, husband’s parents - clan
At home everything is ready night before - no crisis
My work is only 45% of my daily life because I have 3 children
I struggle to get up, come to school, go home, play with baby, watch TV, go over
day’s lesson, outsider might say boring
I lead 2 lives, these kids are disrespectful and some of staff too
Want where the money was at the time
People trust me with their kids all day, trust me to help. It’s pretty meaningful
Inner city kids need a good role model, somebody to push them to do better. Here
   You see you’ve helped a child or family, and made an impact
Make positive calls home when child has good day, especially kids who don’t
   have many of those
Communicate with parents, not just phone but home visits, cultivate relationships
Get to know children by getting to know them through family they’re with
Understand school is about adaptation, get along, and if trainable
If it’s one minute they’re displaying appropriate behavior, you say the most
   wonderful thing
They say they’re not going to do it, that’s when language and behaviors start.
   (Isn’t it better to be rude and to act like you don’t care than it is to
   admit that you don’t know what you’re doing?)
Have teachable moments - somebody makes statement we can expound upon and
everyone understands *(if majority thumbs up, that is a good day)*

When the light bulbs go on
Their faces light up, all of a sudden you can tell this is finally making sense
Students know who cares
They give me feedback on learning, actually know it, not just memorize it
Kids respond positively, you get feedback that they can relate and understand
Them able to build on something they already know and then share it with you
If they get excited about what you’re teaching, something they understand
When I feel they’re getting it
Teach character and values - honesty, perseverance, respect
Draw on something they’re experiencing, they’re going to learn
Their response to what you do can change a whole lesson
Best lesson, interactions are worst ever, behaviors are not paying attention,
Throwing something across room, not engaged, don’t care *(that kind of interaction, especially the behaviors such a huge part of it because we don’t really have any kind of consistent behavior plan. And these kids have to have structure, screaming for it, and yet you have to be able to provide that structure and still provide enough space for them.)*
Get kids to believe in themselves
Do best you can, do not give up. Find out what you want to do with your life
They’ll learn to think and realize knowledge they already have
Get them to think for selves, express selves, communication, math skills
Come in, feel like they’ve accomplished something, want them to realize what respect is. *(They want respect but don’t realize what respect means. If something goes wrong, don’t make excuses, see what you can do to correct the situation that is best for everyone. If they are accused and tell me they didn’t do it, I back them 100%. Learn to admit it, beg forgiveness in easiest way and still maintain face. AND understand there are still consequences.)*
It’s important for kids to see outside of here, this is all they know
Help children understand things happen, there are changes and it’s ok
I think about students at home - how I can help them with education and life
I’m in room all day -sometimes frustrated, or elated kids are learning
After school I regroup, straighten, type plans, get in my car and go home
I’m in books, self-assess, how to do things differently, how to group the kids
My mission: display positive mood and this is a tough situation here
My God-given talents, desire to help kids believe in themselves, find success *(It was definitely a calling! My nature and my purpose on earth.)*
Make sure students get everything from me, an academic education
I want them to tell their children how important education is
Not here for paycheck. Something draws me back every year - I have to stay
Feel I’m working towards something
Go in every day, look at kids and happy they are there, and be enthusiastic
Older you get, more realize how little you know, much gain from others’ experiences
I’m involved - preach and teach. Talk about issues. Believe in tough love
My role is authoritarian, I have a lot of discipline, aware of needs and I do it.
It’s not a job; it’s a way of life, because you always think about it. (*You go somewhere thinking about something you could buy for room. You watch TV and think you should be recording this. You go on vacation looking for brochures so the kids can understand about where you went. You try to give them an experience.*)

Opportunity to share myself with children, community, be part of growing up.
Always wanted to be teacher - connect with children, religious and lay thing (*Told By lady at church I was going to walk the children and it was events after That which led me right into teaching. I wanted to, but I think I was kind of led there. Always liked children-if you teach a child to think, you give them a great gift.*)

Facilitator, don’t give answers, don’t give up. (*Somebody that lets you do Whatever you want, they’re not too concerned about you.*)
Not here to be friend, make sure they get an education - you care about them.
Give them confidence to go forward, curiosity, ask questions, find ways to learn, and feel good about themselves.
Able to encourage someone else
Empathy because I know what it’s like to have challenges as a student.
Teaching was plan B because needed to fall back if I didn’t go to NFL.
The only thing that keeps me going – my own drive.
I wanted to learn about different kids in different situations.
Student teacher saw happy black students see a black man and look up to me.
As Police did not see teachers interacting with problem kids to follow up.
Encouraged by other people. Desire to teach but also to learn about self.
Love kids, wanted to be mommy, able to have career, still spend time at home.
If they look nice, not tired, remembered to take hat off – any little thing you find. (*especially kid who gives worst time, one that you don’t want to see, you worry about at night – that’s the one you have to like the most even though you really don’t want to like that kid. Because that kid is cursing at you, throwing something, never listening, or spitting.*)

Someone who cared and acted upon it. I was kind of student I work with now.
Teacher gave me freedom to do things I wanted to do.
Get your energy, motivation to keep together from religion – I pray every day.
Show kids you’re human and just like them you have problems.
Don’t take things personally, some things I can change and some I can’t.
Don’t take student’s failure to heart.
My good day is students come and have a day with good behavior.
Overall goal is to follow lesson plans, but rarely happens.
Introduce lesson, objective, standards, and why I teach what I teach.
Best job ever had, doing what I wanting, able to communicate, not be afraid.
Resource is higher power – God directing me to this calling.
Have to separate yourself, be able to go home - forget it.
I don’t see anything as unexpected. I am prepared for whatever.
In suburb I was not concerned about home and the baggage with the kids.
I’m growing in my career. I’m not stagnant.
Completely satisfied. No regrets
I’m not unhappy, but I could be happier
There are more things I want to do
Couldn’t have chosen a better thing for me
Be principal, make more money, my 3 kids to see me get Master’s
Not want to teach other grade. Master’s in admin, teach others how to teach
Work at Hospital in psychiatric ward with students with behavior issues
Want to be politically involved to make some difference-school board

Focus Group Guide
I would like to give back to the community
Have my family, job, food, and time with family. I accomplished my goals.
You’re a counselor, mother, father, clergy – everything to kids. And they’re parents
That’s where I’m supposed to be, religious experiences that led me. (Very comforting, especially days I want to say ‘this is just too much stress, I can’t help these kids, these kids are too much’.)
This year made me stronger - something keeps pulling me back
Not give up – challenge myself to find different way to explain

Miracle question:
What would support your teaching in an urban school?
Textbooks, materials, athletic equipment, music and art, a library
Take field trips, have science kits don’t have to send back, textbooks, lockers.
Well-behaved kids who did their work.
Parenting center - courts made parents go on-site at school
Non-threatening atmosphere, get parents to take more responsibility for their children.
A library, textbooks, computers that work, training in anger management.
Parents take GED classes while kids in school, day care moms could work in (alternate, give to each other - these kids don’t get – giving to one another.)
More experienced person in ISS, knew the community well, so ISS = place of learning