

A School Story of Qualitative Inquiry

January 31

Brrrrr! I roll from my face to my side, groping for something to hang onto and finally hunch from sitting to a squat, trying to center my cross-country skis under my soaked flannels. This is my fourth face plant in the last half hour and the strain is beginning to show. After bussing up to Park City at seven this morning, skiing up the North side of this mountain for two hours and lunching in the snow on this snowy ridge near Guardsman Pass since before noon, all 55 of us have been anticipating the thrill and danger of the nine-mile descent we are now making down the South side into the Heber Valley. The high school students seem to have varying abilities. Many have skied for years, but not on these narrow skis. Others have no prior experience. All are adventurous, in my opinion; I glance nervously over the edge of the cliff to my left and plunge my head into a snow bank to keep from falling off.

About half way down, it begins snowing and blowing. I wish I had my goggles so I could see better! I am with the teachers (Sid and Cheryl) now. They have been up and down this mountain many times in the decades Unified Studies has been in operation but they look like they are having fun, trying out some new telemark skis in this wet snow. As a university professor interested in innovative programs that last, I am taking this year to experience the class first hand. But I didn't know this could mean sweat and broken bones!

Suddenly I realize that all the students are in front of us, heading down to the bus at varying speeds. Sid, Cheryl, Jack (a student teacher) and I have stopped for some reason and are standing around talking about how great this day has been. Sid is still ecstatic. Cheryl agrees that it has been a great day but a problem with Steve Wilson has come up. Jack says he saw him smoking and thinks Steve knows it. Bruce (another student) was with him; but Jack didn't see *him* smoking. The class rule is that there will be no smoking, drugs, or alcohol during school related activities; and if there is, then the student is out of the program. They note that Steve has not been attending his other classes at all and is frequently absent from Unified. He had a meeting with the principal and his father on Monday, and it was decided that if he messed up again he would be out of the school for the year. They debate these facts against the point that they want to do what is best for Steve and what is best for the rest of the class. They are sure that other students know about what Steve is doing, and others may be doing it too. Sid comments that during the first few years they had a lot of trouble with kids drinking alcohol on their outings. They combated that and the bad image it gave the program for quite awhile. There has not been much of that sort of thing in the class during the last two years; but this group seems more prone to it. The teachers have been concerned more than usual about dealing with the problem this year.

Cheryl suggests that Jack talk to Steve and tell him that he saw him and make a deal with him to stay with Jack all the time because they have been building some rapport. I ask if that might be a little rough on Jack! Then Cheryl says that she just doesn't feel right about doing that. Sid is anxious to be skiing on down the trail with the rest of the class but Cheryl keeps asking what he thinks they should do. After about 10 minutes in the blinding snowstorm, we finally decide to confront Steve on the next day the class meets about the whole thing and then turn it over to the principal to see what he will do. Sid and Cheryl want to support Steve and not cut him off if there is a chance that he might come around.

Three hours later, we are back at school and most of the students have left. The two teachers, four student teachers and I are talking things over with regard to Steve. Jack says he smelled more smoke on both Steve and Bruce when he met them at the bus and he also notes that Steve was one of about 11 who came to 7th period the previous Thursday, was marked present, and then took off for the rest of the day. He wonders if Steve just isn't trying enough to do well in the class for them to keep supporting him? The teachers also bring up the other students and the message that overlooking this problem might send to them. A major point they have been trying to convey to this class has been acceptance of the reality of consequences. They reviewed the rules at the beginning of the class; it should have been clear to Steve that this was a blatant violation. Dahrl (another student teacher) pointed out that Steve had lied to her, saying he had turned in the budget assignment when he hadn't even been there.

Feb 4

I just spent some time listening to Sid and Cheryl talking with Jack and Steve as they said they were going to do during our visit in the snowstorm last week. When I came in, they had been talking for quite awhile already. Sid was talking at his desk; Cheryl was at hers; Jack was on the couch and Steve was in the chair facing the three of them. Here is most of what I heard them saying:

Sid: I want you to be healthy, and so I can't stand by and not tell you that too many of my friends are dead or very sick from addiction to nicotine, and other drugs and it is not a good thing to be stuck to.

Cheryl: I don't expect everyone in Unified to like me, or Sid. With 75 people out there and our being people, some are bound to not like all of what we do. I don't just go for all of the kids immediately either. But I expect them and me to try to get to know each other. If they don't invest in other people, or if I don't, we are the losers because we miss out on what others have to offer us.

Steve: I don't feel that way. I really like this class; in fact it is about all I come to high school for. There are lots of sub-groups in the class, and some of them really don't like the way you lecture so much. But anyway, I think I deserve the punishment for what I did that you set out at the beginning of the year. You really ought to kick me out.

Cheryl: That is up to the principal. It is a school policy.

Steve: Why are you leaving it up to him?

Cheryl: That is the school's policy. We are not dumping it on him; this would be the same thing we would do if you or anyone were caught smoking here in the school. I like the way you are open with us, and you seem to get along well with the other people in the class. You have been in here because we felt you could make a great contribution to them. That is true for everyone in the class. They know that you have been missing a lot of school and that you smoke and so on. It is good for the straight A kids to get to know people like you and the contributions you can make to them. They can learn from you.

Jack: Does this experience seem similar to Hawaii to you? (Steve nodded). I can see you are trying. I think maybe you ought to go back to Hawaii and have some more of the experience there (I talked to Jack later. He said that he worked with kids like Steve in pineapple plantations of Hawaii for about three years and feels anxious that he and Sid and Cheryl aren't going to be able to influence Steve at all now because he is out of their class and their sphere of influence).

Cheryl: Do you know what you want, Steve?

Steve: To be happy.

Cheryl: How do you do that? Do you see how?

Steve: Some days I just have a good time and then set about to have a better time the next day. The only thing I can't figure out is religion. I need to find out if there is truth in religion, and if there is, I need to get on the right path.

Cheryl: That question can be a struggle for a *long* time. I struggle with some things *now* that I used to think I had figured out. Can't live all your life doing what your parents want. Somewhere inside of Steve Wilson there is a place where you can recognize the truth for you. You may always have questions about these things, but there are some bottom line places you can get to and hold tight to. I just don't want this to be a negative experience for you. This decision has nothing to do with liking or not liking you' like Sid said. I would do the same for everyone in the class. We searched for options but felt we had to do this to be fair given our policies for the class. You think about it as you go talk to the principal.

Sid: I struggle all the time to know if what we are doing is a service or a disservice to you and the other students.

Steve: Like Cheryl quoted from Dr. Belt' some things only have to be decided once and I don't think you should make an exception for me.

Cheryl: Selfishly, I just don't want to miss the relationship we were developing with you.

Steve: Maybe we can still have a relationship outside of Unified?

Cheryl: I appreciate your genuine openness with us. I hope you can see how we feel about it, too. Do what you can the rest of the day to help your group. They have been counting on you to do your part for the World Appreciation Day presentations. Also help others be open with us; if they have things they are unhappy about, we want them to feel free to come talk to us about those. So go help your group until the principal comes back and calls you to visit with him.

As Steve leaves, Cheryl talks to Sid and Jack a minute about how happy she is that Steve accepted responsibility for what he had done; but it seemed a little strange to her too. Why didn't he argue with them about staying in the class?

Feb 5

Tape recorded interview with Sid and Cheryl about the Steve Wilson decision

Dave: I came in late on your conversation with Steve last time. Did I miss anything?

Cheryl: Well, he didn't hesitate at all to admit that he had been involved in smoking. He came in and just shook my hand, and that's what he said he wanted to do' to be dropped from the program. He said, 'I'd just like to shake your hand, and I appreciate what you've done for me.' And I said, 'I really don't want *not* to see you again. When you're writing or you're drawing or stuff like that, I really wish you'd come share your work with me.' He said he would like to do that.

Dave: So do you guys feel good about that decision?

Sid: What do you mean, feel good about it?

Dave: Do you think it was the right thing to do?

Cheryl: Yeah, I do. I felt like we had enough time to think about it before we made it. He kept saying that when he gets up in the mountains or away from the school, he doesn't even think about it as being school and just lights up. Even so, he's still not dealing with the fact that he never would have chosen to smoke in front of me. If he wasn't concerned, why do it behind the water tank?

Dave: How successful would you say this class has been in doing what you wanted for students like Steve who aren't doing too well in high school generally?

Sid: I think it's been really successful. To deal with this thing with Steve, that's a hard problem because Steve's exactly the kind of person that we want to have in the class for a number of reasons. There are just as many reasons why I want to have Steve Wilson in the class as I do any other person at the other end of the continuum, an AP student. But at the same time we won't accomplish anything if the class just becomes a pooling for kids who say, 'Yeh, we can get away

with things. When we go on a trip, we can go behind the water tanks and light up or take a flask with us and drink on the trip.' It's a real hard thing. We must deliver the message that we don't tolerate that and you'll be out of here if you do. But at the same time, we've got to say, we want you because this is an arena you could be successful in and you can impart things to other students that are worthwhile. That's why I'm more worried about the reaction the class is going to have to this than I am about feeling bad about Steve leaving.

Feb 6

I am visiting Unified today. Cheryl is talking to the students about what happened with Steve and telling them that she wants to air it out and get things out in the open. Sid is talking about how the class is built on trust and how they are bending district policy not to keep the students all within their line of vision. 'There is no way we could keep that policy and do all that we are trying to do in here. So if we find that we can't trust you, then we will have to change what we do. That could make the experience completely different for future students.' He is giving lots of examples from rock climbing and belays and other outdoor situations that are built on trust.

On the day Sid and Cheryl met with Steve and agreed with him that it would be best for him to leave, many of the students were very upset. Some were crying. Some claimed that Steve was not the only one breaking the rules. Some worried that he would not get into school anywhere else. But Steve left without any accusations against Jack, Sid or Cheryl. He told his mother later that he was glad they stuck by their decision because if they hadn't, he would not have trusted or respected them.



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