Erica Robinson Nov 4 2015

Cinco Ranch H.S.

Social Studies Coach for the Katy ISD

C: It is November 4th 2015. I am at Cinco Ranch High School on the west side of Houston, just south of I-10 and I am with Erica Robinson and the last time we talked, well, when I visited was in 2008 and you were at Spring Branch High School.

E: So 7 years ago.

C: 7 years ago. So the first question has two parts: How do you define success in the teaching and do you believe Grand Valley prepared you for success in the classroom?

E: I think I would define success in teaching in having the ability to stay flexible and change and continue to do what is best for your students. So evaluating what your students need and how you can best serve them. I think that is difficult to prepare anybody for because every time they move to a different campus it is going to different and every year they are going to get a different group of kids so what I did last year might not work this year and what I do in 3rd Period might not work in 4th Period. But I think the overall foundation of writing lesson plans and being creative and designing things and staying organized is something I definitely learned at Grand Valley.

C: That’s good to hear.

E: Yeah. I definitely remember presenting a lot in front of other teachers and I think that other programs, from what I heard, especially from being down here, is that those programs don’t require you to get in front of people, so sometimes we get these new teachers and they are nervous and they haven’t really done enough stuff up to their teaching debut that they feel comfortable in their own shoes. I feel that Grand Valley did a good job of making sure that if this (teaching) wasn’t for you, you were going to figure that out well before you were heading into the end (of your college career) and it was too late (to change majors). So that was definitely good. So I know the programs down here don’t necessarily do it. It’s more busy work. It’s like, “Now you have your certificate (made a dismissive hand gesture, like the colleges were just pushing people out the door) so you can go and you can teach.” But the reality is they don’t know how to teach. They just know the content. I think Grand Valley did a good job of balancing the content and the strategies, the classroom management, the lesson planning and all that stuff.

C: And Grand Valley, even in the State of Michigan, I know Michigan State has students out in the classroom for a year, but it’s the same classroom so I really don’t know of another university in Michigan where you do two separate placements in two different classrooms.

E: Right.

C: So that’s unique and from what I hear from the feedback, both people in the study and outside, is that makes a difference too.

E: Oh, definitely.

C: You were at Grandville for teacher assisting right?

E: I was at Grandville and I was also at Fennville and those are two totally different worlds.

C: Yeah.

E: And one was middle school and one was high (school) so for the secondary experience at Grandville it kind of speaks for itself. I mean it’s Grandville High School. But the Fennville (experience) and being at the middle school, was a completely different world that I didn’t even know existed and it wasn’t even that far from my house. Those students really opened up my eyes to knowing that kids come to you from all different backgrounds. A lot of those students’ were from parents of migrant families and so you might have those kids for 8 weeks and then they might move on to something else. A lot of those students were just really disconnected because they moved a lot. They were harder to reach and I feel like you could definitely learn a lot being in that situation at least once to know how to connect with those kids because if you can connect with those kids it will make things easier for you in the future. You can use those same strategies again.

C: For the kid who is highly motivated and has support at home from the parents it’s like what can I almost do to not disrupt them as learners.

E: Right. It’s already happening. I think Grand Valley did a really good job and I know that from what I heard of other programs I would definitely compare it in a good way to what I have heard other people have experienced. I am definitely thankful for everything I got there. All the preparation I got.

C: That’s always good to hear. Thanks Erica. Biggest challenges in your career?

E: I think the biggest challenges come…

C: I mean here you are…you moved to Texas from Michigan.

E: Yeah, right. I think the biggest challenge for me at the time when I moved was the move itself. That was challenging being on your own and being young and being in a big city not knowing anyone. But now that I have been in it for a while and that’s kind of taken care of itself I think the biggest challenge is trying to adapt year by year to new initiatives. So you get a new administrative team, you get a new leader, someone goes and reads a book this summer and now everything is going to be geared around that book. I think education really changes a lot. Too often, too much and really for unwarranted reasons so I feel like a lot times we are reinventing the wheel and I think that is really in any district. I don’t think that’s just anywhere that I have been, but I know that it is constantly evolving and sometimes things are making improvements and making progress in the evolution of the craft of teaching needs to be there but I don’t think that all of the initiatives that we come across are necessary (6:03) and that teachers are getting bogged down with a lot of these small, minute details and doing things a certain way and saying things a certain way and I think we lose some of that creativity in regards to teachers don’t feel like they can present things how they want to, they try to do it in a way that reflects whatever leadership has outlined for them. I don’t experience that on this campus…

C: That’s good to hear.

E: But up until this point that’s what I experienced; teachers getting a new strategy every Monday morning, teachers getting a new initiative every month. I think you should stick with 3 goals and let’s just focus on one of those at a time. I think that having 10 different initiatives is too much. If the teachers can’t tell you what the initiatives are off the top of their heads then they are not going to be practicing them. It’s difficult to memorize more than 3 things at a time when you are talking about low performing campuses.

C: And how can you keep track of it? I mean, not only if you are going to have to collect data to support it and you are doing 15 different things at the same time how do you keep track of that?

E: Right. So I think that’s just the biggest thing that I see. This campus that I am on now has had a very solid administrative team, not a lot of movement, not a lot of teacher movement either so that problem is less evident on a campus that has a really good foundation and solid roots but when you are on a campus that is low performing and the teachers are coming and going and you are constantly getting someone new it is very difficult to have any uniform way of doing anything because you are constantly teaching somebody and the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing and it just kind of falls apart. So I would say that would be the biggest challenge, just the change. And not even with technology because I think that everyone accepts that that is going to be the way that it is. Some people, I think, would say, “Oh, technology” but I think that is only improving things.

C: Hopefully.

E: I think that sometimes the leadership teams, the administrative teams need to take a step back and think about the bigger picture here. Are we really going to focus on those small details that really make a larger difference? I think people get a little carried away.

C: To point that up, one of the teachers back in Michigan had…she started one year and they were on semester schedule, actually they had been on semester for a couple of years. I take that back, they were on trimesters. Then they switched to semesters. Then they got a new principal and he switched them back so in 3 years they went through 3 schedule changes and he thought that was no problem. “Oh, it is just a…” and she said, “You have to be kidding me. You go from 60 minute classes to 90 minute classes and it’s a huge change in the classroom and he really didn’t justify it beyond, “This is the way I want to do it.”

E: Sometimes I think, and with that, is what I experienced last year, especially, is a large disconnect between the administration and the teachers and the problem is that the camaraderie is not there, the community is not there, people don’t feel connected, but on top of that, I think you have administrators who have been outside the classroom for a long time and nobody really remembers what it is like to be down there in the trenches, right? And so last year (in her old school) the teachers were very upset because they had to move classrooms and this was the third August in a row that they all got new classrooms. So the first time they wanted to separate it by teams. So the next year they decided they didn’t like that so they separated it by grade level and they didn’t like that so they went back to departments. So if you are having to move your classroom every August you are not going to be starting off on a good note. I think that disconnect. You forgotten what it is like to unpack an entire classroom or pack and move an entire classroom, just those little things create a big difference and if your administrative team can be empathetic and understanding that, “Look, this is not a very good use of our time to be moving for 3 days every August” then that will start you off on a better foot, just all the time. But if your administrative team chooses to not really see it that way you are going to be starting off and having really low morale, and that’s not going to be a good way to start your school year. It’s just not. So that is what happened.

C: It is tough enough as it is (a teaching year in a low performing school or any school) with starting it in a hole.

E: Yeah. So that is what I would definitely say, the biggest challenge is.

C: So along with the challenges, and the caveat I throw in with Question 3 is “things that are nondestructive” what methods have you adopted to deal with the stresses of a challenging career? And maybe you don’t look…I mean there are always stresses, so there are always challenges…

E: Right. I think for me, definitely finding friendships and people who are experiencing the same thing so the people I have surrounded myself with since moving here have always been in education and since then other people, obviously, have come into my life, but the foundation for the people that I talk to the most are the people who are going to understand me the best. So for that reason the majority of my friends are in education. (12:05) And now we’re not teachers and you kind of get a different perspective if you can call your friend and they are a principal they can give you a principal’s outlook. They can tell you to calm down because they are seeing it from a different point of view. And that’s good. And you can also talk to teachers and I can go back because I’m not teaching now and I can talk to my friends that are complaining about the things that are happening in the trenches and being in the front on the lines and then I can remind myself, “Oh, yeah. That is what it was like last year” or “That is what it is like to be a teacher” and really just reaching out. So my biggest strategy is just talking to other people about my challenges and hearing how they would deal with it or how they have dealt it with because most of the time the people around you have been in a similar situation. I don’t really feel like my career has been challenging, but for the small things that happen here and there, I definitely would suggest talking to other people. That’s how I deal with it I guess.

C: When I think the people I feel more concerned about are the ones who put themselves in isolation on their own.

E: Right.

C: And then it’s all bottled up within them and they don’t have a chance to share or see those different perspectives. The other thing you mentioned, offhand, but it is a thread that has run through this study so far, is people work out. They run or they jog or they are camping or they are kayaking or something like that and you mentioned you hit the gym…

E: Yeah. Definitely helps.

C: The interesting thing is that one of the teachers said he approached the administration just to have a treadmill or a stepper put in the teachers’ (work) room because the teachers are walking around the school anyhow as a way to burn off stress, and they (the administration) said, “Why would you want to do that?” and he said, “You don’t get it.”

E: Right.

C: They would actually use it.

E: Oh, cool.

C: So he is still working on getting that accomplished.

E: I think, definitely, staying active and when you said the word “isolation” I do think of people that I have met in the past that are really quiet, that don’t associate themselves in group settings and maybe you would never know it because you don’t talk to those people, but those people are struggling the most sometimes because they are not sharing things. They are not getting ideas from other people and so I think the more open you are to sharing your products and letting other people use your stuff and using other people’s the less work you have to do because you are essentially getting stuff from other people. You can tell when other people are more isolated, they always say things like, “I don’t know how you have time to create all this stuff.” Well, I don’t create it. I borrow it and you are always running out of time because you are doing it all on your own. I definitely wouldn’t take the “lonesome warrior” approach because you want to survive the school year and have some good material to build off of next year and the best way to do that is to get it from as many people as possible.

C: Right. Good teachers know how to borrow or “steal”.

E: Yes.

C: Hopefully legally.

E: Yes. I would definitely suggest that for sure.

C: So, like I mentioned before, part of the study is based on the fact that so many people don’t stay in education. I mean the statistics, Ingersoll did multiple studies on this and 30-40% of all new teachers leave the profession in 4 to 5 years.

E: Ok.

C: So this next question is: How are you motivated to best serve your students and, I guess, based on the fact that you are an instructional coach, to best serve the teachers that you work with? What keeps you going?

E: I really like working with them and knowing that I am making a difference in how much stress they feel in a day. So if I can help them with just one small thing that they could take off their plate and that’s going to, I hope, in turn, help them create a better attitude and that is going to show in the classroom and that is going to affect the students. So the hope is that we can give them all these resources. We also want to make sure that we are surrounding them with positive comments and good feedback and knowing when they get up there and they are in front of the class and it’s their time to shine that they are going to be the best that they can be that day.

C: Right.

E: And I think that even if you are helping them with just one small thing, hopefully that would carry through to the students. So you could be affecting only one teacher but that would be 150 kids. (My thoughts when I decided to change careers and leave my high school classroom and become a college professor who teaches teachers. If I could have a positive impact on several hundred teachers through the years at Grand Valley that impact might carry through to several thousand students over the years to come.) So I guess that is just the way…I never had an instructional coach so I guess I pride myself off of, maybe, just imagining what would I want someone to do for me if I had that person when I was teaching? I would want that person to be reliable and trustworthy and consistent, but also to be knowledgeable. So those are the things that help me stay motivated and if I could create the perfect person for this role what would it look like? I did ask the teachers at the beginning of the year how would they describe the best instructional coach and then I read through their comments so I could see what their expectations were and then I could set my own goals and hopefully fulfill what they wanted me to do because there was someone in my role last year so I knew coming in that I would quote, “Have big shoes to fill” as they were telling me so I wanted to come in and not make a lot of changes. (18:01) But just do what had been done before and then slowly ease in and really develop relationships with them because I think the first step with being an instructional coach is developing a relationship with the teachers.

C: Yeah. If they don’t trust you…

E: Right. You are not going to get anywhere so I definitely think that you have to stay motivated in this job because this role is what you make of it. If you don’t want to be seen and you don’t want to be heard and you don’t want to be out there you could isolate yourself very easily in this role.

C: Like you said, you could come in here every day and spend it on your computer, doing great things for your teachers but then you would be isolated.

E: Not having that interaction. And then sometimes, I’m not motivated by this, but I do noticed a change, sometimes, I just have to be there to listen because sometimes the teachers just need to talk. They just need to vent about something. It might not even be necessarily about school but sometimes, like half through the day or midway they just need someone to spew some ideas of off or to complain about something and that’s ok because that’s life. So I find myself floating between these different roles, wearing these different hats but I like that they are dependent on me. Not too much to the point where they can’t get anything done. They were already productive before I got here, which is great but I do definitely stay motivated by the fact that they appreciate what I can offer to them.

C: And that was evident in the comments that I have heard already today. So that’s great.

E: I feel like definitely in my mind where I would be this far in, this week was the 50th day of school, on Monday or Tuesday, I can’t remember, so I am definitely further along than I thought I would be. Being at a new school, having to learn 200 names and meet all these teachers and know what they teach and when is their off period and where are located and all this stuff I am ahead of where I wanted to be and it’s because of them. They motivated me to work hard and be out there and meet them and have conversations with them instead of just sitting in my office and cranking out curriculum.

C: What changes, if any, have occurred in the strategies and methods you use in your classroom? I mean, obviously, your role has changed, but you’re still, defined by your job, you are there to present them with different ways to teach.

E: Yeah. Over the course of the last two years I have gone to a lot of conferences, trying to get different ideas (21:00), all these people who are coming up with all these new methods, but I just try to share those with the teachers as much as possible. I think in education in general we are getting away from the ‘stand and deliver’ and we are trying to tell the teachers that the students are not the ‘sit and receive’ type. They are just not. Nobody likes that. No one has ever liked that. So we are trying to distance ourselves from that. When you are taking something away you need to offer an alternative so I try every week I send them something new, and whether they try it or not is up to them, but I do send them a new strategy every week. Whether it is something small like if you have classroom management concerns, you can try this to get their attention or if it is a strategy that is just geared towards Social Studies. It might be something along the lines of using primary documents or analyzing political cartoons. Stuff like that. But overall I try to send them stuff that can be utilized in any content area, not just Social Studies.

C: Ok.

E: In that way we can send it to the entire campus and it doesn’t have to be, “Oh, this is a Social Studies strategy.” (She made a gesture as if non-Social Studies teachers would immediately dismiss something not in their content area.) “Well, not really. It is a strategy and you can use it anywhere.”

C: Right.

E: We try to send some of those out and slowly taking baby steps, using like a ladder for our foundation. “Ok, where are we going to get these teachers today and where do we want them to be by the end of the year?” But the reality is no matter how high we want them to ‘jump’ some of them are going to be very eager to do it and then some people are not going to want to come off the ground so we have to find ways to ‘ladder’ everybody up there and then we have to find alternatives. What are we going to do with the teachers who don’t want to (go up the ‘ladder’)? So we spend a lot of time developing that, the solution. I don’t know if that answered the question?

C: Yeah, it did. One of the things that has come up in a couple of these interviews is school districts looking at a ‘growth’ model. “So it’s not how far we get but the fact that we are moving in the right direction”…

E: Right.

C: …and for some people a little bit of movement is tremendously successful because before they were caught, whether it was a student or a teacher, they were caught, and now, at least, they are willing and they show some positive growth in some way. So is that any part of the philosophy here, either toward the students or the teachers? Or is it more an expectation of, “Ok, here are your 3 goals and you better get them all done for the end of the school year?”

E: On this campus is very goal oriented but they are not very specific in regards to driving something like down your throat, “This is what we are going to do this year.” I think the overall goal right now as a campus is really just to create well-rounded students and that can look very different from perspectives in several content areas. But I think the overall idea is that these students are going to be college or somehow post-secondary success. They are going to have it somewhere. So whether they go to a university or not, they are going to be able to have skills that they need to survive in the real world. I don’t think that we necessary have exact goals in regards to that. I think because it is not that narrowly focused my role as an instructional coach is really kind of…I think because the focus is not that narrow it gives us the freedom to have our content areas, our focus, to be something that applies to us. Even though as a campus we might have some similar goals, in Social Studies we are really focused on making sure that students are able to have abilities to analyze. Think like a historian. Write like a historian.

C: I saw that up on the classroom wall when you met (with the teachers)…historical thinking skills.

E: Kind of adapting to that but also bringing the relevance back into the classroom too. Working with current events, and talking about how everyone voted yesterday or whatever it might be. Bring the relevance back into the classroom. Increasing the rigor and getting the kids ready so they are able to have good test taking skills because at the end of the year, in some contents, they have to take and pass these tests and we are not trying to teach to the test, although some people will tell you that. Skeptics will tell you that. We are trying to teach skills so that these students can be successful on any test or in any real life experience or whatever it may be. But along the way, yeah, they are going to have to grasp some of those basic things that the Social Studies teachers can offer, like vocabulary and, you know.

C: Yeah.

E: Map skills and writing and stuff like that.

C: It is good to know what the word “inconsistent” means. (This comment refers to a discussion that Erica had with a group of teachers when it came up that on a recent test students answered a question incorrectly because they did not understand what the word “inconsistent” meant.)

E: Yeah. Exactly!

C: What types of evaluations, both formal and informal, were and are used to assess your classroom teaching and how were or are these evaluations used to better your teaching?

E: So when I was teaching we were evaluated, and this is the problem, we were evaluated, but in one scenario I was at a particular school for 7 or 8 years, I was evaluated by a different evaluator every year. So I had a different appraiser every year. I never had the same appraiser twice.

C: Wow!

E: The difficulty in that is you will get a different perspective every time. One appraiser might be looking for a ‘dog and pony show’ and someone else might really think that is a waste of time. So it is difficult to analyze what the expectations are and where you are going to be in regards to that personal judgment. I mean somebody might say, “I really don’t like it when people do all this “foldables” and have crayons and markers” and then somebody else would say, “Man, you didn’t even have the kids make anything.” So you get caught right between. For me, my experience was very simple. I was evaluated. I was scored very high, and the amount of evaluations that I had thereafter was pretty much on the decline (28:08). I didn’t really have anyone come in for more than 5, 10, maybe 15 minutes a year.

C: Ever?

E: Yeah, after the first two (years).

C: Ok, when you were on probation.

E: Yeah. From there on out it was very minimal.

C: What was the nature of the evaluation tool itself? What is a checklist or a definable rubric?

E: Both. They could do it on a device so they could come in and it wasn’t on paper anymore. (Bell rings)

C: We are still with evaluations, so you were talking about pretty thorough at the beginning of your teaching career and then once you were established and got “highly effective” or “highly qualified” or whatever you want to say, then it slacked off.

E: Right.

C: Did you feel in the beginning process that you had good feedback on those longer evaluations?

E: Yeah. I definitely did. Some of the feedback I got at the beginning, and most of it is written, so it is in the evaluation. You can have it. You can see it on the computer, but I felt like most of it was positive feedback. I got the impression at some point that they had bigger fish to fry (meaning other teachers and other responsibilities for the principals needed more attention than evaluations on Erica and probably other teachers who were judged to be good or excellent teachers). So if you are doing what you are supposed to be doing and you have good results and if your kids are scoring well on the tests, which in my case I was very thankful that that was the case, then you are probably going to be left alone. Right?

C: Yeah.

E: And so that system that they used at the time is still the same system that they use now. They have added a new technology component, pretty much capturing that you are using technology in your class so that means you have to turn your Smartboard on and maybe use that as a glorified projector but whatever that might mean, that’s what you have to do. I always had good evaluations, never had any issues with anything until last year when I became an instructional coach. It was my first time being evaluated as an instructional coach and I was being evaluated by a former friend who…we kind of lost like 7 years of a friendship during the process of that and so my evaluation was terrible. But I anticipated that it would be. Just given the fact that it was a conflict of interest for that person to be evaluating me in the first place.

C: Yeah. My initial reaction to that is that is wrong.

E: Right.

C: It would be better to have multiple people see your classroom than this person is in charge and there is conflict of interest going on.

E: Yeah. If there is other people available I think…and actually at that time I did petition…not petition…I don’t remember the exact word they used for it but basically you are not signing it (the evaluation) so I refused to sign it which means you don’t accept it and then usually they will bring someone else in to do a second evaluation but that wasn’t necessary because of the way that things turned out and I wasn’t going to be there anyway the next year so it wasn’t really something that was going to be relevant, but I do think that when the administrative teams are deciding who is going to be evaluating who, it needs to be for a cycle of time. If you are going to have assistant principals over math they are probably going to need a math background, which is not always the case. (I laughed, in part, because I think evaluators should know at least something about what the teachers are teaching. I know that is not always possible but I also think that changes the nature of the evaluation.)

C: I know.

E: And then they need to probably stick with those teacher for a few years (longitudinal study). I think it is difficult when you do this switch and shuffle around and the administrative team that I was on last year, they got a new set of people to appraise every year. Then you are not really able to show them or talk to them about growth, like, “Last year when I saw you teach you did this, this and this. This year I am noticing that now you are able to do this, this and this.” You wouldn’t be able to have any of those conversations.

C: Right.

E: So you would be reinventing the wheel and starting from scratch every single year. I think some leadership teams have it figured out and some just don’t and maybe it is low on their totem pole of things that they need to do. I wish that maybe there was a book or something that…and I’m sure there is…to guide them in the right direction on how to organize the system ( look for books and articles about how to plan meaningful evaluation systems) because that is out of teacher control and if your system is unorganized or if your teachers know that you are going to be evaluated for 10 minutes a year and they are going to tell you two weeks ahead of time they (the teachers) are going to put on a ‘dog and pony show’ for 10 minutes and then they are going to go back to what they were doing before.

C: Right.

E: So it’s not really that reliable and consistent if the administrative team doesn’t take it seriously. But if you want to have high performing schools then you are going to be doing your evaluations when you are supposed to and the people doing the evaluations are going to be capable of doing that and hopefully closely aligned with the curriculum that they are appraising (with content knowledge).

C: Right.

E: I would not want to be appraising anything other than Social Studies. Maybe ELA because I did ELA last year. As an instructional coach I was Social Studies and English but if you…

C: And that makes sense. (My context is that during my 28 years as a classroom teacher I worked closely with English teachers.) That connection.

E: Yeah. But if you sent me into a math room I would not even know really where to begin, other than just the foundation of strategies: How to keep attendance, classroom management, that type of stuff, but the break down of the content would very definitely get me into a very clouded situation that I wouldn’t even know how to evaluate.

C: Yeah. Yeah. What types of mentoring were provided for you and how would you characterize the results of the mentoring that was provided for you? (34:02)

E: The mentoring that I received this year has been great! And so that has only been since August and it has been really good. The mentoring that I, and I can go into how that works in a second. The mentoring that I have had in the past has been hit or miss. Again, if you have a leadership team that has a good foundation and everything is solid and the team functions well then your mentoring program should not be recreated every single year. If you are a mentor you should be teaching for a long time or several years and if you are a mentee you should be paired with someone who you can bond with and someone who can help you. Last year I had experienced people who were mentors in their third year of teaching or the second year of teaching. The reason was that the staff kept leaving in groups of 20 every year so after you have gotten into your third year of that you might only have second year teachers on your campus. That might be your entire campus. Then you are having the ‘blind lead the blind’, right? So that’s not a very good example of how effective it can work, but on this campus and in this district it has been phenomenal. Going through an institute and training and always having people reaching out to you, asking you how they can help you and what can they do for you. And then you meet once a week. You can talk to them on the phone whenever you want. You can text them. Really having the opportunity to learn from them and grow, instead of just having this person that is on this sheet of paper that has your name next to it and just says, “Mentor”. It actually means something.

C: My sense, and please correct me if you think I am wrong, is doesn’t have to be a function of how much money that school district has. (Cinco—resources, Oscoda—poor). If they are organized it doesn’t…

E: No.

C: If you are organized it doesn’t have to be, “Well, you can do that because you are Cinco Ranch but we can’t do that because we are “Podunk” or whatever.”

E: I don’t think that a mentoring program really costs much. I guess it would depend on how many little extras you are going to buy for your people and how many meetings you are going to have and if you are going to buy them breakfast and stuff, but the foundation of the mentoring program can function off of having no budget. But the problem is somebody has to have the initiative and the intuition to be able to develop the mentors in a way that they are all going to uniform, across the board, help the mentees in this way. Right? So you are going to meet every other Thursday. You are going to have these expectations and guidelines and making sure that they are clear. If you are just picking mentors on some crazy, has no rhyme or reason way, and “Now, suddenly I have been selected as a mentor and I don’t even want to be one” I’m not going to be a good one. I think it is difficult because if you have a campus that doesn’t have good morale it is going to be difficult to find people who want to do it and then even if you do find some, what do you have too many new people and not enough experienced and so it can be hard, but I don’t think it should cost any money. It should be free, but it costs a lot of ideas, but I think once you get passed that part I think anybody can do it.

C: Yeah, and that’s my sense too. I have heard cases, and not within the study, where mentors are paid several thousand dollars to be mentor and so some people want to be a mentor because they are paid but then they don’t do anything because then there is no way to check up on what they are doing.

E: Right.

C: In most cases that is a really bad mentoring scheme. Not that they are paid, but the fact that there is no follow up. So the ones that are successful, there is some kind of follow up beyond just the mentoring team. You are actually doing what you are supposed to be doing and the mentors are picked because they know the content or the subject area and they physically make the meetings, versus, “I’m your mentor but you will never see me again.”

E: Right. And sometimes that is the case. I think that there are ways to get around that so if you don’t have a financial standpoint and you can’t do anything with monetary funds then you could offer, let’s say, hours towards your professional development and they are able to get those. Maybe they are going to get 6 hours per semester from meeting with this person and that could be motivating for somebody who is trying to continue to learn and educate themselves and is not planning to be a teacher forever. If they are wanting to build up their resume then that could be a motivating for them too. I don’t think I have ever heard of mentors that I know of getting paid. I have heard them say that they want to, but I don’t know if they ever have.

C: So basically your experience here has been better than what it was in your first district.

E: Yes. Completely different. Turnaround. Different set up. Everything is organized. It comes via email. You know it’s going on. You know what the expectations are. You know where you are supposed to be. You know who to call if you have an issue. You can already reach out to somebody. It’s very open. It’s a good organized network. I think the more that you do that, the less mentoring you even need. Right?

C: Yeah. Have you pursued continuing education and I know you have because you said you had your Master’s, either in the form of a graduate program or professional development and how has this education influenced your success? (40:08)

E: I do have my Master’s degree.

C: And that’s in Educational Leadership?

E: It is. It is for administration. I don’t intend to use it in that way. Half way through the program I realized that I feel most confident in my ability to continue to work with teachers on a level that I can make a difference versus working as an administrator and dealing with kids who didn’t wear a belt today and kids who mouthed off to a teacher. I just kind of felt like that’s not where I am right now. I decided I want to go into this content-related role so I could still be with students and still work with kids but also work with teachers. Pursuing that I went to Lamar University and did their program and that was back in 2012, I believe, maybe 2011, I can’t even remember and so I finished all that and I feel that definitely influenced me to continue to grow, to continue to learn things, but a lot of the stuff that I learned in that degree has to do with laws, you know the other side of things, which I don’t necessarily need the knowledge and background for this job, but I do appreciate knowing that information. It definitely helps me see the perspective of the administrative team. And I also learned how to do the evaluations and do all that stuff even though I don’t utilize any of those skills right now either.

C: But the perspective helps.

E: Right. I can help the teachers get ready so that they can score higher on their evaluations, knowing and understanding what the administrators are looking for with the appraisal system.

C: And it sounds like, you talked about the Institute several times and books you have read, and I will admit that I haven’t read a lot of things you have mentioned, but it sounds like you are offered opportunities and suggestions that have really helped you too.

E: Yeah. We are constantly, I think we have had 4, 5 or 6 books going at the same time at one point and it is a lot. It is a lot to keep up with, but there are some really beneficial things that come out of continuing to educate yourself and making sure that you are where you need to be. If everyone else on your leadership team is reading one book and everybody’s mind frame is focused or centered around these ideas you need to be onboard too because otherwise you are not going to know where everybody is coming from, and what they are talking about. We’ve done quite a bit of reading this year already, even just since August and I think the majority of it has definitely been influential in something I that will take with me to my next year or however long. It will continue to affect me. It can be a lot sometimes, trying to keep up.

C: I think one of the things that, based you said today alone, but some of the things that I have picked up from some of the other grads, is that I am going to add to each chapter, maybe a suggested reading list of things…

E: That would be good.

C: Like it could be content-based, it could be pedagogy based or whatever because I think teachers would gain from, “Here is what I read and this is what I got out of it” whatever…

E: That would be good.

C: So I think I am going to add that. I think so.

E: I think you should.

C: Ok. Thanks.

E: And that would also be good for all of us to see what other people are reading too because something that is trending here might not have ever been heard of somewhere else and we can get ideas from other people.

C: Right.

E: Depending on what is trending in their area.

C: Right. Question #9: And this is probably the thing that I have shared the most from the first round of (research in 2008). “Pearls of Wisdom”. So what would you tell current students that they should know before they start teaching? In other words, what do you wish you knew before you started? (44:11)

E: I think what I experienced is that teachers in their first couple of years maybe don’t realize the amount of time and the level of time management you really need to have in order to not get exhausted so I would definitely make sure, if I was in my first year of teaching again that I was asking people for help and getting ideas from other people and sharing things, but also asking them, “How did you do that quickly?” or “How did you finish this in that amount of time?” and getting ideas on how to multi-task because even now I come across teachers who tell me that it takes them a certain amount of time to do something and in my mind I could do it in a tenth of that time and so even the small things like that, the time management when you have a new teacher and they are up at the school an hour before it starts and they are staying four hours after it ends you have got to have some sort of intervention and talk to them about the time management.

C: And I think English teachers are the worst (about working themselves to death. I am married to one.) Math teachers second.

E: But just figuring out how to shorten the day. How to shorten the workload. And figuring out those shortcuts and once I saw that there were teachers taking shortcuts and not in a way that they weren’t getting things done, but in the way that they were getting things done in class (46:02). You know, is it possible when your students turn in, they turn it in and instead of you walking around the room and collecting it, can you hand something out without physically handing it out? Can you have your classroom work paperless? All of these ideas to buy yourself more time because in the first year of teaching I got up to school an hour before it started and despite the fact that I was coaching I was still up there until 7 o’clock at night and then on the weekends 11 o’clock at night and then you find yourself sometimes not having a life outside of this job. It becomes your whole thing. So if I would go back I would definitely say, “Find ways to cut out things that keep you busy, tedious little things to give yourself some time and then you get that time, use it to relax and have a day out of the week that you don’t take work home. Keep yourself refreshed so you don’t get burnt out too quickly because it will happen…

C: You can’t do 80 to 100 weeks all the time or you will burn out.

E: Right. You have to find ways that you can feel refreshed and revitalize yourself so that when you come back after a weekend you can take a deep breath and start fresh. And just keep asking people, “How can I make this go faster? What am I doing that is taking so much of my time?” Because I still have friends now that are in teaching and they have been in teaching for 10 years and they are still up at school until 7 o’clock at night and I don’t know how they do it.

C: My wife was an English/Math teacher and she would be grading papers every night until 11 o’clock (or at least it seemed that way during the week). And I said, “You have to have more balance than that.”

E: Right. You don’t want your whole life to become this job and it happens and that’s okay if you are passionate about it but you don’t want to get into Year 4 and you realize that you haven’t done anything else except grade papers.

C: Classical Greece—you have to have balance in your life. (Greek philosophy). Was there any information that you would like to add about your teaching career that I didn’t cover in the questions? And while you think about that, any time if you think about anything you wanted to add or maybe even have me omit, feel free to email me or whatever, Erica, and we can do that.

E: Ok. Awesome. I don’t think there is anything else. I mean I’m happy where I am at. Everyone in my office knows that because I talk about it a lot but I am, very thankful for where I am at.

C: Thank you.