Shelly Milne, NBCT

Shelly Milne has taught seventh-grade humanities at Cashmere Middle School for the past 14 years. A "pioneer in professional growth," she received a Teacher Leadership Grant in 2001 and has organized book studies to explore effective instructional strategies. She is a facilitator for National Board candidates through Central Washington University.

My Journey to Empowerment

As a 13-year teaching veteran, the problems facing educators had finally taken their toll on me. I felt isolated, powerless, and tired. I wasn't sure I had the vigor to continue as a teacher. The only aspect of teaching I couldn't give up was the daily contact with my students. In my small rural district located in central Washington, I felt out of touch with other professionals. As a teacher, I was encouraging my students to become lifelong learners, but in my building the staff development budget was miniscule. The bottom line was if I wanted to continue working with students, I had to make some changes in my teaching life. I needed a plan of action.

At first my plan was simply based on Gandhi's words, "Be the change you want to see in the world." My first step was buying a refrigerator magnet with Gandhi's words emblazoned on it, but every time I opened my refrigerator I doubted myself. "Is it that simple? Could I really become the change I needed in my own world?" I wasn't even sure I knew what changes I was seeking. All I knew for sure is that I wanted to feel less burdened at the end of the day. I wanted to know for sure that what I was doing in my classroom was the best I could offer my students. I set out to change my own world, and this is the story of my journey.

When I work with my students who need to make a change, I often ask them to make a list of things that are working for them. I gave myself an assignment to make a list of all of the times as an educator when I felt highly satisfied. I recalled how energetic I felt when I worked with a mentor as a first-year teacher. I remembered observing in her classroom, and how I would return to my own students ready to try new ideas. To the list, I added the names of classes and workshops I had attended over the years. I recalled returning to my classroom on Monday morning ready to try the new ideas outlined by the dynamic instructors. The list included reflections on how I felt after collaborating with a group of teachers in my weekend master's degree program to write a unit based on the idea that today's students need real heroes in their lives. Collaborating with the members of my group gave me a sense of purpose and direction. How could I reproduce that energy on a daily basis? From these reflections, I generated a four-part action plan. My plan included eliminating negative forces from my daily routine, learning more, finding growth opportunities, and creating a learning community in my school.

First, I had to get rid of negative thinking. I had this attitude that everything that needed fixing in public education was out of my control. I started by limiting the time I spent in the staff room. That place just seemed to bring out the worst in me. With my competitive nature, I kept hearing myself say little gems like, "Well, that's nothing. Let me tell you what she did in my room today." Spending less time in the staff room helped me focus on positive talk with my fellow teachers. I began to seek out teachers to share with during the day. I visited classrooms and dropped by with articles I thought they might like to read. Once I left some of the negative thoughts behind, it was time to look for new solutions.

Next, I started a quest to learn all I could about teaching reading, writing, and social studies to adolescent learners. I had always been someone who checked out every book on the shelf, but I approached academic learning with new gusto. I renewed my membership to professional journals like *The Reading Teacher* and *NCTE.* I started searching the Internet for the best sites for teachers. I discovered and became a frequent flyer at the ReadWriteThink Web site. I bought so many new books from Amazon that they sent me a coffee mug and a thank-you note at the end of the year. Things were looking up for me, but I needed more.

Then I started to look for avenues for growth as a teacher. "Grants," I thought. "There is money available for staff development. I just need to ask for it." I wrote a Teacher Leadership grant in 2001. In the beginning, I was really just interested in getting some new computers for my classroom, but soon I discovered a whole new world.

Through the process I was introduced to essential questions, project-based learning, rubrics, and Web quests. I spent a week with other teachers from around the state learning new concepts and discussing how these new ideas might affect my students in Cashmere. Suddenly I didn't feel so isolated. About midweek, one of the members of my group turned to the rest of us and said, "Wow! I wish I had people like you to share with on my staff." I returned to my classroom that fall with renewed enthusiasm.

I decided it was time to put my newfound skills to the test, so I applied for a scholarship to seek National Board Certification. Again I found myself surrounded by accomplished educators who faced the same uncertainties that I did. We met in a group twice a month and reflected on our craft. I spent hours poring over videotapes and reflecting on my practice. I soon realized that I wasn't powerless. I solved hundreds of problems every day, and what I did had a huge impact on the students in my classroom. After certifying in 2004, I found myself facing new questions like what does it mean to be a teacher leader? What role do teachers fill as change agents in education? How do I become an accomplished teacher? If I pursue this role, will all the people on my staff think I'm a showoff? I was the first person in my district to earn National Board Certification. Instead of calling me a showoff, two teachers in my building signed up to become National Board Certified.

Another experience I wanted to re-create was working in a group toward a common goal. "How could I build a support group in my own school?" I wondered. I had read an article in *Instructor* magazine about book groups, and I decided to start one in my school. I simply put up a flyer and invited other interested staff members to get together twice a month to read and discuss the book *Strategies That Work.* Seven people including my principal responded, and we started meeting. I led the discussion for the first meeting, but other members of the group signed up to lead the next session. The sixth-grade teacher who used lots of picture books in her classroom read the book *Miss Rumphius* and modeled a lesson she had used in her own classroom. The science teacher in the group brought in a picture book about the water cycle, and we discussed ways she might use the book in her own classroom.

I have changed my world. Four years later I still look at that magnet every time I open my refrigerator, and I know for sure my plan worked for me. My feelings of isolation, powerlessness, and fatigue have been replaced by feelings of collegiality, power, and energy. Yes, of course, I am still faced with all the same problems, but my time and energy are focused on the possibilities, not the problems. I look forward to my next 20 years in the teaching profession as I define my role as a teacher leader.