Chapter XI

Demonstrating Learning with Computing:
Sixth Grade

In the early 1980s it was possible to be optimistic about the diffusion of computer use in education because hardware costs were decreasing rapidly and many interesting ideas were in the air; today, we seem to have reached at least a temporary cost plateau that is very high indeed for all but the wealthiest school districts (Scott, Cole, & Engel, 1992, p. 220)

Like fifth grade, sixth grade may be in an elementary school or a middle school. In my elementary school way back when in time, sixth grade was the highest grade. This meant we were the oldest in the school and had leadership opportunities—like helping out in the school office or in the cafeteria. We were the "big kids on campus," so to speak. In some middle schools in Philadelphia, sixth grade has been the youngest group. As noted with fifth grade, there is no doubt a difference in the experiences for students depending on whether they are in an elementary school setting or middle school setting. To such ends, many middle schools are being phased out of the district in exchange for elementary schools that have Kindergarten through eighth grades. Two of the schools represented by these sixth grade teachers were undergoing such changes starting in fall 2005.

In either case, and as noted with fifth graders in Chapter X, the students who have not been admitted to one of the few academic magnet schools with middle grades are the ones for whom learning is more likely a challenge. Teachers in these classrooms are more likely to be challenged to engage these students in subjects they don't understand, perhaps because they have trouble with the subject matter, or perhaps they are reading well below grade level and, therefore, the reading materials are difficult. When reading the material is difficult, students are more likely to be off task or act up.

In any case, sixth graders are becoming more independent people. They are 12 or 13 years of age, meaning they are either pre-teens or teenagers with all the angst and thrill of physical and emotional development that goes along with those ages. While teachers must teach specific subjects like reading, social studies, mathematics, and science, they are challenged also to handle the growth factors that come with pre-teens and teenagers. This is not a topic for this book, but one that can impact teaching and learning opportunities and activities in classrooms.

This chapter presents six sixth grade teachers. All but one taught in a middle school setting, and one taught in an academic magnet school where her students, unlike the other five sixth-grade teachers, were not the oldest in the school, but clearly not the youngest. These issues may become of value in thinking about the different experiences these teachers had through the CPI professional development program.

Table 7 gives the reader an overview of the teachers presented in this chapter. The information provided includes how many years of teaching experience they had prior to participating in the CPI program, what grades were included in their school, how they characterized their prior use of computers/technology prior to the CPI program, and whether they were a Visiting Teacher or also asked to be a Resident Teacher. This information may help the reader in deciding which teacher story is close to their own.

Table 7. Sixth grade teacher summary

Name	Years teaching	Grades in school	Prior computer usage	Overall change	CPI teacher
Paula	3 years	K – 8	Some experience	Little	VT only
Clara	6 years	5 – 8 to be K - 8	Some experience	Very much	VT only
Barry	28 years	5 – 8	Some experience	Some	Both VT & RT
Ernest	12 years	5 – 8 to be K - 8	Some experience	Very little	VT only
Shelly	3 years	5 – 8	Some experience	Very much	VT only
Molly	3 years	5 – 8	Some experience	Very much	VT only

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