

**From Otis to Woodstock:
A Veteran Teachers' Journey
from Work as Single Teacher
to Collaboration as a Team
and
from Year-Round Thematic Curriculum
to Data-Based Instruction**

Introduction

Woodstock Elementary School is one of four Alameda Unified schools that make up the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative's Alameda Collaborative. Located at the west end of Alameda, across the street from the city's largest public housing complex, Woodstock is a K-5 elementary school that receives Title I funds. Of Woodstock's 267 students, 80 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and about 28 percent are English learners. In 2000, Woodstock was put on the state's list of underperforming schools in need of immediate intervention.

In that year, 2000, the new principal, Rosalind Davenport, came to Woodstock. Acceptance in the II/USP program brought the school hundreds of thousands of dollars of grant funding and a requirement to improve academic achievement. Davenport used these resources to provide the teachers with professional development aimed at maximizing their impact on all of the students, but especially underperformers, historically the school's African-American and Hispanic students. In 2003, under Rosalind's direction, the school joined the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative's (BASRC) Alameda Collaborative. In light of the gains the school showed over the years 2000-2003, a BASRC research team came to the school to learn what the teachers themselves thought was making the difference to achieve the accelerated growth rate of their students and the schools increased ability to narrow the achievement gap between ethnic groups. This question led them to the conversation with first grade teacher Gwen Stephens summarized below.

Gwen Stephens, too, came to Woodstock in 2000. Gwen, now a first grade teacher at Woodstock Elementary, has been a teacher in the same district for thirty-five years. One of only four African American teachers in the district, by numerous reports, Gwen enjoys the reputation of being a strong and artful teacher.

In this interview, Gwen reflects on her choice to move from Otis to Woodstock, on her practice as she has transformed it over the past four years, and on what are the key

**At a Glance
Woodstock Elementary
Alameda, CA
2003-04**

Enrollment	267
Free/reduced lunch	80%
English learners	28%
African-American	35%
Asian	18%
Hispanic/Latino	15%
Filipino	13%
Caucasian	12%
Native American	3%
Mixed Race/No Response	2%
Pacific Islander	1%

ingredients in teaching and learning if you want to serve the children that pass through her classroom.

Interview

BASRC Interviewer: How long have you been a teacher?

GWEN STEPHENS: 35 years

BASRC Interviewer: Thirty-five years a teacher—that's a long time

GWEN STEPHENS: Yes.

BASRC Interviewer: And how long have you been here at Woodstock?

GWEN STEPHENS: I've been at Woodstock—this will be my fourth? I started at the Children's Center 25 years ago and I was there 16 years or so. And then I was at Otis School on the other side of town. It's kind-of a middle-class school.

BASRC Interviewer: So there is a big difference between this school and the other one you used to teach at?

GWEN STEPHENS: Oh my, yes.

BASRC Interviewer: What brought you here?

GWEN STEPHENS: I had a friend—two friends—who went to this school. They were in my Sunday School class at church and they were always asking for prayer. My heart was softened and I felt like God said, "you need to be there." There were a lot of Black kids there and there wasn't even one black teacher there. I just felt like "what are you doing? This is where you belong."

BASRC Interviewer: You mean here at Woodstock?

GWEN STEPHENS: Yes, here at Woodstock.

BASRC Interviewer: A lot of Black children?

GWEN STEPHENS: A lot of Black children here, and I just wanted the kids to have someone who really really wanted to be with them.... I just felt like I wanted to lend a shoulder to lean on and do what I can.

BASRC Interviewer: So you were a first grade teacher here?

GWEN STEPHENS: Yes.

BASRC Interviewer: So it sounds like you started the same year as Rosalind.

GWEN STEPHENS: Yes, we started the same year.

From “singular good teacher” to focus on team

BASRC Interviewer: What do you think about what she has been doing—SIM and the teacher practice data that she collects regularly.¹ Her approach to professional development: having teachers read together, other people’s children and conversations like that. What has been your experience with that?

GWEN STEPHENS: I think it really did a lot to pull us together as a team because we had a lot of common things to go from. I have to admit that all of us, including myself, were just pressed into the mold of making excuses for ourselves and the kids about why certain things weren’t working—well they come from this kind of home and we’re not the right match—one excuse after another. She was just not having it and she says “okay, that’s the problem, so what are we going to do for the solution?” What I really liked is that she did have some tools that we didn’t have before, so it helped to read together, discuss together. I had never been on a staff that actually had time to do it, and I am used to putting forth a very hard personal effort. I was not used to being in a school where we worked together so much. I was really quite willing to put down the whole business of “singular one good teacher.” I never liked that anyway—not that I was singular. In the situation I was in, you stood out for what you did and what you were good at, but the piece that was missing was pulling together as a team. I really appreciated having a strong team—not just a grade level team but a whole school team. I found that we did grow as professionals and as friends because we had common foundations. We always had passion, but we had common tools to work on.

BASRC Interviewer: Can you give an example?

GWEN STEPHENS: We would look at the data and we’d say “they’re doing okay here; they’re doing okay here, but wow, what are we doing here and what are we going to do about this area?” For example this year we took writing as one focus. The first grade teacher and I, every week or two, would look at the kids writing and say “they’ve got this but they don’t have that, and what kind of an activity can we do?” It really helped to see how the kids were getting there. That was an important change for me. I was enriched by having other people tell me what worked for them, and then you gain trust by trying other things that other people do. You know you can just become so individual in this practice, so I really appreciated being part of a team. I saw bigger gains with my kids by working with a team than I did individually, and I could rejoice in her games too, and other first grades and second grades. When we’d come together it was more of a whole

¹ By Davenport’s own report, she focuses her staff development on the Strategic Instruction Model (SIM), a research-based model from the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning. The program guides teachers to make decisions about what children most need to learn in a given year and how teachers can best teach it. One of the first forms of data Rosalind began to collect in Gwen and her first year was the teacher practice data on how many positive remarks a teacher made in a lesson versus how many negative or reprimanding remarks.

school cheerleading section. Not just cheerleading but specific tools to make things work.

The data is really, really, really important in making it go, [as well as] time to look at it, interpret it, and decide something that will work. It didn't always work, but if it didn't work, you have time to sit down and think about trying something else that might work. We always find a way that works best.

Standardized Tests can “Keep me accountable, and them, too...”

BASRC Interviewer: Are you looking at the student assessment data?

GWEN STEPHENS: Absolutely.

BASRC Interviewer: What do you use?

GWEN STEPHENS: For the reading we have been using what is provided.

BASRC Interviewer: From Houghton Mifflin?

GWEN STEPHENS: Yes, yes. We have the Summative Tests, the Merging Literacy Tests, the Theme Tests, and lots of tests. I was really resentful at first. Can I just be truthful? I was really resentful at first of all the testing. And it truly was too much. But now they cut some of it out, and now it is so easy to see where you need to focus your teaching. Then I found if you look ahead at the tests, you can look at the standard that is expected and you can teach to that. It certainly isn't as amorphous as it seemed before.

BASRC Interviewer: You mean teaching?

GWEN STEPHENS: Teaching is much more specific and data driven. The tests keep you accountable and them too.

More recently, and at this school in particular, I have been trying really hard to make the kids responsible for their own learning. I just thought that was impossible for first graders, but it's not really. I would show the kids the kind of test it was because I wanted to get them familiar with the format. Today they all fell down in the “Word Writing,” so I said, “You know guys, you have got to know those words real fast, and so these next 3-4 weeks we are going to be practicing every single day because we need to know how to write words really fast.” I bring them in on it: “it's not just you, but our whole class.” It's important that they know why we're doing things. That part's different from what I was doing before, and that's part of the SIM Structure-- really empowering the kids. I didn't think it could be done, but it can.

What matters most: I've met principals just as passionate, but I don't think I've met principals that have had so many strategies ready...

BASRC Interviewer: It sounds like what you are saying about Rosalind is that she didn't just say "you can't do this anymore." She said "You can't do this anymore, but here's what you can do." That made a lot of difference...

GWEN STEPHENS: [agrees] That made a lot of difference. It took about a year to be able to do that. We were just doing it on faith for a little while.

BASRC Interviewer: That's what Rosalind told us too. She also told us that she didn't want to take the credit for the good work that has gone on here, but we see a lot of it as it being driven by her. Although... the teachers are to be credited for implementing it, getting it on board and "singing the same song."

But in terms of gains, have you ever worked with a principal like her before? How would you describe her in terms of other principals?

GWEN STEPHENS: I think I've met principals just as passionate, but I don't think I've met principals that have had so many strategies ready, and that was very helpful. She did have a lot of tools; in fact she was bringing them out so fast [at first], it was like "hold it, hold it, hold it; wait a minute; can we just get good with these and then add on some more?" She's very passionate about wanting her kids to do well and you have to appreciate that.

BASRC Interviewer: Has your teaching practice changed significantly over the past four years? It sounds like it is constantly changing.

GWEN STEPHENS: Oh yes. It is because [Rosalind] didn't actually give us all the tools at once. She gave us a few things at a time. Not just academic, but discipline. She does expect you to do a much more positive way of disciplining the children than I had done before. Of course it was a new population and I was looking for new tools. I knew what I was doing before probably wouldn't work here, so I was glad of it.

Starting with the Pro-social -- Four Positives to a Direct

BASRC Interviewer: [Woodstock] was much more positive?

GWEN STEPHENS: Much more positive discipline. I wasn't a mean teacher before, but I was very direct. "Go sit down." Now I say "I like the way you're sitting." You praise them for approximate behaviors. That was a big deal. Four positives to a direct.

BASRC Interviewer: Did she give you any strategies for changing that behavior?

GWEN STEPHENS: Yeah: "Do it, and I'm going to come in to check and see that you do it." I tell you that clipboard was something.²

² Drawing on SIM, Rosalind introduced a practice of her going into classrooms with a clipboard to register how many positives the teacher uttered versus how many "directs", i.e., reprimands.

BASRC Interviewer: How did you guys feel about that? At first you must have been like...

GWEN STEPHENS: She told us ahead of time. She says “I am going to be making sure you’re doing your best.” So she’d come in and she’d have that clipboard. And then she would report out: “I went into seventeen classrooms, and thirteen were doing a really good job.”

BASRC Interviewer: How did that impact you guys?

GWEN STEPHENS: Well, you really get on your toes. What can you say? I don’t like people coming in with a clipboard-- what can I say-- I don’t like that. But it must have worked.

BASRC Interviewer: You were already at Otis. Did you [either] think it was easier to give more positives, or [that] nobody was paying attention to the ratio of positives [to directs at Otis]?

GWEN STEPHENS: Nobody was paying attention to it! We had so many parents in there; you didn’t get away with anything. If you wanted to be rough with your class, you couldn’t have done it if you had wanted that. It just wasn’t an issue. And at Otis, I would say to the kids: “Sit here a minute while I go get the attendance sheet.” And they sat. It’s just a different... [pauses] kids here are just more fragile. So I had to learn a different way to do things. I was glad for a different way to do things. It fits here. It would fit anywhere because it’s just good teaching. I mean as a professional I certainly didn’t mind. I just don’t like being checked up on at all—I’m sorry [laughs]. That’s just the human part of me. It didn’t mean that it wasn’t a good thing to do, but not the most comfortable.

BASRC Interviewer: But you were a veteran. You had already taught for thirty years with high acclaim, so that is remarkable that you did enter into that learning.

GWEN STEPHENS: I wanted it to be a benefit to the students. It wasn’t about me. I am willing to try anything that will work even if it is uncomfortable. I don’t mean to sound like a martyr, but why would I come here and insist on it my own way when it wasn’t appropriate for these kids? I want what is good for them. I am willing to be uncomfortable. I don’t care really; it’s not about me.

BASRC Interviewer: It sounds like you have done quite a bit of shifting.

GWEN STEPHENS: A lot.

From Teaching “By the Box” to Evidence-based Instruction

BASRC Interviewer: Were you the one that had the box for each month?

GWEN STEPHENS: Oh yes. And it was hard to give up the box. It was a thirty-year box. And people that you admire give you their box, and you've been lusting after their box.

BASRC Interviewer: What's the box?

GWEN STEPHENS: It has all your stuff in it [school materials]. But [now] you have to refer to the data. You can't refer to your personal likes. ...I have to keep changing what I do according to the data. It's not all about pulling out this beautiful stuff that I like to look at. I really love teaching it and the kids really like it, but you got to prioritize. What do they need to get to the finished product that they are all wanting? What are they needing right now? They're on a time schedule to get there, so you have to constantly refer back to the data.

BASRC Interviewer: You went to using [the box] on a religious basis from one to 30 each year to picking and choosing things as you saw the kids need them. That's a major change in your teaching pattern.

GWEN STEPHENS: For me it was a matter of awe and wonder. I like to inspire and give them awe and wonder as part of life. But I also know that it doesn't matter if you have awe and wonder if you can't read and write. So you had to choose what was the most important thing. And having the data helps you choose.

BASRC Interviewer: Why?

GWEN STEPHENS: Because they have to learn to read and write. That's the most important thing.

BASRC Interviewer: So when you see they are not reading and writing, you say, "Oh..."

GWEN STEPHENS: "Oh, we need to do more reading and writing practice." And if you can bring something in [from that box] to make it more palatable and interesting, fine. But if that takes time away from direct instruction when direct instruction is what they are needing. You have to know what they need.

Key Steps: Identifying a Power for the Children in Houghton Mifflin Assessments

BASRC Interviewer: When the data shows that they are not doing well in one area, do you look at them or do you look at yourself?

GWEN STEPHENS: I look at myself. Why would I look at them? I say, "Okay, I need to change my teaching here. I need to change my focus, change my emphasis." If that strategy wasn't working, what else can I do? If I don't have it in my bag of tricks, I ask somebody else until I get it. I'm not satisfied until they have what they need.

BASRC Interviewer: Sounds like you're constantly improving, changing.

GWEN STEPHENS: Constantly.

BASRC Interviewer: There must be some things that you have in place now that you feel are successful, or is everything up for grabs?

GWEN STEPHENS: This [new textbook adoption, Houghton Mifflin] is a new ... turf. It was been very difficult for me. It's scripted. I would never choose it. I feel that there is not enough freedom in the way it is being implemented. I know that it is not being implemented in this way everywhere. The part that I thought that I would like the least, I am liking the best, which is the assessments.

“In a way, it doesn't matter how you teach,” but how you teach it

In a way, it doesn't matter what you use to teach. Maybe next year they will let us not have to go word by word but trust me as a professional to paraphrase or lump things together. It's not really clear this year how much freedom even a veteran teacher has, and so they are holding us to the letter, which is difficult.

BASRC Interviewer: The “they,” is that Woodstock or district?

GWEN STEPHENS: It's district. I've been evaluated this year and the criteria for my evaluation was “adherence to curriculum.” [mimics the criteria] “Do you have the book on your hip? Are you reading it? Oh, don't worry about a lesson plan, just copy the page and give it to us and we'll follow along as you go along.” That's very hard for me. I am doing my best; I don't really have much choice.

BASRC Interviewer: Are you seeing a difference in the learning of the kids?

GWEN STEPHENS: They're certainly learning different things. I made a theme organizer two years ago and it was based on the standards. The emphasis is a little bit different—this is phonics-based. The kids are learning a lot of phonics. I told Rosalind: “The jury's out.” I can't really tell in the long run if this is going to be better or not. Just because they learn phonics doesn't mean they learn how to read. There's even a big emphasis on comprehension. It's so dense; as a veteran, I really can't tell what the end product is going to be. I just have to do what they tell me right now. There is no choice about it. I'm going by faith right now that it's going to work. I'm only in the middle of the first year.

BASRC Interviewer: As is the whole state.

GWEN STEPHENS: I try not to judge, but I will say it's hard to implement/maintain... it.

**The Role of Evidence-Based Decision Making—
“The Cycle of Inquiry is the Only Way To Go....”**

BASRC Interviewer: Well, you've been very positive in your comments. I think everyone is struggling. Have you been using the Cycle of Inquiry (COI)?

GWEN STEPHENS: Oh yeah.

BASRC Interviewer: What do you think of it?

GWEN STEPHENS: It's the only way to do it. It's just so logical. The thing is you got to have time to do it. Everybody knows to do it, but you have to do it when you're not dead tired.

After a certain time it's like [mimics whining kids] "I don't care, just let me go home." You can't have meetings after your workday. You've got to have some time together when you have a brain to think, and that was very helpful. There was a structure to it too. You need the structure and you need the time. We always had the willingness and passion.

BASRC Interviewer: The COI is work that you do as a group of 1st grade teachers?

GWEN STEPHENS: We do it as a whole group—I think it's K, 1, 2. Every now and then we'll get together and have a morning or sometimes a whole day to really look at the data, where we're going, review what we did before. It's just logical.

BASRC Interviewer: You must feel like you are moving and the kids are moving.

GWEN STEPHENS: I do. In the things that we've focused on in the COI, I feel like we've improved.

BASRC Interviewer: And the things that you're focusing on...

GWEN STEPHENS: Writing and vocabulary. The K, 1, 2 teachers are.

High Fidelity Implementation IS Appropriate Adaptation...when the data guides you...

BASRC Interviewer: I was looking if there are any vocabulary words around the room, but they are over there.

GWEN STEPHENS: Actually you can look at my... This wasn't really in the reader. We found that the kids got a lot of vocabulary that were story-specific. We found that they weren't getting the most frequent words. They didn't know how to spell them; they didn't know how to read them. Their frequency, we found from the reading assessment... [pauses to gather thoughts] but they were stumbling over these. Their spelling words, for example, are phonetic words. What they call high-frequency words in this program are story-specific. They don't really transfer very well. There are like 225 story-specific words. Why would we remember those, when these are the ones that we need to remember. Looking at the data, this is what we found. So we made these up ourselves.

BASRC Interviewer: What are you doing with them?

GWEN STEPHENS: Well, honey, we just made it up today.

BASRC Interviewer: Are you kidding? That's wonderful. Because the data told you?

GWEN STEPHENS: Yes.

BASRC Interviewer: Was it the Houghton Mifflin assessments?

GWEN STEPHENS: Yes, Houghton Mifflin. So actually, I am a veteran teacher, I can find out things to do with [the cards]. Next time we get together we'll have to share games. We just had a meeting Wednesday and we did talk about some games. Then I was talking to my student teacher today and I was like, "you know, there's no point in doing this with everybody. Let's test the high kids and see where they are." I color-coded them. There's many games we can do with them. We'll choose some and next time we get together we'll say "what worked for you, what worked for you, let's try this."

I got to bring the kids in on it. I'll tell them "ok guys, you know, we have got to learn these words as well as the other ones. These are actually more important than the others, so we're going to have to put these in the homework.".... [W]e were just going along with the program and weren't giving them the story-specific words. [Now we know:] they don't translate well enough to make them good readers in an unfamiliar context.

BASRC Interviewer: It sounds like you couldn't teach the way you were teaching at Otis here.

GWEN STEPHENS: No.

BASRC Interviewer: You have to have a different way of teaching.

GWEN STEPHENS: Absolutely.

BASRC Interviewer: But you didn't know what that process would be until you came [to Woodstock] and until Rosalind showed you.

GWEN STEPHENS: Right.

She brought the tools and I brought my passion...

BASRC Interviewer: She gave you the tools that you guys needed.

GWEN STEPHENS: Yes. I just brought my passion.

BASRC Interviewer: And a willingness to try something new, different.

GWEN STEPHENS: Not easy when you are 55. Not easy to change.

BASRC Interviewer: I guess because you take responsibility for the kids' learning.

GWEN STEPHENS: They can't teach themselves. That's why they come to school. And to me it's not enough to cover the material. I need them to know it, feel good about it, and be able to build on it. If you don't know it, you can't build on it. Now I'm preaching [laughs].

BASRC Interviewer: This is three questions in one. What's your response to the statement "all children can learn"?

Tending to the Emotional—

"Sometimes they are not ready to learn until they do a little talk..."

GWEN STEPHENS: I know they can. Some children may have a different pace, but you never give up on anybody no matter what. Sometimes you never know what it is that is keeping them from learning. I spend time in the bathtub at night thinking "They didn't get it with that strategy. I'll try this strategy." And it's not just me. We have a great team; we have a great interventions team. I have learned not to depend on myself only. I can talk to them and find new things to try. I find it really great to talk to parents. You learn so much about what the kids are having to deal with.

I love meeting the kids at the door, looking them in the face. Sometimes you can tell by their face, they are not ready to learn until they do a little talk. If you can hit it off at the pass, right at the beginning of that day—either they are sick that day or they had a fight with somebody... It's just really important; every kid can learn. Maybe at a different pace, but every kid can learn. We don't know what all the impediments are, but the ones that we can meet, we do the best we can.

BASRC Interviewer: Given Woodstock has such a strong team and set of resources, how do you explain the fact that a gap exists at Woodstock. It exists across the state, but also at Woodside.

GWEN STEPHENS: It's socioeconomic.

BASRC Interviewer: What specifically about that?

Putting them in charge of themselves for behavior and academic success is huge

GWEN STEPHENS: That's a good question; that's a huge question. I don't have the answer to that question, but I think I have a way of looking at it. That's all I can say to you. I don't have a whole answer to that because I don't want to make an excuse for us or for them anymore.

I mean for us or for us; I don't like to say "us and them." All I know is we have to get rid of the gap. We only have six hours a day and we have to leverage that time. We can't do anything about the time they're not here. I am really shocked and surprised at how you

can leverage that time. Putting them in charge of themselves for behavior and academic success is huge.

BASRC Interviewer: How do you do that? It seems like it is so complicated.

GWEN STEPHENS: I just preach. Preach and preach and preach. “Who’s going to second grade?” And I look them in the face and I say, “You can be the President. When you’re the President, I want you to invite Ms. Stevens to your inauguration. Now, what do you have to do to get there? Go to second grade! That’s the first thing you have to do to get there!” I like to try to bring people in to inspire them. My son is a marine and they just love seeing him—a fine, outstanding young black guy. He’ll come in his uniform. You just can’t get enough of that. That just means so much to look at somebody who is going somewhere. You need somebody in your life [who looks like you and] that’s going somewhere—that’s huge. You can’t get too much of that.

BASRC Interviewer: You’re able to point them in that direction.

GWEN STEPHENS: I’m really glad that I get to do that. It’s not easy, and it’s not for everybody. And I don’t know if I could do it if I didn’t pray. You don’t feel like you win with everybody. When some leave your room you’re like “God, I wish I had them for another ten years.” I send my prayers behind them that I am not the only positive thing in their life.

BASRC Interviewer: When you say you look them in the eye in the morning and sometimes they need to talk before they can learn, how do you create those opportunities to talk?

GWEN STEPHENS: I put my kids on a schedule, girl! When they come in, oooh, they know exactly what to do. They come in, take down these chairs, somebody leads the pledge, and they have a writing assignment on the board and they know not to bother me. When it’s time for me to talk to you they’ll know that. They have a schedule. When they come in the door I’m shaking their hands. I look them in the face. If anyone is having a problem I pull them to the side. Everybody else, they’re on their own for ten minutes. Then, when I get everybody settled here, then I walk around and help with their writing.

BASRC Interviewer: What do you call that? That’s incredible.

GWEN STEPHENS: Routines are huge. That’s what I learned to do here—routines. There’s my morning routine, the after lunch routine. They never should have let me watch the marines. Every time Tyrell leads the pledge. Routines and procedures is the way to do everything.

BASRC Interviewer: How did Tyrell get to be that person [leading the pledge every morning]?

GWEN STEPHENS: Everybody has a job and they have that job for the whole year. What I found at my other school, I used to rotate things, like where they stand on the line and jobs rotate. Kids here just can't bear that. They have to have structure and routine. They need to know "this is my space and she's not going to move me." I'd have a riot if I changed the line order....At my other school I could, but at this school they're too fragile. That's something I had to learn.

BASRC Interviewer: [So here's what I'm hearing...] A couple of things... You're moving away from you box; you had your box and then you gave up your box. The routine is another. We learn a lot about routines, and that you get it down that they have a job. Then you make that talk time where the ones who are really troubled and need you can have that individual attention. That's a new one on me.

GWEN STEPHENS: And then you can gain their trust. I have one little girl who says, "I need a hug." She needs it for about a minute—I mean she really needs a hug. It's a good thing I put that little time in. Some days it's more than five minutes, but it's usually just five minutes. Sometimes that just means they just hang on me that morning. They're not really working that day; they're just hanging with me. Sometimes one of them will point to my hand and say, 'you're not using this one; can I have this one... and take my hand and run it over her cheek... and hold on to it. I'm just holding her hand until she feels better; and then she is fine. I have a bigger proportion of children like that at this school.

BASRC Interviewer: And without that time, they're not going to be ready for learning.
[concludes interview]

BASRC Interviewer: Thank you so very much.