

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH NITA A. PARIS

CONDUCTED, EDITED, AND INDEXED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT

for the

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Monday, 12 December 2016  
Location: Sturgis Library, Kennesaw State University

TS: The interview today is with Nita Paris who won the 2016 KSU Outstanding Teaching Award. It used to be the Distinguished Teaching Award, and it's still distinguished as far as I'm concerned. So Nita, why don't we begin with your background, particularly your educational background? It sounds as though you must have grown up in Texas or somewhere near there.

NP: Louisiana.

TS: I saw that you got a nursing degree way back about 1980 and then got into education after that. Why don't you talk about your background and maybe some mentors along the way as well?

NP: Okay, sure. Well, first of all, thank you Tom for this time. I appreciate your efforts and your long history of interviewing folks. First of all I'd like to say it's quite an honor for KSU to honor distinguished teaching, distinguished research, distinguished service, and I think the KSU Foundation and the money that they provide is unusual.

TS: It is unusual.

NP: It is unusual, and we very much appreciate everything they do to support our work here at KSU. So I came from a family of educators and pushed back against the idea that I would be a teacher. Both my mother and my father were in education. They were public school administrators and had a long history of teaching. That was their primary career. So I grew up in a family of educators. Even my aunts and uncles are all educators. So I really pushed back against that. I grew up in the country in Louisiana. I think my growing up in the country and playing outside in the woods helped me develop a desire for science and an interest in science. I think early on I had an interest in science and going in that direction. I was encouraged to go that direction by high school teachers. I think many people thought I would be a doctor. But at that time in my life, silly of me to think about spending, quote, "so many years in college to become a doctor." I thought, "I don't want to spend that much time in college." So I became a nurse instead. I graduated from high school in 1976 and then enrolled at Northwestern State University [Natchitoches, LA] in nursing and got my bachelor's degree in nursing in 1980. Then I did a couple of years of nursing in Louisiana and moved to Texas to actually go to graduate school in nursing. When I graduated with my bachelor's degree the faculty at the college where I was in nursing encouraged me to go and get my doctorate in nursing. They wanted me to come back and actually teach for them in the College of Nursing. That was my original path. I moved to Texas and . . .

TS: Is this Texas Woman's University?

NP: First I moved to Texas and enrolled in University of Texas at Arlington's master's degree program in emergency and trauma nursing. That was the direction I was going. While there I began getting interested in an exercise physiology focus in that particular program, corporate health. So I abandoned my nursing and jumped into exercise physiology, thinking I would go into corporate fitness instead of going back to teach at the university in nursing.

TS: Still rebelling against teaching.

NP: Yes, I am! So then I transferred to Texas Woman's University [Denton, TX], so it was a thirty-minute drive from where I was living at the time. I got my master's degree in exercise physiology [1983]. While I was doing that I was nursing the entire time. I was nursing at Baylor Hospital [Baylor Scott & White, Denton location], doing their original program, which was the weekend warrior program. They were one of the first hospitals that had the program where you could work on the weekends, twelve hour shifts on Saturday and Sunday, and get paid for a full forty hour work week. So I did that on the weekends and went to school full time during the week.

TS: My goodness, that's a tough schedule.

NP: But you know, when you don't have a family, at that time I didn't have a family. I wasn't involved in any long-term relationship at the time, so it was easy to focus on school and easy to focus on whatever your own dreams are. But while at Texas Woman's University I became very much interested in the whole focus on biology and teaching. So that's where I just finally gave into it. While I was at Texas Woman's University, after I got my master's degree, I went back and got a bachelor's degree in teaching physical education and biology [1985]. I had a dual major. So when I finished the bachelor's degree, then I found my first teaching job, which was an elementary PE position in January of 1986 [at Justin Elementary School, Northwest Independent School District, Justin, TX]. I came in mid-year and stayed there until 1989 and then took a position at Northwest High School in Justin. I taught high school biology, AP [Advanced Placement] biology, and honors biology. I stayed there until 1995. While I was there I realized that what I really enjoyed doing was helping teachers be more effective. I mentored a couple of teachers while I was there and really enjoyed working with teachers to structure more effective learning experiences in the science classroom. I began to think I really had a knack for that, so I decided that probably the best route for me then would be to go into administration.

TS: I should mention before we leave this that you won a Teacher of the Year Award at Northwest High School in 1993.

NP: I did.

TS: So I guess that was the first of your Teacher of the Year Awards.

NP: I had forgotten about that. I was teaching high school biology and Advanced Placement biology. I really realized while I was there also that what I really enjoyed doing was not only helping other teachers become better teachers, but also thinking about curriculum in more innovative ways. I was the first one to establish an Advanced Placement course at this high school. We had an Advanced Placement biology course that I developed and was able to get certified to teach that. Looking back on it now, that pattern of thinking about curriculum and thinking about creating more engaging learning experiences for the learner really began to emerge. In public education about the only place you can go to have a greater impact than your own classroom back then was to go into administration. So I got my master's degree in Educational Administration and Leadership at North Texas State University. At that time that was the name of it. Now it's the University of North Texas, also in Denton. That was in 1994.

So I took a position as a middle school assistant principal in a school district near where I was teaching, Lewisville Independent School District, Hedrick Middle School. There I probably encountered probably the woman who was most influential in my career from that point forward. I really give her credit for where I am now. Her name is Marsha Medcalf, and she was the principal of Hedrick Middle School. All my experience up to that time had been teaching in elementary school, the PE position, and then high school. I really enjoyed the high school teaching more. I enjoyed adolescence; I enjoyed working with adolescents, I didn't particularly care about the little children. They were just a little too needy for me, plus they didn't get sarcasm and humor. So I really enjoyed working with adolescents. When I got to Hedrick Middle School, Marsha helped me really begin to identify where I felt my skill really was, helping other teachers design environments that were engaging learning environments for students of all ages.

TS: I've always thought that middle school is probably the hardest thing to teach of any level.

NP: I realized that people who do that do it because they absolutely love middle school kids. If you don't love middle school kids, you're not going to be there very long because they will make your life miserable if you don't love them. And administrators too, who are really effective administrators, are there because they love that age group, and they love all the potential that middle school kids really bring to the table. So it was at that time I ran across a book by Dr. Jane [M.] Healy on *Your Child's Mind*.<sup>1</sup> She was an educational psychologist and a medical doctor, and she wrote a book on the importance of environmental stimuli in engaging learning experiences to help students develop their learning, their brain development. So that really began to make me realize what I needed to do was to probably get a degree, a PhD in educational psychology, because where I could have my greatest impact would be teaching teachers. What I really loved was the learning theory, teaching teachers first of all how to be familiar with learning theories and then how to apply the learning theories in a classroom when it came to instructional

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Healy, *Your Child's Growing Mind: Brain Development and Learning from Birth to Adolescence* (Broadway Books, a division of Random House, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1987).

strategies. So I guess that brought me to realize that I was probably going to have to move because there was no program around where I was living that offered a PhD in Ed Psych. So that brought me to Georgia.

TS: You couldn't find one in Texas?

NP: I was going to have to move one way or another. In Denton there was no . . .

As; Right. So you'd have to go to the University of Texas.

NP: Or Texas A&M. So a move was involved to begin with. My partner and I sat down under a pine tree in the backyard one day, two years ahead of the move, and talked about what the options were. She was a flight attendant at Delta at the time. So we began thinking about where we could move that would be convenient for her.

TS: Atlanta would be a great place for her.

NP: Atlanta was Delta Mecca. So I began looking at schools in several areas, areas that were commutable for her where she could get to a big city. She flew the international routes. So, anyway, long story short, I ended up at the University of Georgia. They offered me a really nice package for a teaching assistantship and tuition waivers that go along with that. I enrolled in the program there in '97, the Applied Cognition and Development Program, which is a PhD program in educational psychology, and then graduated there in 2000.

TS: Any mentors while you were there?

NP: Shawn [M.] Glynn [Josiah Meigs Distinguished Teaching Professor, Department of Educational Psychology], my major advisor, was very influential in my thinking and helped me really connect my doctoral work with strategies that I had used in the classroom that I had never thought about as being research based strategies. I used analogies quite a bit when I taught science. I think maybe it was just fate. I guess it was fate. But in my first class there, it wasn't even a class with him, we had to write a paper on some sort of strategy we had used that connected to analogical thinking. It was a course by [Martha M.] Marty Carr [Aderhold Distinguished Professor of Educational Psychology]. I started thinking about what I had done in my teaching, and I thought about all the analogies, just verbal analogies that I had used. I started thinking and reading, and I thought, "I'm going to write this paper on analogies." I started looking at the research and finding individuals who had done research on analogies, and I ran across this whole body of work by a man with the last name of Glynn. I was brand new to UGA. I had no idea. I looked at the work and saw that he had been influential in writing this whole body of work on analogies. Now I had communicated with him in my communications back and forth with UGA, and he had been assigned my mentor, but I had no idea that he was interested in analogies. I had never mentioned analogies in my

work in my application letter. So I think it was just meant to be. So my dissertation was on the use of elaborate analogies to teach preservice teachers.<sup>2</sup>

TS: Could you explain what kind of analogies are we talking about?

NP: Well, a simple analogy is an analogy where you just make a reference to it, such as, “This interview is like writing a book.” You never mention it again. You just make a reference to it. So it’s up to the person listening to make the connection between how writing a book is like interviewing. An elaborate analogy goes further in specifically identifying relationships between the target and the analogue, such as, “This interview is like writing a book because there’s a goal in mind. In the interview there is a goal in mind, and in writing a book there is a goal in mind.” Of course, that’s a very simple example, but if you use an elaborate analogy in science, what you’re trying to do is to connect something with which the learner is familiar with new information they may not be so familiar with. For example, a classical elaborate analogy is “the cell is like a factory.” We can make a reference like that and then assume that a student is going to make those connections and never go into detail. Or we can say, “A cell is like a factory. The cell membrane is like the factory’s wall; there are entryways into the factory just like in a cell membrane there are entryways as well.”

TS: Which makes learning much more memorable.

NP: Right. And it engages. Instead of just verbal analogies, in the text you have the written analogy, but then you also accompany it with two pictures: a picture of the factory with parts marked and then the picture of the cell with parts marked. So there’s a deliberate connection between the parts. It’s called the Teaching-with-Analogies Model, and that’s Shawn Glynn’s proposal and his proposed model. He’s written quite a bit about the Teaching-with-Analogies Model.

TS: So you finished that up in 2000 and came immediately to Kennesaw State University.

NP: Yes. When I was ready to look for a position, we wanted to stay in the Atlanta area if at all possible. There was an advertisement posted for this position at Kennesaw State. It was described as an educational psychology position in the Department of Secondary and Middle Grades. When I read the description, it was as though I had written the job description for myself. They wanted someone with experience in middle school and high school classrooms. They wanted someone who had expertise in a content area as well, such as science. My cognate was in science education at the University of Georgia. So I applied for the position. [Marjorie] Marj Economopoulos was the department chair at the time.

TS: Oh, okay, I saw her just the other day.

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<sup>2</sup> Nita A. Paris, “Elaborate Analogies in Science Text: Tools for Enhancing Preservice Teachers’ Knowledge and Attitudes” (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2000).

NP: Yes, she is a dear friend now. She was definitely very welcoming and engaging and warm. She invited me to continue on with the application process. At the time I was in Oxford, England doing a study abroad with twenty-eight students. I took twenty-eight students over there. I was their mother, their counselor, their nurse, and their teacher. I graduated in May of 2000. I defended early January and then that day got on a plane and flew to Oxford with this group of students. I flew back to KSU to interview for that position.

TS: From England?

NP: From England.

TS: Did Kennesaw pay all that way back?

NP: Well, Marj was funny. She said, "It cost us less to fly you from England than it would to fly you from New York City or somewhere like that." Apparently, it was fairly reasonable knowing what I know now about searches. So, anyway, I applied for the position and was offered the position in May and started actually in the summer of 2000.

TS: Well, I usually ask folks why they came to Kennesaw. It sounds like they had the ideal position for you.

NP: And what I really liked was that Kennesaw's focus was on teaching. I knew coming into higher education I would need to have a research agenda, and I would have to have a focus, but my focus really was on teaching. I didn't know it was called the Scholarship of Teaching [and Learning] at that time. I just wanted to teach and look at the impact of my teaching on my students and maybe perhaps even their students.

TS: Were you thinking Research 1 institutions at all or had you already decided that's not where you wanted to be?

NP: The main thing at the time was I wanted to stay in the Atlanta area, so I was willing to wait until the right position came along in this area and apply. Fortunately, this position was posted, and it fit beautifully into what I envisioned myself doing. They also wanted someone who could provide some leadership in the graduate area, and I enjoyed working with teachers. Although my research for my dissertation was with preservice teachers, I was not at all focused just on preservice. I was certainly willing to consider work with graduate students.

TS: In 2000 we had had a master's program for fifteen years in Education and doctoral programs still seven or eight years in the future.

NP: Right. So I came in and immediately within the first year became very involved in the master's program, working with the content folks: Marian [C.] Fox [professor of Mathematics and Mathematics Education], Carol [P.] Harrell [professor of English and

English Education], and Sarah [R.] Robbins [professor of English and English Education] are some of the folks that we worked very closely with to get our master's degree. It was at that time just a middle grades focus. We worked to get it where it was middle grades and secondary education, so we could appeal to secondary education teachers to come back and get their master's degrees.

TS: Oh, that's right, I remember that. I used to teach a course on how to teach local history in the master's program. When I first started teaching it back in the 1980s, everybody in there was an elementary school teacher.

NP: Right. So we did that in the early 2000s, probably my first few years here.

TS: So when you came here what did they tell you? We want you to teach and develop these programs, and did they say anything about scholarship expectations or service?

NP: Service was always a priority in our College of Education, and, yes, I understood that I would need to do some scholarship, but we were encouraged that our scholarship could be and should be on our own teaching or on the teaching of our own students. At that time there really wasn't a focus on becoming a Research 1 or any conversation about moving in that direction. We were expected to teach and do the research as a part of our teaching.

TS: But your focus had always been on applied scholarship anyway, hadn't it?

NP: Yes, correct.

TS: Which is a perfect fit for Kennesaw, I think.

NP: Well, yes. I became very aware of how important it was because of our heavy teaching load and service that we try to overlap our areas, that we try to leverage our activities in one to meet criteria in others. So very early on even with my service work I began thinking about how I could present or write about the work that I was doing in program redesign and what I was doing in the classroom. My early publications were on how to design programs and how to work the standards and align programs. At that time the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards was very popular, so we aligned our master's programs with National Board standards, and I wrote about how we did that. So I really tried to overlap my teaching, my scholarship, and my service.

TS: Which I think is pretty typical of Kennesaw in that period. Let's focus a little on your teaching and your philosophy of teaching. You had a quote when you got the award about teacher as provocateur.<sup>3</sup> Why don't you talk about your philosophy of teaching?

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<sup>3</sup> The full quotation is, "Teacher as provocateur" is a powerful metaphor for me and it captures the essence of who I am as a professor," SMGE [Secondary & Middle Grades Education] news release, September 23, 2016.



NP: Okay. I think the context of what I teach and whom I teach really shapes how I come to see my role as a teacher. Most of my teachers now are coming back to get their specialist degrees or their doctorate in education.

TS: So are you teaching almost all graduate students?

NP: Yes, all; I teach all graduate students, and most of them are advanced graduates. They are coming back getting their doctoral degree or their specialist degree. It's above masters. These individuals for the most part are highly skilled and highly experienced teachers themselves. Many of them are our outstanding teachers or leaders in their schools. They have very high expectations about what they experience in a graduate classroom. So I really find myself having grown into this role that I like to call provocateur. I like to throw out things that poke at conventions, that poke at standard operating procedures, and that cause teachers and leaders to step back from their experiences in the classrooms or schools and say, "That's sounds different" or "I would never have thought of that." I like to disrupt their thinking about their own practice, respectfully though. I've been there. I've been an administrator. I've been a teacher. So I understand the context in which they teach and in which they lead today. It's highly visible; it's high stakes; there's a lot of accountability with it.

I like to disrupt their way of thinking about their own practice and then cause a little bit of disequilibrium in their thinking. Then if you're engaged in conversations around best practices as far as what the research has to say about applied mind theory, about adolescent development, about how schools ought to be structured with diverse kids today, then once you upset their thinking a little bit then sometimes they're beginning to say, "Well, maybe I should think about things differently. Maybe I should look at my teaching in different ways." In my teaching evaluations I see that what I do in the classroom in terms of causing people to question their own practice or to question the practice of those who are around them in a respectful way helps them to walk away from my classroom with the perception that I have shaken them a little bit and caused them to think differently and transformed their thinking about their own practices.

TS: Can you give me some examples of some attitudes that teachers or administrators have that maybe should be challenged?

NP: I am teaching a graduate seminar right now. What we're doing is looking at how current practice in the classroom is really not focused on the individual student. We look at the student scores and we look at student learning only as it causes the school to have a better evaluation. So the shift in being accountable is not on the student anymore. It's to the school. Teacher performance in the classroom is looked at through the lens of the school itself. Leaders are responsible for their school being the best or being higher or ranking above this. States then look at schools based on certain criteria much of which is based on student performance in the classroom. Everything is very data driven right now, and the data that we're collecting is all related to scores on a test. So regardless of what school you're in, regardless of what your school values, regardless of what the

community around the school values, regardless of what you personally may value, it all comes down to your students' scores on a test as a measure of your effectiveness in the classroom.

But they're not really interested in your effectiveness in the classroom. It's related to how the school outcome is reflected. Your scores all contribute to this overall school performance. I'm challenging students to think more specifically about why that movement has been toward school accountability and not so much the child anymore. In our history of education there have been times where we have been more child-focused, student-focused. In the 1960s and 1970s we were more student-focused and child-focused. Now we're focused on the school level.

TS: Do you think this is something from the national level that's forcing local schools and school boards?

NP: Yes, standards, the drive toward schools being more "accountable" with taxpayer money.

TS: And you put that in quotations.

NP: The easy thing to assess is the test score.

TS: Which is pretty depressing, I think.

NP: Right. So our measures of schools today are based on overall test scores by grade level and comparing those test scores to other schools. Leaders feel it as well. Leaders are held accountable to it. School districts are compared across districts. States are compared, state-to-state, who has the better education systems based on these test scores.

TS: And teachers teach to the tests instead of focusing on what the students really need sometimes?

NP: Right. If the test is a valid test, and the test is a good test, there is nothing wrong with preparing students to be successful on tests—not to teach to the test but teach the things that are tested on the test—if it's useful and valuable and real life. But that's not necessarily the case today. So I think teachers feel a lot of pressure. I don't know that teachers experience the joy in teaching like those of us who may have taught twenty or thirty years ago.

TS: It's scary how high the turnover rate is for teachers it seems to me. If you can keep them in education for five years you're doing well it seems like these days, once they graduate from here. It says to me they're getting into the schools, and it's more hassle than it's worth.

NP: It's very challenging. It is. Very challenging today.

TS: I know I've gone out and talked to classes on occasion, and I go away thinking, "I'm worn out from talking to two classes, and these teachers have to stay there for four more classes."

NP: All day. They're on 100 percent of the time. I want to go back to some of my program development here and tie it to what I'm doing now. I guess it was 2004 when we began talking about establishing a doctoral program in the College of Ed.

TS: Yes, I wanted to ask you about that.

NP: At that time [Edwin A.] Ed Rugg was here [vice president for academic affairs until 2002, head of Center for Institutional Effectiveness in 2004]. We began talking about what kind of program would we establish. The general feeling was that the College of Education could be or perhaps should be the college to take the lead on establishing the first doctoral program because the focus was on practitioner/applied doctorates. Related to what I'm doing now and where our college is going, we really began thinking about how to develop not a PhD but an EdD, a practitioner's doctorate, a doctorate that would prepare teachers to be more effective classroom teachers with the intent of them going back in the classroom. We started developing that in 2004. It was a committee of faculty across the College of Science and Mathematics—Marian Fox was one of the faculty members at that time—and faculty from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences and faculty from all over the departments in the College of Education that worked together for several years to develop the program, get SACS [Southern Association of Colleges & Schools] approval, and get Board of Regents approval. We launched our first doctoral cohort in January of 2007.

TS: What was your role in that?

NP: I was one of several facilitators, leaders. I think my role was to keep people at the table, to keep people talking. I think I probably ended up taking a lead role in that in terms of keeping the discussion going, trying to think outside of the box and how to design this program so that it would meet the needs of a lot of different colleges and departments at KSU. We were told then, "We're only going to get one doctorate, so you've got to decide what you are going to do."

TS: The whole College of Education?

NP: Exactly. And a lot of people, a lot of departments, were interested in having a part of that. So we developed one that had multiple concentrations. I guess I was pretty much the lead in trying to keep that thinking going, keeping people at the table, building consensus across colleges.

TS: You weren't associate dean yet?

NP: I was a faculty member at that time. Then I worked with Ed Rugg to really write all the documents that we needed to get SACS approval and Board of Regents approval. I think

that was one of the highlights of my service contributions here at KSU. I consider that maybe *the* highlight of my work so far in the service area.

TS: I guess we just reached the point at that time where we could offer doctorates according to the Board of Regents. It took place after [President] Betty [L.] Siegel had retired [in 2006], but it was really something that she had pushed for, wasn't it?

NP: Yes, it was. She worked very closely with our dean at the time, Dr. [Yiping] Wan. She and Dr. Wan I guess had an agreement that the College of Education would move forward with the first doctorate. Then Dr. Wan left in [February 2007], and Frank [A.] Butler [former vice chancellor for academic, faculty, and student affairs, University System of Georgia] then came in [March 2007] as our interim dean. They wanted someone to step in to help with the graduate program because we had all this work going on at that time. We had a couple of associate deans, but neither of them was solely responsible for graduate programs and graduate programing. So they asked me to step in just as the director at that time. So I did and then when Frank Butler came on board . . .

TS: Okay, so you came into the administrative post before Butler?

NP: I became the director of the EdD and EdS [Educational Specialist] programs, and I worked with Sarah Robbins to transition into an administrative role, working primarily with graduate programs.

TS: Do you have any thoughts on the situation where Dr. Wan was forced out?

NP: I was so busy working on the doctoral program and curricular issues, fortunately, I was not in the loop on all that. I was a full-time faculty member at the time, so I know there were a lot of things going on in that area, but . . .

TS: So who was the dean when you became associate dean of graduate studies?

NP: Frank Butler. I worked with him for a couple of years, and then they wanted me to stay on. I didn't really want to go into administration. I enjoyed being a faculty member and doing program work. When Dean [Arlinda J.] Eaton was coming on board [on July 1, 2008], they thought it would really be good if there was someone who had the historical knowledge of the college to be on board, and so I stayed on as associate dean for her first three or four years and then really longed to go back to faculty. So I stayed associate dean for graduate programs until maybe spring of 2012 or fall of 2011—somewhere around there. Dean Eaton was very supportive. She said, "I understand you want to go back to the faculty." I felt that during her transition into dean [it was helpful to have someone] there to give historical knowledge and to assist with the graduate programs. She had a really strong leadership team in place. After she'd been here three or four years, I felt comfortable that she had her feet on the ground. Not that she needed my help, but I just felt that whatever they wanted me to do in terms of the graduate programs had been accomplished. So I felt like it was okay for me to go back to teaching, and she understood.

- TS: I guess you've supervised a number of dissertations by this time?
- NP: I've been on a lot of dissertation committees, and I think I'm chairing my fourth dissertation right now.
- TS: What's your impression of the program overall at this point?
- NP: I think it's a much-needed program. Now the program has split into multiple degree programs. Our particular degree program is in secondary and middle grades, and we have concentrations in the content areas. I think the College of Education has had about sixty-five or seventy EdD students graduate since 2007. Our department has had about maybe twenty-three or twenty-four since then. I think the reason our program is strong is because we have good strong relationships with our content people. We have folks in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, and we have folks in the College of Science and Mathematics that play major roles in those content area courses. Our students like knowing that they're getting deeper content knowledge and that they're applying that content knowledge in the context of schools. So I'm very proud of our program.
- TS: What are the graduates of the program doing with their degrees?
- NP: Most of them are going right back into the classroom, which is what this program is designed to do. We make it very clear that the program is designed for practicing teachers or leaders. Most of them are going right back into schools. Some because of the content and because of the EdD move into a leadership role in schools like department chairs or department heads, but most of them go back into public schools and impact their own teaching.
- TS: If they had an aspiration to be a college faculty member would they take our program or go to a PhD program?
- NP: Some of them think they want to teach in college, but when they realize they would take a massive pay cut to start as an associate or assistant professor, most of them are not interested. So our program is not designed for folks to come and teach at the university level in the content areas. Now they could take their electives and get enough content, a minimum of eighteen hours in the content, if they wanted to teach Intro to Education courses or Intro to History courses. But most of them will go right back into the classroom. We encourage, and I'm currently the coordinator again, but if they're investigating our program for a potential of being in higher education, I really encourage them to go elsewhere. That's not what this program prepares you to do.
- TS: So you're saying a good many of our students are making more money than the faculty members that are teaching them?

NP: Absolutely. You teach nine or ten months basically, so with a doctorate in education out in public schools your starting salaries would be around \$70,000. An assistant professor here, probably, in the College of Education, would earn in the low 50s.

TS: Those that are starting out and haven't been promoted yet?

NP: Exactly. I believe it is about \$52,000 or \$53,000.

TS: So I guess the question is, you've got to really love it to do it, don't you? What does attract the Bagwell College faculty to college teaching? In your case, you probably could have been making more if you'd stayed in an assistant principal position and moved up to being a principal.

NP: True, but my joy is teaching teachers and pushing against people to think about their teaching in different ways.

TS: So it takes a special kind of person then, doesn't it?

NP: We all have that, I think. We all have the passion for causing people to think about things in different ways and preparing people to go back into the classroom with a different perspective and different skills.

TS: Albert Jimenez [assistant professor of educational leadership] was telling me this morning about the bump in salary that people in the Coles College get when they direct somebody through a DBA dissertation, compared to what he gets in education.

NP: Oh, absolutely. I think they get \$5,000 per dissertation.

TS: I think he said more than that.

NP: Well, maybe. I don't think it's a bump in salary, but it's a stipend.

TS: But education doesn't do it?

NP: No, we get a course reassign after you get three through or something like that. But it's joyous work.

TS: Okay [laughs]. Well, you said that working on the doctoral program was your most important service. You've done some community service too I gather because you got to know Abbie [T.] Parks [historical preservationist and community activist in Acworth, GA] somehow or other.

NP: Well, I guess here at KSU most of my service has been around program redesign and program work, and that brings me lots of happiness and pleasure. I think I had a fairly good understanding of what's going on in public schools and how to make what we do here at KSU align with what public schools are saying they want to be and need to be.

But at the same time we push the envelope a little bit to make people think about things in a different way. I like to try to get creative in terms of how we design programs. In fact just two days ago I got a mail-out from the College of Continuing Education. They have some programs that are called “Start When You Want To” or something like that. It’s an example of how I’m always thinking about how we might be doing things differently and making it more student-friendly in terms of getting teachers access to advanced preparation and advanced degrees. Wouldn’t it be interesting if we could design our programs so that students can start when they want to and progress as often as they want to and finish when they want to? Now that would really shake things up because we wouldn’t have deadlines to apply, we wouldn’t have financial aid deadlines, and we’d have to be flexible. So I’m always thinking how to shake things up a little bit in terms of being more accessible to our students out there who want to come to KSU and get their advanced degree in education.

TS: Do you think it’s possible that it’s going to happen?

NP: I have no idea. It’s happening over in Continuing Education, but I don’t know about degree programs. Anyway, it’s just a thought.

TS: How did you get to know Abbie Parks?

NP: We lived down the street from her.

TS: Oh, I thought maybe you had done something with her in Acworth.

NP: Well, no, my partner and I are very much gardeners, and so we probably met Abbie from doing some planters on Main Street in downtown Acworth. We saw that was needed and might be nice, so we started doing some community volunteer work in Acworth, and that’s how we met Abbie.

TS: I’ve been doing a series of interviews up in Acworth for the Save Acworth History Foundation. They are paying to have some interviews done. I do the interviews for free, but they are paying someone to film and edit them and put them on YouTube.

NP: Good. I’m sure Abbie is actively involved in that project.

TS: I think she got me involved. She’s behind the scenes, but I’m really impressed with the City of Acworth. It’s a neat town.

NP: It is.

TS: Okay, let’s talk a little more about your scholarship. You’ve talked about some of this already, a scholarship agenda focused on adolescent development. We talked about analogies, but I don’t think we talked about metaphors of teaching and metaphors of leadership of practicing educators. It sounds like metaphors would be very closely related to the analogies. Are you talking about people finding metaphors for teaching?

- NP: Yes, well expressing their own metaphors for teaching.
- TS: Oh, have you been researching what people's metaphors are?
- NP: Correct. I teach a class that most of the EdD and the EdS students who are enrolled in our programs take, a learning class. One of the assignments in that class is for them to think about their teaching through the eyes of their own students. If I were a student in your classroom, how would I be experiencing your classroom? So it's a way to get teachers to stand outside of themselves so to speak and to look at their teaching as if I was a student in my own classroom. One way you can get somebody to do that is to think about it metaphorically. So teaching is like being a provocateur. The assignment is I ask them to write what their metaphor would be. If they were to describe their teaching metaphorically, what metaphor would you use?
- TS: That's what you've done. "A teacher is a provocateur" would be a metaphor.
- NP: Right. So I ask them to describe their teaching metaphorically and then to be very specific in doing this pairing between the metaphor and their teaching. A lot of them used, "teaching is like gardening." So what role does the teacher play in the garden metaphor." What's the comparison? And then, what's the student, and what's the content, and what's the context of teaching? What do all the things in the metaphor represent in terms of your classroom? I also asked them to draw a picture. I'm just beginning to add that aspect of research to my investigation, looking at the use of images. It's a brand new area for me. I have a co-researcher in Dr. Harriet [J.] Bessette [professor of inclusive education and educational leadership] who has done work already in this area.
- TS: At Kennesaw?
- NP: Yes, using images to investigate teacher's beliefs and perspectives and classroom contexts. She's joining me in this research. Right now it's all qualitative, and I'm not a qualitative researcher necessarily. So I'm learning a lot from working with her on using coding schemes and looking at texts and comparing written texts to what's expressed in the drawing. Looking for similarity. Where are their differences? What's expressed in the text versus what's reflected in the drawing? So it's really an emerging area of research for me. It's very exciting. We have an IRB [Institutional Review Board] that we started in 2014, I believe, so it's ongoing. Every semester I have this class that I teach. After the semester is over I send the student an invitation to be a part of the study and for them to give me permission to use the metaphor and the drawing that they created in my course. Then I collect a few more demographics, like, how long have they been teaching, what content area do they teach, are they leaders, are they in C&I [Curriculum and Instruction], what their responsibilities are? If they're in Curriculum and Instruction in the school districts, often they're in the central office. They're like a district level leader that oversees history or what-have-you.



- TS: And I assume that you're doing this because they're probably going to become better teachers if they understand what they're doing.
- NP: That, but also by looking at their teaching through the eyes of their students, looking at your own teaching as if you were an other, is really reflexive in its nature because not only do you see, but you also begin to analyze why you do certain things. And perhaps you begin to analyze the belief that you bring to the table. If I say this is what I like to do in my classroom, but when I look at my practice, it doesn't reflect what I say I believe, then there is this mismatch between what I say I believe and what I'm actually doing in my classroom. So why is that? That's not good or bad; it just is. So what's causing me not to be able to practice and teach the way I desire to teach? When students start looking at that, a lot of times that is what causes them so much angst about being a teacher because this is what I really want to be able to do in the classroom. This is what I really believe about teaching and learning. But the context causes me to respond in ways that violate some of my core beliefs about what teaching is about. So I really believe as we look at that gap between what someone believes and what they do in the classroom, in public schools in particular, we may see some trends emerging about what happens to teachers in the long run. How long do they persist, eventually perhaps leaving education because what they're having to do daily in the context of schools today really is averse to their beliefs about how they should be teaching?
- TS: I think that's always the challenge, isn't it, that the system forces you one direction, and you really want to go another direction, or you've got so many students to deal with, how can you possibly have them do these great research projects that you'd like for them to be doing?
- NP: Right. You can ask somebody, "What do you believe?" And people can parrot back what they think you want to hear, but when you start looking at it metaphorically, sometimes your implicit beliefs, your tacit beliefs and knowledge, begin to come to the surface that you won't see if you ask somebody point blank, "What do you believe about teaching"?
- TS: I don't know whether you remember Dr. [Philip L.] Phil Secrist or not. He was former county commission chair in Cobb County [1988-1992] and a history teacher at Marietta High School in the 1950s and 1960s and later at Kennesaw State. Students he had back in the 1950s would tell me, "Well, he took us on a field trip down somewhere to study some Civil War site." I don't know how he would have done on evaluations of his teaching because I know he had a large focus on the Civil War, but still if somebody remembers what you actually did in a classroom thirty or forty years later, that's pretty neat, I think.
- NP: Yes, absolutely. I guess in psychology they call that flashbulb memories. We all have these memories of where we were on certain days or times. We all have memories. I think all of us who become educators have memories of some event that we experienced in our educational background that perhaps made a huge difference on us and made us want to go in that direction.

TS: Yes, so whether that's going to cause the students to perform well on those standardized tests is another matter.

NP: Exactly.

TS: That's where I guess the teachers get caught.

NP: Right.

TS: Let me just ask you where you're going with your scholarship on this. I can see how it's applicable to what the students take back to the classroom. What do you want to find about metaphors? That teachers that have these certain kinds of metaphors are better teachers or what exactly are you trying to measure?

NP: I'm really, I think, trying to go deeper into what world views do they hold in terms of their core beliefs about teaching, their core beliefs about one's action in the world, whether or not one has agency in the world or whether or not one is basically just responding to things as they happen around them. I'm wondering if teaching is seen as a process . . .

TS: By the teachers themselves?

NP: By the teachers themselves, or do they approach teaching as a product, process versus product. I really don't know where this is going to lead. I'm open right now.

TS: But which is the better of the two approaches?

NP: Right, or maybe teaching is process when these are the outcomes or these are the goals, and maybe teaching is a product when it's this. Is the teacher's role this or that? Not that it's good or bad, but what context drives where a teacher or how a teacher goes about or shapes his or her beliefs about teaching. What's going on in the environment? What's going on around them that causes them to go this direction versus that direction? I don't know exactly where it's going to lead. I'm thinking it's going to lead in the direction of core beliefs, world views. I'm not sure; I'm really not sure. I can see eventually a book that we write about metaphors of teaching, metaphors we teach by. I'm also interested in metaphors of leadership. There's not been a lot of work done in that area. You know, the white knight riding in to save everybody doesn't work very well.

TS: No, I think probably you get over that in a hurry.

NP: Exactly right.

TS: Betty Siegel said something once, and I can't find it. I think it was in an interview I did with her. But she had this neat statement about how she liked teachers because they weren't cynical, I think is what she said, that cynics wouldn't stay in teaching.

NP: Correct, I agree.

TS: I can't find the quote anywhere now, but she had something really neat about that—that you have to have faith in something to be a teacher.

NP: Absolutely.

TS: Public schools have come into a lot of criticism in the last fifteen or twenty years. I guess some other institutions in society have too. I guess all our institutions have come into a great deal of criticism. But I just wonder what you think about the job that the schools are doing.

NP: I think they're doing a much better job than what you would hear in the news. There's a statistical phenomenon called Simpson's Paradox. I don't know if you're familiar with that or not, but basically what I see happening, and what Diane [S.] Ravitch who has written a lot in this area has demonstrated with her data, is if test scores, which I abhor, are the measure by which schools are being measured today, and they are, they have been for the last several decades, if you look at test scores overall, our SAT scores or the scores on these national standardized exams have remained fairly stable, if not increased over time. You don't hear that in the news. Everybody says, "Oh, it's terrible, we're going down." Well, here's what's happening, and Diane Ravitch has a lot of data on this in one of her books where she provides an example.<sup>4</sup> If you have a very heterogeneous group of students, predominately white students, in schools, which is what we had in the 1960s—a lot of the tests that were done were on predominately white, middle class kids. So if you have your assessments on those students, let's say they come out with a score of 80 percent. If you look at the demographics, let's say you have 80 percent white and 10 percent African American and 10 percent Hispanic.

TS: Which is very few schools nowadays.

NP: Exactly. But back then that was not unusual. So your whites would score much higher, your blacks and your Hispanics would score a little bit lower or quite a bit lower.

TS: Because of the question of privilege and opportunity?

NP: Equity, exactly. Jump forward from the 1960s to now. You can trace it over time. If you looked at the overall score, all clumped together, all demographics together, the scores are about the same if not a little bit higher today. If you break it apart into demographics, if you take only the whites and you look at the whites' scores from 1960 to 2016, their scores have increased slightly. African Americans, their scores have increased slightly, sometimes much more percentage-wise than the whites.

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<sup>4</sup> Diane S. Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Undermine Education* (Basic Books 2010).

TS: I would hope so.

NP: And the same thing with the Hispanics. But if you look at the percentage of white students, black students, and Hispanic students, there are fewer whites and a lot more Hispanics and blacks that are now taking those tests. They're being encouraged to. They're going to college more; African-Americans and Hispanics are going to college in greater numbers many, many more times than they were in the 1960s. If you look at the scores, each demographic group has increased significantly over time. But because the whole population is much more diverse, it flattens out the total score, so the final score isn't anywhere near the high percentage of increase that you see by demographic data. So to me, we're doing a better job—and the data support that—than we've been doing for decades.

TS: If you broke it down from a national level to say a Georgia level, would we see the same thing?

NP: I'm not familiar with Georgia's scores at this point, but I would say that it's probably reflective of what's happening at the national level because Georgia is a very diverse state. It's in many regards very much like the United States, so I would think that we would see . . .

TS: Maybe even more so, and that's why the scores are a little lower in the South than they are in other parts of the country?

NP: Perhaps. I'm not an expert in that area, but I have done some reading in Diane Ravitch's work, and the data is compelling, but you don't hear that in the news.

TS: My impression, when teachers invite me out to speak to their classes, is that they are very impressive. I don't know whether the teachers I know are exceptional or typical, but I'm amazed at how hard they work and how good a job they seem to be doing.

NP: Absolutely. Those are the students that I teach, those teachers, and to me they are colleagues and co-learners.

TS: Well, a good many of those who have invited me out have been the ones that have come through here.

NP: Right. I feel very fortunate. They inspire me, what they do every day, and I feel very fortunate to be able to be in a classroom with them and be a co-learner because I learn so much from them every time we meet.

TS: What do you think you did that helped you win the Outstanding Teaching Award this year?

NP: I think some of the evaluations that came from my students support what I believe is the way I teach in terms of being this provocateur. I've tried to be very intentional about aligning my teaching and my scholarship and my service, so that they support one another. I don't know if our move to being a doctoral institution caused folks to look a little more at people who have been doing a lot of their work in graduate programs. I don't know if that was a factor.

TS: It seems like for a long, long time that nobody in the College of Education won the teaching awards on campus.

NP: Ironically!

TS: I think there's been a lot of built-in prejudices in who gets the awards on campus. Nobody who is African American has ever won the teaching award.

NP: Isn't that interesting?

TS: It is. Of course, I know that because I've interviewed them all, but I think there really was a bias against people from the College of Education for a long time.

NP: [Kimberly S.] Kim Loomis [professor of science education] did.

TS: Kim Loomis did in 2011. And [Pamela Burress] Pam Cole [professor of English education and literacy] in 2005, and also [Bernard D.] Bernie Goldfine in 2002 if you include Sport Management. But there was no one from the College of Education in the first twenty years of the award going back to 1982.

NP: But maybe moving toward the Research 1, folks are more willing and interested in looking at graduate teaching. I don't know; you've interviewed everybody, so you know, but I don't know how many others have a primary focus in graduate teaching.

TS: No one.

NP: Maybe it was just the right time.

TS: Ana-Maria Croicu [associate professor of mathematics] won it last year, and she does a lot with undergraduates. I don't think she does anything with graduate students. It's amazing that we've had a number of international faculty to win the outstanding teaching awards. She's from Romania originally. Jonathan [W.] Lewin [professor of mathematics and 2012 recipient] was South African. Sabine [H.] Smith, [professor of German and 2009 recipient] was from Germany. We've had four now, going way back to Vassilis Economopoulos [professor of sociology] in 1995. You know he died too early, and so I interviewed Marj in his behalf. But nobody who is African American has ever won the campus-wide distinguished professor, distinguished teaching, or outstanding research and creative activities award. Army Lester won the outstanding service award in 1999 and a few African Americans won the old Preston community leadership award, but that's it.

NP: Wow. That's very interesting.

TS: But I do think there was a built-in prejudice against the College of Education for a while, and I'm glad that we're over that.

NP: Yes, it seems to be.

TS: Bill Hill [G. William Hill IV, former director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning] used to always want me to ask everybody who won the teaching award what their definition of a master teacher was. Bill had a pretty good idea of what he thought, but he wanted to know what other folks thought. I think in many ways what you've talked about today is his definition of a master teacher, but I'm just wondering how you would define a master teacher.

NP: I guess I go back to my work with metaphor. If a teacher can experience or see their classroom or their teaching through the eyes of their students and then design the experiences in a way that meets that student's needs and then challenges the students to think about themselves or the world in a different way, then to me that's a master teacher. So to me master teachers have to be able to get outside of themselves and think about their lessons, their teaching, and their classroom through the eyes of their students.

TS: That's a good definition.

NP: And that varies by content, by context, and by level.

TS: Right. I've heard a diversity of definitions over the years. Bill focused on being a teacher of teachers as a master teacher, and you've certainly had that aspiration ever since your middle school days.

P; Yes, that's true.

TS: I guess even before then.

NP: Yes.

TS: Okay, that's a good definition. Well, let me ask you too, you've been here now for sixteen years; how have we changed in those years? If you think of the intellectual climate at Kennesaw in 2000 and the intellectual climate on campus today, how has it change or has it changed?

NP: You know, I think it's shifted, obviously, more from valuing teaching.

TS: Okay, you think teaching is not valued?

- NP: I don't think it's as valued as it was. I think individuals talk about valuing teaching and how important it is for us to not lose our teaching focus, but I think there's a real feeling that we are shifting more toward the research piece.
- TS: So we hear that everybody still wants us to be a teaching institution, but when it comes to promotion and tenure teaching is not the number one priority?
- NP: I wouldn't say it's not the number one priority. In the College of Education I think we still value teaching over anything else. But campus-wide I believe that research is as important and in some colleges perhaps more important than strong, effective, consistent teaching.
- TS: Do you have in the Bagwell College the different tiers like they do in the Coles College and WellStar College of Health and Human Services and I guess Math and Science too? I guess a lot of the departments to some degree have teaching tracks and research tracks. Do you have that in the Bagwell College?
- NP: No, in the Bagwell College, in our tenure and promotion guidelines, we have what's called variable workload models. There's a 60-20-20 and a 40-30-30 with 60 percent being teaching, 20 being research, and 20 being service. That's stated in there as an option, but we're in the process of talking about workload right now in our college. Although we have that variable workload model stated in there we don't see a lot of variable workloads beyond your basic 3-3 teaching load [3 courses in the fall and 3 courses in the spring] for graduate and undergraduate, although we say we do.
- TS: Grad and undergrad?
- NP: They have the same teaching load.
- TS: You have a 3-3 in graduate school?
- NP: If it's graduate school it's 3-3; if it's undergrad it's 3-3.
- TS: Wow.
- NP: Doctoral teaching as well. I don't think that's the case in other colleges. I think there's a differentiated workload based on grad or undergrad.
- TS: Well, we know Coles started it where you could get into a research track or a teaching track or a blended track.
- NP: Right. That may be because so many of our faculty work across grad and undergraduate programs. We have really a handful of faculty that are solely doctoral and master's level.
- TS: So you're teaching a 3-3?

- NP: Yes, and all doctoral classes. So I think in the College of Education teaching will always be a priority, and I think that's reassuring to those of us who came here because we wanted to teach. I think some of our newer faculty that are coming in now come with more of a research focus, but they understand that they're coming to a place that's not a Research 1. So they're expected to be effective teachers as well, but you can sense that they're the ones that are applying for the research grants, as they should be. They are early in their career. I want to support them. I want them to be able to get their feet on the ground in their research as well as their teaching.
- TS: I thought it was obvious by the time I reached retirement [in 2011] that when we hired folks we were putting a lot more priority on the scholarship and research agendas and their research potential than we were on their teaching. If we bring in people for that reason, we shouldn't be surprised that that's what they want to do once they get here.
- NP: Exactly, right, agreed.
- TS: So you think we have changed?
- NP: Yes, I do.
- TS: And not necessarily for the better?
- NP: From someone who values teaching, you know, I don't see that we have to sacrifice good teaching for scholarship agenda, but perhaps it's time to seriously think about the Coles model, where you have primarily a research track. But even those individuals should have some minimum expectations for effective teaching, just like those of us who choose a teaching track should have some minimum expectations for effective and appropriate scholarship. I think as we grow there needs to be room for multiple models.
- TS: With regard to the Outstanding Teaching Award, we went through a period, especially when CETL was running these things, where we were focusing about as much on scholarship of teaching as we were, I guess, just effective teaching. Do you think that's still the case with the award? You've done scholarship of teaching. To what degree did that contribute do you think to the award?
- NP: I don't know. I wasn't . . .
- TS: Well you don't know what went on in the selection committee.
- NP: I don't, but I did in my packet make a strong case for my scholarship of teaching. I looked at it through early career, mid-career, and most recent career work. Each of those areas are a little bit different, even though [my dissertation work on] analogy really is a scholarship of teaching investigation. Then my work, mid-career on the program development area, demonstrating program impact—to me that's scholarship of teaching as well. Then most recently my work in the use of metaphors to examine teaching, so when we use metaphors in our teaching to get teachers to think about their teaching,



that's a scholarship of teaching focus as well. So really all of my research, almost exclusively has been on teaching.

TS: One other thing too, at a point when we didn't have the Distinguished Professor Award, the Distinguished Professor Award talks a lot about the integration of teaching, scholarship, and service. I really think before 2002 when we started that award that the Distinguished Teaching Award was really kind of like our Distinguished Professor Award today. It was all three. It sounds like you're doing all three. The integration of those three together I'm sure contributed to your winning the award this year.

NP: Well, to me that just makes sense. You only have a certain number of hours in the day to really accomplish the kinds of things that we should be doing here at KSU as faculty. To integrate them, to leverage one in multiple areas to me just makes complete sense.

TS: What are your plans for the future?

NP: Oh, I'm going to finish out my time here at KSU. I'm what Betty Siegel used to say is a long marcher.

TS: Well, you're getting to be a long marcher.

NP: Yes, I can't say I'm new faculty anymore. I used to say, "I'm fairly new," until I guess I had been here maybe eight or ten years.

TS: Until most of the people in the department weren't.

NP: Right, until I was a senior faculty. So, yes, I'm going to continue teaching and enjoy what I'm doing. I really want to spend a little more time in my research in the metaphor area with my colleague, Dr. Bessette. I'm happy doing what I'm doing. I wake up happy every day, so I want to keep doing what I'm doing. I really have always considered myself fortunate to be here at KSU because the climate here is encouraging, it's supportive, it's inclusive, and I've just always been very loyal to KSU.

TS: Great. I'm just about out of questions. Is there anything that I've left out that you'd like to talk about?

NP: Like I said when we started this interview, how fortunate we are here at KSU that good teaching is valued and rewarded. I think we're very fortunate to have the KSU Foundation to fund these awards and to encourage us in our good work. I appreciate you, Tom.

TS: Well, thank you, and I appreciate the interview today.

NP: Thank you very much.

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