CASE STUDY: Doreen Miller  
Michael Gillespie

Setting
This study was conducted in a Nebraska elementary school in a rural community. It is in the afternoon after dismissal. The school district, though fairly small, is respected among educators in the state for its committed teachers and experienced principals. School programs have recently been under scrutiny because of growing budget constraints.

Case
As she thought back on it, staring out the window at the end of the day, Doreen Miller knew what made it worthwhile. When students really saw something new on their own it all made sense—all the workshops, the summer institutes, the planning, the figuring out how to use art in the regular curriculum.

"The famous art teacher pondering big ideas again, I suppose!" said Sandy, the other fourth grade teacher, startling Doreen out of her reverie.

"Yeah, art teacher. Some art teacher." Doreen recalled how her own first excitement about using art in her class had come only with the summer institutes. None of the classroom teachers had really been trained as art teachers or even to use art very much, and there was no elementary level art teacher.

"So what were you thinking when I came in? You jumped when I said something," asked Sandy.

"Oh, I was just thinking back to earlier today. You know, that Social Studies unit where I was trying to use paintings of different people at work in different cultures. I really do think there is something about the art..." replied Doreen.

"Well, of course," Sandy broke in, "art provides some good examples of things. But you could just as well use something else, right?"

"Well, not just examples..." Doreen began, a little hesitantly.

"See, that's what I mean. You're becoming an art teacher."

Doreen replied, "Not really. You know how I've struggled with what Sid said about that. I just think that the lessons work best when we really do include real art, stop and talk about it, interpret it in small groups. It sounds odd to say it, but the art works best as an example when you don't think of art as an example."
"Sounds like you’re getting philosophical again," put in Sandy, who obviously enjoyed teasing Doreen about her enthusiasm for art, philosophy, and art history, subjects many teachers had tried to avoid at the university. "Anyway, that stuff with Sid is long past, isn’t it?"

Later that night at home Doreen found herself thinking that she sure hoped the “stuff with Sid” was in the past. But she wasn’t so sure. The “stuff with Sid” had started several years back when Doreen had made her first attempt to get other teachers in their small district interested in the new approach to art teaching. She had come back from the weeklong Summer Institute so energized inside about using art in her classroom! Just thinking about it gave her a feeling something like when she had started teaching 14 years ago. Still, it was scary—she never had taken philosophy or art in college, and she didn’t know much about art. But she felt very encouraged by the Institute and by some of the teachers who had tried it out. Plus, her first attempts to share her enthusiasm in her building went pretty well. The other teachers didn’t exactly jump up and down, but they were interested. She knew that if she could show them how art could work in everyday classrooms, they might try something too; or maybe some of them would apply to the Institute.

But then she had gone to the meeting where she was to report about what she had learned. Her principal, Mabel Grundvig, had kept it informal, just inviting a few teachers who were old friends. Doreen was nervous when she saw that Sid Bascom, the high school art specialist, was there, but she knew he was a big advocate for art and she thought he would be pleased. Yet after she had made her presentation, he started asking some hard questions, especially about her suggestion that art could be used at all levels, from elementary through high school.

"If we broaden it out, try to reach so many students, we can’t do it," he had said.

"Why not? Maybe…"

"Because," Sid put in, "I’m the only art teacher, and I already have all I can handle."

"Maybe things could be arranged so that some of the time you teach a group of students that wouldn’t usually hep much about art," Doreen said.

"How could I do that? You have to begin and end with production. It sounds like the ‘Institute’ people want to teach a lot of other stuff. What about making art?"

"Well, I don’t have all the answers," Doreen replied hesitantly, "but at the summer meetings they said they wanted to explore a different way to teach art. They’re not against making art."

"Maybe not. And that might be all right for the little kids. But I have to work with the kids with talent. I have had at least two accepted for Scholastic Art Awards every year I’ve taught. And that’s obviously what butters the bread around here. That’s what superintendent Tarnley wants."

That’s how it went with Sid. He was a nice guy, usually, but it had surprised her how strong he had been. Was he threatened somehow, or just trying to do what he thought was right? He did often have to defend art against the budget cutters who more and more seemed to want schools to be job-training centers, especially the high school. And he was probably right—superintendent Tarnley did put on the pressure for high school department to get “recognition.”

The worst of it was that she had stumbled around so much when she tried to explain it. Maybe Sid was right to raise questions. The same thing had happened when some of the other teachers asked later whether the new approach to art wasn’t something “extra.” The curriculum was already laid out almost day by day, so how could they possibly add on something more? Doreen had tried to explain that “adding on” wasn’t the way it was supposed to work, but she knew she wasn’t always very convincing when it came to specifics. It was so frustrating to be full of ideas and not be able to explain very well how they are supposed to work.

That was then. Thinking back over the past 4 years, she knew she had made some real headway. She used art a lot now in the way she taught. She hadn’t made more presentations, though. And she had sort of found her place. She knew she was an introvert anyway, and she saw herself as a quiet worker. She was a personal communicator, not a public proclaimer. It had been lots of work, but her original feeling had been right; this was a way to bring new life to her teaching. She had won over a few of the other elementary teachers, but the stuff with Sid was probably about the same—she had heard early on (through the grapevine) that he had said some things, things that hurt, like that he didn’t care if people did some “crafty” things in class, or held up some reproductions, but that he had to teach “real art.” Lately, she heard that he had mellowed a bit, saying her work was “really interesting,” but “not really teaching art.” Still, the situation might be changing a little…

Three days later, just after coming in the house after giving her gardens a good fall clean up, the phone rang. She picked it up absentmindedly.

"Hello."

"Hello, Doreen?" She was surprised to hear the voice at the other end of the line.

"Yes."

"This is Sid Bascom. May I talk with you for a minute? Sorry to disturb you at home."

"It’s no bother. What is it?" Doreen wondered. Sid had never called her at
home before.
"Tarnley wants art to be included in the workshops next spring," Sid added straightforwardly.
"Yes?"
"Uh, I was hoping you could help in the planning and presentations. It would be good to have art represented at different grade levels. You are doing more than anyone in elementary." His voice was stiff, like someone who has thought up ahead of time what to say.
"I have been working hard, it's true," she said as pleasantly as possible. And it was true. She also thought to herself, "Are you sure it's really art teaching, Sid?"

"I've been hearing really good things about your teaching. Actually, I thought this might be a chance for me to get to know more about that new approach you've been using. I only heard about it that one time before."
"Well, I don't know what I would do for a whole workshop," she replied. Part of her really liked what she was hearing, though a sarcastic inner voice said somewhere in the back of her mind, "Yeah, you want to find out more now that you need me to help."
"We could work it out together," Sid replied.
"How many workshops do we have?"
"One."
"One?"
"Yeah. That's why I need your help to make it really good."
"How many does math and science get?"
"Six."
"Wow, same old stuff, huh?"
"I'm afraid so."

It really made her mad. After all the work in her classroom, and with other teachers, and studying in the summers, art always got the short end of the stick. Talk about "add ons!" They would probably be up there with volleyball, driver's ed. and drug awareness! Still, sometimes the workshops ended up in brainstorming among some of the teachers and those sessions could be really good. If she could get a discussion started on including art in the regular curriculum... Then Doreen thought of something else.

"Why are you making the calls about the workshops?" Everyone knew Superintendent Tarnley usually made the calls about district activities. A nice thing to do, though she could never quite tell with Tarnley whether he was sincere or was trying to build a reputation as a "superintendent with a personal touch."
"He asked others to set up workshops because he's so busy with the Board," replied Sid.
"Again? Is it art this time?" It seemed like every time they turned around the school board was responding to some complaint form a group of parents. The board, she thought, was on the edge of lunacy, but the superintendent and the principals more and more had been trying to please the parents who complained. Her own principal, Ms. Grundvig, who was so good with the kids and with her teachers, did not handle outside pressure well. Teachers felt they were watched, and had to walk on eggs. Why were the parents who supported what teachers were trying to do so silent in public?

"Tarnley didn't say what it was, just that he had to spend a lot of time right now with the principals. Anyway, what do you think? Would you be willing to join me for the workshop?"
"Well, I suppose if Tarnley says so..."
"I'm calling on my own," Sid added, sounding nervous. Tarnley just said for me to organize it. It's up to you whether you want to do it."
"Oh."
"Look, I know this call was unexpected. You don't have to say right now. It's Tuesday evening now. How about if I call back same time Thursday? I have to know by then because I'm supposed to hang in an outline on Friday."
"OK. And thanks for calling, Sid."
"Goodnight."
"Goodnight."

She heard herself sigh deeply as she hung up and slumped into her favorite chair. She didn't know what she would do. She wanted to share what she had learned, but she was suddenly frightened. She would probably botch the explanation again, ruining something she had grown to care deeply about. But another side of her thought she should do it, like it was her duty. Doreen Miller, public proclaimer. Messenger to the community. If the community cared. Maybe she and Sid could work out a good workshop. If she could work with Sid.

Discussion Questions
1. What are the main issues in this case? What is the most important issue in this case to you?
2. What personal, social, and institutional circumstances evident in the case contribute to your understanding of what is at issue?
3. What are some challenges facing Doreen? What would you do if you were Doreen? How about the other people in the case: How might they each see the situation from their perspectives? What might they be thinking?
4. How are Doreen and Sid's aims for teaching art similar and different? What conceptions of art education best align with Sid's point of view? With Doreen's point of view? Would conceptual and philosophical differences play a large role in their possible cooperation?
5. What have you learned from this case?
Case Closure Questions
1. Which option do you think is best for the case dilemma and why?
2. What kinds of social, historical, moral, ethical and/or political forces impact the case dilemma, the case outcomes, and selecting options for the dilemma?
3. How has the case discussion changed your views about an art teaching issue?
4. What biases and/or assumptions do you hold about any of the case issues or topics?
5. In future practice, what would you do differently as a result of reading this case?

Suggested Readings

CASE STUDY: Wendy Briar
Michael Gillespie

Setting
This study took place in a central Nebraska elementary school. The school is in a mid-sized district that has recently made some initial attempts to encourage more cooperation and curricular innovation among the more experienced teachers.

Case
“Mrs. Briar
Looks like Doubtfire!
Mrs. Briar
Looks like Doubtfire!”

Wendy Briar listened carefully for more of the giggling chant from the two young male voices gradually receding down the hall. But they were gone. She hadn’t seen them, but she guessed they were in the third-grade class she had taught just before recess.

She felt a little hurt. Usually she took it in stride or just kidded them back. After all, she had done the same thing when she was a girl (“Mr. Sharp, big fat carp.”), and she knew it was just part of the way kids let off steam, especially with the teachers they didn’t see too often. But today she felt vulnerable. In the back of her mind (and in her throat) she felt rolled up, as she often did when she was thinking about a big decision that she might have to make.

That evening, while resting up from the day, enjoying the spring’s greening with a cup of tea in the back yard, she thought back to the first time the students had mocked her name. That was 20 years ago, and she had been a student teacher.

“Is something wrong?” Dr. Danforth, her supervisor from the university, had asked.
“Why?”
“You haven’t said a word since we began packing up after the class. It’s not like you.”
“Oh,” she had sighed, “I just didn’t expect them to call me names on the first day.”
“Don’t worry about it,” Dr. Danforth replied.