PART FOUR: REFLECTING

CHAPTER EIGHT

LEARNING FROM SARAH:

EVOLVING PRAXIS - UNWAVERING COMMITMENT

At the beginning of the 1996/97 school year, I entered Sarah's classroom as a participant observer, hoping that I might glean from my experience in her room an understanding of what it meant for Sarah to live out in daily practice her expressed ideals about teaching and learning. I anticipated that I might spend most of my time there watching Sarah's actions and listening to what she said to her students. I wanted to keep a record of methods and techniques that she used to move her students towards establishing the *"student-directed community"* that she frequently mentioned. At the same time, I desired to build within my college courses the "democratic practices" and "community" that I had read so much about, and I hoped that my experience with Sarah might provide me with insight into developing these possibilities. My story concludes with reflections on what I learned from Sarah and consideration of how these understandings have impacted my work as a teacher.

Evolving Praxis

As the year progressed, I observed Sarah's practices amongst her students on a regular basis. I watched as she built relationships with her students, giving them hugs, publicly praising their accomplishments, eating lunch with them on the picnic rug, conversing with them each morning, and frequently writing them messages. I listened when she dealt with children seriously, reminding them of their responsibilities as learners. I observed as she discussed with children the importance of treating one another as they wanted to be treated, and I sensed Sarah's reflectivity when she realized that the children needed more structure than she had provided in order to support their efforts in this area. I watched as she later established structures within the classroom for the purpose of supporting both *"kind and caring"* actions towards others, and cooperative team work. I listened as she invited students to contribute their knowledge, experiences and ideas through activities such as Personal News time, Star of the Week and writing

their own stories. I observed when she told students that they were capable of handling substantive responsibilities such as reading to preschool children and organizing classroom spaces and materials.   I listened when she invited students to make choices which directly impacted their learning experiences, such as determining inquiry projects and voting on focal topics for class study.

Over the course of my year's work with Sarah, I realized that her practices shifted and changed a great deal. It was apparent to me that she began the year by allowing students a great deal of freedom, but soon realized that this sense of freedom was so foreign to her students that they had a difficult time making positive choices and contributions within it. Subsequently, she provided structures and stated expectations concerning personal responsibility within the classroom. Later, as students began to increasingly contribute in positive ways and better support their peers, Sarah perceived that external structures were less important and necessary to the development of the group as a mutually supportive whole, and she placed decreasing emphasis upon them over time. As an observer, I perceived that Sarah's use of teaching approaches evolved as she experienced the needs and growth of her students, reflected on how she might better support their development as members of the class community, and took action based upon these reflections.

Linda Christensen (1994) writes, "The steps we take to reach 'community' are not often in a straight path. We stagger, side-step, stumble, and then rise to stride ahead again" (p. 55). In a similar fashion, Sarah and her students moved slowly towards the development of community, utilizing a wide range of classroom management approaches and teaching strategies. Sarah was not afraid to be flexible. She held no method or teaching technique as indispensable, but rather as a tool to use with her students based upon who THEY were, at a given time, in a given situation. McLaren (1989) writes, "The pedagogy that I propose takes the problems and needs of the students themselves as its starting point" (p. 226). Sarah's pedagogy followed this pattern as well. I perceived, over time, that her work with these children followed a continuing pattern of struggle, reflection and action. As she became aware of children's strengths and interests, of their academic and personal needs, of things that motivated them and things that seemed to

329

frustrate or even anger them, she used her awareness as an impetus for reflecting upon how she might better support each child.

As I considered the evolution of Sarah's work with these second grade children, I perceived that focusing on the visible classroom approaches and teaching strategies that Sarah used enabled me to see only a small part of what I could possibly learn from her. I realized that Sarah's actions and words in the classroom were fueled by several fundamental purposes which she held to tenaciously. While her teaching methods and classroom approaches changed and shifted over time, her commitment to these fundamental purposes remained constant. Joan Wink (1997) writes, "We can't DO pedagogy . . . we LIVE it" (p. 103). Sarah did not just "do" teaching strategies that enabled her kids to become members of a supportive classroom community; there was no step-by-step method that she followed. Rather, Sarah tried to live out on a daily basis what she believed about her children and about herself, and what she hoped for all of them. As I began to recognize the beliefs, hopes and purposes that fueled Sarah's actions and words, I was better able to understand not only her practices, but also my own.

Unwavering Commitment

Over the course of time, I have come to the conclusion that Sarah's work with her students emanated from two central commitments which served to fuel her actions. First, I recognized that Sarah "saw" her students in a particular way, and she committed herself to giving these children the opportunity to see themselves as she did. Second, Sarah believed that developing a sense of "community" within the group was essential for mutually supporting the contributions of all members, and she determined to provide whatever structures and support she could for nurturing this growth. Sarah perceived both of these purposes as essential to what she hoped for these children.

Seeing Students and Inviting them to See Themselves. Teacher educator Janet Fortune stated to Mike Rose (1995), "Teachers need technique, yes, but what counts more is what underlies technique. What counts . . . what really counts is sweeping aside the veils that keep us from seeing kids in all their richness" (p. 249). Fortune's message is clear; what really counts involves not just what we do with students, but more

importantly, how we see them. From observing Sarah, I learned much about what it means to "sweep aside veils" and see students "in all their richness."

Sarah continually asserted to me and to others that her students were *"good kids,"* that they were *"smart kids,"* and that she was amazed by all that they offered to her and to each other. Although these valuations may sound simplistic or even seem to be "given" assumptions about working with children, I believe that for Sarah, these perceptions were anything but simple. Even before school began, several Eastside teachers had cautioned Sarah concerning the poor behavior of the group that she would be working with. The majority of Sarah's students were children from economically disadvantaged homes, more than half represented racial minority groups, and half had been labeled as needing special academic help of one form or another, their special needs ranging from attention deficit disorder and learning disabilities to emotional disturbances. Later in the school year, when Sarah commented that she hoped to "loop" to third grade with her children, a staff member asked her, "Are you crazy?"

McLaren (1989) writes, "Economically disadvantaged underclass students can be easily spotted. This can work against them, especially if teachers register such students as intellectually or socially deficient" (p. 191). Given McLaren's statement, perhaps it is not surprising that the children's former first grade teachers remarked that they had done very little teaching with the group, but had instead focused most of their efforts on managing them. My personal perception, having worked with Sarah's students across the course of the year, was that they were as intelligent and as sociable as any group of children that I have worked with. What I believe they lacked, however, was what Wink (1997) refers to as "cultural capital." She describes this form of capital as "referring to the behaviors, values and practices that are valued by the dominant society" (p. 33). McLaren builds on this definition, asserting that "students from the dominant culture inherit substantially different cultural capital than do economically disadvantaged students . . . schools generally value and reward those who exhibit that dominant cultural capital" (p. 191). He adds that cultural capital is generally reflective of material capital, and in this respect, Sarah's students were certainly lacking.

Sarah's commitment to perceive her students as *"good," "smart," "capable"* kids,

despite their lack of material capital and social status, is in this sense connected to the historical tradition of critical pedagogy described earlier in this text. John Dewey, in the early part of this century, asserted that students might transcend the social injustices of their worlds if they could experience what it meant to both act and perceive themselves as valued contributors within the "communities" of their school classrooms. Reproduction theorists of the 1960s and 70s protested the oppression and "sorting" of students toward low educational achievement based on their socioeconomic status, and production theorists of the 1970s and 80s insisted that students could resist and transcend their oppression if they could experience what it was like to become "empowered" to act and speak in school settings. Recent scholars, like Freire and Shor, wrote of specific groups of impoverished peoples who began to develop what these writers called "critical consciousness," and who began to perceive their own abilities to act as capable, expressive members of their worlds, by first acting capably and expressively within educational settings.

Sarah's work with her students was grounded in her commitment to seeing her students differently than the larger society might. Because of the pervasiveness of lowered expectations towards Sarah's students amongst many of the faculty members at Eastside, at least that I sensed, I believe that Sarah's choice to perceive her children as good and smart was of central importance to the growth that they experienced over the course of the school year. Mike Rose (1995) writes, "We tend to forget what a radical idea this is - - - the belief that all members have a contribution to make, have the potential for full participation in society . . . It's revolutionary . . . to get kids to believe they are worthy" (p. 423). Rose's statement describes well not only the importance of believing that her children were worthy contributors, but also the significance of inviting them to share that belief by viewing themselves as such. Sarah mentioned to me towards the end of the school year, *My main job this year, I think, has been to have these kids feel good about themselves . . . the first thing I had to do was to get them to realize that they were good kids."* Rose adds what he has observed by watching teachers who were able to accomplish this, "At heart, the teachers were able to affirm in a deep and comprehensive way the capability of the students in their classrooms" (p. 422). Sarah's actions and words

332

were fueled by her desire to affirm her students, as good, as smart, as capable. Essentially, she wanted to impact how they saw themselves. The trust that she invested in her children, the high expectations that she maintained for them, the relationships that she built with them, the invitations that she offered them to contribute what they knew and had experienced, all of these elements that characterize her teaching are connected to her commitment towards affirming students as good, smart, capable contributors.

Nurturing the Growth of Community. Not only did Sarah want to move her students towards perceptions of themselves as good and smart, but she also committed herself to nurturing a sense of *"community"* within the class group as a whole. She mentioned to me on several occasions that she believed it essential that her students realize their responsibilities towards one another. Sarah hoped that they might move towards treating one another with respect and caring. She envisioned a classroom community that was based upon mutual support, a classroom in which student contributions could be applauded and valued by all members rather than ridiculed or disrupted.

Moving towards nurturing community within her classroom was extremely difficult for Sarah. During the fall months particularly, several students within Sarah's classroom were anything but supportive and respectful towards their peers. Donald stole from his classmates on several occasions, taking items such as Chip's flashlight, Erin's book and Alton's silly putty. Jonathan, a child whose former teachers had noted his "giftedness," often scowled or complained when he was asked to work with partners such as Regina or Donald. Alton carried out both verbal and physical attacks against Sarah and several of his peers. Sarah described a period of time during which Alton *"could be verbally abusive for hours on end. And we would go on and ignore him, and the guidance counselor's in here taking notes, and he would go on for hours of, 'I hate you. You're ugly. You're a big fathead . . .'"* Evan also exploded in anger on several occasions and significantly disrupted class time. Sarah gave an account of an instance during October on which, *"He threw a fit . . . Furniture was thrown, chairs were going, books were flying. He broke the easel . . ."*

For each of these students and others, "acting out" against Sarah or their peers, in

one way or another, was a common practice during the early months of the school year. Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (1990) write that for many youths this type of behavior is grounded in a sense of insecurity or disconnection. They state that these young people "are struggling to find artificial, distorted belongings through behavior such as attention seeking . . . others have abandoned the pursuit and are reluctant to form human attachments. In either case, their unmet needs can be addressed by corrective relationships of trust and intimacy" (p. 47). Sarah realized that the development of trust was essential to the growth of the class as a connected community. She also recognized that the growth of trust involved how students perceived her, how they perceived themselves, and how they perceived one another. She expressed to me her hope that children might feel both physically and emotionally safe within the group, explaining, *"I don't want them to go home scared. I want them to think it's a safe place to be, that Mrs. Rhea is interested in what they have to say and in them, and that the other people in the room are,"* and that they *"might feel that what they have to say is important, and their questions are important, and their ideas are important."* Sarah's perspective aligns with a viewpoint that William Ayers (1993) expressed concerning the need for this type of security within a classroom group. He writes that students grow as learners and contributors "when we feel good about ourselves and others, when we trust the environment and the people in our lives, when we are safe" (pp. 62-63). Sarah recognized that for students to experience this sense of trust and safety, the elements of support and respect for each class member must come not only from her, but also from amongst the class members themselves.

The "connectedness" amongst community members which is characterized by mutual support and respect has been documented not only as a responsibility to strive for, but also as a basic human need. French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1964) asserted the individual's need for a sense of community, through which they can experience an attachment to a collective group, a sense of personal autonomy within that group, and a knowledge of duty to the collectivity. Sarah recognized that her children needed not only to see themselves as good, smart and capable, but also that they needed to experience what it meant to affirm others as good, smart and capable. She hoped that each child

might internalize an attachment with the class which provided him or her with both security and connection and also built within him or her a solid sense of their obligation to support one another.

Sarah's praxis shifted and changed a great deal as she sought to work towards this internalization amongst her students, although her purpose remained steadfast. Sergiovanni (1994) writes, "Democratic communities do have rules, rewards and consequences . . . but these are not at the heart of what matters. Key are the standards, values and commitments that make up a constitution for living together" (p. 120). For Sarah, internalized commitment to one another was far more important than following class rules or receiving rewards. The external supports that she used, such as class discussions, rules and personal points, emphasis upon acts of *"kind and caring,"* and focus upon team cooperation, were simply tools for supporting internal growth amongst her students, as both givers and recipients of a sense of community.

Growth . . . Over Time

In March, John Dixon prepared a Teacher Performance Review for Sarah, which involved his evaluation of her effectiveness as a teacher in several categories. His statements in three of these categories reflect his perceptions of the growth that Sarah's class group had experienced to that point in the school year towards becoming the type of community that Sarah had hoped for. Under "Classroom Climate," Mr. Dixon wrote, "Mrs. Rhea has created a caring, positive, supportive, challenging learning environment where her students have made great positive changes in their attitude towards one another and school as an institution." Under "Provision for Individual Differences" he wrote, "Mrs. Rhea has had a struggle from the beginning with the demanding needs of a number of students. She has persevered and won them over as contributing students." And under "Instructional Delivery" he wrote, "Mrs. Rhea's approach has enabled a class of individuals to become a class functioning as a unit."

My own perceptions of both personal and community growth for Sarah's students align closely with John Dixon's statements. As the year progressed, the classroom environment became increasingly characterized by acts of caring and respect for others

335

and less prone to threatening comments or volatile outbursts. As this occurred, Sarah offered her students a growing number of opportunities to contribute within the classroom. Students became more heavily involved in decision making that impacted their learning, in teaching their peers, and in assuming substantive responsibilities. I observed that not only did these physical contributions to the class increase, but also that each child's sense of who they were within the class group seemed to change. Although it is difficult to provide physical evidence for the assertion that Sarah's children became more secure, self-confident, giving individuals, I do believe that this occurred. Reviewing what I observed across the school year, I think that several children showed marked growth in these respects.

One child that comes to mind is Erin, who entered the second grade as a shy child with a history of school failure. Erin could not read, and she could write very little. Her former teachers had recommended that Erin be retained in first grade, but her mother had decided to send her on to second grade with her classmates. Across the course of the year, Erin learned not only how to read and write, but also that she was knowledgeable and capable of offering her knowledge to others. Towards the end of the school year I remember watching her interact with Anthony as they read a book together that she had brought from home. The book was difficult, but it was familiar to her, and she appeared confident and proud as they worked their way through it, taking turns as reader and listener. Several times during Anthony's reading turns he came across difficult words and hesitated. Erin assisted him in pronouncing the words. I recall several other occasions on which evidence of Erin's abilities was shared with others in the class. Erin was quite artistic and often drew detailed pictures in class when the opportunity arose. On several occasions, Sarah asked Erin for permission to use her drawings as visual teaching aids, and Erin agreed to let her do so. As the year closed and I reflected on Erin's growth, I believed that she had grown not only as a reader, writer or artist, but also in the way that she viewed herself within the class community. She willingly assumed class jobs, read with vigor, and perhaps most important, she smiled and laughed and took part in class activities, which had occurred very little for her during the early months of second grade.

Another child that comes to mind is Evan. During the first week of school, Evan

told Sarah that he was "bad" and proceeded to explain how often he had been suspended from school during first grade. When his former teachers described him to Sarah, they remarked, as well, that he was a behavior problem. When Sarah talked with me about Evan, she did mention that he was cocky, outspoken and prone to volatile outbursts. Her valuation did not stop there, however. She clearly emphasized to me that she also believed Evan to be intelligent, creative, and possessing the potential to become a leader amongst the class. Sarah told Evan that she believed in him almost daily. I enjoyed watching their relationship unfold. Evan appeared proud of himself when Sarah praised him. He reciprocated her warmth by joking with her about football, "visiting" with her early in the mornings when the other children were at breakfast, and seeking her out when he had difficulty with the music teacher and with Mr. Dixon. By November, his physical explosions were no longer occurring. Although he was prone to occasional verbal outbursts throughout the year, they decreased significantly over time. Evan did become a leader within the class community. When classmates such as Anthony or Alton acted out, Evan was sometimes the one to caution them to "get it together." Once when younger children started a fist fight outside, Evan broke it up. When Evan enthusiastically took part in class activities such as independent reading, group discussions and inquiry projects, others followed his lead. I remember observing one morning in May when Evan and Chip were reading a lengthy book of fairy tales together. Both of these children had been volatile and angry much of the time during the early part of the school year, and placing them together during reading time would have likely evoked outbursts. Yet on this occasion they were reading collaboratively. When one trailed off, the other picked up. When one got stuck, the other pitched in a word. They also talked and laughed as they worked through the humorous parts of the story. That laughter is a sound that stands out in my mind as a dramatic shift in the classroom presence of both of these boys.

Erin and Evan are just two of many children in Sarah's room whom I perceived as having grown not only as active contributors with the classroom community, but also as people. Maxine Green (1988) writes, "Dewey, like the existentialist thinkers, did not believe that the self was ready-made or pre-existent; it was, he said, 'something in continuous formation through choice of action ' (1916, p. 408) . . . Education can be a

process of futuring, of releasing persons to become different" (pp. 21-22). I believe that Sarah's students were immersed within a classroom experience that impacted who they were. I think that I witnessed the personal growth of self-confidence within these children. I also believe that I observed the growth of these children as community members who thought about what it meant to treat others with kindness and respect. Finally, I believe that I witnessed the development of these children as active, contributing participants across learning experiences. They handled responsibilities, made decisions, and shared their knowledge with others in ways that I had not seen occurring during the early weeks and months of second grade.

Sarah's students grew against the odds. Despite the low self-esteem, disruptive behaviors and special needs that each child brought into this classroom community, they grew. I believe that much of this growth can be attributed to Sarah's commitment. She refused to retreat from her belief in these kids as good, smart, capable classroom contributors. And she doggedly worked towards the development of a sense of community in which students both gave and received support. Particularly during the fall months she struggled a great deal as she worked with her kids, continually reflecting upon what she might do or say to better support their needs. She tapped into networks of support as she reflected, leaning heavily upon John Dixon and Kelly Ainsworth, and confiding at times with persons outside of the Eastside community who took her commitment to children very seriously. Based upon her reflections, she acted, allowing her daily practices to flex and evolve, as she and her children evolved toward community.

Considering My Own Beliefs and Practices

As I have observed, reflected on and written about the growth that I witnessed in Sarah's classroom community, I realize that along with Sarah and her students, I have also changed. When I began my research in June 1996, I did not anticipate that I would develop strong attachments not only to Sarah, but also to many of her students. As the year progressed, however, I found that I became more connected to and invested in the personal and community growth of Sarah's students than I had ever been with my own students as an elementary teacher. This attachment surprised me. Yet I believe that my

338

extended considerations of what it means to build a "democratic" or "student-directed" classroom community, coupled with the opportunity to watch Sarah carry out her beliefs on a daily basis, have significantly changed my perspectives about what it means to be a teacher. I am not the same person that I was as an elementary teacher ten to fifteen years ago. I am not the same person as a teacher educator that I was a year ago.

Goodman (1992) writes that, "People's ability to visualize the actions that occur in one setting and apply this visualization to their own circumstances is a potentially powerful skill" (p. 174). For me, this process of visualization that Goodman describes has involved not just seeing Sarah's practices, but even more so, visualizing her purposes and thus considering her practices as mechanisms for living out those purposes. I have spent considerable time reflecting on how I might carry what I learned from Sarah into my own work as a teacher educator. I believe that observing and talking with Sarah about her work this year has impacted me on two levels, both an external level involving teaching applications and classroom strategies, and an internal level involving my personal understandings of the committed purposes behind her visible practices.

External applications. In terms of context, my teaching situation differs a great deal from Sarah's. She works with children; I work with college students. Sarah sees her students each weekday for the course of a nine month school year, and I see mine once or twice per week over the course of a fourteen week semester. Her students attend school because they are required to do so, whereas most of my students have entered the field of education because they chose to do so. Many of her children have not experienced the status that comes with "cultural capital;" most of my students assume the possession of cultural capital to be a given part of who they are. These differences make my work both easier and harder at the same time.

At the surface level, I believe that my work is easier in that my students do not often disrupt class sessions or visibly show disrespect or unkindness towards the contributions of others. The vast majority of students with whom I work are polite, caring individuals who have decided to consider teaching because they are committed to the needs of children. In another sense, however, my work with these students becomes difficult. Many of my students are passive and compliant during class meetings, eager to

do well in order to learn and in order to receive a good grade from the course. Often, if I share my own beliefs during a class meeting, students are quick to make personal statements that align with my positions. Britzman (1991) writes about this type of situation, in which "students may take on the desires of teachers as if they were their own" (p. 74). Shor (1992) discusses this as well, asserting that many students learn that "their role is to answer questions, not to question answers . . . they wait to be told what to do" (p. 26) I am never quite sure whether or not student contributions to class discussions are reflective of their honest beliefs or reflective of what they feel they "ought" to say. It is difficult to assess whether or not students feel personally connected to matters we are considering. Given my uncertainty in this regard, it is challenging to attempt to nurture a sense of community that is genuinely meaningful to all class members, yet my desire this school year has been to move in that direction.

The curricular focus within my courses relates directly to teaching children. Because of this connection, I have chosen to consider and even to emulate with my students many of the visible teaching approaches that Sarah utilized with her children. This fall, on the first night of our Techniques of Reading Instruction class, I invited students to express what they wanted to learn from the course, much as Sarah had asked her children to share with her on the first week of school, "What We Want to Learn in Second Grade." Across the class meetings that followed, we focused on the questions they raised, as well as others that I believed we needed to talk about as we considered what it would mean to be future educators of readers and writers. I genuinely wanted to develop meaningful relationships with my students and tried to invite opportunities to get to know them, such as putting up a message board and sending them mail, staying well after class to talk with some, and writing at length to each student in response to their written work for the course. I tried to follow Sarah's lead in the area of personal sharing by asking students to write a self-exploration paper about themselves as readers and writers for their first assignment, providing them the opportunity to reveal a little bit of who they were, much as Sarah's students did when they shared legacy boxes in September. Additional assignments in the course included preparing journal responses to class readings and sharing them with a partner, and authoring a story which they

discussed with peers; both assignments aligning with activities that Sarah had engaged her students in. We also held class discussions, and I sought determinedly to open the floor to any and all perspectives concerning issues such as "What is Reading?" "What is our role as Reading teachers?" "How can we support students with special academic needs?" and "How can we respect children's parents?" Finally, my students compiled personal essays and portfolios to culminate the semester that reflected how they envisioned themselves as future teachers. My hope was that this activity might provide students with the opportunity to carefully examine their personal beliefs and ideas about teaching and learning and to develop a more solid sense of who they were becoming as future teachers.

Across these assignments, activities and discussions, I was seeking to affirm my students, much as Sarah was. Although most of my students were not struggling against the odds, as many of Sarah's were, I believed that even these students "of privilege" were worthy of affirmation, as individuals and as future educators. I wanted to communicate to them that I valued their ideas and experiences, that I held high expectations for their thoughtful attention to the matters we were discussing, and that I believed they had much to offer to one another. As Mike Rose (1995) stated, I did want to "affirm in a deep and comprehensive way the capability of my students" (p. 423). The assignments, activities and discussions that I decided to offer were an outgrowth of that desire.

Internal Understandings. Was my venture into affirming my students and nurturing a sense that we were a mutually supportive classroom community free of struggle? In all honesty, I admit that I naively believed we were making a good deal of progress each week, through the use of many approaches that invited student contributions and through continuing efforts to build relationships with students. Despite these efforts, however, I often hollowly felt that I lacked the sense of "connectedness" with my students that I had experienced with Sarah's children. Although my rhetoric at the time may have reflected otherwise, in retrospect I do not believe that I sensed a deep personal attachment toward or concern about the personal and community growth of these students. Perhaps because I superficially observed that they presented themselves to be self-confident, relatively privileged students, I found it easy not to be concerned about

their present lives and their futures beyond our course experience. Thankfully, our class as a group experienced a shift that altered my perceptions of my students a great deal. It was at this point that I began to gain a glimpse into an understanding that Sarah had tried to explain to me many times before.

When our class group completed our story writing cycle project, I decided to schedule a sharing session during which each person could introduce and share their story. I had no idea that this event would become as meaningful for us as a group as it did. As the students arrived for the evening, I noticed first that several students had brought along refreshments for the group. Bob, who had written about his experiences as a child growing up in a "railroad" family, brought in hot tea for the class, explaining that this was served in the formal dining car in which he had eaten meals when taking a cross country railway trip with his family. Marcia, who had written about a week long visit to her grandparents' farm when she was a little girl, brought two lemon meringue pies to class, representing the pies she had made with her grandmother during that visit. The tea and the pies seemed to set the tone for our evening together. We spent almost two hours sharing writing as a group, sitting in a large circle. Each person described for the group how they had chosen their writing topic and then went on to read their work to us.

Their work was impressive. Almost every student had bound their work in some fashion. Many volumes were fully illustrated. That evening I learned more about my students than I had across nine weeks of working with them. I learned about Bobby's military boot camp experiences, about Bill's trip west with his dog after he graduated from college, and about Wendy's summer visit to Panama. Michelle, an art teacher, had created an illustrated book for young readers that is presently being considered for professional publication. Kathy, a Vietnamese citizen who moved to the United States following her marriage, wrote a poignant story about a Vietnamese child who lost her mother and struggled with her father to rebuild their lives.

As the readings came to a close, I realized that I had not shared my own work with my students and sensed the need to do so. In some way I felt that I had breached my commitment towards acting as a member of the community by listening, but not sharing. Returning from my office with several selections of my dissertation draft in hand, I

realized how risky this business of sharing who we are with others can actually be. I felt nervous and uncertain as I read through three segments from my third chapter. Yet my students listened, asked questions and later talked with me about the work with respect and interest, much as they had done for one another throughout the sharing time. Through their actions and words, I personally experienced what it was like to feel supported within this community. It was at this point that I began to understand what Sarah meant when she claimed that her students provided her with the highest level of support she had experienced. It was also at this point that I began to "see" my students differently.

Although I had made numerous efforts preceding this evening to "show" students that I valued their contributions, and that I was interested in getting to know them, nothing impacted me as much as the sharing session did, because it provided me with a sense of being a community member amongst them. Perhaps I was beginning to understand what it meant to "see my students in all their richness," as Janet Fortune stated and as Sarah so remarkably tried to do on a daily basis. This experience opened my eyes to the realization that these fifteen students were not "just" students, but real people with very specific interests, life situations and areas of expertise. I saw that within our class, I had the opportunity to learn from and with an art teacher, a teenage single mother, a student who followed Zen Buddhism, an athlete, a local youth pastor, a man with military training, a woman who taught English as a Second Language, and a social worker, among others.

As I learned more about my students, I frequently envisioned opportunities through which I might invite them to share their expertise with all of us. Marcia, who works as a city social worker, shared firsthand concerns about instructional disparity and the disadvantages that her children face in standardized testing situations. Kathy, who teaches English as a second language to students at a local high school, described to the class what it was like to learn a second language as well as how she tried to support students who were doing so. Kelly, whose younger brother has a severe learning disability, spoke about the need to consider the perspective of a student and his or her family during a process such as going through child study or entering the realm of special

education classes. The contributions of these students, as well as others, added dimensions to our class interactions that I alone could not have offered.

Did our class group grow as a mutually supportive, "democratic" community? We were certainly not democratic across all of our practices. I was essentially the authoritative figure concerning setting class requirements, assigning readings and evaluating work. Yet in other ways, this group of students guided the direction of class discussions and invested personal meaning in their writing and sharing probably more so than any group of students that I have worked with in the past. Thoroughly democratic? No. Growing towards that direction? Yes, a little. In the realm of becoming a mutually supportive community, I believe that our growth was significant, probably because I feel that I sensed and experienced it myself as a community member. Do I believe that any single event, such as the book sharing session, was the impetus behind this growth? Only in a small way. I believe that it was a vehicle that was used for this purpose.

I am convinced, however, that our movement towards community emanated not merely from an activity, but from a changed "way of seeing" the members amongst us. I learned from Sarah that how we see students shifts our praxis significantly. Before I met Sarah, I worked hard to implement democratic practices with my students. Yet my efforts were focused essentially on practice, method and actions. Working with Sarah has challenged me to consider more deeply the beliefs and commitments that underlie classroom practice. Sarah's "way of seeing" her students impacted her relationships with and expectations of them, and it shaped the classroom opportunities that the group participated in. My desire as a teacher is to continually reflect on my own "way of seeing" students - as a touchstone upon which to build relationships, expectations and opportunities - as a driving force behind the evolution of our classroom practices.

Considering the Future

The Reading course group disbanded in December, and I have now moved into another semester, working with different groups of students, across different courses and field experiences. Beginning again has been hard. As they did last semester, my students seem polite and respectful, willing to participate and cooperate, and interested in what it

means to become a teacher. I sense internally, though, that we have yet to make a connection as a class community. In this semester's Reading course, there is an entirely different feel. We are comprised of twenty eight members, rather than sixteen. We meet twice per week for shorter sessions during the morning, rather than one long evening each week. Our group this semester includes mostly on-campus, traditional students, whereas last semester half of our group was made up of adult students, who were working and living in the community as they took the course.

Can we grow as a mutually supportive "democratic" community? Can we connect as a group despite our size, our shorter sessions, and the fact that I realize as an instructor that this group has had less opportunity for exposure to the working world than our group had last semester? Will these factors preclude my ability to "see" myself amongst them and for all of us to see ourselves as mutually responsible to a collective whole, to which each of us must contribute? I have yet to determine the answers to these questions.

As I reflect on what I learned from Sarah, however, I realize that she has shown me that a teacher's responsibility is commitment towards these ideals, and that our practices can evolve in unexpected ways with each group of students we become part of. Joan Wink (1997) writes, "As I start off each new year in teaching, I have to relearn because each class is so unique that I can't use the same type of teaching methods" (pp. 14-15). I am learning that it is essential for me to understand that each community takes on a life of its own, and that the "steps" toward community will be unique for each group. Perhaps a book sharing session will not be a significant vehicle used towards our growth as a community this semester, or maybe it will. I am coming to know that there are no "surefire" methods for accomplishing the purpose of developing as a democratic community, but that I must learn with my students what it takes to move us in this direction. I hope to continually keep in front of me consideration of what it means to become part of this community, what it means to see what these students offer to all of us, how to invite them to make contributions, and how to nurture our support of one another.

Sudia McCaleb (1994) offers a poem by Antonio Machado to readers of Building Communities of Learners: "Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar," which

is translated as, "Traveler, there is no road, we make the road by walking" (p. 26). To me, "we make the road by walking" suggests unchartered territory, risk-taking, surprise and vulnerability, all characteristics which Sarah experienced over the course of her work with her second grade children. This certainly sounds like an uncertain, "no guarantees" way of teaching, and I believe that it is. Speaking honestly, I believe it is quite possible that some class groups may never come together in sensing a rich connection as a community. Yet at the same time, I am convinced that if I commit myself as a teacher educator towards honestly grappling with what it means to move toward this purpose, our class groups won't stand still either. We will evolve in some sense. What I desire to commit myself towards is the continuing pattern of struggle, reflection and action that I saw Sarah persistently work out on a daily basis. Although the specific steps that Sarah and I may take towards nurturing the development of democratic community with our students will likely be very different, I believe that we're both hoping to walk in the same direction. Observing her as she has journeyed with her students across the course of second grade has tremendously impacted my own walk with my students. My hope as a teacher educator is that my students might take our community experience with them, as well, when they begin to teach real children in real classrooms.