

## Taking the Time to Think: A Portrait of Reflection

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*This article examines the meanings that students make of self-assessment work in school. Using the portraiture method (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) to reveal the students' multifaceted understandings, this article details the experiences of first and second grade children engaged in the complex work of looking at themselves as learners and thinkers. Through close observations, formal and informal interviews, and attention to children's reflective work, the author, a researcher and former teacher in the Adventurers' classroom, discusses the tensions children confront when they are asked to assess their thinking and their school work. As children talk about the importance of "looking back" as they grow, searching to find "right" answers, and struggling to tell "the truth" about themselves, they teach us that self-assessment is a challenging task—intellectually, emotionally, and relationally. They also teach us that self-assessment is a process that can help students and teachers know each other in fundamental ways. This portrait seeks to help teachers and researchers understand the cognitive and relational demands that students confront when engaged in self-reflective work in school.*

### Introduction

How do children come to know themselves as learners in school? In this age of high-stakes testing and standardized curriculum, we are in danger of losing track of students' voices and perspectives on their learning. Do we know what sustains students' desire to learn and to build the knowledge that will support them as they grow? Student self-assessment and self-reflection practices are recognized by teachers and researchers alike as powerful opportunities for students to become invested in their learning and to deepen their understandings (Andrade, 2003; Black & William, 1998; Bruce, 2001; Paris & Ayres, 1994; Perrone, 1991; Seidel et al., 1997; Stiggins, 2002; Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991; Veenema, Hetland, & Chalfen, 1997; Walker, 2003; Walters, Seidel, & Gardner, 1994; Wiggins, 1989; Zessoules & Gardner, 1991). Indeed, in a time when standardization and its consequent depersonalization threatens the basic fabric of school life, authentic assessment practices—such as self-assessment—bring

teachers and students into conversation and are key experiences in sustaining the essential relationships of classroom life. In thinking about these practices, I have long wondered how students understand and make meaning of this kind of school work. How do they understand its importance in their learning? What purposes do they feel it serves in the context of their classroom?

In order to address these questions, I went to the "Adventurers,"<sup>1</sup> a combined first/second grade classroom, where students engaged in self-assessment work on a regular basis. I went to watch, listen, and understand students' thinking about self-assessment in school. In the following pages, I use the portraiture method (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) to illustrate life in the Adventurers' Classroom as well as discussions with two individual students, Lex and Andrea, and their teachers, Rosie and Ron. I close with

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1. All names in this portrait are pseudonyms, including names of the school and classroom.

the implications of this portrait on our understandings of self-assessment, reflection, and the relationships that embed these practices.

### Context

The leading research on self-assessment and self-evaluation demonstrates that these practices improve student learning, augment cognitive understandings, and bolster student achievement (i.e., Andrade, 2001; Black & William, 1998; Paris & Ayres, 1994; Ross, Hogabaum-Gray, & Rolheiser, 2002; Stiggins, 2002; van Kraayenoord & Paris, 1997). Similarly, research on student self-regulation and self-efficacy suggests that student engagement increases when students' metacognitive awareness improves (Schunk, 1990, 1996; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997; Walker, 2003). While these studies locate the uses of and need for student self-assessment, the literature does not reflect the students' perspectives on this type of work in school. Authorizing students' voices as key informants in understanding the learning experience has strong empirical and theoretical support in current research (Coles, 1990; Cook-Sather, 2002; Duckworth, 2001; Gallas, 1998; Katch, 2001; Paley, 1986, 1999). Rooted in this student-centered research tradition, the following study begins with the proposition that students' perspectives on self-assessment offer us a unique view of how children make meaning of reflective assessments which are inherently embedded in the relationships of classroom life (Raider-Roth, 2000, in press). Additionally, this research draws on John Dewey's theory of reflection and the importance of offering students the opportunity to make connections between present experience and prior knowledge (Cuffaro, 1995; Dewey, 1910/1933). This process of reflection requires that students observe and describe their experience, take "intelligent action," and analyze the nature and consequences of these experiences

(Rodgers, 2002). It is the idea of making connection between self and experience that is central to this study of self-reflection and self-assessment.

### The Portraiture Method

#### Overview

Guided by the portraiture method (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), I sought to collect data that would help me understand the rich texture of the Adventurers' classroom life, the many layers of the reflective curriculum as it was viewed by both the teachers and students, and individual children's deep thinking about self-assessment. The portraiture method begins with a stance of searching for goodness in the research context. Rather than honing in on failures, the portrait seeks to highlight the strengths in the environment, thereby providing a context for understanding the tensions and difficulties (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9). The portraiture must "combine empirical and aesthetic description," "focus on the convergence of narrative and analysis," address "broader audiences beyond the academy," hold to "its standard of authenticity rather than reliability and validity," and be "explicit [in its] recognition of the use of the self as the primary research instrument for documenting and interpreting the perspectives and experiences of the people and the cultures being studied" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, pp. 13-14). These exacting standards required that I spend many hours in the Adventurers' classroom observing, documenting carefully, and interacting with the children and teachers in a thoughtful and reflective manner.

#### The Standards of Authenticity

Eliot Eisner (1998, 2003) details this standard of authenticity into three discrete "sources of evidence" necessary to render a qualitative aesthetic study as credible:

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“structural corroboration, consensual validation, and referential adequacy” (1998, p. 110). I addressed these evidence sources in each of the stages of the development of this portrait: the data collection, analysis, and writing. By “structural corroboration,” Eisner argues that there must be multiple data sources that can support or contradict each other and that are considered thoroughly in rendering an interpretation of the evidence. In this sense, there must be a clear “trail of evidence” that reveals the path of the researcher (Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995). To meet this standard, I began by observing the children at work on recording and reflection as well as other school work such as Project Time, Quiet Reading, and Morning Meeting. Sitting by their sides, I then talked with children who were in the process of working on their recording and reflections. I also interviewed a number of children in a more formal manner about their thoughts regarding recording and reflection. With the children’s permission, I read many of their “reflection books” (folders that contained a cumulative record of all their recordings and reflections) and journals. The teachers, Rosie, Ron, and Ella, invited me to observe and participate in Morning Meetings that were reflective in nature or that might give me insight into the children’s thoughts about reflection. I met with the teachers at the beginning of the project to explain my questions and to find out how this project could be helpful to them. I also interviewed them separately as the project drew to a close. I spoke informally with one parent who expressed strong interest in the project and her daughter’s reactions to the self-reflective work.

I recorded my experiences with an audiocassette recorder and by writing copious notes both during and after my observations. This method calls on the researcher to make explicit how her self shapes her understandings and interpretations of the phenomenon in the research

context as well as in the selection and description of the emerging themes (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 13). I, therefore, wrote reflections of each research interaction in order to disentangle the world I observed from my collections of opinion, experience, and interpretations that contributed to my research stance.

The second source of evidence described by Eisner is that of “consensual validation.” By this he means that there is some agreement among “competent others that the description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics of an educational situation are right” (1998, p. 112). For my purposes, the primary sources of agreement needed to be the teachers and students in the Adventurers’ classroom. To this end, I gave the teachers copies of the portrait and asked for feedback, especially for places where they felt resonance and dissonance with the descriptions and interpretations. I also described what I saw to the students in the context of the interviews, discussions, and observations and asked for confirmation and disagreement with my observations. Finally, I shared this portrait with both teaching and research colleagues to elicit their understandings, agreements, and disagreements.

Eisner describes the third evidence source as “referential adequacy.” A work is “referentially adequate when readers are able to see what they would have missed without the critic’s observations” (1998, p. 114). In order to do this, the researcher must unearth the complexity embedded in the focus of study, thereby rendering deeper “human perception and understanding” (1998, p. 113). In simple terms, the reader must be able to see and understand in the text what the researcher saw in the field. To this end, the researcher’s descriptions must be thick (Geertz, 1973) and vibrant, creating images, sensations, and experiences that the reader can apprehend. In considering referential adequacy, the standard of authenticity rings loudest. It is this standard that guided the recording of what I

saw, the notes I took, the reflections I recorded and the writing of the portrait itself. In this effort, I describe the details of the classroom artwork, an observation of a classroom “Morning Meeting,” up-close interviews with two children, and excerpts of student writing. Setting the stage for readers to experience the depth and richness of the Adventurers’ classroom is my paramount goal. In seeking to bring forth the “goodness” of this classroom (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), I aim to illustrate the complexity and nuance that underlies children’s experience of reflective self-assessment.

### Revisiting the Adventurers’ Classroom

The first day I enter the Adventurers’ classroom, there is a busy silence. With books in hand, children are comfortably sprawled throughout the room. I hear a gentle bell ring and “Quiet Reading,” a half-hour of silent reading, comes to an end. In this sunny room, whose shelves and corners are cluttered and brimming with the possibility of creation and learning, some children slam their books shut and toss them into their cubbies. Other children keep the pages of their books close to their face as they slowly walk to their cubbies which sit in the center of the room. Rosie and Ron teach the Adventurers, a lively combination of nineteen first and second grade children. Ella, a student teacher, has also joined the Adventurers’ community this spring. The Adventurers’ classroom is one of three first and second grade classrooms at the Forum School, an independent elementary school in the Northeast.

As Rosie gathers the children, I look around. I taught in this room for three years, and while it feels familiar, it also feels strange. The orange-rust corduroy couch has gratefully been covered in luscious violet corduroy. The scratched white filing cabinets which hold the children’s portfolios still wear a sign written in my handwriting, though it is

now faded and torn. While I experience this strange familiarity, I am also amazed by the artwork that is proudly displayed throughout the room. Child life-size paper bodies hang above from strings tied between the fluorescent light fixtures. On one side, the bodies are painted with bright colors, expressive faces, and bold movements reflecting each courageous attempt at a self-portrait. On the other side of the bodies, white cardboard bones are glued on, some carefully, and others more haphazard, reflecting the fall and winter curriculum about the human body which included a section on the skeletal construction of the body. These paper self-portraits dangle happily across the classroom. Hanging on the wall that defines the “math area” is a breathtaking display of paper quilts that the children created during a recent math study. One-inch graph paper divided into nine squares provided the template for the children to design repeating patterns. The results are a cross between mosaic, stained glass, and Amish quilt motifs which are strong in their blues, greens, purples, reds, and yellows.

“Come to the meeting area,” Rosie calls out softly, referring to the open space between the cubbies and the reading area that is defined by a fading orange/brown oriental-style rug. She tells the children that they need to get ready for “recording.” Recording is a daily event in the Adventurers’ room. It is a time for the children to sit quietly, think about their day, and write a sentence about an event or project. They are then asked to write a question or comment about their chosen topic. A single sheet of paper, housed in their royal blue work folders, provides space for a week’s worth of recording. On Fridays, the children look over these recordings to help them complete their weekly “reflections.” These reflections ask the children to take stock of their week and think about times that were pleasurable and the parts that were more difficult. Often the reflection sheets ask questions

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such as: “What was one thing you enjoyed this week?” “What was a challenge for you this week?” “What do you want to work on next week?” These two rituals form a centerpiece of Rosie’s and Ron’s reflective curriculum. It is this reflective curriculum—one that offers children the rare opportunity to step back and think about their relationship with their work and play—that brings me to the Adventurers.

I listen as Rosie reminds the children that at the end of the week, they will have the opportunity to share their recordings with the class. As Rosie discusses this sharing, I remember that she and Ron told me that they feel this end-of-the-week forum for sharing is very important in providing an audience for this work and helping children feel that this work has a purpose. Rosie then tells the children that after they have recorded, they need to work on “responsibilities” and then make a choice. Each week, the children find a list of responsibilities in their blue folders that they must complete during the week. The responsibilities vary from “meet with your math group” to “play with a new friend at recess” to “write in your journal” to “work on your transportation scale drawing.” Each day the children have one or two extended “Project Times” during which they can work on responsibilities and make choices. During one Project Time, Ashley, a wiry effusive eight year old with a distinctly raspy voice, tells me that she is almost done with all her responsibilities. I am surprised because it is only Tuesday and these responsibilities are intended to last for the whole week. She tells me that she likes to get them all done as soon as possible so that she can make choices for the rest of the week. Not like other children, she tells me, who do only one responsibility each project time and then make a choice. Her comment reminds me how hard Rosie and Ron have worked to individualize the classroom so that each child is working at her own pace.

As Rosie dismisses the children, the room is filled with chatter, quickly moving bodies, laughter, and the noise of children getting settled. I notice that many children are scribbling forcefully with pencil on their folders. Spread around the circular wooden table near the cubbies, Violet and Nick sit with their recording sheets, thinking quietly. Brian joins them. Violet puts one knee on the table, and pokes a pencil into a purple blob of plasticene.

“What did we do today?” she says in a sing-song voice. She looks at Ella, a tall college senior with striking blond hair, who has just approached the table.

“I don’t know what we did today,” Violet moans.

“Do you want to look at the schedule?” Ella suggests, referring to the daily schedule written on the blackboard.

Furrowing her brow, Violet replies, “I don’t know what to write about.” She begins to swing a short gold-colored chain.

I notice Abigail who is sitting at the rectangular wooden table under the window. She is focused on her page, chewing on a pencil. Violet jumps up from the table and stomps over to Rosie who is standing in the meeting area. Four children are now huddled around Rosie demanding help. While Rosie helps Stacey, Violet begins to draw on the blackboard. Realizing that she has to wait, she runs back to her place at the table. She and Brian begin to play with the purple plasticene, discussing the various creations that can be made with it. I notice that many children have already begun their “responsibilities.” Just as Violet begins to write, Abigail climbs over the back of Violet’s chair (while Violet is sitting in it!) in order to get by. Violet looks up to watch Abigail, who is plastering the plasticene on the bottom of her shoe to see the patterns that it makes. Intrigued, Violet tries it on her shoe and they compare patterns. Ella joins the group and asks them to focus on their work.

“I don’t know what I did!” Violet complains.

“What did you do this morning?” Ella gently inquires. Abigail plants herself next to Violet.

“I don’t know what to write,” Violet wails.

“I can help you,” Ella says with a comforting tone, and she crouches down next to Violet. Very soon, Violet hops up from the table, shoving her blue folder in her cubby. Clearly, she is finished with this task.

As I watch this scene I wonder what is making this task so difficult for Violet. And she is not alone. I noticed that it took Brian thirty-five minutes to finish his recording. Meanwhile, at the blue rectangular table underneath the window, Andrea sat totally immersed in her work. And after her initial scribbling, Ashley finished her recording in a few short minutes. I am puzzled. What makes this task hard for Violet, while relatively straightforward for Ashley? And are my impressions—that it was hard for Violet and easy for Ashley—correct? Most prominent in my mind are the questions: What does this work mean to them? Do the children like it? Do they think it is important? And, most importantly, what purpose do they think it serves?

### *Why Am I Here?*

I am intimately connected to this reflective curriculum. When I taught in the Adventurers’ classroom, I helped create the forms, systems, and rituals that support this kind of reflective thinking—the thinking that is called upon when children are given the opportunity to step back from their work and think about their thinking, their process of creation, and their product. As a teacher, I learned a great deal from this reflective work. I vividly remember one January evening as I read through Mia’s weekly reflections and discovered that, while in October she wrote how hard math was for her, by December she wrote proudly about her mathematical accomplishments. Mia was a competent and

private child and I had not realized the extent of her early struggles. Her reflections had allowed me to see her dynamic growth during that fall. There were always children, however, who did not enjoy doing this reflective work and who found it truly difficult and said they hated it. There were always children who complained that it was hard. It is these children who inspire this project. I want to understand what this kind of work means to them. What makes them hate it? Is it the task itself or the kind of thinking that is required of them?

I had interviewed three children in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, all graduates of the Adventurers’ classroom, to talk to them about their experiences with self-reflective work. All three spoke about the self-revealing quality of self-reflections and the dilemma about telling the truth, or rather, how much truth to reveal in this kind of work. They spoke of the delicate balance between wanting to reveal their thoughts so that their teachers could be responsive to their needs, and yet being afraid of revealing too much for fear of being exposed or not being responded to. They spoke of wanting to be able to see how they have improved over time and needing the support for doing so. These older children inspired me to return to the beginning—to the children’s first formal exposure to self-reflective work. I needed to spend time with children who are in the thick of this intensive reflective curriculum to understand how they make meaning of this work. I wanted to see if the themes expressed by the older school children found their roots in the hearts and minds of six, seven, and eight year olds.

### *The Adventurers Community: Thinking About Friends*

Early one Tuesday morning I enter the Adventurers’ room as they are gathering for Morning Meeting. Many parents are giving their children last minute kisses and a few linger at the

doorway, hoping to listen to the beginning of what promises to be an interesting discussion. Rosie is writing a message in bright green marker on the poster-sized writing tablet that serves as the focal point of the meeting. She writes:

Hello Adventurers. Today is Tuesday,  
 April 2, 1996.  
 Today we will have community  
 meeting.  
 How do you become a friend?  
 How do you work out problems with  
 friends?

I am sitting with great anticipation as the meeting begins. Rosie has posed tough questions. Rosie asks for a volunteer to read the message, and the children begin to whisper and wriggle as they consider the questions. Rosie leaves great spaces of silence for the children to think, and slowly the children begin to talk openly about their strategies for making friends. They are tentative, yet willing to share the struggles that their friendships present. I pay close attention when Lex, a tall child with a bold voice, speaks about trouble he's been experiencing on the soccer field. Stacey, an effervescent girl with light brown bangs, parchment-colored skin, and a ponytail that bounces as she speaks, offers him advice for solving his problem. In a voice barely louder than a whisper, Nick agrees with Lex and adds that recently people have not been so nice to each other on the soccer field. I watch as Abigail, a child with penetrating dark brown eyes and pale pink cheeks, leans forward to listen but does not join the conversation. Andrea, a good friend of Abigail's, suggests that you should try to solve the problem, but if you have trouble you should call the teacher. Many other children share ideas about how they have solved problems with friends. Suresh, a child with dark olive skin who sits with his knees drawn up to his chin, once again suggests that if you really have trouble you should call a teacher. Rosie remarks that

she has noticed that different children have different feelings about when a teacher is needed and that it is important for each child to know when things are getting out of hand. The children are listening to Rosie carefully, as if they are trying to figure out if they know what that point is for them.

### *Rosie*

As I watch Rosie teach, I feel myself missing my work with her. For two years, Rosie and I taught together, complementing and challenging each other's practice. At forty-six years of age, Rosie is a flowing, smiling woman. With shoulder length hair that is colored now in auburn shades, Rosie walks through the doorway in blue jeans that are torn at the knee, and an olive-green long sleeve T-shirt. Daisy earrings rest on her earlobes, reminding me that she and her nineteen-year-old daughter Sarah share clothes, shoes, and jewelry. I wonder whose earrings these are. That day, Rosie is at her most casual; it is school vacation and we are meeting in the quiet classroom so I can interview her. In her school life, Rosie prefers to wear longish comfortable dresses. Rosie's cream colored hands are generally decorated with paint, pastels, or chalk dust, revealing her most recent creative endeavor. Rosie is an artist of many media. She is most lovingly a painter. Leaves, teapots, stars, spirals, and moons are often her subjects, while paper, wooden boxes, and most recently, chairs are her canvases. The children are drawn to Rosie's love of creation and to the freedom she brings to her art. Rosie is the most veteran teacher at the school and has been there for thirteen of the school's fourteen years of existence. Both Ron and the children have told me that the enactment of the recording and reflection curriculum—designing and experimenting with the formats of the recording and reflection sheets, facilitating the class meetings about recording and reflection—is primarily Rosie's responsibility.

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**Ron**

I do not know Ron as well as Rosie. I met him when he visited the school during the months before I left. He was getting ready for his transition to become the next Adventurers teacher and Rosie's new partner. Ron, an athletic man of medium height, is thirty-two years old with short, graying hair and a ruddy complexion. Having taught in day-care for eight years, Ron comes to elementary school teaching with a strong understanding of early childhood. Sporting gold wire rim glasses, Ron's eyes can look hazel and green at the same time. They seem to reveal a man who can be serious and jovial from one moment to the next. One of Ron's most prominent characteristics is his dry, and often sarcastic, sense of humor. What amazes me is how the children understand this humor and respond to him in kind. Ron is also a highly sensitive teacher who reminds the children that learning to read did not come easily to him and that children learn at different paces. In reading some of the children's journals, a composition book in which they write weekly to a teacher about their thoughts and concerns, I am struck by Ron's honesty about his feelings. Ron is also firm about setting limits with the children while respecting their autonomy. Ron has many questions about the reflection curriculum. While he sees a clear purpose to the work, he is skeptical about its enactment. When I hear Ron complain about Rosie's piles of papers and ongoing projects scattered across the classroom, I am reminded that now, in the second year of their partnership, Rosie and Ron have created a successful team—a partnership that allows for mutual support and critique.

I also sense Rosie and Ron's success as a team from the thoughtful and relaxed atmosphere that fills the classroom. Rosie and Ron have told me that they think this is an unusual group of children because they are highly reflective about themselves as individuals and they have also

coalesced well as a community. I sense this quality from the comfort in which the children exchange ideas and share their experiences throughout the day. Rosie and Ron have worked hard to help create this unusual community—one where children feel truly free to be themselves.

**Being Themselves**

One Tuesday morning, I walk into the Adventurers' classroom and notice a new sign that has been taped to the dusty white entry shelf. This shelf holds the wide-ruled composition book where children sign in, to mark that they have arrived in school.

Next to the book is an index-card sized sign, written in a child's whimsical handwriting: "DANGER! Creativity Zone. Do not enter unless you are creating something."

I smile at this sign, not knowing which child is the author. But I am thinking that this public declaration represents the culture of this classroom. I am struck by the joyful, humorous tone that urges each child to create. Later, when I ask Rosie about the sign, she giggles and says, "Isn't it great?" and informs me that Rachel was the author. This freedom of expression (both to write such a sign and tape it to a piece of furniture) is important to Rosie and Ron.

One Friday morning during reflection work, Ron finds Abigail standing and leaning over a table, while writing carefully. He gently suggests that a chair could help her work and brings her a short wooden chair. Abigail grins at him and as soon as he leaves, she jumps up and skips over to a tattered blue sign that hangs on the side of the cubbies. In neat teacher-made handwriting, the sign is titled, "What you need to write." Listed underneath are: "your purple writing folder, a pencil, paper, ideas, a good place to work, a good surface to write on." Below the word "pencil," Abigail carefully inscribes "a chair." In watching this scene, I am struck by Abigail's freedom to make her mark and

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contribute to the evolving creation of this sign.

When I later tell Rosie this story (she had not had the good fortune to watch the scene unfold) she recounts another similar story. She brings me over to the math shelves whose contents—geoboards, money, playing cards—were precisely labeled by the children. She also excitedly points out two rocks that were recently placed in the wooden planter filled with healthy purple pansies. One rock reads, “In honor of Brownie, the lady bug. Died April 12, 1996” and the other, “In honor of B. T. Little. Found Dead. Friday, April 12, 1996.”

“I love this,” she chuckles. The first spring ladybugs had died in the classroom last week, and the children decided that they needed a proper burial. I think it is the spontaneity, freedom, and ingenuity that Rosie loves. I am impressed by the children’s real comfort in the classroom, by their freedom to make every aspect—the curriculum, the schedule, the materials, the furniture—their own. In this environment, children work hard to find their own place and to articulate in one form or another their unique view of the world and themselves. The reflection curriculum is a key piece in this work.

### Talking With the Children

#### *Lex*

On the day I am to interview Lex, I notice that the breathtaking paper quilts are gone. In their place are the children’s recently completed scale drawings, rendered carefully with colored pencils and black felt-tip pen. The children have culminated their study of the body and are now studying transportation. I am drawn to Lex’s drawing of the Dodge RAM truck. It is one of the most detailed drawings of a truck I have ever seen a child produce. I have worked with Lex a few times and have learned that he has a vast wealth of knowledge about trucks, including a memorized record of their structures,

statistics, and performance ratings. In fact, most of his letters to Ron in his journal focus on trucks. He loves the class’s current study of land, water, and air transportation vehicles because he is so knowledgeable and can serve as a resident expert. I make a mental note to tell him that I think his drawing is amazing.

Sitting through the Morning Meeting, I think about the most pressing questions to ask him in our interview. As the meeting draws to a close, Lex raises his hand and says he wants to ask me a question. He asks why I am only studying the children in school. He suggests that I might learn more if I study what they do after school, like in his Kung Fu class or Ashley’s clay class. I am surprised and impressed by Lex’s question and hypothesis. I can see that he is trying to understand the purpose of my work in the classroom. In his bold and thoughtful manner, he recognizes that I am interested in understanding the Adventurers’ perspectives on their world. I can see that Lex is a reflective child—a child who thinks deeply about the world that he sees and tries to make meaning of his observations and interactions. I am glad I have the chance to interview him. Early on, Rosie and Ron suggested that I spend some time with Lex. Their suggestion stemmed from the paradox that while Lex is indeed a highly reflective child, he struggles with the recording and reflection curriculum. When they first described this tension that Lex holds, I knew I had much to learn from Lex. I wanted to understand this paradox.

Lex is eight and half years old with fair skin, pink cheeks, and straight sandy brown hair that rounds his face and hangs long in the back. He is one of the tallest and oldest members of the class. Often dressed in sweat pants and T-shirts, Lex exudes the comfort of a child who has been at the school for a couple of years. Rosie has remarked that he does everything with a dramatic flair. Indeed, I observed many of his comments in Morning Meetings had a performance

quality to them—a pound of his fist, an English accent, a sophisticated turn of phrase.

When I interview Lex, we begin by talking about his insightful question from the Morning Meeting. Our discussion quickly turns to the topic of reflection. I begin by asking him if he thinks recording and reflection are important.

“Well, sometimes yeah, and sometimes no,” he hesitantly replies. After a moment’s pause he resolutely adds, “Well, actually, I never really think it’s a good thing to do. ... Well, it’s like a waste of energy, it takes too long, it makes me uncomfortable.”

I ask him what he means by “uncomfortable.”

“The writing part, I hate writing,” he says quickly.

When I worked with Lex on his reflection the previous week, he had complained bitterly about writing. I am interested in finding out if it is the act of writing that makes reflection uncomfortable or whether there is something about the reflective thinking that is discomfoting. We spend a lot of time talking about the aspects of reflection that are so hard for him.

Lex says that the Friday reflection work is harder than the recording because “reflections have a lot more questions, not to mention, not to mention really hard questions.”

I want to understand what he considers to be “really hard questions.”

“Like what was hard for you, what was easy for you, stuff like that, and especially the why’s.” Lex is referring to the question “Why?” that is often tacked on to the Friday reflection questions (e.g., “What was easy for you this week? Why?” or “What was hard for you? Why?”). I have heard many children complain about the “why” questions. Both Stacey and Rebecca complained about these questions to me in our very first conversation. I quickly recall Ron recounting that he and Michael, a child who made sure to tell me

that he was Irish, had a long talk about the difficulty of the “why” question. “Why” questions seem to imply that a reason exists and are questions that can be overwhelming for children. I ask if Lex has a sense of what makes these questions hard.

“I don’t have an idea of what does it, it’s just, it’s a lot, well, the only thing I’ve thought of is that it’s very hard to do,” Lex answers.

I sense that Lex has thought about this and decide to pursue this topic further, hoping I won’t frustrate him. “Do you have a sense of what makes it hard?” I ask. I feel myself longing to ask him *why* it is hard! His reply stops me in my tracks.

“Well, it was always like unthinkable, what it is. What the answer is,” he says matter-of-factly.

The work “unthinkable” sticks in my throat. What does that mean? What does that feel like to a child? It sounds painful. I tell him I’m trying to think about what makes a “why” question unthinkable.

He replies immediately and clearly as if he doesn’t get why I don’t get it. “I don’t know, it’s, well, it’s sort of unthinkable because it’s just, like, so so hard to think of the answer.”

I remember that Ron has told me that a number of kids in the class hate the “why” question because they feel that there is a right answer to this type of question. “Some kids need to have right answers,” he told me. I wonder if this is part of the issue for Lex. I follow this association and ask, “Do you think you are supposed to come up with the right answer and ...”

Lex interrupts me for the first time in the interview. “Cause yeah, I don’t think you’re allowed to lie.”

I take a deep breath at this point. The issue of telling the truth and lying came up repeatedly in my interviews with the older children (Raider-Roth, 2000). I was taken aback by this theme. As a teacher, I never wondered if the children were telling the truth. I never considered that they might be

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struggling with telling the truth, how much truth to tell, or trying to decide how true their answers were. When I shared the children's truth-telling dilemma with Rosie, she wondered if the "truth" was something the children felt deep inside but could not articulate.

[The children] may sense that there's some deep truth that needs to be uncovered but they haven't gotten to it ... That they somehow feel like there's something to be said about it that would be a revelation of sorts and they can't quite get at it.

I feel compelled to pursue this issue with Lex. I ask him to say more about what he means about lying.

"Well, because you're not allowed to lie anyways, in your recording or out of your recording?" he offers hesitantly.

I tell him that I hear him saying that reflections are hard because there is some right answer he is supposed to come up with. And there is a right answer because he is not supposed to lie. I tell him I'm wondering what would make an answer right and what would make it wrong.

"It would be wrong if, like, you just, like, put something down you did not know about." He seems to be thinking aloud.

"What do you mean 'didn't know about?'" I ask.

"Like something that, like, was not easy for you or was not hard for you. Just putting it down to be done with," he clarifies.

I am beginning to understand what he is saying. A wrong answer would be one in which he did not write about who he was but that filled up the space just to get the work done. He explained later that it would be wrong to write down that soccer was easy for him, when it was actually swinging on the swings that was easy, just because it was the first thing that came into his mind and he wanted to get the

assignment done. When I tell him that I think I understand, he adds a new twist.

"Putting down the right answer. Like, it, you know that it was good." He seems immersed in his thinking. By using the word "good," he adds a moral judgment. As I think about the "goodness" of right answers, Lex tells me that doing the work wrong, or bad, or with a lie, is easy because you know what to write. But doing it right, or good, is hard "because it's very hard to think of a right answer."

I think carefully about Lex's ideas: The right answer is the good answer, which is the truth, and that is very hard to think about. I wonder what it feels like to be eight and half years old, on a Friday morning, with this heavy moral weight on your shoulders as you try to think about and answer reflection questions. I must try to understand this feeling.

"For an 8 1/2 year old, what does it feel like to be sitting there trying to come up with the right answer?" I ask slowly.

"Very, very uncomfortable!" Lex emphatically responds.

And so we have returned to the "uncomfortable" feeling. I have now learned that it is not only the act of writing that can be uncomfortable, but also the act of reflective thinking itself.

### *Andrea*

Andrea has a different perspective on reflection. Like Lex, she is a strongly reflective child who thinks deeply about her work and herself. Andrea, however, likes the reflective curriculum of the Adventurers. Andrea is new to the school this year, having moved to the northeast from the West Coast in the fall. She has integrated herself well into the Adventurers' world and is an eager and active participant in the class. Andrea is tall and willowy, pale complexion, blond bangs, and a long braid that hangs part way down her back. She is often dressed in flowered leggings, a turtleneck, and sweater. I first notice Andrea sitting on the floor, leaning

against the tall white book case in the reading area, reading her reflection book. Until this moment, I had not seen any other child read their reflection book, and I am curious about this choice. I sit down next to her and ask if I can join her reading. She politely agrees. Unsure whether she wants me to join her or not, I begin tentatively. I ask her if she would like to read aloud to me, as reading to a teacher is a common activity in this classroom. She smiles and quickly starts reading aloud from her recording sheet that week.<sup>2</sup>

Monday: Today we had writing workshop. We shared writing.

Questions and Comments: We had two schedules.

Tuesday: Today we had a fire drill. it was my ferist (first) fire drill here.

Questions and Comments: It was very scarey.

Wednesday: We had Adventurers Supreme, I played with Violet at Recess.

Questions and Comments: I have had a grat (great) day.

Thursday: Today the Land grup (group) went on a filed (field) trip and we saw Limos.

Questions and Comments: It was grat (great)!

I ask Andrea if she likes doing this work and she answers with a definite "yes." I ask what she likes about it and she explains that she likes to "look back" at things and that she saves all kind of things. I ask her what kinds of things she saves. She begins to tell me compelling stories:

Well, we did this ... thing with *Green Eggs and Ham* ... in preschool ... and well I have ... this thing from preschool and it's called my "me" book and ... I love it because ... it has this doll, this Indian doll sort of thing from a magazine I cut out, but I can't find it. But I want to cause I love it.

I am struck by her detailed memory. I am thinking about how Ron has mentioned to me that he thinks some people can remember in detail like Andrea and some people, like himself, cannot. I think about Abigail, who often writes in her journal that she forgets what she has done. I wonder how Andrea's and Abigail's relationships with memory affect their relationship with reflection work. Andrea draws me back to her story.

"My mom has a book that she was doing when she was a little girl. It's the exact same book. It's a hard special copy. It's the exact same book."

Andrea's stories tell me that she treasures her mother's souvenirs of childhood. I can't help but wonder if her passion for saving and remembering is related to this legacy that Andrea's mother shares with her. As Andrea's stories continue, I learn about her mother, her friend Veronica on the West Coast, and her dogs. Maintaining her connection to the West Coast seems to be important, and she expresses great sadness about having left her home and friends. She tells me of her recent trip to France with her mom. I flash back to a Friday morning meeting in which Andrea describes a mystery that she was solving with Casey and Abigail during recess. Andrea strikes me as a worldly seven and a half year old who holds on to the mysteries and joys of childhood as well as to the strains and sorrows that one hopes children can avoid.

Later, when she shares her journal with me, I am moved by the freedom with which she writes about pain of loss that accompanies moving and death. In writing to Ron about the death of her dog, she

2. In quoting children's writing, I have maintained their original spellings to help capture the essence of their writing. I have included parenthetical translations to conventional spelling as needed. All written excerpts are quoted with children's and parents' permission.

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responds to his suggestion that “Sometimes it helps to remember special things about someone who has died.” I am surprised by her response. She writes:

Dear Ron, My Dogs NaMe was guy. It DoesINT help to think about guy. It Makes it wers! (worse) I miss guy aLot! guy was a very good Dog! he DiD NoT BiTe. and VeRonica was a very Nice Friend! I miss Them BoeTh alot! I am very very sad!!!!!! I hope I can see veronica soon!!!! ...  
Love, Andrea

As I read this letter I learn that Andrea, who seems to do a lot of remembering and often thinks that remembering is important and joyful, has also encountered some of the pain that can be involved in memory. I am perplexed, however, by her adamant stance that remembering can make things worse. When I interview her, I ask her if she likes recording and reflection.

She says she likes it most of the time because “Well, you can look at your writing at the end of the year and see how much you got better at it.” I ask her about the purpose of recording and reflection.

“To remember what you did,” she says succinctly. So while memory can be painful, and perhaps not helpful in all cases, Andrea clearly thinks it is important.

When I rephrase my question and ask her what her reasons are for doing it, she responds: “To remember it and (long pause) it’s so fun. IT’S SO FUN!” she says with a rise of excitement in her voice. Her blue eyes widen and dance mischievously as she reads to me a recording from the previous week. She reads to me how she had fooled Roselyn, the school’s director, on April Fools’ Day by giving her a book that was blank inside. After she read that entry, she giggled breathlessly as she tried to describe Roselyn’s reaction when she opened the book.

I listen and watch Andrea tell this story. She seems to be reliving the pleasure of the joke. Seeing her capacity to recreate the past, I begin to understand. If remembering a happy event can elicit such pleasure in the present, then recalling a sad experience can elicit profound sadness. No wonder she felt that thinking about her dog made things worse. In this interview, Andrea helps me understand that perhaps one reason some children dislike reflection is their reluctance to re-experience sad or difficult events. Maybe that’s why some children particularly dislike the question, “What was hard for you this week?” If a child struggled with their reading that week, it would make sense that they do not want to re-experience that struggle. I also understand Andrea’s joy in reading her reflections. When I read her reflection book, I notice that she often chooses to write about episodes of happiness, pride, or puzzlement. She provides herself many opportunities to relive her excitement and accomplishments.

### On Looking Back

My conversations with Andrea urge me to think deeply about the notion of “looking back”—of being able to physically look at artifacts created in the past. In my conversations with the Adventurers, the primary reason the children gave for doing recording and reflection work is looking back. Lex said the purpose of recording and reflection in his mind was that, “Like, say I was in sixth grade, I could, like, think of the difference ... [in] my handwriting, [and] my ability to think of, to think something up.”

I am curious to know what makes looking back important to Andrea and her classmates. Lex’s comments give me one clue—to see their own growth over time. I ask this question of the children when I lead a Morning Meeting.

Andrea raises her hand and says that you can look back and show your children what you did when you were a kid. This

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comment confirms my hunch that her mother's childhood treasures inspire Andrea's love of saving and memory.

Christopher raises his hand. This is the first time I have heard him speak in meeting. "You can look back and see what you were like in second grade."

"You can look back and see what were fun activities and do them again," Violet pipes in.

"The good old days!" Ann sings out.

Nick raises his hand and quietly adds, "If you are an adult and you don't remember what you did as a kid, and you are frustrated, then you can look back."

Brian ties it all together when he adds, "When [you're] older you can see if you can do it better."

Later I ponder this anticipated nostalgia that the children express. They support Andrea's notion that it is important to be able to look back. The reasons vary but seeing how they have grown and changed is paramount. Hand-in-hand with this idea is having a way to remember what they are like as first and second graders. No one mentions that they might want to see how they stay the same as they grow, or in the words of a kindergarten teacher at the school, "how they become more themselves" over time. I wonder if this idea, which is essentially the unfolding of their personality, lurks behind the notion of having a record of what they are like at this age.

When I interview Rosie, we talk about looking back and what she thinks it means. She, too, sees it as one purpose of this work. She underscores "[The] looking back piece, having over time a record of their year, and what they've done." In trying to understand the children's experience, she offers her own:

I probably parallel them in kind of being able to look back on their recording, and it's interesting that sometimes I think that they take on more significance when you look

back at them than when you're in the middle of it.

I understand Rosie to be saying that when she reads their recording over time, they seem to take on greater meaning. My experience with Mia, the budding mathematician, echoes that feeling. This sense of an evolving meaning—that is, the meaning that is created over time—helps me understand the reason that the children do not talk about the purpose in the actual act of writing the recordings and reflections. The children are still too much "in the middle" of the process. As a teacher, I felt that the actual act of recording and reflection helped them make space to think about their work and play and recognize the thinking and energy that went into their work. It gave them a chance to step back from their work, take in the complexity of their work and play, and consider next steps, questions, reactions—an act that Robert Kegan (personal communication, 1995) labeled as forming a relationship with their work.

In our interview, Rosie speaks eloquently about the blurry distinction between the over-time effect of this kind of work and the impact of the actual "doing." As she talks, I am listening carefully because one of Rosie's greatest gifts is being able to get inside the experience of children.

So many of the things that they do are like that ... They do it and it doesn't have to have any ultimate other meaning, that ... keeps. I think it does build but not in something that they necessarily are conscious of ... It's about the doing ... The act of doing, it is itself.

She refers to the tombstones that the children made for the ladybugs, and that the purpose of it was found in the actual creation—searching for the right rock, deciding what to write on the stone, the burial, and placing the rock in the newly

created ladybug cemetery. Rosie continues to explain, wanting to clarify the tensions between the actual act of creation and the accumulation of meaning over time. I intuitively know this aspect of Rosie's pedagogy, though I have never heard her articulate it before.

One hopes that the ... recording and reflection build on one day after the other day, year by year; that they have a sense of themselves as being able to look back. And that doing it every day is a validation ... The contradictory part is the separate act, and maybe it's not contradictory but it appears that way at first, the separate act of just doing it ... writing down something ... and taking that time out.

In Rosie's words, I understand the desire to validate children's work, day after day, so that they have a cumulative sense that they can look back and validate their own work. I also grasp the sacredness of each moment that a child stands back to appreciate and understand her own work.

### **Conclusion: The Centrality of Classroom Relationships**

The final day of my field work is Friday, the last day of school before spring break. Children are spread throughout the building—in the halls, auditorium/gym, front office, computer room—scrubbing and cleaning. This community spring cleaning helps the children get ready for vacation and bristles the exploding energy that is inevitable on the day before vacation. As I leave the building, I bump into Sophie and Alice, two sixth graders. I enjoy seeing them—they were in my first class at the Forum School and I had a particularly close relationship with them.

"You've been here a lot these days." Sophie says suspiciously. "Are you teaching here again?"

"No," I reply. "I'm doing a research project in the Adventurers." I explain that

I'm studying recording and reflection. I ask if they remember this work.

"Yeah," Sophie replies with a touch of disdain. "We lied sometimes, you know. Besides, it was pretty dumb."

"It was kind of dumb, but maybe it was important." Alice offers.

We talk about truth and importance in school work and I tell them that I want to interview them about this topic before they graduate. When I return to the school after vacation for some last minute details, Sophie reminds me that I have to interview her, as if she has more to say.

I drive home that Friday afternoon, pondering the tension between children experiencing this work as an act of fraudulence and an act of importance. It resonates with the feeling that the Adventurers' classroom is an unusually reflective environment in which some children struggle with the overt reflective curriculum. I wonder about the most useful ways to explain and position the value and pedagogical purposes of self-assessment work in the classroom. I return to Rosie's and Ron's words as my touchstones. In our interview, Ron explains that his purpose in using this curriculum is to help children build knowledge about themselves:

I believe ... in this idea that self-reflection is essential for being able to live in the real world. That if you live a life that's not self-reflective, you're not real. You're not able to change and grow in ways that are constructive ... It's feeling confident in who you are, and feeling confident, being able to understand that you're not great at everything, and knowing what your strengths are, and your style, your personality.

In talking about her purpose, Rosie focuses on the notion that giving children time to think validates their very act of thinking.

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I think that giving them time and saying that you have a certain amount of time to think back upon your day ... [is] an important kind of thing to do in your life; to just have some time that's your own to look back on things. That's one piece of it ... I can't come up with another word besides 'validating' ... that their choices and their activities are worth writing about ... I guess in the context of hurried lives—they will probably have hurried lives ahead of them—and I think it's important for them to know that there should be time for thinking.

Indeed, their statements support and are supported by the current research on self-assessment (see Stiggins, 2002). The act of self-assessment helps children know themselves as learners, values their acts of thinking and learning, and communicates a centrality that student voices have in the assessment process and the classroom itself. I continue to think about helping children know themselves in the context of hurried lives. I think about the Adventurers' immersion in self-assessment, past interactions with my own students in self-assessment, and conversations with the older students around self-assessment. Rosie's words ring true. There is an inherent value for students in learning to step back, consider their work, and develop relationships with their work and thinking.

In listening to Rosie and Ron, I see another central quality of the self-assessment process embedded in their words and action. I see the relational context of their classroom. In reading, listening, and conversing with the children about their self-assessments, Rosie and Ron have invited the children into an ongoing conversation about their learning. Not only is self-assessment helping the children know themselves, it is helping the teachers know the children in a fundamental way. Similarly, Lex's ideas about telling the truth and finding "right"

answers, which are echoed by other children, suggest that the nature of children's relationships with their teacher and peers can profoundly shape how children relate to their own self-assessing work. It is the discovery of the relational context of the self-assessing process that has urged me to examine how the predominant classroom relationships shape students' capacity to develop trustworthy knowledge (Raider-Roth, 2000, 2002, in press). This line of inquiry is essential in order to understand the ways in which the web of school relationships—students' relationships with self, peers, and teachers—shapes the way students learn and build knowledge. Recent research on the centrality of school relationships in student learning support the need for such research (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Howes & Ritchie, 2002; Koplow, 2002; Skolnick, 2000; Watson & Ecken, 2003). Research on self-assessment has also begun to recognize the importance of examining the ways that classroom context shapes children's self-assessment processes (van Kraayenoord & Paris, 1997). Such research is needed for furthering our understanding of both theory and practice. We must deepen our collective understanding of the ways the human relationships not only impact learning processes but also provide the basic foundation upon which knowledge is built. This understanding will help us see how the relational context is not just a "frill" but an essential component of schooling—like books, pencils, and rulers. This understanding will help us see how the culture of standardization in which we currently reside undermines these relationships at every level. Finally, this understanding will help us learn how to construct and preserve the relational context of classroom life. Such understanding is essential in supporting children's desire to learn and ability to construct knowledge that will nourish them as they grow.

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