

## **On My Knees Again**

**By Rebecca Akin**

The solitude of my winter vacation seems accented this year by the freezing weather. I wear layers of clothing even inside my house, and still I can't get warm. I feel the cold down to my bone, like it's coming from inside of me. I have too much time to think and fall easy prey to an aching, unnameable frustration. I go over and over in my head all the new things I'm trying in my classroom this year—my student portfolios, the tape recordings of classroom dialogue, my own journal writing, and the stories I'm trying to write of my classroom experiences. Like a new grandmother with photographs, I'm always on the hunt for a willing audience. It depresses me that I can't find anyone to take an interest in looking at this stuff that so fascinates me. I realize I'm starved to simply talk with someone about my thoughts and ideas. The physical solitude of this time away from school, at home by myself, seems to heighten the overwhelming sense of isolation I feel professionally as a teacher. I'm

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*Rebecca Akin is a teacher at Lincoln Elementary School in the Oakland Unified School District, Oakland, California. She is also a participant in the Mills Teacher Scholars Project at Mills College.*

actually happy when school begins again and I can take refuge in the caring company of my kindergartners. Talking with these small people who listen, I realize they somehow seem to know how essential it is to engage each other in discussion. On my knees, looking into a child's eyes, talking together as though the world depends on our conversation, I feel partially rejuvenated.

My four years as a teacher have been spent entirely in the same urban public school. I've lived in the city in which I teach for almost twenty years. This is my

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city. This has become my school. The students, my colleagues, and the community are all wonderful. Yet the culture of my actual school site and district is such that authentic talk about the dilemmas, uncertainties, struggles, goals, and purposes of teaching are taboo. I write accounts such as these because they help me make sense of my experiences. I do research on my practice because it feeds me as a learner. Both help provide dialogue, external and internal, that I don't get in my actual teaching environment. Both help mitigate the numbing isolation I experience as a teacher. Yet both feel so fragile, almost ephemeral, because neither writing, research, nor the processes they entail are valued in the environment in which I find myself.

I've been focusing my research this year on the structured conversations that take place in my classroom during journal sharing time. I'm not really sure what I'm doing, but I feel that I need to help my students become more comfortable talking about their ideas. This is uncharted territory for me, and I go there feeling very much alone. I'm not totally convinced I'm making good use of instructional time. I often think our conversations are contrived and teacher driven. I usually feel as though I'm pulling teeth. And yet the kids won't let me skip this daily ritual.

Like most of my students, Ivy literally bounds up to the front of the class when it is her turn to share her journal writing. Today, as usual, she's enveloped in various shades of pink and purple. Ivy is always so well dressed that she's out of place among the tattered blue and white hand-me-down uniforms that adorn the rest of my students. Until recently I thought she was better off than my other kids. She's always escorted to and from school by a family member. She's dressed in clean, new, brand name clothes. She's so self assured and confident that she's almost cocky. And she has so much nice stuff. The other kids drool over her possessions: whole stacks of Sailormoon cards, a pencil box, coloring books, fancy erasers, and a Pikachu watch hanging from a key chain on her Hello Kitty backpack. I recently learned, however, that it's her grandparents who spoil her, perhaps trying to appease the hurt I imagine she must feel at seeming unimportant to her parents. Ivy and her brother Patrick rarely see their parents, who come home only to sleep between jobs. She never talks about her mother and father, won't even acknowledge that they exist. How they manage to avoid being a part of her life, I can't begin to imagine. The six of them, Ivy, Patrick, Grandma, Grandpa, Mom, and Dad live cramped into a two bedroom apartment a block away, in a crumbling building in the midst of this city's bustling Chinatown.

Though quick to find the page of her journal that she wants to talk about today, she stands waiting for my prompt. "Tell us what you did, Ivy." Silence. She fidgets. The class and I wait. "Ivy, what's this about?" I finally continue. Immediately her hands turn up, shoulders shrug, a huge smirk emerges between chubby cheeks. Her whole body resembles a question mark. "I don't remember." This statement slips off her lips as though it's one word. Always feeling the press of time, it's hard not to lose my patience. Ivy knows exactly what her story is about. It's difficult for me to give her the time she needs to feel comfortable before beginning. I have to push myself

to wait and not explain it for her. “Well, what’s this?” I ask, pointing to the drawing of a castle on her page. In a second she’s off, telling her brief story from beginning to end. That this child has been speaking English only four months now is remarkable. We all seem to understand exactly what she’s saying.

I worry that these journal sharings have gotten out of hand. I not only have one group of students share their work each day, but I let each of those students answer two questions about their work and listen to two suggestions as to what could be improved. I’ve thought long and hard about this use of instructional time. I allow this time for dialogue because I believe that in order to learn we must talk about what we’re doing. Although I constantly question the usefulness of this structured discussion time in my kindergarten class, I stick with it, reminding myself daily that if I value discussion I must honor it by providing adequate time.

“Ivy did a beautiful job on her work. She has a story, a picture, and it’s colored. But there are always ways to make work better. Who has a suggestion for how she could make her work even better? Two suggestions please.” My poor kids. They hear this same speech four times a day. I wonder that they don’t get sick of my voice. Yet hands shoot up immediately. Ivy examines the potential participants, staring back at the pleading eyes of each child for what seems like an eternity. She finally selects Nancy. We wait again as Nancy gathers her thoughts. Is she trying to think of a suggestion only now, or is she searching for the words in English? My frustration mounts as more empty wait time passes. I bite my lip and remind myself over and over how important discussion is. Somehow, we all sit silently for her. “Why you don’t..., um..., why you don’t..., um..., why you don’t color the window?” Nancy finally asks. Ivy stares silently at her work. My heart grows a little heavier. A few of my kids can make suggestions, but most, like Nancy, don’t seem to understand. I muster as much enthusiasm as I possibly can, “Oh! So you think it would be better if she colored the window? Is that your suggestion?” Nancy happily agrees. As we proceed I’m sidetracked by the thought that I am asking too much of my kids and wasting their time. If they’re not developmentally ready for this, all the practice in the world probably won’t help.

My principal walked in once as journal sharing was about to begin. In a panic, I fabricated some pretext for having to postpone this sharing time until after the next activity. I was terrified that she would see so much empty wait time go by unused. I imagine that the other kindergarten classes are churning out volumes of work samples, racing through the curriculum and keeping busy, always occupied in producing tangible evidence of growth and development. I always think that I am the only one who struggles with getting my kids to move along in their development. I believe strongly in what I do and I could argue intelligently for why I make particular curricular choices, but still I am insecure. Though never challenged, I feel completely unsupported. I am alone in the choices I make, and my panic and insecurity seem clear evidence of my isolation.

I get all the way through dictating a story for Ivy the next day during journal

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time before I notice that she has again drawn a castle. And in that castle is a large window with many panes, almost identical to the one she drew the day before. But this window has fabulous rainbow colors that have been filled in with the most extraordinary care, overshadowing everything else on the page. I'm dumbfounded. It takes me only a second to realize that Ivy has incorporated into her work the suggestion Nancy made the previous day. Here, finally, was an affirmation, some kind of feedback that maybe the effort involved in our journal sharing times was in some small way working.

I am troubled though. What if I hadn't seen Ivy's work that next day? The affirmation provided within her work, so essential to my understanding of what I am trying to accomplish with my students, was left completely to chance. I do actively look for signs like the one Ivy was able to provide for me. I am constantly pouring over work, asking questions, assessing, reflecting—searching for ways to understand what my students are learning. Yet I feel bogged down in the limitations of my own perceptions. Thinking about all of this has brought me to realize that the kind of dialogue that I try to provoke among my students, dialogue intended to help them move along as learners, does not exist for me in my own collegial environment. I rarely get the chance to talk about my own work. I, too, need a chance to share my ideas, answer questions about my thoughts, and hear suggestions as to how I might improve or what I might do differently. I need the same consistent opportunity for dialogue that I insist on for my students.

In my slow development as a teacher I'm beginning to think about learning as consisting of the daily process of acting and reflecting. It seems that much of learning happens through the medium of dialogue—the act of talking about a product or idea, reflecting on its merits, discussing where an idea came from, recounting how work was executed, explaining what the impetus was for doing it one way as opposed to another, revealing what was challenging about completing the work, acknowledging and valuing the effort expended. I think it is difficult to expand our abilities and our perspectives if we don't actively acknowledge that all of these intangible components are part of the “end product” we create.

Learning as a process is an idea that is painfully neglected in my own growth as a teacher. This idea of process gets ignored in the teacher-proof curricula we are asked to use. In order to survive we must often pretend we know exactly what we are doing. And when asked to make improvements, we are simply expected to incorporate new techniques. I'm brought to my knees again and again under the weight of the purposeful non-acknowledgement of my own status as a learner. This is a burden under which I feel buried, voiceless, unable to even think straight. I don't know how long I will last as a teacher if I am supposed to function as though I have nothing to learn.