



A Thrice-Learned Lesson from the Literate Life of a Five-Year-Old

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Source: *Language Arts*, Vol. 82, No. 4, Literacy Learning and the Young Child (March 2005), pp. 286-295

Published by: National Council of Teachers of English

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41483489>

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Thrice-Learned Lesson

Revisiting a pivotal experience with a young child pushes a teacher's understandings of language, literacy, and culture.

Lori A. Norton-Meier

Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning.

—Paulo Freire, 1998, p. 31

Once upon a time there was a child . . . or so this story begins. In the tradition of oral storytelling, narratives are told repeatedly for pleasure and learning for each new generation. I have discovered over my career that every child who comes through the classroom door becomes our teacher. Daily we ask questions, make inquiries, and learn from each other. But there always seems to be a child . . . one child who comes along and shatters our thinking, shakes us to our core.

Aaron was that child for me. Many years after Aaron left my classroom, the effects he had on my teaching persist. The following entry adapted from my teaching journal is about a five-year-old child who continues to teach me lessons about family

and community literacy, the wide existence and use of print in the real world, and how our assumptions about diversity and social practices, language and literacy, shape us as teachers and learners. This thrice-learned lesson details my professional journey of continual transformation by revisiting this story at three different times in my career—as a kindergarten teacher, a graduate student, and a teacher educator. As I return to Aaron's story at three points in my professional life, I critically reflect on my representation of Aaron and how my experience with this one child continues to give me opportunities to learn and grow and to reinterpret this same story from new perspectives. For the purpose of this narrative, the names of the characters have been changed to ensure confidentiality. Here is his, or rather, our story followed by three interpretations of this initial narrative that over time provided numerous opportunities to question my thinking, consider issues, and expand my understanding about literacy teaching and learning.

THE STORY BEGINS

It is 3:05. The bell rings and children from Laramie Elementary School move hurriedly out of classrooms as they buzz about the day's activities. I escort my group of 28 kindergarten students to the front of the school building because I am always worried they will get lost in the chaos of over 400 children leaving the building! They tell me when they see their ride or a sibling who

has come to walk them home. Aaron walks by himself, which always worries me a little in this urban Midwestern neighborhood because the school sits right next to a major four-lane highway, and traffic moves very quickly. This particular neighborhood is also situated close to a busy downtown area that sees its share of gang violence, drug trade, and prostitution.

"Bye, Aaron," I say to him, "Hurry on home now." His deep brown eyes glow when his lips turn to a smile and he tells me that he isn't going home. He is on his way to see his mother at her work.

In the few short months I had known Aaron, I learned that he and I had much in common. Aaron lived in a single parent home as I did at his age. We both had roots in rural ways of knowing. Aaron's extended family farmed in the South, my family in the Midwest. Aaron spoke the language of his family and community, African American Vernacular English. I spoke a standard form of English wrought with what many would call rural "farmisms."

I smile back and ask him where his mother works. Aaron stretches out his arm and points to the local drinking establishment that sits on the corner across from the school. I am shocked and wonder to myself, "He goes to a bar after school? Is this dangerous? Is this true? Is this really where his mother is working?" Concerned, I decide to walk with him to be sure he will be okay. Aaron lights up when I say I will walk with him tonight. He takes me

by the hand and we walk towards the bar that has been a source of great controversy in the short time I have been at this school. Petitions have circulated to get the dilapidated building closed down, with residents arguing that a bar next to a school is inappropriate. Others argue that the bar has historical significance and has been in the neighborhood longer than any other building, so it must be preserved for future generations. The students on the playground often wonder out loud when it will fall down since the building is in such poor repair. As we walk, Aaron continues to talk non-stop about his mom, her work, and what he does when he gets there.

When we walk through the door, several of the patrons shout greetings to Aaron. It is dark, and I notice that I am the only White person there. Aaron tugs me along as an older Black man comes forward to shake my hand. He says that he knows who I am based on how much Aaron talks about kindergarten and Mrs. Norton-Meier.

Aaron crawls onto a barstool next to an elderly man and asks, "Hey Joe, ya' ordered yet? I can read the menu to you again." Breaking into a big smile, the elderly man pats him on the back and says how glad he is that Aaron is here to help him.

Aaron comes over and whispers to me that it is a good thing that I am teaching him to read because they need him to read a lot here at the bar. I stammer and stare as I watch Aaron communicate in the language of his home, his community, and his world—a language that he easily uses to negotiate the knowledge about reading and writing that blend home and school for him. I question myself, "Why don't I see more of this in school? Do I create a space for Aaron's home language in my classroom?"

Aaron's mother comes out of the back looking nervous to see me as she smooths her hair and apron. Her eyes fall from my face to Aaron's as she says, "Has Aaron been bad?"

"Oh no," I quickly responded, "Aaron just told me I could walk with him today."

"Yeah, mama," Aaron takes my hand, "I'm gonna show her around!" She nods slowly. I don't really know what to do but follow Aaron, his excitement obvious as he flashes a smile at his mom and begins the tour. As we walk, Aaron points to each word and reads every beer sign on the walls.

every day when he was in the war so his mother would know he was okay. Aaron sits on his knee, hanging on his every word.

I say my good-byes and they all tell me to come back and visit any time. Aaron's mother gives me a bag full of food to take with me. I walk back to the school with a million thoughts racing in my head. Aaron was at the top of my "kids who are struggling" list. He had just exposed me to a whole new world that I am not representing in my classroom. He carries the classroom into his outside world but do I let him bring his world into the classroom? Do I allow any of the children to?

How will Aaron ever find success in this world of school when his freedom to live his life is judged as not good enough by individuals on the outside, people who do not understand or value his world?

"BUDWEISER—KING OF BEERS. LITE. OLD STYLE."

Then, he spells each word.

"See, Ms. Norton-Meier, I'm reading the walls just like at school!" he exclaims as he tugs me along. This is the child I viewed as struggling with literacy in the classroom. It is clear that he is totally literate in his world!

We stop by a table where four men are playing cards. Aaron cries, "What are you doin', Roy? That's a full house." I realize that Aaron knows how to play poker—a complex game with its own vocabulary, rules, and complicated ways of thinking about your opponent's next move.

Roy asks, "Did you do any writing for me today?" Aaron gets his journal out of his backpack and reads every page to Roy. In return, Roy tells him stories from his own life and how he used to write letters

I am ashamed by my ignorance and judgmental attitude. Aaron has taught me a powerful lesson. I go to the teacher's lounge to share my epiphany in relation to this experience and my concerns with my own teaching. My colleagues' responses are surprising to me.

"Oh, you can't let that world come in here."

"That world is violent . . . so sad."

"His mother is awful for letting him be in that environment."

"He's around drunks all the time."

"Reading beer labels is not literacy."

"He is doomed to failure."

I walk to my room thinking that a value—or lack of value—has been attached to the experience Aaron is getting by the same people who will try to help him learn in the next few years. I worry that he may come to feel that his world is bad, that his mother is bad, that all

the things he has learned in the initial years of his life are meaningless. How will Aaron ever find success in this world of school when his freedom to live his life is judged as not good enough by individuals on the outside, people who do not understand or value his world? Will Aaron be a risk taker? Will he have the freedom to choose his future?

going opportunities for children to read every day. Wal-Mart, McDonalds, Snickers, and Bubble Yum bubble gum were all words my students could see and recognize with excitement. What an important connection for the children to make between the letters being learned in school and the way language looks in the world outside of school. However, are there certain forms of

I was faced by my own small view of the world and my limited definition of language, literacy, and learning.

On the following day during writing workshop, I pull my chair up alongside Aaron, and we decide to write a story together about our experience. When we share our story with the rest of the class, many more children are prompted to share stories from their worlds—stories of Sandra's next-door neighbor who raises 200 birds and of Manuel's grandma who had a runaway tamale!

FIRST TELLING AS A TEACHER

This story was adapted from my teaching journal and represents a turning point in my teaching career. I was faced by my own small view of the world and my limited definition of language, literacy, and learning. It was as if a door opened up to an exciting new world that I had not considered as a source of my teaching. I realized with the help of Aaron and the other children that it was my job as a teacher to use strategies that let children learn about the languages of their cultures through sharing their stories and their personal literacies and experiences.

Suddenly, through my experience with Aaron, my eyes were opened to a world of print that provides on-

environmental print that are acceptable texts and others that are not? Should beer labels be acceptable print in the classroom? While the answer to that question seems obvious, one has to concede that Aaron had constructed an important understanding of print that he could naturally use to help him in his own writing. One day in class during writing workshop, Aaron was writing a note to me that we needed more clay in the art center. As he wrote my name on the note—Lori—he made the connection that he saw the letter “L” all the time when he was helping his mother organize the back room. “Lori, Lite, Lori, Lite. They sound the same—both start with L and both have four letters.”

My experience with Aaron also caused me to question the curriculum and materials that I provide in my classroom. How could I reorganize my curriculum to build on the knowledge that my students bring to the classroom and build on their questions about the world? At this time, I was introduced to the work of Jerry Harste and others (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996) who discuss how curriculum is a metaphor for the way we live our lives. Literature on theme studies and inquiry cycles

(Fisher, 1998; Gamberg, Kwak, Hutchings, & Altheim, 1988; Short & Burke, 1991) helped me transform my curriculum from themes about teddy bears and applesauce to inquiry cycles where the children asked questions pertinent to their worlds. Questions surfaced about the house that was being demolished and rebuilt across from the school. When spring came, it rained and rained and eventually caused major flooding. Nature gave us incredible reasons to investigate our world.

This experience with Aaron also caused me to look for innovative ways to create partnerships with parents and families in the school neighborhood. After reading a variety of literature about parental experiences in school (Cairney & Munsie, 1995; McCaleb, 1995; Vopat, 1995), I played with ideas about how I could move beyond notions of the “bake sale parent” that only provide opportunities to parents as fund raisers and providers of needed supplies (Cairney & Munsie, 1995). What opportunities could I create in my classroom where parents were actually part of the curriculum? In addition, I questioned how I could counter the one-way flow of ideas and information that tends to stream rapidly from school to home but rarely flows the other way. I tried many ideas but found that my most powerful lesson came once again from Aaron and his family, who reminded me that the parents and community can become our experts.

One day after school, I walked to the corner with my kindergartners to be greeted by Aaron's mother. She mentioned how I looked tired and distraught. We sat down and I talked about my frustration at my young students' use of racial slurs on the playground. The more I talked to them about it, the worse it

got. She asked if she might visit the classroom and talk to them the next day. Little did I know at the time how difficult it was for Aaron's mother to cross the threshold of the school. In future conversations, she revealed many of her own negative school experiences (including bullying and verbal abuse by both her peers and teachers) and how nervous it made her to step into a school building again.

What happened in that ten-minute conversation was transformational. As students listened to Aaron's mother tell her own painful stories about racial slurs, she convinced them that the only name anyone should be called is their given name. For the rest of the year, racial slurs disappeared as a major classroom issue. Aaron's mother offered a learning opportunity to my students that I could not. My experience did not give me the context or

I came to see how important it is to continually question my whiteness.

history to make it real for my students; Aaron's mother could. It was in this moment that I began to understand what it meant to be partners with parents and families in the education of each and every student. However, I continued to struggle with how I could make parents true partners in my curriculum within the constraints of curriculum requirements, standards, and what are traditionally seen as acceptable parent roles in school settings.

I also became aware of my whiteness. I found understanding in the work of Vivian Paley in *White Teacher* (1979). Through her narrative of her own experience as a kindergarten teacher, I came to see

how important it is to continually question my whiteness, how it influences my thinking and the experiences I plan for children in my classroom. I was intrigued by the way she could write a descriptive tale about the lives of her students while reflecting on her own understandings about teaching and learning. One particular passage in the book reflects my thinking at this time in my career:

The children, in fact, already know how to open up a classroom, for play is the original open-ended and integrated curriculum. It is the pathway to learning in which differences are valued and rewarded because they enhance the creative potential of the imagination. Children do not ask: Where do you come from? They ask: What role will you play? The children have much to teach us, if we but stop and listen. (Paley, 1989, p. 142)

SECOND TELLING AS A GRADUATE STUDENT

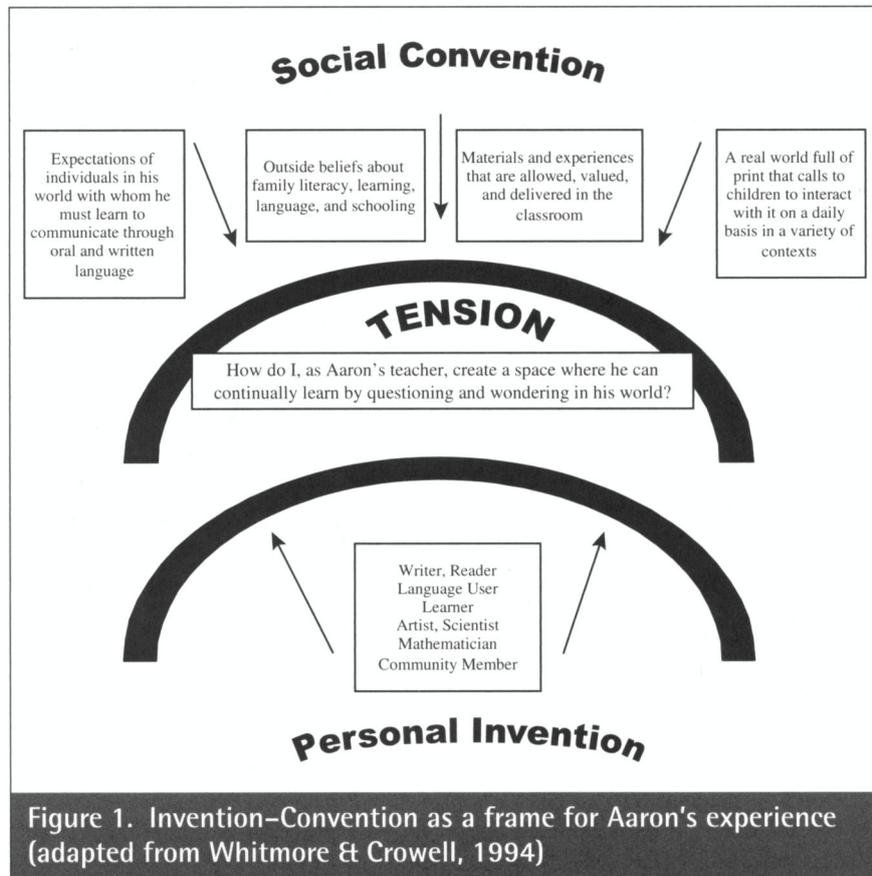
It was the questions I had about curriculum, print in the real world, and creating home-school partnerships that brought me back to graduate work. Little did I know that I would show up with a few questions and leave with many more as my thinking was challenged and my learning continued.

I was introduced to the work of Ken Goodman (1994, 1996) and the theory of invention-convention, which provided me with a framework to study and understand Aaron's story. Goodman's theory can be likened to the phenomenon of centrifugal and centripetal force. We each have an outward energy that pushes us to personally invent ourselves (centrifugal force), while social convention is that outward energy that holds us in (centripetal force). Goodman used this theory to

describe the writing of a young child who invents language while continually learning to exist and communicate within the social conventions of the language and the people in the world who use it. His discussions gave me a new framework for understanding children's writing. For example, Aaron's artwork and the strings of letters that he placed on the page demonstrated his developing understanding of the printed word. He knew that there was a difference between the words of a story and the illustrations. In addition, he was beginning to create conventional letter shapes, inventing their order to make different words. Through Goodman's frame, I came to understand that with each piece of writing Aaron created, he was demonstrating his developing knowledge of print and how it works.

Whitmore and Crowell (1994) used Goodman's theory as a frame to examine how children create meaning and invent themselves within a whole language classroom community. Their work demonstrates the teacher's role in keeping the tension alive between personal invention and social convention—to keep the student engaged, interested, and learning. Within Crowell's classroom, one way the tension is created is through symmetric power and trust relationships so that the power and decision making are shared between the teacher and the student within the classroom community.

I use this frame to re-visit my work and Aaron's experience (see Figure 1). How was Aaron inventing himself in school and perhaps differently at home? What were the social conventions that were shaping and, perhaps in some way, constraining Aaron? From Aaron's story, it appears that some of the conventions that affect the way he invents himself as a learner are the



expectations of the people in his world, societal views of family literacy, and the materials and curriculum that he encounters in school. It is interesting to consider who or what provided the tension that Aaron needed to negotiate between the invention that inspired his learning and the convention that would allow him to communicate that inspiration and imagination with others. As his teacher, I also had to consider how Aaron felt when we have "Say NO to drugs!" programs that tell him alcohol is a drug. What kind of tension does this put on Aaron? Will there be a time when he will have to make a choice between home and school? How can I help Aaron with this struggle?

This frame also helped me understand my own invention and convention (see Figure 2). As a teacher, I tried to invent a classroom that

would allow children to bring the outside world in but the convention of school indicated that this was not acceptable. Both Aaron and I were shaped by convention—I by the convention of what I thought school was to be—and Aaron by what society said was an acceptable home environment and what literacies would be valued within the walls of school.

In exploring real world literacy, I was introduced to the concept of "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Armani, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Funds of knowledge are defined as those essential bodies of learning and knowing that exist and are exchanged within and between families. The funds of knowledge in Aaron's family had been passed on through many generations and included running a business, cooking,

card playing, and creating art. With further investigation into the research base on literacies in families (Auerbach, 1989; Delgado-Gaitin, 1987; Hartle-Schutte, 1993; Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988), I came to see family literacy from a strength orientation and to realize that strengths do indeed exist in all families. The deficit perspective views the family as something that needs to be fixed. The strength orientation brought the realization that strengths in the form of funds of knowledge exist in all families—ready for educators to use as connections in helping children learn.

I also came to understand that learning literacy and language is a socio-cultural process that begins at birth (Bissex, 1980; Cambourne, 1987; Dewey, 1990; Dyson, 1997; Y. Goodman, 1990; Smith, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978). Aaron had been learning important lessons about language and literacy for years before he even came to sit in a kindergarten classroom. His mother and the community in which he lived provided a rich context in which he could play with language, experiment, and question the sounds and images of his world. He was embedded in a social environment that said, "Yes, Aaron. We expect you will learn to read, write, and talk as well as grow up and work hard."

As I continued to share Aaron's story with different audiences in various settings, my struggles became the source of dialogue, debate, and argument, particularly in relation to Aaron's home language. Should African American Vernacular English (AAVE) be acceptable to use in the classroom? Is AAVE a dialect or a language? Can AAVE be recognized as a second language that is accepted and validated within my classroom community? How can I *not* represent Aaron's lan-

guage in my classroom when it is an essential part of his world? How can I make a space for his home language but also teach him the power inherent in Standard English?

Once again, re-visiting Aaron's story caused me to question my whiteness. I found it necessary to re-visit the work of Paley (1979) after reading a critique from Lisa Delpit (1994):

Paley's book and her approach to children have many strengths, and I could not hope for a more sensitive white teacher of African-American children. Yet I worry. Paley asks, "How much does it matter if a child cannot identify ethnically or racially with a teacher? Does it matter at all? If the teacher accepts him and likes him as he really is, isn't that enough?" I suspect she and I might differ. (p.132)

As I continued to read, Delpit pushed my thinking with her own questions. Have I ever considered how difficult it is for a child to have to spend great energy attempting to figure out what were appropriate ways of being within the whiteness of my classroom?

During this time, the great debate over Ebonics began. In December 1996, the Oakland, California Board of Education passed "the Ebonics resolution," calling for the recognition of Ebonics as a language and "mandating that effective instructional strategies be utilized to ensure that every child has the opportunity to achieve English language proficiency" (Perry & Delpit, 1998, p. 156). In passing this resolution,

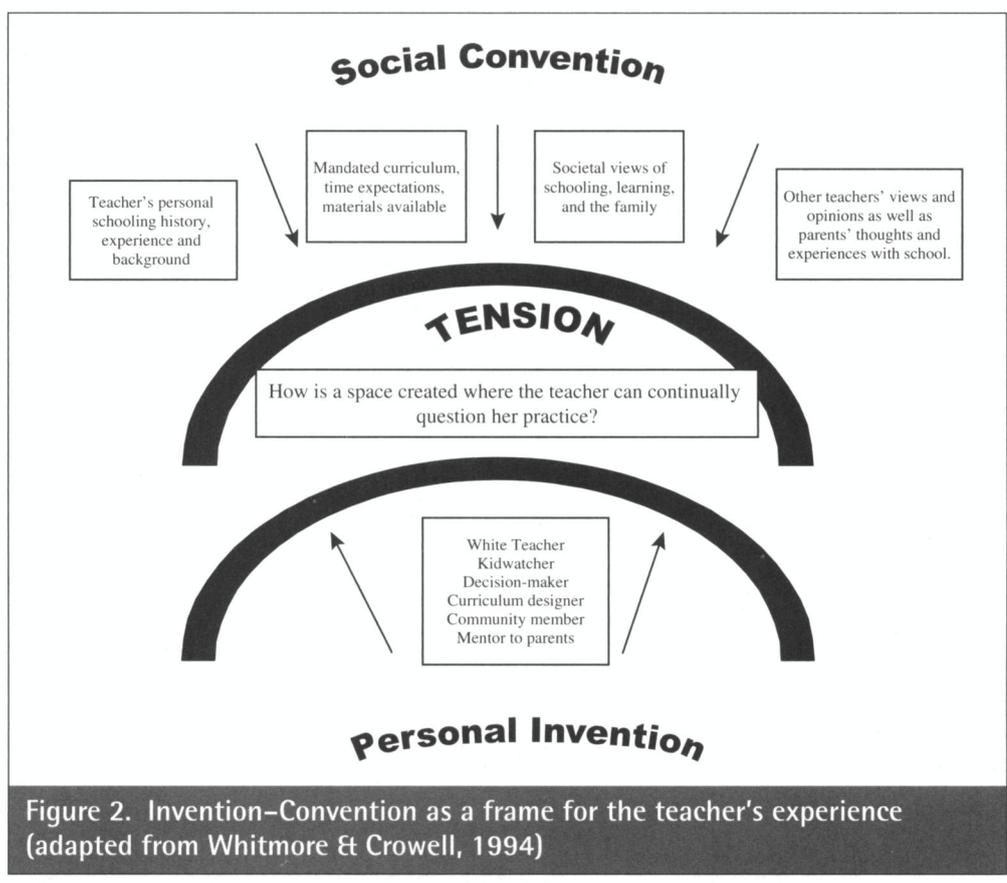


Figure 2. Invention-Convention as a frame for the teacher's experience (adapted from Whitmore & Crowell, 1994)

the Board sought to address the scholastic underachievement of African American students by recognizing Ebonics as a rich and creative language with a structure and history going back centuries. Still today, the topic receives a great deal of coverage that is often misleading, inaccurate, and racist, generating heated debates. To address the complexity of this issue, Perry and Delpit (1998) edited *The Real Ebonics Debate: Power, Language, and the Education of African-American Children* that contains the stories of African American educators, linguists, writers, activists, teachers, and students who eloquently define and discuss the issues, arguing that the Ebonics controversy goes beyond linguistics.

It is a debate about culture, power, identity, and control. It is a debate

about how best to acknowledge and change the reality that our nation's schools are failing African-American students. It is a debate that will never end until our society and our schools provide true access and opportunity to African Americans. (p. xiv)

Once again, I found myself with a new lens to view Aaron's story with many new questions. I shared Aaron's story over and over again, questioning the choices I made as a teacher and returning to the thought-provoking words of Delpit (1998) that remind me of my job as Aaron's teacher:

To conclude, the teacher's job is to provide access to the national "standard" as well as to understand the language the children speak sufficiently to celebrate its beauty. . . . The teacher must know how to effectively teach reading and writing to

students whose culture and language differ from that of the school, and must understand how and why students decide to add another language form to their repertoire. All we can do is provide students with access to additional language forms. Inevitably, each speaker will make his or her own decision about what to say in any context. (p. 26)

THE THRICE-LEARNED LESSON AS A TEACHER EDUCATOR

For a third time in my career, I find myself re-telling Aaron's story. This time it is to a new group of preservice teachers each semester. The first theme that we explore in my course on early literacy methods is called, "Bringing ourselves to the text." The purpose of this theme is threefold. First, I want to get to know these future teachers and create a comfortable classroom where they can share their personal literacy histories. As they tell these stories over the semester, I want them to take risks and to question the way they were taught and the teacher they want to be. Second, I want them to always think from the child's point of view. Begin with the child and what the child knows. Become a keen kidwatcher (Owocki & Goodman, 2002). Know your students' worlds because it is through their stories that you will understand the best way to teach. Finally, I have the students explore the notion that "the sense you make of a text does not first of all depend on the marks on the paper. It depends first on the sense you bring to it" (Goodman, 1996, p. 1).

I read Aaron's story to help them see that our entire semester will be based on learning from a child's point of view. After reading the story, we talk. The discussions lead to the sharing of personal literacy and schooling experiences as well

as the questioning of our assumptions about language and learning, the pervading deficit view in relation

to family, and the creation of a student-centered curriculum that values and validates each student's culture and ways of knowing. At the end of the semester, the students write in their journals about significant learning from the semester. Most of them mention Aaron's story.

Significant learning for me this semester was when you read Aaron's story. It really made me think about

My students, once again, become my teachers, pushing my thinking and always providing conversations that are stimulating!

the term culture and what children bring to the classroom. Culture, language, and learning are all so tied up in each other. I am also daily amazed at assumptions and how that can really constrict teaching and learning. If you assume certain things about a child's home environment or experience and state that it is NULL and VOID—what have you done to the child? When we learn in every course that learning is building on a child's prior knowledge and making connections to what they know—what happens when society says your learning outside of school is not good or doesn't matter?

—Sonja, junior in teacher education

Aaron's story sticks out in my mind because it caused me to really look at the print in our world and how it calls out to kids, READ ME! READ ME! It is important that I represent this print in my classroom and real-

ize that children have been reading long before they get to me.

—Josie, senior in teacher education

I can't help but remember Aaron's story because it made me think about how many times we complain about parents and what they don't do for their children. If we choose to see the bad, we will! If we want to see the strengths, then we have to look . . . and we have to realize that what we think we should see is not always right. There is not just one form of family literacy but many—be open to it. I also need to create a safe place for parents to be involved in my classroom—I still question how I will do that. Do you think parents will show me the way?

—Audrey, senior in teacher education

My students, once again, become my teachers, pushing my thinking and always providing conversations that are stimulating! Many times throughout their education courses, preservice teachers hear about the importance of being a reflective practitioner (Schon, 1987) and how ongoing reflection has the power to help teachers analyze the teaching and learning process. I discuss the factors that contribute to my ongoing transformation as a teacher and learner:

1. Being a keen kidwatcher
2. Continually reflecting on my teaching
3. Reading professional literature
4. Engaging in discussion and debate with others
5. Journaling and writing about my experiences

These five key elements permeate my professional journey thus far and continue to challenge me as a professional (see Figure 3).

As a researcher who models her work after her (s)hero, Vivian Paley, I work primarily with narrative ap-

proaches to research. In exploring this approach, I am continually confronted with questions of presentation or (re)presentation of the individuals whose stories are told. Within the past five years, several pieces of professional literature have emerged that explicitly deal with the issues of white teachers reflecting on their interactions with students of color (Ballenger, 1999; Howard, 1999; Perry, 2000). Each has provided a new frame to use to examine Aaron's story, pushing my understanding of literacy, language, and pedagogy, inevitably leading to new questions: Who am I in this research and how do my ways of knowing and understanding as a white female affect the ways I represent individuals in my research? Consequently, what or who gives me the authority to tell the stories of others? And finally, whose stories are told and who is silenced?

AND THE TELLINGS WILL CONTINUE . . .

As I reflect on what I have learned from the literate life of this five-year-old, I know I will continue to retell this story for years to come and will learn new lessons about children, teaching, and the literate world in which we live. For me, Aaron has become what Vygotsky (1978) calls a more knowledgeable other—interesting to consider given Vygotsky's original definition that a more knowledgeable other is "an adult or a more capable peer" (p. 86). I would argue that the more knowledgeable other is always shifting. At one moment, I may be teaching Aaron; at the next moment, he is challenging me to see the world differently or to question my own beliefs and understandings.

Denny Taylor (1993) offered teachers insights into a form of assess-

In the three reflections on Aaron's story, each time period presented me with a new set of questions. Each set of questions is followed by a reflection on the artifacts and experiences that pushed my thinking at each point in time.

Part I—Kindergarten Teacher

- How do I welcome parents as true partners in education, including those parents whose lives differ significantly from my own or from the values of the school?
- How do I mediate each child's life and literacy experiences with the values, norms, and expectations of the school and the society?

Kidwatching and journaling were essential tools to my learning at this time and helped to preserve this experience. By sharing this experience with colleagues and building a relationship with Aaron's mother, I engaged in professional inquiry, while also using professional literature to complicate my thinking.

Part II—Graduate Student

- How can the concept of "funds of knowledge" be used to revalue the family as a partner and revalue the literacy strengths the children bring to the classroom?
- What is the role of race as a factor in helping children mediate their culture and the culture of school?

A variety of professional readings helped to offer me new perspectives on Aaron's experiences and my own related experiences. Discussion with other teachers and students played an essential role, as well as various opportunities to write, share, and receive feedback from others.

Part III—Teacher Educator

- How can I help others learn to value the child as informant and the cultural/literacy experiences children bring to school?
- How do teachers observe and reflect on their students' lives and literacy experiences to challenge and deepen their own beliefs and understanding?
- How do I assist newcomers to the profession to learn about the value of reflecting on anomalies in order to examine our own assumptions and to fuel our inquiries?

Taking the stance of teacher educator offered yet another valuable perspective for me to examine my own experiences and the lessons I have learned, considering what I want to share with others joining the profession. This act of going public with what I believe becomes a valuable tool to look more deeply and critically at what is currently understood.

Figure 3. My professional growth story

ment that moves the “in your head” thinking about what children are learning into a systematic, ethnographic profile of a child that illuminates their learning with a cultural context. It is interesting that Taylor predicted the current political climate of isolated testing of skills, mandated programs, boxed curriculum, testing of teachers . . . a truly frightful time in education. Recently, during a presentation to preservice teachers, a panel of practicing teachers asked them why they wanted to teach. Many preservice teachers responded, “I love children!” The teachers scolded them

Little did I know when Aaron first crossed my path that the lessons from this child would continue throughout a lifetime.

stating that it is not enough anymore to love children as a reason to go into the teaching profession. They stated that the goal must be that every child can learn and will learn and that their jobs would depend on it. I watched the students' faces sink. After the presentation, they approached me, wondering why I had spent a semester teaching them to focus on the child. I responded that perhaps what the teachers meant was that it is certainly a strong foundation to love children but the joy of teaching comes from the inquiry, from observing children, from asking and listening and wondering. I drew them back to one of my favorite messages from Lucy Calkins (2001), “There is never a time when I pull my chair alongside a child and a miracle doesn't appear” (p. 10).

I will still tell you after all these years that the reason I do this job is

because I love children. I love how they challenge me, question me, and push me to learn more, be more, live more. Perhaps Mary Catherine Bateson (1994) said it best,

Ambiguity is the warp of life, not something to be eliminated. Learning to savor the vertigo of doing without answers or making shift and making do with fragmentary ones opens up the pleasures of recognizing and playing with pattern, finding coherence within complexity, sharing within multiplicity. Improvisation and new learning are not private processes; they are shared with others at every age. The multiple layers of attention involved cannot safely be brushed aside or subordinated to the completion of tasks. We are called to join in a dance whose steps must be learned along the way, so it is important to attend and respond. (pp. 9–10)

So, I will continue to listen and document children's stories. I will continue the dance by looking for patterns and coherence in the complexity. Little did I know when Aaron first crossed my path that the lessons from this child would continue throughout a lifetime and would become a catalyst for so many others to dialogue, question, wonder, and make changes to their practice—to encourage our peripheral vision. Let the dance and the learning continue!

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Young Children Learn about Literacy in the "Virtual World"

Teachers can build upon young children's natural inclination to role play through computer programs, such as *Richard Scarry's Busytown* (Simon and Schuster, 1993). *Busytown* creates a virtual small town world full of simulated problems that children are invited to solve. The town, beautifully rendered in primary colors that are nearly exact replicas of Scarry's book illustrations, include a working fire station, a well-stocked delicatessen, a doctor's office in a hospital, a fully functioning gas station, a warehouse filled with products that need to be delivered, a house under construction, and a ship that needs to be loaded.

When children enter into this "screenland," they click and drag the mouse to maneuver through the streets and play games involving different forms of transportation and jobs. The program also includes scenarios that result in real-world consequences. For example, if a child's mouse movements result in a car crash, a police-

man arrives to scold the driver or present a ticket. Captain Salty, who stands on the dock beside his ship, directs the use of a winch to load cabins and rooms with supplies needed for a sea voyage. Children may also work at a gas station as they operate two *Busytown* characters, Huckle Cat and Lowly Worm, to provide service for buses, cars, and motorcycles. Children use the mouse to complete tasks that must be done (e.g., filling the gas tank, adding oil to the engine, fixing a flat tire) to keep *Busytown* moving. As children role play, they can learn about workplace literacies and acquire vocabulary concepts. After previewing the various sections of the town, teachers of young children will want to demonstrate how to use the program during whole-group time before inviting students to enter into, play in, and problem solve in the virtual world of *Busytown*.

—Linda D. Labbo