

October 1996

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### Recommended Citation

Pardo, Laura S. (1996) "Becoming a Reflective Teacher: One Teacher's Journey on the Road to Reflective Teaching," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 29 : Iss. 4 , Article 8.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol29/iss4/8>

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# Becoming a Reflective Teacher: One Teacher's Journey on the Road to Reflective Teaching



ARTICLE BY **LAURA S. PARDO**

For the past 14 years, I have been a classroom teacher. Recently however, I have expanded my viewpoint and my definition of what it means to be a classroom teacher. I now consider myself a reflective teacher/researcher. The pathway I took to get to this point was a long and bumpy one. There were no road maps or guidebooks to teach me how to reflect, no college course to take. I even encountered detours in the form of fellow educators who thought my journey a wild goose chase. However, I forged ahead, often charting my own course. This paper will describe my journey to become a reflective teacher.

## **Preparing for the Trip: Background Information**

To understand where I am today, it helps to understand where I was previously. I recently completed my thirteenth year of teaching. The first six years I taught mathematics in a middle school setting. I taught in a very traditional manner. For example, each day I presented a lesson which focused on one specific skill or algorithm. I then assigned a practice set of problems and the students worked on them independently. The next day we would begin by correcting the previous day's work, and the pattern repeated itself. I was comfortable in this routine, but at the end of my sixth year I was displaced from middle school and assigned to a second grade classroom. Needless to say I was in shock and quite upset about this move. I did not feel prepared to teach second grade, nor did I want to. My biggest fear was teaching reading. I pan-

icked with thoughts like, "Second grade students are barely out of first grade; first graders don't know how to read. I do not know how to teach reading."

It was at this point that I decided to actively pursue my Master's degree in Reading Instruction at Michigan State University. During those three years I read and heard about ways to teach reading, and I began to feel more comfortable as an elementary teacher. However, I was in my last semester at MSU when I took a course from my advisor in the program, Dr. Taffy Raphael. One course requirement was to keep a reflective journal. This journal became a way in which we got to know each other. She challenged and pushed my thinking through her written comments. We began to carry on conversations through my journal and I looked forward to her responses each week. Later that term Taffy was approached by Dick Anderson, at the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois, and asked if she had a teacher who could become part of a videotape series. Taffy talked to me about the videotape series, and I became the teacher in the content area reading tape in a six part series which focused on Reading Strategies (Center for the Study of Reading, 1991). It was through this project that I became aware of my journey towards reflective teaching.

About a month before the taping was scheduled, Taffy began visiting my classroom and talking with me about the instruction and learning she witnessed in my room. She began to question me about my decisions and teaching meth-



ods, and to push my thinking to consider why I was doing certain things. She made suggestions, and we planned things together that I would try the next day. It was then that I began to notice that things I had read about in my Masters courses could actually happen in my classroom. Taffy and I eventually planned the unit that the tape would focus on, and I began to think about myself a bit differently. During the taping of the unit I felt a power over my instructional decisions that had been missing previously. I began to think about what was responsible for this change.

The following year Taffy had a doctoral student who was looking for a classroom within which to gather her dissertation data. Taffy arranged a meeting between the student, Susan McMahan, and me. Sue decided to work in my classroom the following year. This project became known as the Book Club Project (McMahon, 1992). From this experience I witnessed first hand the inner workings of a research project. Sue and Taffy included me in decisions along the way. I began to see how my role as a classroom teacher was so much more than I had once thought. I began to reflect upon my teaching, my student's teaming, and my role in that teaming. The journey for me advanced quickly.

### **On the Road:**

#### **Becoming More Reflective**

There were three things that were crucial in pushing me along the path towards reflective teaching: 1) the presence and influence of a knowledgeable other, 2) understanding the decision making process, and 3) teaming how to question. These were the things which I needed to come to terms with before I could continue along my path.

**Knowledgeable Other:** There is much research among the social constructivist theorists that supports the

role of a knowledgeable other in enhancing teaming (See for example, Vygotsky 1978, McCarthey & Raphael 1992, Au, Mason & Scheu 1995 ). Even though I held two college degrees, and seven years of classroom experience, I did not see myself as a knowledgeable person when faced with problems. I would consult my teacher's guide, ask other colleagues, or simply go on with something else when instructional problems arose. When Taffy and Sue began to work in my room, I saw them as knowledgeable others whom I could look to for support and help. They however, helped me to see that I was also knowledgeable, and that I could and should look to myself for help in solving instructional dilemmas. It was only over time and repeated encouragement, through modeling and scaffolding, that I began to think of myself in this way. I feel that this was a crucial point for me in becoming more reflective.

**Decision Making:** Instructional decisions can impact teaching. Such a simple statement, but one I could not understand as a beginning teacher. I often made decisions based on other teachers suggestions or what the teacher's guide said. During Book Club, and with Sue and Taffy's support, I began to see how I had control over my decisions, and how the decisions I made could ultimately affect students learning. I began to see ways to bring in ideas from my course work and to trust my own judgment. In making instructional decisions I learned to consider my students' prior knowledge and previous experiences. I became deliberate in my decisions and realized decision making is a process. Understanding the magnitude of the influence that my decisions could have on student learning was a big step for me as I continued along the pathway towards reflective teaching.

**Questioning:** As I considered my instructional decisions, I began to ask



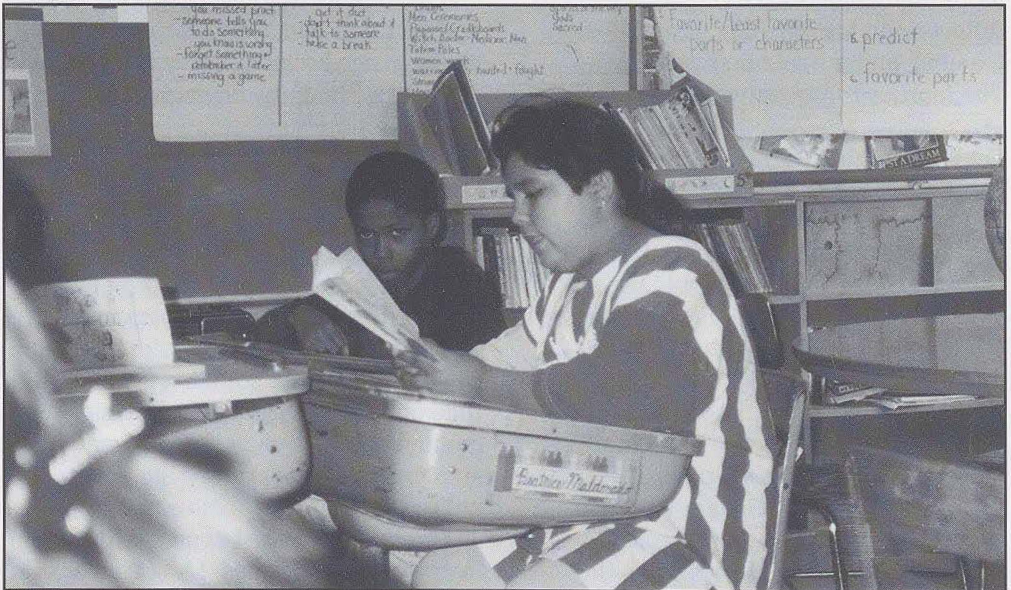
questions like: What is the desired student outcome? What are my choices for teaching it? What information and experiences do my students already possess? How can I optimize their prior knowledge and connect new information? How will I most likely be able to reach my outcome? By asking these kinds of questions, I began to make myself accountable. If something didn't work, I asked why? Instead of telling myself I'd never teach it again, I tried to understand what went wrong and teach it again. This ability to question and learn from my questions and answers was not something I had learned in college or from a teachers' guide. It was done through the modeling and scaffolding provided by Sue and Taffy and through an authentic need. I found my behavior in concurrence with current writing about learning. (See for example, Au, Mason & Scheu 1995, Fox 1993, and Routman 1988). They state that learning takes place more rapidly in authentic situations that are meaningful to the learner. Until the need arose for me to ask authentic questions, I did not ask them. But once the situation arose where I needed to ask questions to understand

my role as a teacher, I was able to learn how to ask questions.

### **Packing my Bag: Tools of Reflection**

Once I realized and accepted these three things, I began to think differently about myself. I was no longer a teacher, but a *teacher researcher*. I saw qualities in Sue and Taffy that defined the role of a teacher researcher and strove to make those qualities my own. I joined a group of teachers who also did classroom research, and together we began to explore our new roles (Goatley, et.al 1994). Reflection is a crucial part of being a teacher researcher, and I began to look seriously at the tools of reflection. For me these included: 1) use of a personal writing journal, 2) a support group, 3) reading professionally, 4) collecting and understanding student data, and 5) sharing with a larger audience. In this section, I will describe these five tools and their impact on my journey.

**Personal Journal:** I keep a journal. I use it to record what is happening in my classroom, and how I feel about those happenings. I write while my students are writing or while they are working quietly. I often write at lunch time





when the room is quiet and I am alone with my thoughts. I usually take my journal home on weekends to reread what I wrote during the week and add comments, look for big issues or questions, or to come to terms with something that has been bothering me. My entries usually fall into one of four categories. First are field notes. I write down observations of the students in my class. For example, in September of 1994, I wrote: "Jerry didn't read today, or write. He won't talk. Is giving Kami a hard time. Eleni goes to sharpen her pencil. Now Thea goes too. Julianne's group is very quiet. No one is talking. Lenny looks sad/mad. Mandy is reading her log softly to herself." These are notes taken during writing time of my Book Club program (Raphael & McMahan, 1994). They serve to help me reconstruct a feeling or a situation from my teaching at a later date.

The second form of journal entries are reflections. This example occurred in October of 1994 as we had been doing Book Club for a couple of months. "I feel good about our beginning. They are really doing well for such an early time in the year. Talk is coming. Some are better than others. I know it's a different way to do things for most kids, and it takes awhile to figure it out." These entries focus on how I was feeling or what I was thinking about at a particular place in time. As I look back and reflect, my own thoughts often help me to understand why I reacted in the way I did.

A third way I use my journal is to relate step by step what we did during a certain lesson. From early in December, 1994, "We began **The Fighting Ground**. Did some oral predicting, based on cover, back, and revolutionary war knowledge. Discussion of Hessians on front - Meg recognized the hats. Silent reading. Writing follows. I taped group 1, will observe group 2, and group 3 is in the hall." This helps me to

reconstruct whole class periods at a later date in attempts to understand what works and what doesn't. My lesson plan book doesn't always give me detailed information.

And finally, I use my journal as a place to plan further lessons. Where and when better than as I read and reflect to think about what I want to do in the future? For example, in early February of 1995 as we just completed *Hatchet*, (Paulsen, 1987) I made the following notes to myself about what to talk about when I handed back the students' reading response logs, "Get out spelling Have-a-go's. A lot of misspelled words — talk about strategies of good spellers again. nor next time, only use blank pages to encourage share sheets. Not all are trying them. Sequences are big events, not feelings or opinions. Talk about this." In this way my journal also becomes my plan book, one in which I can write more fully and explicitly,

My journal is a simple spiral bound notebook. I usually fill a couple each school year, and I place them in three-ring binders for easy reference. I believe that my journal is the most important of the tools I use for reflection. I can look back three and four years and see what I've struggled through, and use my own thoughts and words to learn more about my teaching.

**Support Group:** The group of teacher researchers I belong to consists of Taffy, Ginny Goatley (then a doctoral student and now at SUNY Albany), and six classroom teachers. Our commonality is the Literacy Master's program at Michigan State and our desire to become teacher researchers. We meet about once a month at each other's homes for dinner and conversation. We talk about our classroom research, raise questions for study, discuss data collection, and offer support and suggestions to each other. This group keeps me focused and acts as an extrinsic motivator. I feel like

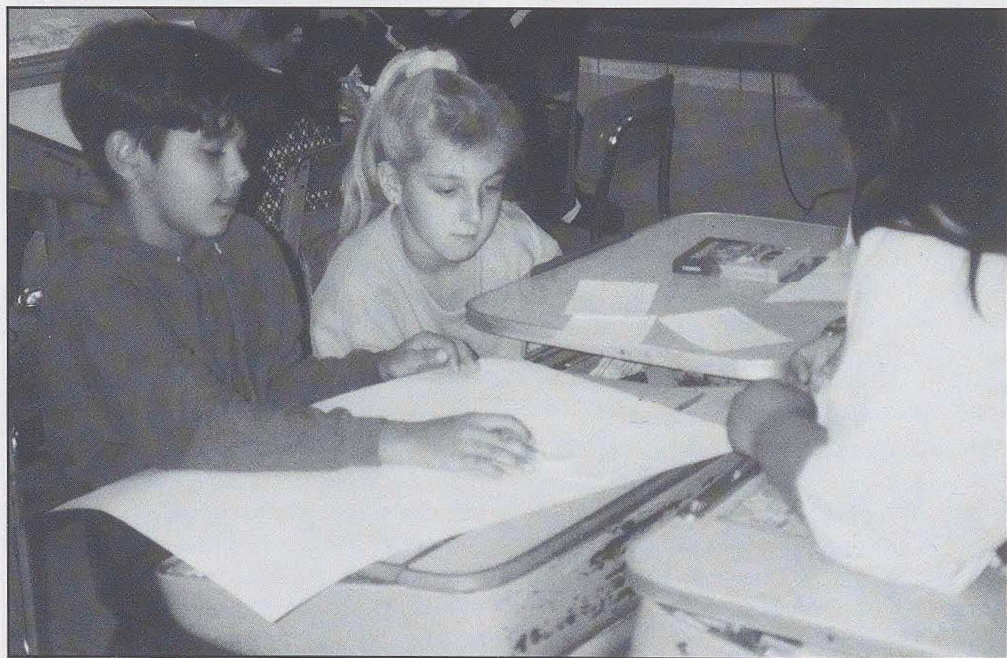


I am letting the other members down if I don't keep up with my research project. We also offer affirmation and support which is often lacking in our day to day classroom teaching. Several times we have co-presented at state and national conferences. We collaborate and plan these sessions, as well as practice our talks before the whole group. These experiences have united us and have strengthened my desire to continue classroom research.

**Professional Reading:** I read journals like *The Reading Teacher*, *Language Arts*, and *Michigan Reading Journal* on a regular basis. I do so because it keeps me in touch with current research and practice. It also helps me to see that other teachers struggle with the same issues I do. It offers me opportunities to consider alternate suggestions. A book that has been especially helpful to our Teacher Researcher group and me personally is Hubbard and Power's book (1993) entitled *The art of classroom inquiry: A handbook for teacher-researchers*. This book offers practical suggestions for doing class-

room-based research; from identifying a research question to data collection to organizing and analyzing your data.

In the fall of 1994 I decided to return to the college classroom, and I enrolled in a course called "Learning to Teach." In this course we tried to identify what it is that helps teachers learn how to teach. One crucial element was the role of reflection. A book that was especially helpful to me as I struggled with reflection was Schon's (1987), *Educating the reflective practitioner*. In this book Schon talks about two kinds of reflection — reflection "in-action" and reflection "on action". Any classroom teacher will tell you that they make countless decisions "in-action" all day. We are continually bombarded with questions and we make moment-to-moment decisions, based usually on prior experience. But what is lacking for many teachers, and what I found most interesting, was thinking about reflection "on-action". Looking back on something I did or said, thinking about it, and making future decisions based upon this action and reflection. Schon's ideas have been





instrumental in pushing me further along the road to reflective teaching.

**Student Data:** When I began teaching elementary school, I began to collect student work. I do not know why, it just seemed the thing to do. I would read something that was "neat" or "cool," and I would decide to keep it. Pretty soon, I had files and drawers and boxes full of student work. However, this was not helpful to me and often caused me frustration and confusion because I did not know what to do with the student work I saved. Part of being a reflective teacher has been my growth in knowing what kinds of student work I should collect, and further, what to do with the pieces I do collect. Student data can be valuable in helping me reconstruct lessons, think about what went well or what didn't, and moving me towards positive decision making. However, I had to learn what to collect and how much, and then to use it effectively. The most effective pieces for me are when students actually write about a piece of work. (See figure 1). Julianne identified this reading response log entry as her best one. On a post-it note that she stuck to the page, she wrote, "*This is my best response because it's a good summary. It tells everything in the chapters that we went through without a lot of detail. Also if someone read this summary they could tell what happened in that part of the story.*"

By reading Julianne's self evaluation, I can gain insight about her learning. First, she has learned from a previous mini-lesson that a summary touches on the main ideas but does not include a lot of minor details. Second, she has identified a purpose for writing a summary so that if someone were to read this they would know what the story was about. This kind of information will help me in structuring further mini-lessons for the class, as well as evaluate Julianne's progress in Book Club.

I also use interviews and surveys to increase my understanding of what my students are thinking. For example, in June 1995, I asked my students to tell me how they would describe Book Club to a third grader. Below are some of the responses:

*"It's were you are sitting in a group and you read a book. You have a bunch of paper. You write down your thoughts on the paper. Then you share your thoughts with your group members and they respond."*

*"I would say book club is were you read a book you have a viritey of questions to do like, picture and others. Then you write down what you are thinking and read to your group."*

*"I would say that book club is fun, first of all. I would tell them that you write responses in a reading log that you get in a group and ask questions and talk about the book."*

*"I would say "Book Club is when you read a book each day and talk about it with you group to help you or someone else understand the story. You also write your info in a reading log."*

This kind of information helps me to plan for future classes of students. These students all mention response to the book and talking in the group. These are key components of Book Club and are both something I have focused on during the last school year. It lets me know I'm on the right track. I will continue doing some of the things I think were responsible for this metacognitive awareness.

Audio and video tapes are also very useful for re-creating and thinking about specific classroom situations. I often play the tapes for my students, and we evaluate ourselves. Sometimes we look and listen to previous classes to help us understand what Book Club might look like. I have a lot of tapes, and I listen to them regularly — however I do not tran-



Figure 1

Jessica

DATE 9/29/94



Summary -

Running Bird and Bright Morning were captured by Spaniards and turned into slaves. Running Bird and Bright Morning were split up. Bright Morning was a guest hostess for a Mexican family. She got to wear a velvetreen dress and pretty ribbons for her hair. Bright Morning worked with Rosita & Nehana. Nehana told Bright Morning to meet her at the church in ten days. In ten days Bright Morning snuck out of the house where she worked and met Nehana at the church. Nehana had Running Bird and they were gonna escape. When everything was dark Nehana, Running Bird, and Bright Morning snuck out on horses. But the Spaniards see their tracks.



scribe many. What seems to be different for me now is my selection process. I do not keep masses of student work samples as before but look for pieces that will help me in making further instructional decisions.

**An audience:** Presenting at conferences, consulting with local school districts, and professional writing keep me motivated and striving to find more answers to my classroom questions. It helps to tell someone else what I am doing and why. It is one way I identify questions, understand issues and come to some insight on possible solutions. For me, I have to make my reflections public before I feel real ownership. It has to do with making sense. I need to be able to explain it clearly before I can understand and learn from my experiences. Often my teacher researcher group or my school colleagues serve as my audience.

### **The Joys of Travel: Benefits of Reflective Teaching**

Looking back, I see many reasons to continue to reflect about classroom teaching. Three of the most important are: 1) increased student learning, 2) personal growth, and 3) confidence and competence.

**Increased student learning:** I feel that as a reflective teacher I can greatly impact my students' learning. I inform my students of my dual role. On the first day of school I tell them that I am a teacher researcher. We talk about what that means, and many times during the year my students will hear me refer to my research. I share writing and parts of presentations with them from time to time. I question them about what happens in our classroom, and ask if it is helping them learn, and how I could do more. The following excerpt from Julianne's end of the year interview, reinforces my belief that reflective teaching increases student learning. "I

*think it's neat that you let us help plan and stuff Because we learn more and have more fun when we decide what we want to do. And I like that you listen to our ideas. Like in our journals, if I write something, like a question to you, I know you will answer me back. It's like you care what we say and if we learn and stuff."*

### **Confidence and Competence**

**Increases:** In my early years of teaching, I dreaded parent teacher conferences. I never wanted to talk to the parents because I was afraid they would ask me something I could not answer. Becoming reflective about my practice has lessened this anxiety. I think ahead about what questions parents might ask, and I make sure I not only have an answer, but that I understand and believe in that answer. I owe it to my students to be the best I can be, and part of that is being competent and confident in the job that I am doing.

**Personal Growth:** Sometimes I think about the growth I've made. I remember that beginning middle school teacher of thirteen years ago, and I reflect on who I am today. My mother used to say, "The day you stop learning is the day you die." I used to get angry at her for saying that, but now I've come to realize she was right. As a classroom teacher I can not just sit, content in my classroom, doing the same things year after year. I must continue to learn and to grow and to meet the needs of my students. I know that by being reflective I can continue to grow as a teacher and a learner.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The road to reflective teaching is neither easy nor short. There are no set methods to study or guide books to follow. However, the benefits outweigh the bumps and detours encountered along the way. Being a reflective teacher is one of the most rewarding and meaningful



aspects of being a teacher. Since embarking on this road, I have learned so much, met so many wonderful people, and enjoyed myself and my students. I will continue my journey as long as I continue to teach children. For since embarking on my journey, I can not imagine any other road to take.

*Laura S. Pardo was a classroom teacher for 14 years. She is currently a consultant for Silver Burdett Ginn.*

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