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Helen Lundberg Williams

Isbister Elementary School, Plymouth, MI

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Learning to See and Notice the Possibilities

Helén Lundberg Williams
Isbister Elementary School
Plymouth, MI

Coming in to a third grade classroom for my student teaching practicum, I believed that building relationships with students and families was imperative to teaching and learning. But I wasn't prepared for what that really meant. I didn't expect to become so profoundly moved by the children; I didn't expect to feel so changed by knowing them as their teacher.

Even though I had previously worked as a teacher in various places (including Sweden, my country of origin), I had never considered myself deserving of this role because I felt unprepared. However, after years of living with *childhood* questions, both as a mother of three children and as a returning student in a rigorous teacher preparation program, I was ready for the teacher in me to finally show her glorious self (I hoped).

What follows are observations and reflections I wrote throughout this journey and process. (I have changed the names of the students and identifying traits.) Although the students, my university supervisor, my cooperating teacher, and others at the school were hugely important in my progress as a teacher, it is through the journals that I wrote (presented in part below), and through this reflection, that I make visible my own learning and how these experiences have prepared me to teach.

Initial Observations

In the beginning, I have the fortunate role of an observer. I spend time in the room, just watching, listening. I have been told that many children in this class don't perform well academically. But I have no information about any of them as individuals besides their physical nature. Some of the children I notice first: Christopher, sitting on his feet, curled up in his chair, taking up so little space, his

side turned to the teacher; pale and thin, dark circles around his eyes, silent, seemingly in a world of his own. Nicholas is in the last row, looking around the room for an answer when the answer is in the book on his desk; Elijah, also in the back, almost never on the same task as the rest of the class, chatting with his buddy Josh, and drawing, always drawing pictures with crayons; Brian, head down on his desk, eyes closed, Teacher asking him to fill in the blank, her finger on his paper. 'Where is your pencil?' Allison was there too, a quiet, compliant girl who struggles with math, but I don't notice her.

Journal Entry: Week 1, January 12

I feel like I could write a whole chapter about today. So much is happening in the interactions between students, between Teacher and students, between the students and me.

In the hallway, I have a few minutes to work on shared story writing with four of the boys who struggle with reading. I explain the activity and they immediately tune in (I'm amazed) and they brainstorm (their idea). Within just a few minutes, they have decided who their characters are. Someone suggests a red robin, others a snake. After some discussion, they welcome a third alternative: how about the red robin and the snake in one story together? There is so much energy at our table that this process takes no more than two minutes.

So we begin. Josh starts us off. The collaboration between teller and scribe begins. He understands the process right away, keeps an eye on me when I write to make sure I get it right. They take turns, discuss what will happen next, reach consensus with very little guidance from me. I'm completely in awe. These struggling readers are showing me creativity, enthusiasm, commitment to the task. Josh turns his attention to the emerging text often, wanting to see the story on the page. After we have a beginning and a middle (although I don't talk about structure overtly), I read what we have so far. They question some things, with "That doesn't make sense!" And we change it. I offer suggestions, but make it clear (with my attitude) that they decide.

We have a little trouble with the resolution

(haven't we all?), but I think they're satisfied. They want to end with, "and they lived happily ever after."

I tell them I'll type the story on my computer for them to read next week. (Elijah asks if we have computers in Sweden. I say yes, and add that I'm going to use my computer where I live here. He seems to think Sweden is where I still live.) They get all excited about having their story typed. Especially Nicholas. He exclaims eagerly, "We could act it out!" "We could show it to our parents!" "We can draw the pictures!"

My sense is that this type of collaborative writing has many purposes, especially for struggling readers: it motivates students to create; establishes connection between spoken and written language; gives students an experience with several aspects of the writing process: brainstorming, putting spoken ideas into written words, reading and revising, thinking about structure, thinking about the reader; gives the student a book he or she can read!

*

Things I heard today:

"My grandmother was in the crowd." This is in response to my asking one of the students if he is doing anything special on MLK day. From that comment, I learn that his grandmother was present at one of Dr. Martin Luther King's speeches. He is visiting his grandmother tonight, and I suggest he ask her to tell him something about that. I remind him before he goes home.

"I'm scared." (In tears.) One student hasn't finished the writing assignment that is due today. I don't know anything about it, but reassure her, and promise we'll discuss it with Teacher. She reminds me about it later in the day.

A girl walks up to me while I'm working with the boys on story writing: "Someone wrote a swear word in the bathroom." Later in the day she tells me: "I'm not doing anything for my birthday."

I'm sitting at my desk working on something. Nicholas who sits within close proximity appears by my side. "Mrs. Williams. Do you know how to draw roses?"

"Well, not really, but I can try. Something like that? Sorry, I'm not very good. Why do you want to draw roses?"

"Today is my mom's birthday."

A few minutes later, I see the birthday card he made.

I read the words spoken from his heart, written in pencil on a lined piece of paper folded in half. Unconventional spelling revealing work done without assistance, "I love you very much. Happy 40th birthday Mom." His message is punctuated with three hearts, my attempt at drawing a rose, and another made by Nicholas. I tell him she will love it. (A few days prior, he brought in sweets for the class to celebrate his own birthday. He also told me his sister had planned to take him and his cousins bowling, but she didn't have enough money.)

Poor Elijah. At the end of the science assembly in the gym, the presenters ask the kids a few questions as a review. They want to see if the students have learned the scientific term "biome" (a biological community living in the physical nature of a geographic region). They repeat the definition, prompting the students to say the scientific word. Several students raise their hand in this crowded gym, and they call on Elijah. He answers, "Mohawk!" sincerely believing he was right. Until everybody starts laughing. It was both comical and sad. I thought it summed up pretty well the disconnect that exists between presenters/teachers and our students. We're talking biomes; they're hearing mohawks.

Journal Entry, Week 2, January 17

This happened yesterday: Christopher looks very distracted during morning math, both squirmy and tired. I walk over to him and ask him quietly how he is feeling. "I'm so hungry," he whispers back. I learn he hasn't eaten breakfast. (I feel absolutely awful about this – the morning will be long: math, writing instruction, and reading assessment before he'll get something in his belly.)

"I only eat breakfast on the weekends," he begins. "I got up at 7:30 and I took a cold shower." (Gee, I hope not a cold one!) "Then I had to get on the bus."

I ask him if he could try to get some breakfast tomorrow, maybe fix some cereal for himself in the morning before school. I say it's real important. I remind him gently about breakfast before he leaves on the bus to go home in the afternoon. This morning he tells me he had breakfast at school.

Journal Entry, Week 2, January 18

In the morning before the bell rings, I greet each child who is waiting in line. Sometimes a parent is standing there too, waiting to speak with Teacher. I say hello and introduce myself. I can tell they are a little uncomfortable meeting a teacher; they don't come across very confident. A bit nervous actually, about asking the teacher something, not wanting to be a bother.

During library I notice that Nicholas has trouble finding a book that he can read. (Teacher tells me that he's reading at first grade level.) So later, during silent reading, I ask Teacher if it would be all right to sit with him and have him read to me. She says it would be good, so I pull up a chair and we read a book together using a variety of strategies. I notice that he can fairly easily decode the first letter sound of words, but invents the ending of the word. He also looks up frequently and not at the word he's trying to read. I'm drawing his attention to the whole word, one chunk at a time. I also try to get him to listen to himself read—does it make sense? He gets a few words by looking at the pictures.

I wonder if his sense of reading is warped (if that's the right word). His behavior tells me he doesn't *expect* to read and understand; he doesn't expect it to make sense. It's just a bunch of sounds on a page. He says to me, "I suck at reading."

Journal Entry, Week Three, January 24

My read aloud of *Charlotte's Web* is going well. It's probably my most favorite time of day. The read aloud is slowly developing into a lesson of sorts. I'd like to incorporate more writing. My first try was the shared writing of the summary paragraph. How can I get them more engaged? I think the writing needs to be more open-ended, if it's going to work. I must take their suggestions seriously and write them down. For that first writing lesson, I was more focused on getting a good summary on paper.

Elijah sits in the back row and does his own thing for much of the day. He seems bright, but he tunes out.

Brian, who isn't doing well at all, is starting to make contact with me. He needs a lot of probing to get any work done in class, and he rarely does his homework. His behavior card is turned from green to red almost every morning for this reason. (Red means "Warning.") He rests

his head on the desk, and often his eyes are closed. He's not loud; he doesn't act out. He's failing in a quiet sort of way. He turns in his homework this morning for the first time all week. He gives me a bookmark for *Charlotte's Web*. He wrote the names of all the characters on it, and then made one exactly like it for himself.

Journal Entry, Week 4, February 6

Some students, and more often than not it's usually the same two or three, don't turn in their homework. Consequently, they have to go over to the behavior chart and change their green card to red. Their day begins with a warning.

I design a homework assignment for the first time. As usual, all but three students turn it in. I copy everything the students have written in response to their assignment. At the beginning of the lesson I share with them all those phrases and words they have written to describe Fern, one of the characters. I can occasionally hear a soft, "Oh, that's mine!" from the students. They are very pleased to hear their words mentioned publicly.

First four weeks

The first four weeks have been especially overwhelming and intense. The expectations of me as a student teacher are always in the back of my mind. I know I'm being observed and evaluated, the whole time. But those concerns fade when I work with the students. My awareness is focused on them and how I respond. I learn so much from these encounters and feel the most changed by them.

Journal entry, Week 5, February 7

I pull up a chair and listen to Brian read for a few minutes. During those minutes, I learn that he has four siblings, all under the age of ten. He says he's got another brother too, whom he "thinks" is also ten. Brian is the boy with dirty ears and chapped lips. Today during computer lab, he asks if he can write his dad a letter. I learn that he hasn't seen his dad in a very long time due to extraordinary circumstances. I give him paper and my pencil. He sits by the computer, intently writing a letter. He shows it to me and it says something like this:

Dear Dad,
I hope you're having a great time. I liked the picture. I hope you will send a note to James [Brian's brother] too. When you come home I want you to take me to Uncle Rick. Have a great day or not. [That's a school slogan.] I love you.

He signs the letter with both his first and last name. He draws a picture at the top of the page, of a person saying, "I'm free!" I ask if his dad is coming home soon and he says, yes, March 15. He says his mom needs to get some envelopes so he can send the letter to his dad. I'll bring a stamped envelope tomorrow in case he wants it.

Journal Entry, Week 5, February 8

This morning I place a stamped envelope on Brian's desk. I am busy with morning procedures, but in the back of my head I notice him as he sees it. At first he says, "What's this?" But it takes only a moment, and he knows. Nothing else is said about it, by him or me.

I'm finding that the more teaching I take on, the less I seem to remember what students say. I am not available to listen, as much. Sad truth.

Reading *Charlotte's Web* today is magical. (Chapter 11, when Charlotte weaves the words "Some Pig" into her web.) After the reading, I hear some of them utter, "I love *Charlotte's Web*!"

....focusing on *what* students are trying to say is more important than *how* they're able to say it.

Journal Entry, Week 7, February 27

Teacher asks that I read aloud *Charlotte's Web* after lunch. At the same time, a few students are asked to go out in the hall and read with our assistant. One of those students, Christopher, comes up to me and says, "But then we'll miss *Charlotte's Web*." His speaking up really surprises me as he rarely talks unless prompted by a question. He clearly doesn't want to miss our read aloud. Of course I would have preferred to continue the novel with everyone present, but it has already been decided.

When I look at Christopher standing there, wide-eyed and concerned in between his teacher and me, I know how he feels about that book and I want to give him a hug.

Journal entry, Week 8, March 10

My attempt at writing workshop is going better than I hoped. Most of the students did a good job at revising. They seem very interested in my comments. (I say this, not because I have time to watch their faces, but because I can see them working on their second draft. Also, periodically throughout the day, some students ask if they can work on their paragraph.) Their interest in my written responses confirm what I believe about writing: focusing on *what* students are trying to say is more important than *how* they're able to say it. Nicholas doesn't have his homework done. I ask him about it. He says his dad works two jobs and he has to help him with some things. I say I understand he's been very busy, but remind him that school is *his* work, and that he must make time for it.

The students are noticing that I wear a pin every day. Today they exclaim, "How many pins do you have!?" I say, "I have many." (They are quite gaudy—large, colorful brass animals usually, and I always wear them when I teach.) Sometimes students ask, "Why do you always wear a pin?" Then I ask, "Do you like them?" When they say yes, I say: "That's why." I wear a pin as a small symbol of how special I feel, and privileged, to be their teacher.

Journal Entry, Week 10, March 21

I'm creating and teaching a social studies unit on ancestry. Believing that students learn most when emotionally and imaginatively engaged, I use drama, music, and storytelling in some of the lessons. I feel that the anticipatory activity is especially important to this end. It sets the mood, and getting the students' attention from the very start always leads to a better lesson. One time I dress up and act the part of a mid-nineteenth-century Swedish immigrant, speaking in a heavy accent about the crowded voyage and my life as a young girl coming to America. The room was never so silent as when I transform myself into this immigrant girl. My supervisor described the students as "mesmerized."

We conclude this unit with a small research project. The children do not have much experience working in groups,

or working on projects. We collect information to represent ancestry of everyone in the classroom: African American, European, and Native American. It's exhilarating to see them engaged and in charge of their learning during this project. Watching students pouring over books, sharing them, being self-directed and motivated to complete the tasks without me telling them exactly when to do what, is immensely motivating and rewarding for me, and I hope the children feel the same. Throughout the day, many ask me when we're going to work on our project. They ask, "Did you make copies [of pictures] for us?" Today I notice Christopher going over to the box of folders when he has some free time, finds his, and quietly starts working on it. I see others too, working on it from time to time during free time.

I recall moments that reveal insight and immediate learning. I was telling the story of Frederick Douglass, speaking of his determination to learn how to read and write, precisely because he wasn't supposed to. I ask, "Why do you think the slave owners didn't allow slaves to learn how to read and write?" Elijah remembers our discussion and I remember exactly how he answers the question: "Because then they would learn how to change things."

The students have a lot of questions. When they are not comfortable asking, I give them a chance to write. It turns out everyone has something to say about our discussion:

"Why would they take people from Africa?"
"Why [to a slave owner] don't you help a slave at least sometimes?" "Why couldn't they [slave owners] do the work themselves?" "I feel sad about what happened."
"What if you were a slave?"

"Why they would be so mean to a slave and if they are sorry." One African American student asks, "Were only black people slaves?"

I discover that most of the African American students want to do their research project on a Native American tribe. But Elijah, who is African American, does his research project on Sweden. When I ask students if they want to share what countries their ancestors came from, several of them do. Elijah raises his hand. "Get ready for this," he says. And then, in earnest, after a brief pause: "Sweden." I'm in awe of his comment, as it reveals

a connection to me, and the imaginative thinking of a child, believing that anything is possible. Reflecting on the complex issues of race and ethnic identity, I realize that he is more right than it might seem.

Journal Entry, Week 10, March 23

After recess I speak to Morgan since some children have complained about her being bossy. Apparently she gets her peers to do and say things to others that are not kind. I tell her I've gotten some complaints about her (without naming names). I also tell her she is one of the leaders in the class (I consider them all leaders) and that other students look up to her, and that it's, therefore, real important that she set a good example and does what is right by others. What I say surprises her completely, it seems. Honestly, I can see her thoughts right there on her face, in her eyes and smile. It's as if she's thinking, "Really? I am a leader? Wow, I never realized I have such an important role in this class."

I arranged for a parent to come in this afternoon and talk about her Native American heritage. She does a wonderful job telling stories and showing some artifacts. The students are very interested, asking a lot of questions. It's a great additional lesson to our unit on ancestors. I want the students to remember that parents are teachers too.

Unfortunately her visit ends badly. We believe one of the students took one of the small items that were shown. The parent has an idea who it might be. I take the student aside and ask her about it. She is animated, doesn't look me in the eye and comes up with a very elaborate explanation of what happened when she was looking at the bracelet. Her reaction makes me believe she might have taken it. This happens at the end of the day as the children are being called to line up for the buses. It's very hectic. The parent is very gracious, doesn't want to make a big deal out of it. I promise to talk to her soon.

Journal Entry, Week 11, March 28

We've confirmed that Rebecca took the bracelet. Today she brings it in. She's written a note of apology to Teacher, the parent, and me. When asked in the office to write an explanation to why she stole the item, she writes: "Because we are seven months behind on our rent. We don't have any money. That's why I stole the bracelet."

Final observations

On my last day, I was absent for a short time in the morning to take care of some administrative tasks. When I return I find some homemade cards and notes from the students on my desk. Christopher had glued his school picture onto a card that says, "I will miss you," surrounded by lots of red hearts. The quietest girl, Allison, whom I still don't know much about, has written a letter, each word colored with a different colored pencil:

Dear Mrs. Williams,
You will be a great teacher and you are my best friend forever. I like how you read the Charlotte's Web book and you teach very well. My favorite day was when you dressed up in Sweden clothes and brought a big suit case. Thank you so much. You will always be my best friend and I will never ever forget you.
Love, Your student, Allison

It's a glorious afternoon, sun streaming in through the windows. I've asked for some time to celebrate my last day with the students. I give the students little booklets I have printed – they are sky blue – with the writings they completed with my guidance. We watch the videotape they've helped record, of themselves reading their narratives and poems. Here is one:

My best friend is Andre. He is seven years old. We play football together. He likes to throw the football. I like to catch it. He is the only friend I got. That's why he's my best friend.

I'm reading the last chapter of *Charlotte's Web*. (It magically worked out that way.) The students ask that we first do our chant about Wilbur and Charlotte, which has become our regular opening. When I come to the very end of the book and read, "It's not often that someone comes along who is a true friend," I feel how perfect this book is for all of us in room 19. I feel that everyone knows what I mean with my teaching, what E.B. White means with his book. The reading is absolutely perfect.

Except for one thing. Josh isn't part of the celebration because he didn't finish his spelling tasks as he

was supposed to. He's out in the hallway working on it.

The day ends with my giving each of them a different pin, the same kinds of pins I have worn each and every day. I open the door and go out in the hall. There is Josh. Having finished his spelling, he stands up from the table and starts walking toward me. In my hand is the pin I've picked out for him (two silver dolphins on a golden ocean wave) inside the little blue fabric bag.

I say his name, and I want to say "I'm sorry" but I don't. He doesn't look sad. His face is resolute. He finished what he had to. He comes to me, and we wrap our arms around each other and just stand there, for several seconds. When we turn and walk back into the classroom, I feel his resilience also becomes mine and I know we will both endure.

About the Author

Helén L. Williams (HelenLWilliams1985@comcast.net) is a Swedish native with a BA in English from the University of Massachusetts, and Teacher Certification K-5 at Eastern Michigan University. Currently she works as a Special Education Paraprofessional in second grade. She lives with her husband and three children in Northville, Michigan.