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## Children's Literacy and Classroom Community: How Do They Relate?

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# Children's Literacy and Classroom Community: How Do They Relate?

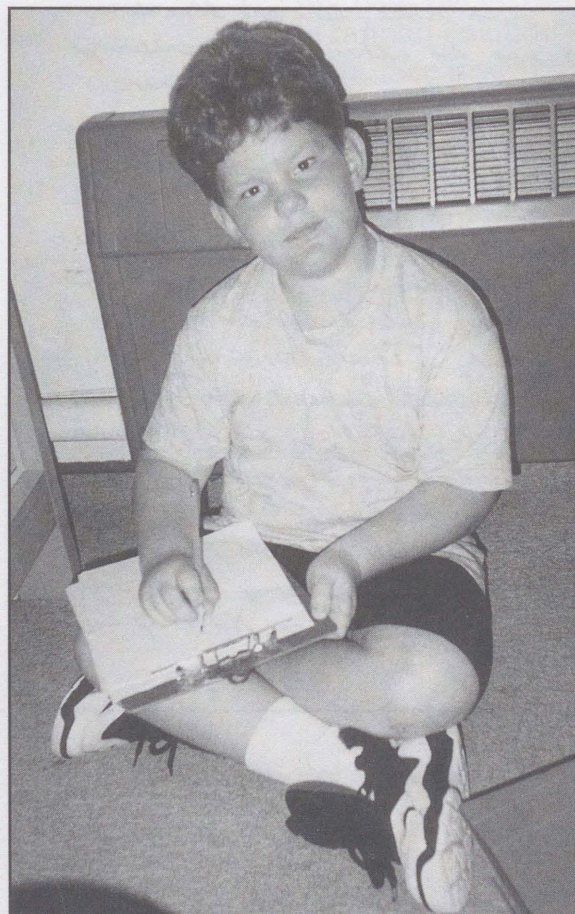
ARTICLE BY CATHY PERZ GWIZDALA

I believe, as Ralph Peterson says in *Life in a Crowded Place*, that "... community in itself is more important to learning than any method or technique. For the last several years in my early elementary classroom, I've been working diligently with my students in the development of both literacy and classroom community. When I was invited to join the Michigan English Language Arts Frameworks (MELAF) project, I was delighted. When our MELAF team chose *Developing Community in a Language Arts Classroom* as our theme, I was ecstatic.

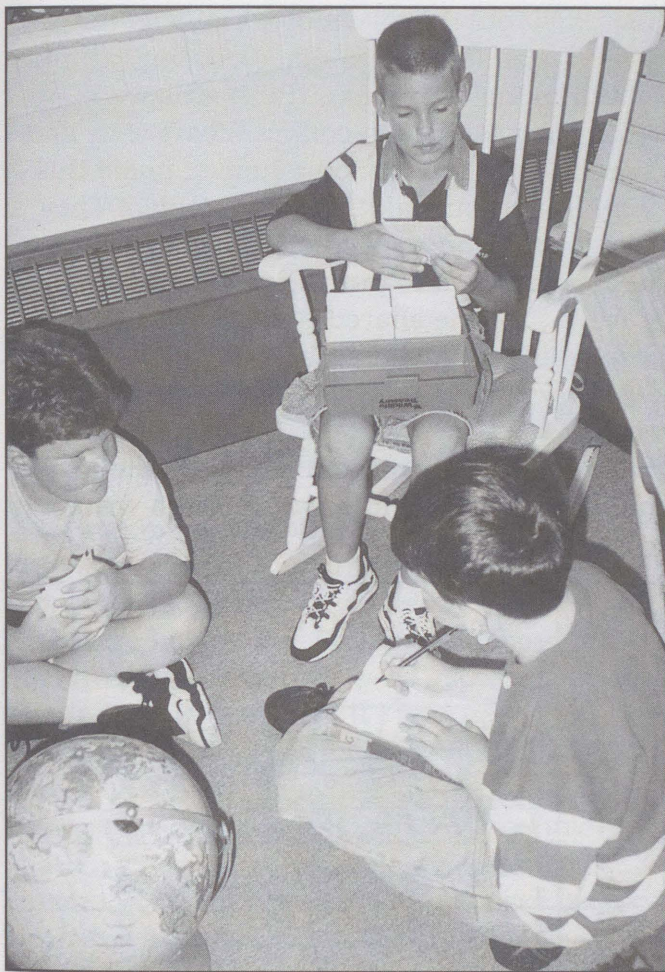
In order to develop a feeling of community in our classroom, we participated in a myriad of what Peterson calls rites, rituals and ceremonies (Peterson). The children and I worked together under the premise that "Caring and interest of others breathes purpose and life into learning (Peterson, 1992). We sat at tables instead of desks, we shared our thoughts and writing as a group several times throughout the day, we worked out our differences inside our own room instead of in the principal's office, we developed two classroom mottoes, which we recited daily, and we gave each other "**H**andshakes, **H**igh-fives or **H**ugs", which occurred as hellos in the morning, good-byes in the afternoon, and after just about every good or exciting thing that happened to any of us. One day six-year-old Brittany decided her first-grade friend, Aaron was ready to receive his first "H — H or H". (A word of explanation is necessary here. After a full year of kindergarten and long into our year together in first grade, Aaron was just learning how to get along with his peers. He still had extreme problems with impulse control; he solved

problems violently; he had only just begun to develop an interest in friendships and learning. Consequently, we had not, as yet, been able to draw him into our "H — H or H" strategy. However, we still believed that "...learning awakens a variety of internal processes that operate only when the child is interacting with others in his environment and in cooperation with his peers [Peterson, 1992]." We believed that we could that we could get to him through our kindness and persistence.)

Brittany approached Aaron to deliver his "H — H or H", but she decided to give him a little







peck on the cheek instead. As she teetered on her tiptoes, beaming at him with her partially toothless smile, he slapped her — *hard* — in the face at least three times. I stood motionless, momentarily unable to get a single word out of my mouth to stop him. Brittany and the other children around her were stunned. After a moment, her face crumpled, and Sonia and Daniel rushed to her with a hug. Aaron hadn't had a violent physical outburst in several days, and to hurt Brittany was unthinkable and unforgivable, or so I thought. I removed him from the classroom, comforted Brittany, and we went about the business of the day.

After lunch that day, the students returned to our classroom, retrieved their journals from their cubbies, and began to write. I turned on the compact disc player, which filled the room with soft piano tunes from Gary Lamb's *Twelve Promises*, and sat down in a vacant student seat to begin my own journal entry.

Aaron straggled in a few moments later, his breathing loud and raspy. As he bumped his

way through the chairs to his seat, a few of the students glanced quickly over their shoulders and scooted their chairs up tighter to the tables. We all worked apprehensively, but Aaron just dropped into his chair, hung his head and rolled his pencil under his fingers on the table.

Brittany, too, sat quietly in her seat, her head bent, but she was working diligently in her journal. Upon finishing my own entry, I began roaming among the children, checking out their progress, and saw that she had written and drawn the following entry.



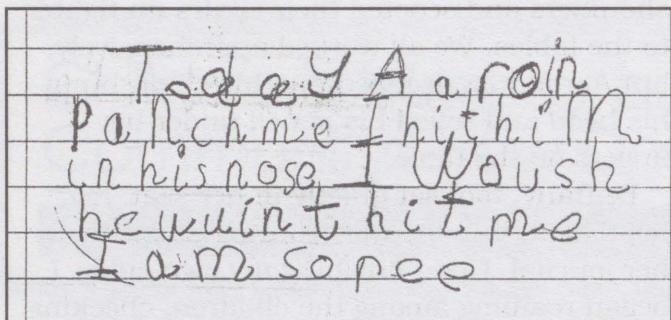
*I like my friends.  
My 1st friend is Bershay.  
My 2nd friend is Aaron.*

After journal writing time, we gathered on the rug to share, sitting in a close circle so that everyone could see and hear the speaker. On this particular day, Brittany was the first volunteer to share. She stood bravely and read her entry aloud, looking directly at Aaron. Here was a six-year-old girl reaching out to a troubled friend — *again* — to help him learn how to be a friend and to accept friendship. Earlier that same day, Brittany had found Aaron incapable of accepting her personal, physical attempts, so now she had decided to try writing. She was successful: Aaron really paid attention to her. He listened, and accepted her compliment, and the other children actually applauded when she finished! I asked them why they were clapping. Sonia responded, "Because we're so proud of Aaron." Daniel answered, "Because it's so nice of Brittany to write that about Aaron."

Another indication that the journals encouraged community in the classrooms was that, occasionally, children wrote journal entries for a specific person as their audience.

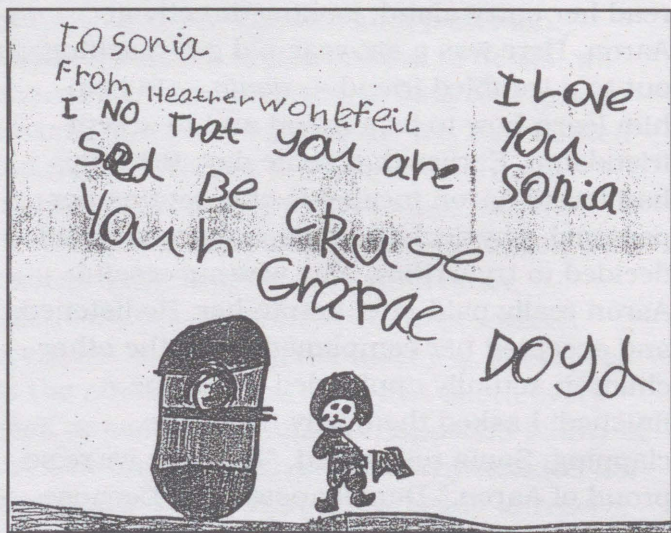


For instance, after a lunchtime conflict, Robbie J. wrote the following:



Today Aaron punched me I hit him in his nose  
I wish he wouldn't hit me I am sorry

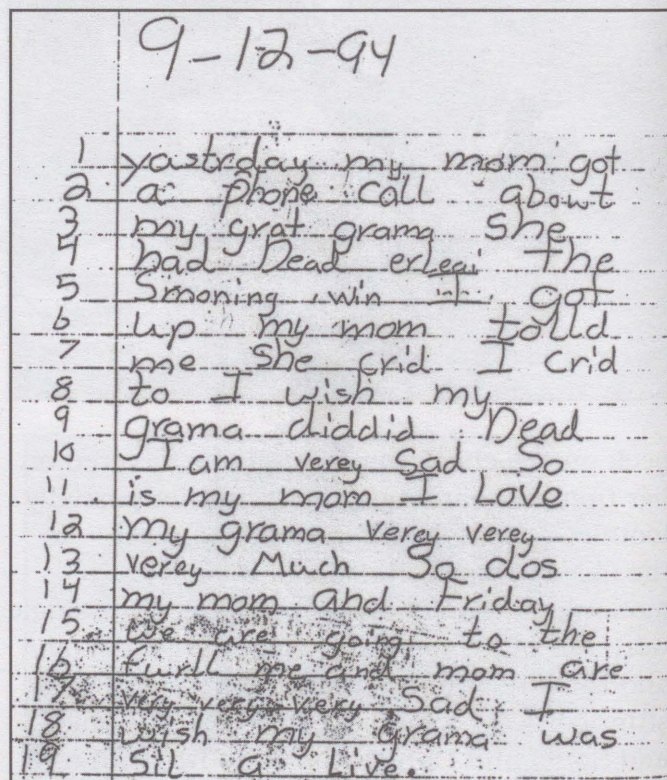
When Robbie read his journal entry aloud at sharing time, Aaron listened and accepted his apology. I'd never heard of children apologizing through their journals before. These students used their journals and the following sharing time for reflecting on life's events, and thinking critically about their problems! Throughout the year, some of the other students found the journals and journal sharing time valuable as well. When Sonia's grandfather died in Texas, she went for a two week visit. During those two weeks, the other students were constantly talking about Sonia, her sadness, and what they could do to help her feel better. Upon her return, Heather W. wrote the following:



After Heather read her entry aloud at sharing time, Sonia cried quietly and several of her friends hugged her until she regained her composure. Lindsey, another of Sonia's

friends, wrote the following: "I am sad for Sonia because her grandpa died, but I think he's thinking about you." Both girls were using their literacy to communicate with and comfort their friend. Sonia herself made this entry in her journal: "My grampa died. They buried my grampa. My tia (aunt) cried. She don't want them to put the dirt on my grampa." As she shared this entry, her classmates were still and respectful.

Another student, Heather B., didn't say a word to me or anyone else about her great-grandmother's death, but she was able to manage her grief and worry through writing in her journal.



Yesterday my mom got a phone call about my great grandma. She had died early this morning. When I I got up my mom told me. She cried. I cried too. I wish my grandma didn't die. I am very sad. So is my mom. I love my grandma very very very much. So does my mom and Friday we are going to the funeral. Me and mom are very very very sad. I wish my grandma was still alive.

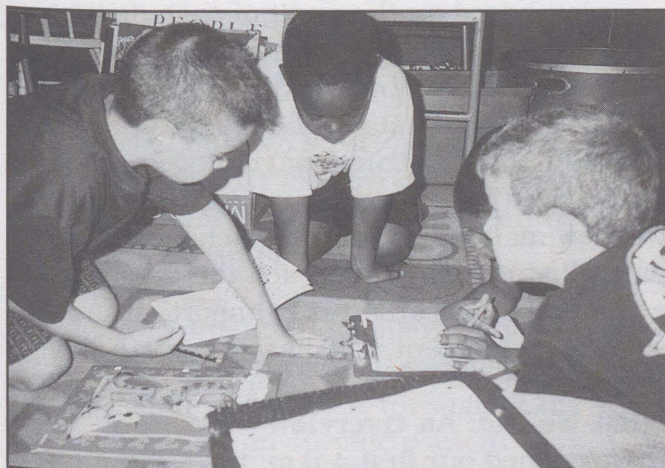
So many times, these children were able to express grief, sympathy, apologies and conflict resolution in their writing, even though it was difficult to talk about those things openly.





This was not something I actively taught, nor did I even dream it might happen! This was totally developed by the children. I believe they were able to use their writing so effectively because they were allowed to write about their own issues. If I had been assigning daily topics for journal time, these pieces would not have been written, the interaction between students with conflicts wouldn't have been as intense, and our classroom community would not have been nearly so strong.

In the past, I've considered the difficult topics the children wrote about this year "above" students as young as these. No more! I've learned that, given ample time, choice and opportunity, even young children are able to use their literacy to communicate effectively with each other, to develop a sense of classroom community with their classmates, to discuss really big issues, and to deal with complex emotions.



*Cathy Perz Gwizdala is a multiage primary classroom teacher at Lincoln Elementary School in Monroe. She is one of the Monroe MELAF demonstration site team members and is a member of the Monroe Language Arts Curriculum Development Committee.*

#### **Reference**

Peterson, Ralph (1992). *Life in a Crowded Place*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

