

# Foreword

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Sandra Cisneros's short story, "Salvador Late or Early," is slightly more than 300 words long, barely filling one printed page of her collection, *Woman Hollering Creek*. More poetry than prose, this piece of writing provides a brief glimpse into the life of Salvador, a "forty pound body of boy" who is perhaps 6 years old. Depending on the audience, one sees Salvador as a hero or a responsible family member, as unfortunate or abused (Campano, 2003). Although she leaves the interpretation to the reader, Cisneros manages, with such brilliance and in so few words, to reveal how this child is framed as invisible through the lens of school:

Salvador with the eyes the color of caterpillar, Salvador of the crooked hair and crooked teeth, Salvador whose name the teacher cannot remember, is a boy who is no one's friend, runs along somewhere in that vague direction where homes are the color of bad weather, lives behind a raw wood doorway, shakes the sleepy brothers awake, ties their shoes, combs their hair with water, feeds them milk and corn flakes from a tin cup in the dim dark of the morning.

Salvador, late or early, sooner or later arrives with the string of younger brothers ready. (Cisneros, 1992, p. 10)<sup>1</sup>

As a teacher, I've had many students who would find Salvador heroic, recognizing him as their older brother or maybe seeing themselves in him. Over the years, my own interpretation of children I see in Salvador has been complicated. Disruptive late arrivals, inconvenient

## xviii TEACHING AS PRINCIPLED PRACTICE

early arrivals, struggles communicating with families who don't speak English, judgmental silence, frustration with a lack of contact with parents who are working, busy, weary both of me, a middle-class white woman, and the institution of school—all interpretations I unconsciously wrap around children like Salvador, who are seen through my own historical and cultural lenses.

What I hope to illustrate through Cisneros's portrait of Salvador is that, as teachers, we have the power to "story" students in a way that frames their educational experience. Although we are likely to remember their names, we may know nothing about who they are. We may be unfamiliar with their communities and see where they live as a vague place, contrasting simply to that which we do know. Their late and early arrivals reinforce our notions of unreliability, of half-presence. Often without knowing that we are doing so, we interpret what we don't understand as "other" or as invisible, simply because our own life experiences are necessarily limited. To whatever degree each of us struggles to understand our students, the power of the impact we have on children in these interpretive ways lies at the very center of what it means to teach.

In the book that follows here, the authors, themselves teachers, will discuss the ways in which they try to help their students, preservice teachers, begin their process of learning to teach. Their writing is framed in terms of six principles that guide their practice. The principles are focused around justice, equity, care, knowledge, growth, and power; at the core, they honor the welfare of students like Salvador. The voice I write from here in introducing their work is as former student, colleague, first-grade teacher, and cooperating teacher of the students these teacher educators teach.

As a teacher, it has been my experience that knowing students well is the most important, and by far the most difficult, of my responsibilities. It's one thing to think about a student like Salvador through the beauty of Cisneros's language. It's another to encounter him in a classroom, where one's attention is focused on a whirl of subject matter, management issues, assessment, immediate physical needs, standards, and contextual factors; where an actual child, particularly one of Salvador's nature—quiet, unobtrusive, outwardly complacent—can be a mystery who easily slips under the radar screen. As I hope the following narrative excerpt from my own teaching will help illustrate, in even the smallest account of classroom interaction so much of this complexity is revealed:

Working on a lesson from a unit on place value, the class is struggling explicitly for the first time with the distinction between *tens* and *ones*. This work time following our group introduction meets with various levels of success. Iris and Helen can place the digit 1 representing *tens* and 5 representing the *ones* from their solution of 15 in the correct column, but neither can verbally explain to me why, even though the picture they have collaboratively drawn to represent their thinking makes sense.

Michael, who insists on working alone, counts to 18 instead of 15 and then records both digits in the ones column. His drawing shows 14 individual linker cubes, arbitrarily placed around the page. Thomas, his silenced partner, copies his incorrect answer of 18 but draws his cubes in a way that indicates to me he understands the work.

AnLe, who speaks only Cantonese, builds her linker cubes into stairs, yet records her work perfectly on her paper. Mei, who can communicate with both of us, translates an explanation I don't understand. It doesn't help that, as I'm trying to hear her soft voice, an announcement from the office loudly interrupts for the third time today, informing us that the heat should be back on by the afternoon. I spy Karl and Lavon building a fort with their manipulatives.

I'm about to investigate when Salvador arrives, an hour late now, shoes squeaking with water, pants soaked up to his knees from his walk to school in the rain. On my way to help him, I notice Marcus with his head down on the table, quietly sleeping. Later, he'll tell me that he spent the night in the emergency room of the county hospital. With his infant sister and his mother, he took two buses to get there in the middle of the night. He reveals in graphic detail how his mother's arm, which required 10 stitches, bled the whole way.

Although I've substituted *Salvador* for my own student's name to illustrate my point, what unfolds here is one brief moment in a morning that is very typical of my year, one much like those experienced by my Mills graduate colleagues who teach in the urban districts surrounding the campus. As one can see, in the immediacy of the classroom, Salvador himself becomes small—even smaller somehow than his 40-pound body would suggest. What we see in this account is that there is so much going on at every moment for a teacher in her classroom that of necessity she functions in a place firmly situated between

## xx TEACHING AS PRINCIPLED PRACTICE

the automatic and the intuitive. There is simply too little time to stop and struggle with the many and varied responses required of us throughout the day. To then think of Salvador as Cisneros describes him, “inside that wrinkled shirt, inside that throat that must clear itself and apologize each time it speaks, inside that 40-pound body of boy with its geography of scars, its history of hurt, . . . in that cage of the chest where something throbs with both fists and knows only what Salvador knows” (p. 11), would call forth too much that is at the core of all the dilemmas my Mills colleagues and I face in thinking deeply about schooling. We might find ourselves overwhelmed with emotion (a feeling we often fight) to the point of inaction. Salvador’s story is only 1 of 20 in my classroom. When he is in high school, his will be 1 of 150 stories for his teachers. But to not think of him from the perspective Cisneros offers renders him largely invisible. To keep Salvador in one’s mind and heart and, at the same time, to teach him and his classmates in the context of the classroom requires a deep, complex, and principled foundation.

It is this complex foundation on which the “automatic” and the “intuitive” mentioned above function. These are not unthinking states, nor are they a reaction to being overwhelmed. They are, in fact, a huge part of what teaching is about—being able to negotiate many different needs in the moment, both anticipated and unexpected, and to do so while holding firmly in view subject matter objectives, developmental expectations, physical and emotional needs, knowledge of individual students, and the implications, both large and small, of our work together.

It is the building of this foundation that is the work written about here by the authors in this book. Each addresses a specific principle that is a core component of the foundation the faculty in the Mills College Teachers for Tomorrow’s Schools Program tries to help their students establish, principles addressing the moral and political nature of teaching, inquiry, and collaboration as methodologies, subject matter acquisition as a goal, and learning theory as a foundation on which teaching decisions rest. As readers will note as these chapters unfold, each author writes about a specific principle, but embedded in the writing of each is evidence of the presence of the others. Whether this was their intention, I don’t know, but I do know that this is exactly as it should be. As a teacher, I’ve found that what the authors are referring to here as principles are so interconnected in my mind that rather than individual, bounded ideas (although they are that, too), they come

together in practice in a way that one cannot be thought of without consideration of the others.

It is my recollection that these principles were seldom explicitly mentioned when I was a student. Certainly, they were not on a list that we were expected to memorize. We were not assessed on our ability to recite them. What was explicit—in the course work, through the teaching, in our interactions, with the language used, through conversation, in the various texts produced and with which we engaged—was the actual presence of these principles, fully enacted as well as illustrated. The teaching of these authors itself was guided by these principles, so that rather than simply being talked about in their teaching, the principles were lived. The impact of such modeling was extraordinarily powerful. The principles became mine because I was immersed in them, I had to grapple with them; they pushed my thinking and my way of understanding the world until finally I not only understood them, but I understood why they mattered. That I left my years as a student at Mills with these principles internalized is not to say that, as a teacher, I was fully formed, knowing what to do in the complex environment of my classroom, school, district, and community. Uncertainties and insecurities and doubts abounded (and abound still). Instead of a repertoire of formulaic responses or prescriptions for what to do, however, what I developed was a beginning yet firm foundation that itself would continue to grow and deepen over the years—a frame that helped guide my thinking, questions, dilemmas, uncertainties, emotions, doubts, beliefs, learning, decisions, and actions.

Most important to our role as teachers of children, seeing through the lens of these principles has helped me over the years to complicate my understanding both of my students and the place of schooling in their lives. Being able to negotiate the immediacy of the classroom is unimportant if that is not done with a complex and deep understanding and belief in the individuals who make up that classroom. Always to some extent bounded by my own cultural, class, and gendered perspectives, it is necessary that I have the tools that my internalization of these principles provides to help me see beyond what I think I might know about my students to what they might actually be. With that ability to see more deeply, I can then help students like Salvador compose their lives in schools as lives of fullness and hope. It is to that end that this book—and the practice it represents—is written. And to that end, I believe it will contribute to the practice of both teacher education and teaching in urban schools.

xxii TEACHING AS PRINCIPLED PRACTICE

❖ NOTE

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❖ REFERENCES

- Campano, G. (2003). *Reading Salvador and our reluctance to learn from others*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Indiana.
- Cisneros, S. (1992). Salvador late or early. In *Woman Hollering Creek* (pp. 10–11). New York: Vintage.