APPENDIX G

A Day in the Life of A

Paramount Bard Academy Student

One Student's Day at Paramount Bard Academy

A Sixth Grader's Experience

It's Wednesday and Michael is in his fourth week at Paramount Bard Academy and he continues to be surprised by his experience. There are classrooms and teachers and fellow students and subjects to be studied and learned, but that's about all he can answer when his parents ask him how his new school compares to his experiences at his previous school. Michael has tried to explain the differences to his parents more than once and most of what he says focuses on two areas of difference – his relationships with his teachers and fellow students and his responsibilities as a student. These two aspects of his experience become clear when he describes a typical day in the sixth grade at Paramount Bard Academy.

"But wait," Michael says, "I have to begin at the beginning. We had school for a week before school really started. I mean real school, classes and subjects. Because the first week, well, it was almost like practice for school, getting in shape, and we did things we are still doing but all day long, lots of different things but all the same together. I mean we learned lots of things but mostly we learned about learning and we learned about our selves as learners and we learned about each other. And I've never read so much or written or talked or listened as much in school as I did that first week. It felt like I was learning for months and sometimes I was tired but I was never bored. It's all I could think about when I went home at the end of the day."

For all students at the Paramount Bard Academy, the year begins with a weeklong sequence of workshops that follows the model of the Language and Thinking program (L&T) originally developed at Bard College in 1981. L&T was an early innovation of President Leon Botstein that addressed the transition to college, moving high school students from the more passive models of learning that are typical of public school to the forms of prolonged engagement with ideas that characterize the active construction of knowledge and authentic learning in a field. At Bard College, first-year students arrive on campus early to engage in three weeks of writing and thinking that build language and college-level thinking skills while engaging with texts and other learning materials in a collaborative learning culture. In 1981, at President Botstein's invitation, Peter Elbow gathered like-minded scholars and teachers from across the nation to develop a model of learning based in innovative writing practices that soon became a laboratory for exemplary approaches to teaching and learning. In 1982, the Institute for Writing and Thinking was established to continue to develop and share the teaching practices that emerged from these innovative classrooms.

As Michael can tell you, "My hand was tired at the end of the first day. I've never written so much and I had to share what I wrote in class with all the other students. I was really nervous at first but I got over that fast. I learned that almost everyone was nervous. And even the teacher wrote and shared and did everything we did, like she was one of us. But soon all I wanted to do was writing, thinking, listening to others, and sharing my ideas. I found out how to read graphs and tables and different ways to understand a story. One

day we read an essay that seemed really confusing but the first thing we did was make a picture of something that stood out for us in the essay using colored paper and glue. As I made my picture, I kept thinking about the essay and then we had to write about our picture, like a description that explained what it had to say. We hung our pictures on the wall and we took turns reading what we wrote while everyone stood around looking at our pictures, like being at an art gallery. It was great. I didn't know how much I really had understood until I heard myself reading and how much more I learned listening to others. The next day we wrote an essay about that essay and I had so much to say. I think I'm becoming a writer."

As Michael can explain, these strategies for using writing and the habits of listening and reflection that accompany the writing have created a model for so much of what has been happening in the regular classroom since that first week. That week of workshops not only introduced Michael to a way of learning but it brought him into close learning relationship with one teacher and thirteen other sixth grade students. This group has become his "advisory group" and they meet the first period of each school day. Advisory group is not a regular academic class but Michael says it's a good place to start the day and they learn "lots of stuff" that is very interesting. Advisory group is a time for the practical business of taking attendance, catching up on personal, local, or national news. But it's also a class, a time to reflect about many different and important issues.

On this Wednesday in advisory group, Michael and his advisory group are completing 'individual learning profiles'. The first weeks of advisory were devoted to exploring questions of how learning best occurs. It began with students reflecting on their own learning experiences. Soon, the classroom walls were covered with lists of ideas about what helps learning happen. Michael's teacher had also introduced her advisory group students to some ideas that have emerged from educational research about the kinds of knowledge and skills that lead to success in college and adult life. Michael had moved to develop a document that described himself as a student and learner, including goals for the year ahead. He would be sharing this document with partner students in advisory on Thursday and Friday and with his parents and teacher in an individual conference scheduled for the following week. It would be a document to refer to in the months ahead at regularly scheduled conferences with his advisor and parents.

"We are going to meet regularly to talk about my work at school and my goals as a student," Michael explains, "and that's really different. My parents and my teacher and I will meet to talk about my work and life at school so that everybody is talking and understanding how things are working. We will meet just to talk and I'm responsible for talking and sharing my work but my teacher will help too. My teacher says that school is important and we need to honor that in different ways. She tells me that school is all about my work and growth as a learner and that's what's important. I've heard that before but I'm beginning to feel more responsible for it because it's getting a lot of attention. My parents and my teachers are taking time to just listen to me."

Michael leaves advisory and moves to science class. Most classes are 80-minutes in length, which allows students time to follow through investigations and advance projects

in ways that invite inquiry and reflection. For Michael and many other students this is another difference at Paramount Bard Academy. There is a different sense of time. It never feels like the teacher is moving the class through a set of predetermined activities with a goal of getting finished before the bell rings. There are no bells at Paramount Bard Academy and teachers plan lessons for the long blocks of time that always involve some mix of writing and sharing, small group work, and a focus on using lots of materials that relate to the subject.

In science class today, Michael's class is continuing their study of meteorology. They have been collecting data on temperature, humidity, winds, air pressure, and general weather conditions for the region and are comparing it to weather data from other regions across the country. They have learned how to construct and read weather maps. They are working to recognize patterns and have begun to see that barometric pressure is connected to sky conditions and that rain and storms, especially, are associated with boundaries between areas of low and high pressure.

They built their own barometers in class a couple weeks ago – they've been calibrating them against the classroom barometer and some student groups have been trying to figure out how to make their instruments more accurate. Michael's group is not so engineering minded and are happy enough that there barometer seems to measure differences that match the classroom barometer closely enough. But today they are conducting lab investigations to look at how different surfaces are heated differently by sunlight and how moisture content affects the process. Their teacher has explained that the earth's atmosphere is a 'heat engine', and that weather is the result of how heat energy is transferred and exchanged across the surface if the earth.

Yesterday they began developing questions about how energy from the sun becomes energy that drives the earth's atmospheric system. They created hypotheses and experiments to test these hypotheses. They made predictions about the results of these experiments. Today, they are working in small groups to conduct these experiments and collect data. Tomorrow they will enter the data into their computers and use Microsoft Excel to generate data tables and graphs. They will compare different groups' results and they will combine all the data and see what a larger sample has to tell them. There will be many questions to answer but they will develop a vocabulary of terms and ideas and, most importantly, a way of thinking about the world that will continually yield more questions and a deeper understanding of the world. They are doing the work of science.

There is always a brief break between classes. Five minutes to walk from one place to the next, talk with a friend, get a drink, and use the bathroom. It's enough time and, without bells ringing to mark the end and beginning of classes, it seems like more than just five minutes. Michael is on his way to social studies class, right next door to the science room.

In social studies, they have begun the study of ancient civilizations. Part of their study has had to do with how geography played a role in the development of ancient civilizations and they have begun to recognize patterns that suggest a formula for what

makes a civilization. They will be able to link their growing understanding of global weather patterns to the agricultural development that helped populations settle and grow into more complex social organizations.

But today they are working with a variety of documents to construct a narrative of social life and organization in the ancient culture of Mesopotamia. Through guided explorations they are coming to see that there is a limit on what can be known from the historical record of this period. There are some things that historians and archaeologists can agree on as 'facts' but there is a lot of room for conjecture and interpretation. The students are beginning to grapple with these issues of interpretation and beginning to see that history is not about simply knowing 'the story' of the past but understanding that the past is made up of many stories that must be reconciled. For Michael, this is both confusing and exciting. He is beginning to see that knowledge is a living thing and that he has a role and a responsibility in knowledge making. Michael sees that he has a lot to learn but that learning means asking questions, not memorizing answers. The more he asks, the more he understands how the facts fit together and why one answer may be better than another but how competing interpretations may lead to a more comprehensive explanation.

Social studies class is followed by lunch and the afternoon is given over to English, mathematics, art, and physical education. Michael experiences all his academic subjects in longer periods that allow learning to be an experience of extended inquiry and varied activities, interacting with teachers and fellow students to answer questions that drive the development of knowledge and understanding. A lot is accomplished in these longer periods so that the need for homework is lessened and homework assignments may focus on individual practice of discreet skills, further study of work begun in class, or the independent completion of projects.

Unique to Paramount Bard Academy, homework is completed at school. The day is long and balanced in its activities and a period of time for homework completion is part of the daily schedule. Michael may return to his advisory classroom to work on homework during this block of time or he may visit with a particular teacher to get some help. Graduate students from the Bard College Master of Arts in Teaching Program are available in every classroom, providing one-on-one and small group instruction as needed. Michael is challenged at school but excited by the challenges because he's surrounded by a culture that values his learning and his ideas. Michael feels very much in control of his education, responsible and proud of his work.

As Michael walks home at the end of his school day, he talks with his friends not only about 'the usual stuff' but also about school stuff. They have a friendly argument about a poem by Gary Soto that they had worked with in English class that day. They had first read the poem by rewriting it. The teacher had given them a copy of the poem with many of the words removed and they filled in the blanks with their own language. They had shared the results discussed the word choices each of them had made and how the meaning changed depending on these choices. They had begun to organize their word choices into kinds of language – sensory, auditory, rhythmic, metaphorical, and more – and they began to think about how language works. By the time they read Gary Soto's

own words, they had a lot to say about his poem and how its structure helped it say what it had to say. But as they walk home from school, the discussion erupts again into a friendly debate about the best way to describe something, challenging each other to describe a favorite food, an animal, and the weather. They laugh as their language spirals into invention bridging them to new ideas.

As Michael walks to his front door, he sighs – satisfied but tired from his day – and smiles as he remembers some things he couldn't wait to tell his parents about his day at school. He doesn't have any work to bring home and what happens for the rest of his evening is for him and his family to decide, though he has brought home a copy of the Epic of Gilgamesh, hoping he'll have a little time to read in bed before he falls asleep.