Theorizing Literacy from the Ground Up in French Immersion: Challenging Contemporary Perspectives through Cross-Disciplinary Connections

by

David Arbez

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Abstract

Contemporary literacy pedagogy is rife with theories and practices that attempt to foster development for all children. The plethora of options available to classroom teachers can feel convoluted and difficult to navigate even though they all have roots in one of three paradigmatic orientations towards language and literacy pedagogy: skills orientation, meaning orientation, and balanced orientation. The current paradigm is nevertheless becoming insufficient in responding to the needs of increasingly diverse classrooms. This is especially true within French Immersion education which is commonly marginalized as elitist, teacher-centric, conservative, and exclusive. This study engages in an autobiographical narrative inquiry of the researcher’s 10 year career as an Early Years (K–4) French Immersion teacher. Specific events throughout the autobiographical narrative that challenged the researcher’s sense of identity as a French Immersion educator or his theorizing of language and literacy development were labelled as “Critical Moments” and were explored through themes of tension, key questions, and resolution. Primary source texts that played a role in those “Critical Moments” were critically analyzed and connected in an ongoing theorizing of language and literacy that ran in parallel with an ongoing critical reframing of the researcher’s identity as a French Immersion teacher. This study demonstrates that a cross-disciplinary perspective of language and literacy allows for pedagogical approaches that are not constrained by skills, meaning, and balance orientations. It also serves as an example of teacher identity construction within French Immersion teaching contexts and raises important questions about, and suggests future directions for, French Immersion education.

*Keywords:* French immersion, literacy, teacher identity, narrative inquiry
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Chapter 1: Introduction

I have to confess, somewhat sheepishly, that after ten years as a classroom teacher I still don’t totally know what literacy is. It’s not that I haven’t explored the topic in great detail. I have. And it’s not that it hasn’t been an ever-present consideration. It has. In fact as an Early Years (K–4) teacher there is no topic more valued than literacy development, however contentiously it is valued. This is doubly so for me as I have the distinction of working within a bilingual education program where the language of instruction (French) is rarely the maternal language of the students (Tagalog, Punjabi, Russian, English, and others) and is not the dominant language of the surrounding community and greater metropolitan area (English). Si cette phrase est difficile à comprendre, ou si tu as besoin de traduire cette phrase, imaginez la crise d’identité qui peut se produire pour mes élèves à la quotidienne. After all, a child’s identity as a language and literacy learner is crucial to their success at school (Cummins, 2006, 2012). Those children who do not have the most positive aspects of their selves reflected back at them through their work in language and literacy suffer academic and social consequences that go well beyond language arts curricula. Yet, with all the importance placed on literacy development in the earliest years of school, contemporary literacy pedagogy ensures that there are still students each year who suffer the disheartening reality of struggling to find their voice, being stifled in their attempt to share personal stories, and who are desperate to be known and valued within their learning community. This problem can be further compounded in French Immersion programmes where students are expected to communicate in an additional language, and there are always the effects of socio-economic background and cultural marginalization (Cummins, 2006). Unfortunately, many contemporary pedagogical approaches to language and literacy development are woefully inadequate in responding to these and other complex challenges. Even worse, it could be argued that some approaches inadvertently prevent children from living out
their “storied lives” (Short, 2012) at school, diffusing the creation of “identity texts” (Cummins & Early, 2011) that affirm each child’s competence and value. It is only when children are able to become the narrators of their own lives—and to feel like those lives matter—that they are able to successfully develop meaningful ways of communicating through language and literacy.

All educators, no matter their pedagogy, want to help each and every child achieve success with language and literacy. Nonetheless, it is a perennial challenge to meaningfully engage every child within a learning community. In response, literacy pedagogy has diversified into a multitude of approaches as educators seek many ways of meeting perceived needs. This may on its face seem like an improvement given that educators have more pedagogical tools at their disposal, but Alexander and Fox (2013) point out that the last several decades of progress include “unabashed support for particular “new” reform efforts that are, in actuality, iterations or reincarnations of past reading approaches with qualified or questionable records of success” (p. 33). Part of the shortcomings associated with contemporary literacy pedagogy may also stem from a lingering “incompatibility” between certain ontological, epistemic, logical, ethical, and phenomenological perspectives that inform the theoretical basis for pedagogical choices that are ultimately made in the classroom (Wilkinson & Staley, 2019). Traditionally, struggling readers and writers are subject to a barrage of interventions and programs designed to support their development: things like Reading Recovery, 6 + 1 Traits of Writing, Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention, PM Benchmarks, often accompanied by heavy doses of rote memorization, flash cards, and standardized tests. Not only are these questionable ways of supporting learners (Allington, 2002), there is also some evidence that, in the long run, such approaches lead to a reduction in engagement with reading despite increases in ability (People for Education, 2017). What sense does it make to proverbially teach a person to fish if it also

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1 I use the term “approach” here and throughout the rest of the study to indicate a cohesive group of pedagogical decisions or actions. Examples of approaches could be a commercial literacy program or the Montessori method.
causes them to avoid fish at mealtime? Focus of this nature on skills is of particular concern in French Immersion programs where these types of approaches are commonly adopted (Cummins, 1998; 2006; Cummins & Early, 2011). More progressive educators in English and French Immersion programs are trending towards multimodal approaches to literacy development through the inclusion of visual arts, music, movement, and play as valid ways of communicating alongside written text (Serafini, 2014; Wohlwend, 2011). Many of these educators also see literacy as socially-situated and context-dependent, demanding pedagogical attention to the circumstances and conditions surrounding literacy learning as much as the process for literacy learning itself (Barton, 2007; Heath, 1982; Street, 2000). Nonetheless, the contributions of these approaches continue to be undermined in practice by their servile nature to reading and writing as the primary ends to the means of language and literacy learning. These approaches, which appear to take time away from reading and writing and may require additional and varied supplies, are thus vulnerable to intentional removal from curricula when education budgets are tight, instructional time is limited, and systematic efficiencies are prioritized. Some educators have subsequently attempted to mix and match a “balanced” set of methods, activities, and interventions from all over that attempt to minimize the disadvantages and maximize the advantages of multiple approaches (Pressley & Allington, 2014). Unfortunately, there is not much consensus around what “balance” really is, although it often looks like embedding skills instruction within more holistic literacy experiences. While well-intentioned, common “balanced” approaches often have a “Mary Poppins” feel to them in that the spoonful of meaning (sugar) helps the skills (medicine) go down.

In the end, what students and educators are presented with is a set of three powerful pedagogical orientations—an “orientation” here meaning a relative positioning of pedagogical decision-making towards a particular essentialist account of literacy—that have shaped the
current paradigm of language and literacy education. These come in the form of skills orientation, meaning orientation, and balance orientation that each tend to have distinct theoretical research bases, classroom practices, and an overall guiding focus: on literacy as essentially skills-building, literacy as essentially meaning-making, and literacy as essentially an optimal combination of skills-building and meaning-making activities. It should be clear here, however, that the word “orientation” is not used here to refer to an extreme or closed ideology. A skills-oriented researcher, who would likely believe that phonological awareness is the single most important factor in reading development, would also likely advocate for the inclusion of authentic children’s literature in the classroom. Nonetheless, skills-oriented approaches tend toward similar pedagogical features, as do meaning-oriented approaches, and these bring with them certain tensions. Balanced approaches seek to resolve these tensions, but in so doing will often create other tensions. But what if some of the tensions between skills-oriented, meaning-oriented, and balance-oriented approaches could in fact be resolved? What impact would this have on children’s engagement with language and literacy throughout their formative years at school? What, then, is literacy? That last question is one that has come up for me many times throughout my career. As I have made sense of how best to approach literacy pedagogy over the last 10 years, I have been introduced to theoretical constructs and pedagogical practices that have challenged my thinking around what literacy is and how it develops. I have also done this as a French Immersion educator, a professional role that comes with its own set of challenges and constraints. The purpose of this study is to retell the story of my career and to think critically about how my identity as a French Immersion educator has changed alongside my evolving theorizing of language and literacy. It was the goal of this study that these two stories within a story would challenge me to find a way out of the current paradigm of literacy pedagogy while also shaping a commensurate vision for French Immersion education.
Area of Focus and Guiding Questions

This study was situated first and foremost in the context of my professional experience as an Early Years (K–4) French Immersion classroom teacher. The increasing popularity of French Immersion as well as the increasing socio-cultural diversity of French Immersion learners brings with it a rich set of pedagogical considerations that I have negotiated throughout my career. Any one of those considerations—emergent reading and writing, differentiating instruction, authentic engagement, assessment tools and techniques, or multiple literacies to name a few—could individually be the subject of its own study but as I explored each of these more deeply I seemed to continuously encounter theoretical constraints and tensions imposed by the current paradigm of skills orientation, meaning orientation, and balance orientation. For example, thinking through the integration of phonological awareness activities with the critical reading of a children’s picture book evokes the ways skills-oriented and meaning-oriented educators and researchers have interrogated each other. It also arouses competition among the most fervent within each orientation for appealing explanations as to “how” and “why” particular practices should take shape. This isn’t to say that educators are not already coming up with meaningful solutions, or are not adept at navigating those tensions, although this appears to happen less so in French Immersion classrooms. This study focuses on whether it is necessary for them to do so, and whether it is sufficient in supporting the development of language and literacy, especially in an environment of dual language education. It goes without saying that there are a great number of children who already benefit from pedagogical approaches to language and literacy that have their roots in the current paradigm of skills orientation, meaning orientation, and balance orientation. After all, children go on to become doctors, lawyers, engineers, writers, academics and a plethora of other types of professionals who require the ability to find one’s way around the written word: and a number of French Immersion students do so bilingually. This year’s graduates from the faculties of medicine or law are the product, in part, of the last few decades of
literacy pedagogy. What some fail to see is that there are an equally great number of children for whom literacy learning is not providing the value-added benefits its position within curricula would suggest. They are the ones who call themselves stupid because they couldn’t get all the words right on their spelling test, or the ones who reject books because they’ve never met a main character like themselves, the ones who are transferred out of French Immersion into an English program because French is “too hard”, or the ones who think that stories—their stories—don’t fit within the overall syllabus of their schooling (Pope, 2001). This is of particular concern here in Manitoba, where school-aged children are thought to be at a deficit in their literacy learning, both nationally and internationally (Aumell & Hirschfield, 2018; O’Grady, Fung, Servage, & Khan, 2016). There is also a particular need to critically re-examine language and literacy learning as communities become more linguistically and culturally diverse. This is certainly of crucial importance in French Immersion programs where the dominant language of instruction can sometimes be a third or fourth language. Further to this, French Immersion programs tend to exhibit large attrition rates—almost half the students who begin Kindergarten in French Immersion end up leaving by the time they reach Grade 12 (Manitoba Education and Training, 2017). It may be time to ask whether the current paradigm of skills-oriented, meaning-oriented, and balance-oriented approaches is capable of responding to the needs of all literacy learners or whether enough progress has been made across a multitude of disciplines directly and indirectly related to literacy that allows for a possible paradigmatic shift. At this point in my career, I am certainly feeling the desire for something more theoretically sound. As I retold the story of my career as a French Immersion teacher, I interrupted myself periodically to dig deeper into “Critical Moments” that, over time, have touched on a broad corpus of research. I was able to use those “Critical Moments” as conceptual pivot points for theorizing literacy as my identity as a French Immersion educator continues to unfold. These two stories within the larger story of my career—my ongoing theorizing of language and literacy development as well as my evolving
identity as a French Immersion educator—also framed this study’s two guiding research questions, each with their own sub-questions:

1. How has my understanding of language and literacy changed over the course of my career?
   a. What has a cross-disciplinary perspective afforded me in my theorizing?
   b. Does my current theory and definition of literacy go beyond the current paradigm of skills orientation, meaning orientation, and balance orientation?

2. How has my identity as a French Immersion educator changed over the course of my career?
   a. How has my theorizing of literacy informed perceptions of myself specifically and perceptions of French Immersion education more generally?
   b. Which parts of my teaching identity and vision for French Immersion education are French Immersion specific?
Design of Study

This study was situated in the narrative of my own professional inquiry regarding language and literacy development. Throughout my career, literacy pedagogy has been of particular professional and personal interest that has culminated in the opportunity to study how both my theory and practice have changed over time. In this sense, this study was framed as a type of autoethnography that allowed me to chronicle the various interrogations, reflections, conversations, and practical experiences with literacy pedagogy that I have had over the last 10 years as an Early Years French Immersion teacher. Specifically, I engaged in an autobiographical narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013) of my teaching career with a focus on experiences that challenged my thinking with regard to language and literacy or challenged my identity as a French Immersion educator. These moments, as they arose through the retelling of my teaching career, were labeled “Critical Moments.” They were framed and discussed differently than the overall narrative, and will be explored through the themes of tension, key questions, and resolution. Thus, as I retold the story of my career I took repose from autobiographical narrative inquiry at “Critical Moments” in order to systematically theorize literacy and construct my teaching identity directly from my experiences.

Figure 1. Design of study. The blue arrow represents the autobiographical narrative inquiry which begins in 2006 and continues to the present day. The green circles represent “Critical Moments” that arise periodically throughout the narrative inquiry. The green arrow represents the continual theorizing that is informed by each “Critical Moment.”
Significance of Study

For educators like myself, professional decision-making in the area of literacy pedagogy is often marred by the recommendations and tensions between skills-oriented, meaning-oriented, and balance-oriented approaches. The incompatibility between these orientations has grown into a major obstacle that often prevents well-meaning educators from fully exploring useful theoretical and practical approaches: approaches that can significantly improve children’s perception of, and engagement with, language and literacy. This is especially true in French Immersion programs where “classrooms have tended to be highly teacher-centered or ‘transmission-oriented’” (Cummins, 1998, p. 36), where classroom teachers often “do not implement more cooperative learning and project-based strategies” (Cummins, 1998, p. 38), and where the remedy for perceived lagging in language and literacy development is a simple transfer out of the French Immersion program altogether. As it stands, “differential perspectives on research and practice may be judged as conflicting rather than complementary” (Alexander & Fox, 2013, p. 35) and the three dominant orientations on offer do not provide the necessary paths to resolution. This study, thus, represents the ways I have navigated those differential perspectives on research and practice within the context of teaching in the French Immersion program. Through it, I questioned whether it may be time for a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1977) in thinking about how cross-disciplinary research and diverse pedagogical approaches to language and literacy may inform the theoretical constructs used in making pedagogical choices in the classroom. I also questioned what this might look like within French Immersion education. I also attempted to distance theory and practice away from the current paradigm—characterized by the oscillating influence of skills-oriented, meaning-oriented, and balance-oriented approaches—by using “Critical Moments” as theoretical stepping stones towards an approach that resists current orientations. While the call for such a theory exists already (Alexander & Fox, 2013), this study overcomes some noted barriers to theorizing literacy such as “continuing focus on early reading,
especially phonics and phonological awareness; difficulties in assessing deep and complex
processes; and the requirement of interdisciplinary cooperation” (Alexander & Fox, 2013, p. 35)
that have currently fostered a measure of paradigm paralysis in literacy research. This study also
showed that this type of theorizing of literacy pedagogy is commensurate with shifting
pedagogical visions for French Immersion education.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Literacy learning has held a position of privilege amongst many of the world’s cultures, both past and present. Consequently, as some educators have pointed out, school subjects tend toward a certain hierarchy around the world with languages somewhere around the top (Robinson, 2009). Literacy, with reading and writing as its traditional core, is thus a heavily prioritised dimension of most education systems the world over. This sentiment is echoed by many multinational organisations who describe literacy as “a human right” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2006, p. 27), and literacy skills as “an increasingly essential prerequisite for success in today’s societies” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2003, p. 5). Despite an agreement across many cultures on the importance of literacy, there is considerable debate over what literacy is exactly and how to go about teaching it. In North America, literacy pedagogy has developed largely through three essentialist perspectives, or orientations: skills orientation, meaning orientation, and balance orientation. The myriad of instructional programs and approaches on offer for literacy educators are commonly understood as being oriented in one of these three ways. Therefore, skills-oriented, meaning-oriented, and balance-oriented approaches define the current paradigm of literacy education in North America, which has developed over the last two centuries.

The Origins of Skills Orientation, Meaning Orientation, and Balance Orientation

In North America, reading and writing as it has been popularized today was brought with the colonial powers that aimed to usurp the land and natural resources from its Indigenous populations. Although the various British and French colonies scattered across the continent exhibited high amounts of illiteracy throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the teaching of reading and writing was nonetheless a contentious issue—if not a privileged activity. On the heels of the American Revolution, Noah Webster would publish his blue-backed speller “The
American Spelling Book Containing the Rudiments of the English Language for the Use of Schools in the United States” in 1783. Webster’s speller was largely developed as a means to curtail dependence on British textbooks, but also generated some self-proclaimed controversy as a text that “when first published, encountered an opposition, which few new publications have sustained with success” (Webster, 1824, p. iv). Part of the controversy comes from a call to reject European pronunciation and orthography—such as the French “ouisconsin” in favour of an Americanised “Wisconsin”—but also in Webster’s notion to separate word learning into more defined stages, mostly derived from syllable structure but also by phonological irregularity. Despite the blue-backed speller’s commercial success, educators further north in British North America (soon to be the Dominion of Canada) resisted the influence of the United States and continued to import reading “primers” from England, Ireland, and France. It is only as public school systems became more formalised throughout the first half of the 20th century that American and Canadian approaches to literacy education began to harmonise. Tensions in how to best support the development of reading nonetheless persisted. This was especially evident throughout the Dick and Jane movement from the 1930s through to the 1960s. This set of basal readers as well as accompanying teacher guides and student workbooks became a ubiquitous part of literacy education in North America as well as the locus for debate over pedagogy. In 1955, author Rudolf Flesch wrote a famously scathing review of the Dick and Jane series in his book *Why Johnny Can’t Read: And What You Can Do about It*. Flesch’s charge was that the “look-say” method of the Dick and Jane series strayed too far away from the phonics approaches of previous readers. A little over a decade later, psychologist Jeanne Chall would attempt to summarise the ongoing debate in her 1967 book *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. At the crux of the debate, according to Chall (1967), was a question of how beginning readers should be taught: either with emphasis on meaning, or emphasis on decoding. According to Kim (2008), “Chall captured the essence” (p. 372) of the skills-oriented/meaning-oriented dichotomy that
would later evolve into what is referred to as the Reading Wars (Anderson, 2000; Lemann, 1997; Pearson, 2004; Street, 2006).

**The Reading Wars**

Chall’s book drew a very clear line as to where educators could situate themselves with respect to literacy research and pedagogy. The following decades therefore saw educators not only taking sides in the “great debate,” as Chall would suggest, but also digging trenches on either side. In 1967, shortly after the publication of Chall’s classic work, Kenneth Goodman would publish a paper that positioned reading as a “psycholinguistic guessing game”. For Goodman (1967), the guessing game works in the following way:

> It involves partial use of available minimal language cues selected from perceptual input on the basis of the reader’s expectation. As this partial information is processed, tentative decisions are made to be confirmed, rejected, or refined as reading progresses. (p. 127)

This work, very much meaning-oriented, would lead to the “whole language” movement which Goodman saw as an improvement to the popular skills-oriented approaches found in schools at the time. Goodman felt that skills-oriented approaches took language and literacy learning and “postponed its natural purpose—the communication of meaning—and turned it into a set of abstractions, unrelated to the needs and experiences of the children we sought to help” (1986, p. 7). Whole language brought renewed attention to meaning-oriented literacy pedagogy in a number of important ways. Its focus on contextualising literacy use as well as honouring multiple cueing systems would serve as the precursor for a growing interest in the relationship between literacy learners and their learning environments (Calkins, 2001; Harste, Woodward, Burke, 1984; Routman, 1991), the development of multimodal approaches to literacy (Serafini,
2014; Wohlwend, 2011), as well as investigations into the sociocultural discourses involved in literacy development (Cazden, 1992).

Skills-oriented educators would waste no time in responding to the growing interest in meaning-oriented research and practice. Continued interest in phonics instruction, especially as it related to phonological awareness, would be marshalled by researchers such as Keith Stanovich (Stanovich, Cunningham, & Cramer, 1984; Stanovich, Cunningham, & Feeman, 1984), and would be given larger scale political support (as in the report “Becoming a Nation of Readers,” (1985) by the United States Commission on Reading). Advocates for the dominance of phonological awareness in early reading development would offer purported statements such as “the causal connection at the earliest stages of reading acquisition is probably most strong from phonological awareness to increased reading acquisition” (Stanovich, Cunningham, & Cramer, 1984, p. 189). Phonological awareness studies, and studies into phonics instruction more generally, became very influential in shaping literacy pedagogy throughout the decades that followed. Work by Marilyn Adams (1990), Marie Clay (1985), Barbara Foorman (Foorman, Francis, Fletcher, Schatschneider, & Mehta, 1998) and other skills-oriented researchers bred new programs of early literacy instruction that rely on increasing amounts of decontextualized literacy learning (Clay, 1993; Cunningham, Hall, & Defee, 1998; Morris, Shaw, & Perney, 1990; Slavin, Madden, Karweit, Livemon, & Dolan, 1990; Tyner, 2004).

**Balanced Literacy**

In light of such vociferous debate over the decades, it would be reasonable for literacy researchers and educators to call for a truce in the reading wars. In fact, many of the popular belligerents throughout the period of the reading wars would themselves signal the need for reconciliation amongst skills-oriented and meaning-oriented researchers and educators.
Stanovich (1990) would publish an entire paper whose purpose was “to argue for an end to the paradigm or perspective wars within the reading research community and to call for a rapprochement among researchers” (p. 222). Adams (1990) warned skills-oriented and meaning-oriented educators that “by misinterpreting each other, we prolong a fruitless debate and worse, we do so at the cost of precious progress and of our school children’s potential reading achievement” (p. 26). Goodman (1992) would write:

I said earlier that it is an oversimplification to suggest that there are two neatly separable sides to this struggle. I would prefer that we devote our money and energies to careful study of the scientific and moral issues that need to be resolved. (p. 198)

Some have since attempted to combine elements from skills-oriented and meaning-oriented approaches in an effort to find an optimal balance that best promotes literacy development. In their report *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) sought the middle ground between competing approaches. In an attempt to mediate any favouritism, they proclaim that “on the assumption that understanding can move public discussion beyond the polemics of the past, we have made it an important goal of this report to make the complexities known: many factors that correlate with reading fail to explain it; many experiences contribute to reading development without being prerequisite to it; and although there are many prerequisites, none by itself appears to be sufficient” (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 314). This type of approach would be adopted by others who also wished to skirt any unnecessary debate by focusing instead on what they felt were best practices in literacy instruction regardless of which approach they were associated with (Pressley, 1998; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001). Seeking a “balanced” mix of approaches emerged as a sensible third option for researchers and educators who saw the ongoing debate between skills-oriented and meaning-oriented approaches as a theoretical and
practical dead-end. Allington has recently concluded that “our best understanding of the research currently available suggests that there are valid aspects of both skills-emphasis and meaning-emphasis approaches to beginning reading” (Allington & Pressley, 2014, p. 53).

**Literacy Learning in French Immersion**

Public French Immersion programmes across Canada are often seen as originating from the St. Lambert experiment of the early 1960s (Lambert & Tucker, 1972) in the province of Québec. Although forms of bilingual education had existed in Manitoba as far back as 1897 (Gregor & Wilson, 1984), it was the successes in St. Lambert, along with the Constitution Act of 1982, that inspired public programmes of French Immersion education here and across the country. Since then, the French Immersion programme has been a magnet for families seeking the perceived benefits of learning both official languages of the nation. As such, the increased sociocultural and linguistic diversity of the families choosing French Immersion has been the topic of much discussion over the decades since St. Lambert, and the collective responses on the part of educators and families has shaped French Immersion learning in important ways. Of primary concern to educators and families of children in French Immersion are general academic ability, first language ability, socio-economic background, and minority language status (Genesee & Jared, 2008). Each of these presents unique challenges to any French Immersion programme and, as French Immersion has been a popular choice for newcomer families to Canada, increasing sociocultural and linguistic diversity within French Immersion has demanded that educators “let go of the assumption that early immersion classes would be full of homogeneous young anglophones” (Swain & Lapkin, 2005, p. 174). In addition to this, French Immersion educators have been increasingly challenged to respond to the needs of children who would be considered “at-risk” for academic difficulty or failure (Genesee, 2006; Genesee & Jared, 2008) rather than transfer them to English programmes citing spurious reasons why these
children are not able to learn in a French Immersion setting (Bruck, 1985). This is a practice that remains common enough today such that “many, if not most, students who experience difficulties in immersion are compelled to transfer to an English program” (Genesee, 2006, p. 37). Over time, this has created the overall impression that French Immersion programs across the country are essentially elitist, “serving a middle-class English-speaking population” (Dagenais & Berron, 2001, p. 143) whereby “the generic student that pre-service teachers are being prepared to educate is white, middle-class, monolingual and monocultural” (Cummins, 2006, p. 6).

Language and literacy learning are, without a doubt, central to children’s perceived ability to cope with the demands of a French Immersion programme. French Immersion children are heavily scrutinised in how they are able to communicate with (speaking and writing) and comprehend (listen and read) the French language. Historically, literacy pedagogy in French Immersion programmes tends to align itself with skills-oriented approaches (Cummins, 1998). Language and literacy instruction has certainly changed over the last half-century as French Immersion educators have taken note of pedagogical developments elsewhere. However, “despite the concern among many policy-makers and the general public that traditional models of pedagogy have been abandoned in favour of ‘liberal’ child-centred models, the evidence overwhelmingly shows that traditional or transmission-models persist” (Cummins, 2006, p. 256). Where any large shifts have occurred in literacy pedagogy within French Immersion programmes, they seem to stem from further appeals to a theoretical and practical middle ground, such as Cummins’ (2012) recommendation that “literacy engagement should be a primary focus of a balanced reading program from the earliest stages of reading instruction” (p. 1974). Literacy pedagogy within French Immersion is thusly situated within the current paradigm of skills orientation, meaning orientation, and balance orientation.
Other Disciplinary Perspectives on Literacy

Much of the research that affects language and literacy experience in classrooms comes from studies that have looked directly at the effects of skills-oriented, meaning-oriented, and balance-oriented approaches. Nonetheless, there has been a growing body of educational research as well as research on the periphery of education that has influenced the ways in which children today engage with language and literacy in the classroom.

**Anthropology and multiliteracies.** The most prominent of these has been the interest of anthropologists who would conduct influential ethnographic work on language and literacy use. Shirley Brice Heath’s landmark work *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (1983) made evident how different children’s experiences with language and literacy could be, even if they lived in the same geographic location. Her development of the term “literacy event” would spark further work into the notion of literacy as a social practice. Brian Street’s work *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (1984), for example, would introduce the term “literacy practice” as a means of discussing how people brought with them a social understanding around patterns of literacy use that influenced each literacy event. As Street (2000) explains, understanding literacy practices “involves attending to the fact that in a literacy event we have brought to it concepts, social models regarding what the nature of this practice is and that make it work and give it meaning” (p. 21). David Barton would again expand the sociological implications of Heath and Street’s work by discussing literacy within an ecological framework in his 1994 book *Literacy: An introduction to the ecology of written language*. In Barton’s view, literacy was not only found within individual moments of engagement with the written word (Heath’s events), nor the patterns of use embedded in socio-cultural contexts (Street’s practices), but it was also found in the relationship between people and their environment. Further to these efforts, researchers such as Scribner and Cole (1981) and Gee
(1990) would explore how power relationships and social discourses played a role in language and literacy use.

Street (1984) and Gee (1990) would have particular influence on the “New London Group”, a collective of ten researchers from the United States, Great Britain, and Australia whose “focus was the big picture, the changing word and the new demands being placed upon people as makers of meaning—in changing workplaces, as citizens in changing public spaces and in changing dimensions of our community lives, our lifeworlds” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2008, p. 196). The group’s classic work “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures” recognised literacy pedagogy at the time as “a carefully restricted project—restricted to formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language” (New London Group, 1996, p. 61) that was unable to respond to increased linguistic and cultural diversity as well as increased use of diverse communications technologies. The group coined the term “multiliteracies” as a means of exploring how multiple languages, multiple variations of the same language, and multiple technologies “had the potential to transform both the substance and pedagogy of literacy teaching in English, and in the other languages of the world” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2008, p. 197). Multiliteracies has more recently been labeled “literacies” as a means of highlighting distinct discourses and methods of communication that span across all disciplines associated with education (Kalantzis, Cope, Chan, & Dalley-Trim, 2016). A literacies approach, despite the change in name, retains the “multi-” aspect of multiliteracies by continued reliance on the multiplicity of languages and cultures as well as the multiplicity of resources for meaning making as the foundation for pedagogical design.

The advances of anthropology into the study of literacy (Heath, 1982; Street, 1984; Barton, 1994/2007) as well as the development of multiliteracies via the New London Group (1996), is sometimes referred to collectively as the “New Literacy Studies” (NLS). Interestingly, the NLS
and its various branches of inquiry developed alongside the research that fueled the decades of the reading wars, and for a long time the NLS was largely isolated from direct confrontation with it. This is likely due to the fact that the NLS eschewed the somewhat psychological framing of reading and writing as mental states or cognitive processing favoured by researchers directly implicated in the reading wars. Instead, the “NLS argued that literacy was something people did in the world and in society, not just inside their heads, and should be studied as such” (Gee, 2015, p. 35). Despite this, the NLS is still very much situated in the current paradigm of skills-oriented, meaning-oriented, and balance-oriented approaches. Some of the earlier work that influenced NLS made direct connection to whole language (Cazden, 1992), while NLS as a whole is commonly associated with meaning-oriented approaches by virtue of the fact that they share a social constructivist ontology and epistemology. Gee (1999), for example, states:

> Recent controversies over ‘whole language’ and phonics have misled people into thinking that the most important design feature of written language is the phono (sound) - graphic (writing) ‘code’ that relates sounds (phonemes) to letters. This is a mistake. (p. 367)

It is easy to see how Gee, despite an earlier caution that he did not wish to explicitly advocate for one side or the other (Gee, 1999, p. 363), is at least sympathetic to meaning-oriented approaches as he builds the more nuanced case that “the New Literacy Studies, though, do not see young children learning to read, but rather young children getting scaffolded socialization (enculturation) into different and multiple literacy practices, each connected to specific forms of language, specific activities, and specific identities” (Gee, 1999, p. 369). The NLS made inroads into meaning-oriented approaches by mapping the ways language and literacy are socioculturally influenced. More recently, Gee (2015) has contended that:

> ‘literacy’ is plural: ‘literacies.’ There are many different social, historical, and cultural practices which incorporate literacy, so, too, there are many different ‘literacies’ (legal
literacy, gamer literacy, country music literacy, academic literacy of many different types).

People do not just read and write in general. They read and write specific sorts of ‘texts’ in specific ways. And these ways are determined by the values and practices of different social and cultural groups. (p. 36)

**Semiotics and multimodality.** Language and literacy may be a central focus of education, especially early years education, but they are relatively smaller systems within the larger field of semiotics. Semiotics is loosely defined as the study of meaning that is constructed and communicated through the use of signs: any tangible or intangible objects that communicate meaning through our senses. Oral language, for example, is considered a system of signs within semiotics. Discreet speech sounds are connected arbitrarily with propositional concepts about lived experience. Pinker (1994) notes:

> The word dog does not look like a dog, walk like a dog, or woof like a dog, but it means ‘dog’ just the same. It does so because every English speaker has undergone an identical act of rote learning in childhood that links the sound to the meaning. (p. 75)

This is extended to reading and writing as written words become signs that can systematically convey meaning. This dyadic understanding of signs as being composed of the signifier (the physical stuff the sign is made of) and the signified (the intended or constructed meaning associated with the sign) is most commonly attributed to the work of semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Around the same time as de Saussure, Charles Pierce had been working on a broader triadic understanding of signs. For Pierce, a sign (similar to de Saussure’s signifier) represents objects which could be any conceptual thought and which are connected to other objects that form the whole of someone’s conceptual world. The third element is the interpretant which is the effect the interpretation of a sign has on the person who is interpreting the sign. Pierce and de Saussure stand as figures for two different and
influential traditions in semiotics that has informed more contemporary scholars of semiotics as it relates to literacy learning in an educational context (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Of note also is the work of Michael Halliday (1978) who introduced the term “social semiotics” and whose systemic functional linguistics would further push the semiotics of language into sociocultural contexts and serve as a major inspiration for social semiotic approaches to language, literacy, and communication more generally (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Kress, 2010; Serafini 2014).

Language and literacy—or more appropriately speech and writing—are thus seen as distinct sign systems comprised of specific semiotic resources which are always in relationship with, and often used alongside, other semiotic resources. Most contemporary scholars within the field of social semiotics would refer to these semiotic resources, or sign systems, as modes akin to modes of communication or modes of representation. Although what constitutes a mode is still of some debate (Jewitt, Bezemer, & O’Halloran, 2016) the most popular definitions are variations of the following from Gunther Kress (2010):

Mode is a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning.

Image, writing, layout, music, gesture, speech, moving image, soundtrack and 3D objects are examples of modes used in representation and communication. (p. 79)

For example, Serafini (2014) explains that “a mode is a system of visual and verbal entities created within or across various cultures to represent and express meanings” (p. 12), while Wohlwend (2011) suggests modes are “the physical or sensory aspects of the material environment that are useful for making meanings” (p. 4) in reference to facial expression, gaze, gesture, proximity, and layout as potential modes. Jewitt (2009) also explains:
a mode, its organizing principles and resources, is understood as an outcome of the cultural shaping of material. The resources come to display regularities through the ways in which people use them. In other words in a specific context (time and place) modes are shaped by the daily social interaction of people. (p. 21)

Writing could then be understood as a mode, composed of many semiotic resources (script markings, type face, colour, size, movement, space, and media such as paper or digital screens), and is shaped by cultural conventions around what are acceptable semiotic resources and what are acceptable uses of those resources. To further complicate the matter, modes exist very rarely if ever in isolation. This makes communication, from the standpoint of social semiotics, inherently multimodal. That is, in any given instance of semiotic meaning-making there is more than one mode at work. According to Jewitt (2009), there is an assumption “that representation and communication always draw on a multiplicity of modes, all of which have the potential to contribute equally to meaning” (p. 14). As such, the study of multimodality has arisen from the field of social semiotics as a means of exploring the ways many modes operate together in the design, communication, and interpretation of meaning (Jewitt, 2009; Jewitt, Bezemer, & O’Halloran, 2016; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress, 2010). This work has been of special interest to educators who see school literacy as also being multimodal in nature (Serafini, 2014; Wohlwend, 2011). Even traditional uses of oral and written language are understood as being multimodal given that something like a public speech can involve gaze, gesture, posture, and movement whereas a written essay can involve image, layout, and animation. Multimodality research goes further by challenging language as the central mode in communication and casting doubt on the notion that other modes are merely included with language in a supporting role (Jewitt, 2009).
**Communication and linguistics.** The reason language and literacy are positioned so highly within educational systems is that they provide access to one of the most important human acts: communication. As such, language and literacy are a part of a broader discipline of communication sciences which “focuses on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, and is the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media, and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific, and aesthetic inquiry” (National Communication Association, n.d.). Like semiotics, communication science is generally concerned with the way humans make meaning from the messages in their environment. Nonetheless, where semiotics tends to focus on the resources used to generate meaning (e.g. signs and modes) communication science differentiates itself by focusing more on the process of sharing messages between agents (human or otherwise). Naturally, the bulk of the work done in communication science is heavily interested in human communication and this undoubtedly has implications for theories of language and literacy use.

Communication science traces its academic roots to the early 20th century, with some of its most celebrated researchers coming from disciplines that pre-date communication science as a distinct discipline (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roloff, & Berger, 2010; Schulz & Cobley, 2013). Social scientists working throughout the periods of the first and second world wars were keenly interested in the way humans were sharing and interpreting messages. The breadth of work done during this time has been categorised in a number of ways, suggesting broad themes specific to communication science such as the shaping of public opinion, language use, information transmission, relationship development, and cultural studies (Eadie & Goret, 2013). Some have drawn connections from landmark researchers such as Harold Lasswell and Paul Lazarsfeld to contemporary fields of communication science such as interpersonal communication, language and social interaction, organisational communication, intercultural communication, political
communication, journalism, health communication, visual communication, instructional and developmental communication, communication and technology, and public relations among others (Bryant & Pribanic-Smith, 2010). With nearly a century of related research under its belt communication science is still regarded as a nascent discipline within academia, especially by communication scientists who are often the first to proclaim that “its history as an academic discipline is relatively brief” (Eadie & Goret, 2013, p. 17). Part of the characterisation of communication science as a fledgling discipline may be its prolific generation of theoretical frameworks that can at times feel lacking in coherence. In Anderson’s (1996) famous review of second edition textbooks on communication theory, 249 “theories” of communication were counted across seven textbooks. If this weren’t staggering enough, Anderson adds that only “eighteen theories were identified by three or more of the authors or author teams” (1996, p. 200). This has led some researchers such as Craig (1999) to conclude that “communication theorists apparently neither agree nor disagree about much of anything” (p. 119). A review of the latest Encyclopedia of Communication Theory (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009) seems to corroborate Anderson’s (1996) account of the theoretical diversity found within communication science, but more recent surveys of research eschew Craig’s (1999) concerns in favour of more coherent syntheses and less cumbersome categorisation of theories and models (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roloff, & Berger, 2010; Schulz and Cобley, 2013). For the purpose of this study, the breadth of approaches to communication science provides a rich perspective from which insights about language and literacy can be drawn.

Another discipline that bears on early years literacy research, and is often connected directly to communication science as well as semiotics, is that of linguistics. While linguistics shares a common heritage with semiotics in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, as well as a common focus with communication science in that of human message-making, linguistics is
primarily concerned with the scientific study of language and its forms, meanings, and contextual use. In North America, those considered influential in the development of modern linguistics include de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, Nicholai Trubetzkoy, Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and Leonard Bloomfield who all together represent the “structuralist” movement in linguistics (Campbell, 2003). Their efforts led to greater understanding around the systematic connections between theorised elements of language such as phonemes, morphemes, syntactic units, semantic units, and representations of a mental lexicon. In effect, structuralists began to map out more precisely the structures they felt could be generalised across multiple utterances in any given language. After 1957, however, all academic roads into linguistics lead one way or another to the work of Noam Chomsky. It is in 1957 that Chomsky first published his book *Syntactic Structures*, the subject of which would eventually revolutionise linguistics towards more formal models and theories of generative grammar: in essence sets of finite grammatical resources that can lead to the generation of an infinite amount of utterances. Revolution doesn’t come without conflict and Chomsky’s work would lead directly to the “linguistics wars” whereby “morphology, syntax, and semantics—the provinces more directly involved in meaning—were all flash points” (Harris, 1993, p. 7) for acrimonious debate amongst a small but influential group of linguists. Of particular controversy was Chomsky’s rejection of behaviourist explanations for language development, such as those of B.F. Skinner (Chomsky, 1959), and his insistence that children were genetically predisposed to acquire language. This line of reasoning, which holds that there are universal properties of language that allow for the emergence of specific and contextualised languages, came to be known as Universal Grammar. Chomsky would revise his theoretical approach to linguistics a number of times with the most contemporary iteration being called the “Minimalist Program” (Chomsky, 1995). Chomsky’s influence on linguistics would permeate much further than this review can account for, with Pinker (1994) noting that “Chomsky is currently among the ten most-cited writers in all of the
humanities (beating out Hegel and Cicero and trailing only Marx, Lenin, Shakespeare, the Bible, Aristotle, Plato, and Freud) and the only living member of the top ten” (p. 10). Despite this, Chomsky’s legacy as well as the overall thrust of generativist theories is not uncontested. Even some of his most staunch allies during the linguistics wars, such as linguist Ray Jackendoff, have developed approaches that are critical of Chomsky’s current work (Jackendoff, 2009; Jackendoff, 2010). Others such as Michael Tomasello would argue that any innate cognitive abilities children use to learn language are not actually specific to language per se, suggesting that universal grammar is unnecessary for understanding the cognitive foundations of language development (Tomasello, 2003). Add to these, developments in functional theories of language (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) as well as diverse fields of research such as discourse analysis, neurolinguistics, applied linguistics, and pragmatics, and there is much more outside of Chomsky’s efforts for linguistics to offer the study of literacy. Pinker (1994) wisely points out, in reference to the massively prolific citation of Chomsky, “what those citations say is another matter” (p. 10).

**Psychology and neuroscience.** Another important discipline to draw upon in the effort to better understand language and literacy is that of psychology. So grand and diverse is the study of human psychology that “the ability to speak with authority on the whole of the field of psychology is now no longer in the hands of any single person or source” (Popplestone, 2013, p. xiii). Contemporary handbooks on psychology span multiple volumes for each subfield, and there is an entire field dedicated to the history of psychology. While it may seem daunting to wade through the wide breadth of research that psychology has to offer, there are also certain advantages that come with such a large corpus. First is that language and literacy development have already become the primary focus of many psychologists. Two that immediately come to mind, as they should for anyone with an education degree, are Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky.
Piaget, famous for his stage theory of cognitive development (Piaget, 1954), wrote an entire manuscript on the subject of language titled *The Language and Thought of the Child* (Piaget, 1959). Lev Vygotsky is perhaps known even more for his contributions to the study of language development. His posthumously published book *Thought and Language* (Vygotsky, 1934/1962) was very influential in North America beginning in the 1960s. The ideas in *Thought and Language* would inspire further work on interactionist theories of language development such as those proposed by psychologist Jerome Bruner (1983). An important debate amongst psychologists that emerged throughout the 1980s and 1990s was whether or not language learning could be best understood through symbol-system or connectionist models (Fodor & Pylyshyn, 1988; Rumelhart, McClelland, & the PDP Research Group, 1986). Adherents of symbol-system models saw the mind as a formal system of cognitive modules—such as auditory or visual processing, executive functioning, long term/short term/working memory—that all work together in interpreting discrete units of information. Adherents of connectionist models see the mind as more closely related to the physical composition of the brain in that connectionist models are composed of large numbers of network nodes (much like our brain’s neurons) that individually process information and give rise to patterns of activity that approximate human thought and action. The debate continues as models have been refined and critical analyses of research continue (Hausser, 2004; MacWhinney, 2004; Marcus, 2004; Pinker, 2004). Leading researchers (including prominent connectionists) seem to agree that connectionism has some ground to make up before it can act as a reasonable account of language use. Paul Bloom in his 2000 book *How Children Learn the Meanings of Words* writes:

In particular, if a connectionist theory can account for the origin and nature of the relevant theory of mind capacities, then connectionism is consistent with the facts of early word learning. If it can’t, it isn’t. (p. 60)
Michael Tomasello (2003) suggests “connectionist models at the moment are psychologically unrealistic” (p. 324) because they do not address communicative intentions or functions, nor do they deal with units of language larger than morphemes and words. Nonetheless, contemporary proponents of connectionist models such as Rogers and McClelland (2014) contend that “the current theoretical landscape differs radically from that of 1986, and we believe that, controversies and limitations notwithstanding, many shifts in the field at large reflect increasingly widespread acceptance” (p. 1060). It goes without saying that for many psychologists the study of language serves as a proximal study of how the mind works more generally and this connection between mind and language has created wider potential for the synthesis of psychological research with other disciplines related to both language and literacy.

Psychology is, of course, not without reading-related research. The specific interest of cognitive psychologists in reading is often traced back to Edmund Huey’s (1908) book *The psychology and pedagogy of reading*. Outside of Huey’s work, advances in the psychology of reading would remain rather limited until a re-emergence of research interest in reading throughout the 1960s. The rise of behaviourism, led by B.F. Skinner, offered psychologists some promise in terms of better understanding the process of reading but, as noted above, behaviourists were unable to adequately respond to the scathing critiques they received in psycholinguistics and elsewhere. In fact, Huey’s book was republished in 1968 and, according to Rayner, Pollatsek, Ashby, & Clifton Jr. (2012), “we hadn’t learned a whole lot more about the cognitive processes involved in reading in the 60 years between the initial publication of the work and the second appearance of the book” (p. 6). Nonetheless, by the time of the second publication of *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* psychologists had already begun researching reading through diverse topics such as intelligence, perception, comprehension, cognitive style, personality, language, readability, and hygiene (Chester, 1974). Many reading
psychologists, including some embroiled in the reading wars, came to prominence throughout the decades that followed, including: Jeanne Chall (1967), Frank Smith (1971), Keith Rayner (1983), Charles Perfetti (1985), Keith Stanovich (1986), and Marilyn Adams (1990), just to name a few. The psychological study of reading also brings with it the connectionist vs non-connectionist modelling featured in the study of language. This is especially true in the area of word recognition where some of the most influential research has taken place (Snowling & Hulme, 2005). A popular model of word recognition is the Dual-Route Cascaded model developed by Max Coltheart and colleagues (Coltheart, Rastle, Perry, Langdon, and Ziegler, 2001) which Coltheart (2005) argues can better simulate reading behaviours, including those of acquired dyslexics, than its connectionist counterparts. A common response is that whatever deficiencies connectionist models may exhibit in their ability to simulate reading behaviours they make up for by the fact that they also do something that non-connectionist models do not: simulate learning how to read (Snowling and Hulme, 2005). The focus of psychologists on this type of research has grown in dominance within the psychology of reading. Contemporary, and influential, psychologists of reading such as Usha Goswami work squarely in this area and have had significant impacts on reading pedagogy (Goswami, 2008; Goswami & Bryant, 1990; Ziegler & Goswami, 2005).

An emerging feature of literacy research over the last several decades has been the reliance on various brain-imaging techniques and corresponding statistical analyses that together form a large part of what is known as neuroscience. In essence, neuroscience attempts to make sense of the functional and emergent properties of individual neurons as well as clusters of neurons or neuronal circuits. The appeal of this type of study for reading researchers, especially psychologists, is evident. Connectionist models, for example, are often referred to as neuronal network models and researchers such as Plaut (2005) regard such models of reading to offer “the
further advantage of being explicit about how such mechanisms might be implemented in the brain” (p. 24). Neuroscience has been seen as a boon to those efforts and despite the relative infancy of neuroscience itself as a discipline it has been hugely influential in both policymaking and pedagogy regarding literacy (Coles, 2000; Strauss, 2005). The addition of neuroscience to the study of reading has been used in a variety of ways, including the development of “brain-based” approaches to instruction (Sprenger, 2010; Sousa, 2014), the creation of special issues of prominent research journals (Howard-Jones, 2008), the creation of entirely new research journals (Fischer, Daniel, Immordino-Yang, Stern, Battro, & Koizumi, H., 2007), the neuronal basis for reading difficulty (Shaywitz et al., 1998; Goswami, 2008), and a whole host of other cause-effect descriptions between brain activity and reading behaviour (Dehaene, 2009). The zeal with which researchers have applied neuroscience to reading research, as well as educational research more generally, does not come without caution and criticism. John Geake (2008) warns of general “neuromyths” that tend to seep into education such as the notion that the brain’s overall usage can be increased or the existence of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning styles. Geake notes that neuroimaging can be easily misinterpreted and offers controversial statements for neuroscience-minded educators such as “neuroimaging studies do not support multiple intelligences; in fact, the opposite is true” (2008, p. 123). With respect to reading specifically, Gerald Coles (2000) takes on some of the most seminal neuroscientific work in reading research and meticulously demonstrates how it is at best misunderstood and at worst misleading. He states:

The simple fact is, the functional MRI data themselves do not carry an imprint of their meaning. Explanations can be proposed, but without any information about the processes through which the brain activation occurred, various reasonable explanations of the activation facts are possible, with one being as good as any other. Researchers who assume
that beginning reading is primarily about making sound-symbol relationships will create research methods that contribute to manufacturing outcomes that ‘prove’ that assumption. (Coles, 2000, p. 66)

This understanding is further supported by the work of Steven Strauss (2005) who writes:

The most that one can conclude from research on the neuroimaging of reading is that, in using this sophisticated technology, an active area of the brain can be identified when a subject is given a task that requires phonological or other psycholinguistic processing. But the task itself must be a demonstrable component of the reading process in order to conclude that this is a study of reading, and this simply has not been done for most, if not all, of the tasks used in neuroimaging. (p. 73)

Goswami (2006), herself a major advocate of neuroscience in reading research, offers her own caution as she suggests, in comparison to behavioural studies, “so far, neuroimaging tells us little more” (p. 3). More recent work confirms this, with Goswami (2018) noting that neuroimaging could support the idea that “a cultural artifact such as nursery rhymes would be analogous to ‘supernormal’ stimuli” promoting phonological development (p. 61). This is an interestingly academic way to explain something that most Kindergarten teachers have known for decades if not centuries, and it highlights the salient notion that neuroscience has to make further inroads before it can contribute directly to the generation of novel pedagogical approaches to literacy development. More often than not, neuroimaging studies are used to corroborate already established approaches to literacy development as Coles cautions. Within the current paradigm of skills-oriented, meaning-oriented, and balance-oriented approaches, interest in neuroscience tends towards skills-oriented researchers. This includes connectionists who focus on neural networks, behaviourists who make cause-effect claims between the brain and behaviour, as well as researchers who have vehemently concluded that phonological awareness is the single most
important factor in reading. It makes sense that these researchers would be drawn to, and end up dominating, the field of neuroscience in reading given the ontological and epistemological nature of neuroimaging research. There are, nonetheless, some limited forays into neuroscience on the part of meaning-oriented researchers who would contend that “neuroimaging research on reading has assumed the correctness of the phonological processing model, and has in no way confirmed it” (Strauss, Goodman, & Paulson, 2009, p. 22). At present, neuroscience’s most promising role is likely that of providing empirical support for other disciplinary studies of literacy as long as the influence of pedagogical assumptions and the trappings of the current paradigm in literacy research can be kept in check.

It may be apparent that across these distinct disciplines, some names and even specific works have found a comfortable place. This is first and foremost a testament to the ever-growing nature of research as multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary work. It seems that the further one inquires into any specific topic, the more one encounters thinkers whose primary interests lie in other disciplines. Life is inherently complex, and if any understanding about it is to be achieved then at some point the interconnectedness of thoughts and actions about particular phenomena will have to be explored. It comes as no surprise then that the renowned thinkers and actors referred to, and cited, in this literature review and throughout this study will have already explored some of this complexity and come up with important thoughts that touch on more than one disciplinary line of inquiry. Jean Piaget, in a forward to the first edition of his manuscript *The Language and Thought of the Child* (1959), writes about confronting the labyrinthian nature of children’s thoughts and the challenge it poses to him as a psychologist. He comments, “it is no easy matter to hold fast to the thread of consistency throughout this labyrinth, and to achieve a systematic exclusion of all problems not connected with psychology” (Piaget, 1959, p. xviii). This then also serves a second important point: namely that the study of a phenomenon such as
literacy development can no longer be conducted in the absence of such multidisciplinary connections. If it seemed difficult to maintain a singular disciplinary focus in Piaget’s time, it now seems downright detrimental to even attempt such a feat. The current paradigm of skills-oriented, meaning-oriented, and balance-oriented approaches does not go far enough in any one direction to honour this multidisciplinary reality and it may be time to explore a novel paradigmatic approach that holds interdisciplinary connection as the a priori state of being from which pertinent theoretical constructs can develop.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The methodology for this study is borne from sets of multiplicities. Multiple theoretical perspectives are woven together in order to provide a richer and more serviceable ontology and epistemology with which to explore the complexity inherent in language and literacy learning. Multiple methods are brought together through a “bricolage” (Kincheloe, McLaren, Steinberg, & Monzó, 2018) of autobiographical narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013) and critical thinking (hooks, 2010) as means of theorizing and identity construction. These multiplicities also allow for the inclusion of cross-disciplinary research that can operate dialogically throughout the study. Altogether, the multiplicities that make up the methodology of this study engender the types of data construction and analysis that best respond to this study’s research questions. Effectively, this study will become the largest exercise in professional reflection and reflexivity that I have undertaken (Bolton, 2010). In particular, this study will draw theoretical connections through cross-disciplinary research that surfaces within an autobiographical narrative inquiry featuring cycles of professional meaning-makings that have shaped my understanding of literacy development and my identity as a French Immersion educator. The purpose of structuring the study this way is ultimately to gain further insight into the theory and practice that I have experienced, but to also generate novel theory and practice that will inspire subsequent years of my career as an early years French Immersion educator.

Theoretical Framework

The nature of this study demands a theoretical framework that is able to adequately negotiate multiple, and sometimes contradictory, theories that come with a diverse sampling of research across many academic disciplines. This study, thus, will be conducted as a theoretical bricolage whereby “the frontiers of knowledge work rest in the liminal zones where disciplines collide” (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 689). The researcher as bricoleur uses the theoretical and
methodological tools at hand in order to both enhance and unpack the inherent complexity within a subject of inquiry, especially as it concerns the ways language, history, and social structures come to bear on the construction of knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Although bricolage has been employed primarily as a methodology for bringing together diverse qualitative research knowledges such as “ethnography, textual analysis, semiotics, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, historiography, and discourse analysis” (Kincheloe et al., 2018, p. 342), this study aims to go further by demonstrating that theorizing can occur by drawing connections between both quantitative and qualitative research. This will test the mettle of bricolage’s ability to be “grounded on an epistemology of complexity” (Kincheloe et al., 2018, p. 343). In particular, bricolage serves here as a framework for tinkering with a kind of complexity that goes beyond data enrichment through multiple, and often congruent, perspectives and instead sees complexity as an emergent property of any knowledge-generating system of inquiry (Sumara & Davis, 2006). Such a system cannot be satisfied with the addition of perspectives for the sake of generating greater and greater detail and comprehensiveness, but must include the theoretical tensions and dissonances that allow it to self-modify and embody the resultant adaptations (Sumara & Davis, 2006). In this way, the theoretical “construction and reconstruction, contextual diagnosis, negotiation, and readjustment” (Kincheloe et al., 2018, p. 343) that bricolage offers will extend to perspectives related to literacy research that are sometimes thought of as incommensurate.

**Social constructivism.** One of the perspectives that will prove influential in this study is that of social constructivism. This perspective is borne from its precursor constructivism which Glasersfeld (1995) contends, “starts from the assumption that knowledge, no matter how it be defined, is in the heads of persons, and that the thinking subject has no alternative but to construct what he or she knows on the basis of his or her own experience” (p. 14). Ontologically,
this perspective eschews the notion of an objective reality that people must come to know in favour of a relativist notion of reality that is constructed by each individual mind. Palincsar (1998) notes that constructivism becomes social constructivism as constructivists informed by the sociocognitive conflict theory of Jean Piaget begin to grapple with the sociocultural theory of Lev Vygotsky. Knowledge and reality are therefore not just constructed individually, but also co-constructed in socially situated contexts from which an individual can never really be extricated. Furthermore, conceptual understanding of the world cannot be separated from the subjectivities people bring to the process of knowledge construction. Epistemologically, social constructivists see knowledge construction as transactional, subjective, and meaning-oriented (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2018).

Postmodernism. Social constructivism is a part of a wider theoretical perspective in postmodernism. Therefore, this study will incorporate tenets of postmodernism insofar as they provide a trustworthy way of theorizing. While the process of defining a postmodern perspective reveals that “it is easier to discern what it is against than what it is for” (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 2), this study nonetheless shares Edwards and Usher’s interest in four important pieces of postmodern thought. These are “Lacan’s work on subjectivity, knowledge and the cultural-linguistic system, Foucault’s on discourses and power-knowledge relations, Derrida’s on signification and textuality, and Lyotard’s on grand narratives and performativity” (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 4). Lacan’s work puts forth the idea that there is no singular or essential “self” that any one person is. Every person is multiple selves that come with their own distinct, though often overlapping, ways of being that are constructed and influenced by the use of language. This bears on the present study in two important ways: first is that I will have to be aware of which self I am invoking—teacher, researcher, student, parent—throughout different parts of the study and, second, literacy as the subject of inquiry should also be considered in terms of embodying
multiple selves that seek developmental sufficiency with respect to particular learners. Foucault’s work suggests that power and knowledge are intertwined, and that they are institutionalized through discourses that embody the way power is balanced. This is contrary to more modernist interpretations of power as being situated “between” a subject and knowledge construction that occurs through discourse. Here, power-knowledge is an intrinsic part of every discourse as discourses themselves include and exclude patterns of thought and action. This is an important consideration throughout this study as it will be advantageous to explore dominant and alternative discourses that propose differing balances of power in generating knowledge.

Derrida’s work highlights the tensions between words, both spoken and written, and meaning. Through deconstruction it is possible to explore how texts have intentional meaning, but also potential meanings that are sometimes contradictory or self-critical. This study will employ a measure of deconstruction in analysing potentially conflicting interpretations of existing research. Lyotard’s work brings an awareness of narratives as they relate to science and the language used to make sense of it. For example, Lyotard notes that no matter the type of science being conducted, it will always “sit” within language structures because that is the only way we can communicate findings. Since language cannot be used as a pure and transparent representation of an external reality, this puts science discourses in the realm of narrative communication no matter how much they may restrict language use. This has two important consequences for this study. The first is that it legitimizes narrative inquiry as a “scientific” method of knowledge generation and theorizing, while the second is that it allows for critical reflection on the narratives and metanarratives that may influence the ways diverse research are presented.

One way in which this study will stray from postmodernism is through the rejection of the “decentring” of knowledge. While I agree that individual subjectivity creates multiple ways
of knowing about a single object, I do not think that it necessarily follows that there must be no “authorising position” (Usher & Edwards, 1994) from which knowledge-claims can be derived. I contend that it is possible to disavow knowledge-claims that bear “the cloak of universality and value-neutrality” (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 10) while also holding knowledge-claims that are nonetheless universal (although perhaps conditionally) as well as value-laden (perhaps in a shared way).

Postpositivism. Here enters the influence of postpositivism. As its name suggests, postpositivism is a theoretical movement that developed after positivism in response to the numerous criticisms positivism received, especially from the aforementioned poststructuralists and postmodernists. Positivism, in simple terms, contends that there is a knowable world outside of human experience that science should endeavour to understand. Through the verification of hypotheses during experimentation, science gains more and more knowledge that provides a more accurate understanding of what the world is really like. Secondary assumptions of positivism are that the most reliable knowledge comes from science done by researchers who can maintain distance or detachment from their experimentation, resulting in the valuing of certain forms of science over others for their “objectivity” in knowledge-generation. Positivism can be seen as a modern extension of Western philosophy that has roots in the scientific revolution and enlightenment periods. It has been so pervasive that, even today, positivism informs what most people consider to be science: the use of our senses to gather empirical data through the scientific method so that we can develop more useful theories and laws about how the world works. With respect to education research, Phillips and Burbules (2000) write that “the image of research that has been presented in social science textbooks over the past four or more decades has been predominantly positivistic in orientation” (p. 4). As such, positivism has come under justifiable
criticism and necessary amendments to the flaws of positivism have come in the form of postpositivism.

One important shift in thinking comes from the work of Karl Popper (1959) who challenged the notion of verificationism (proving something is “true” by inductive observation) by proposing the notion of falsification (proving something is “false” by deductive observation). When thinking about knowledge-claims, this changes thinking from “are my observations consistent in showing me this is true?” to “is it possible for there to be an instance where this is false?” This subtle difference is important since the latter encourages critical self-reflection while the former may tempt spurious reasoning based on limited experience. The classic example used to illustrate the difference is that of swans. A verificationist may observe many swans and conclude that “all swans are white” based on their experience of seeing many white swans. For a falsificationist, however, this would be invalid since it is nearly impossible to observe all swans. The knowledge-claim “all swans are white” would have to be altered to more accurately reflect the conditions of the observations being made, while further study would be designed around falsifying the claim. Value is placed on explanatory power of a theory or knowledge-claim rather than some sort of probabilistic truth.

A second change comes from the work of Thomas Kuhn (1977) who suggested that scientific change happens as whole paradigms shift through the introduction of revolutionary research. That is, common or typically used patterns of theory and practice within a field become disturbed by new theories and practices that will ultimately saturate the field and become a new paradigm that is distinguishable from previous paradigms. An example of this is the shift from Newtonian physics to Einsteinian relativity. Kuhn’s idea of the “paradigm shift” also comes with the implication that there are periods of non-shifting, or outright obstinance, within a field that is sometimes referred to as “paradigm paralysis”. Although these are not to be understood as
either/or characterisations of a given field, it is important when evaluating and analysing research whether or not theories and practices represent instances of revolutionary shift, suppressive paralysis, or the maintenance of the status-quo in particular contexts.

Complexity theory. The above theoretical perspectives represent, more broadly, the kinds of ontological, epistemic, logical, ethical, and phenomenological differences that are sometimes understood as correspondence and coherence theories of learning (Sumara & Davis, 2006). Correspondence theories hold that “there is a real world out there that exists independently of our beliefs about it, researchers form theories about this world, and the theories that track the world best are closer to the truth and thus provide a better basis for action” (Stanovich, 2000, p. 371). This is by far the most popular perspective on knowledge and experience. Sumara and Davis (2006) note “the belief that learning is a matter of building in an inner model of an outer world is so deeply engrained and so woven into habits of speech that it remains the default position in collective belief” (p. 37). Positivism and Postpositivism could both be considered correspondence theories as they seek to explain an outer reality that we come to know through our sensory experience. Coherence theories, by contrast, are “about maintaining coherence with one’s own perceptions and memories and with one’s social/cultural contexts” (Sumara & Davis, 2006, p. 39). Stanovich (2000) suggests that “most coherence theories reject realism and instead argue that knowledge is internally constructed—that our evolving knowledge is not tracking an independently existing world, but that internally constructed knowledge literally is the world” (p. 371). Socio-constructivism and postmodernism could certainly be understood as coherence theories as they adopt a relativist perspective on knowledge and experience. In general, correspondence theories and coherence theories are not often combined within the same theoretical framework and adherents of one are quick to criticise adherents of the other. Misunderstandings abound, and there is a common assumption that correspondence
theorists and coherence theorists—much like skills-oriented and meaning-oriented researchers—are unable to communicate effectively and find common ground. The ontological difference between realism and relativism as they are currently understood is enough to support the idea of an insurmountable divide. What may be the solution? Stanovich would have us believe “that in order to avoid this distressing conclusion—that continuing conversation among people in the reading field is futile and might as well cease—adherence to the correspondence notion of truth is essential” (2000, p. 374). I am sure there are coherence theorists with equally unconvincing invitations and I am unaware of any pragmatic balance of the two.

Bricolage again serves as a way of thinking critically about where correspondence and coherence theories may in fact agree. Kincheloe et al. (2018) go as far as to refer to bricolage as an emancipatory research construct as bricoleurs, in a traditional sense, use whatever tools are available to them. In this study I contend that both correspondence and coherence theories provide necessary theoretical tools that can help elucidate the complexity of language and literacy development. As such, this study will critically reframe postpositivism, postmodernism, and socio-constructivism as parallel perspectives that can, when in agreement, inform a complexity theory approach (Sumara & Davis, 2006). To be clear, this is not an appeal to balance that would otherwise seek to identify and utilise the strengths of correspondence and coherence theories while minimising their shortcomings. Rather, a complexity theory approach here suggests that elements of correspondence and coherence theories are necessary in understanding the conditions for complexity which include adaptability, self-organisation, internal diversity, internal redundancy, decentralised control, enabling constraints, and neighbour interactions (Sumara & Davis, 2006). For example, complexity theorists assert that “while each human subject experiences a personal and individual consciousness, the systems of cognition that support this consciousness are not so easily located or even traced” (Sumara and Davis,
2006, p. 43). Complexity theory transcends the individual, which normally serves as the boundary for correspondence and coherence theories. Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler (2008) write that “complexity thinking prompts attentions to other levels of evolving coherence that are not typically addressed within discussions of education including, for example, thinking of a class of students as a collective learner rather than merely a collection of learners” (p. 110). Theoretically, this creates a space that is simultaneously outside of an individual’s mental representations (such as in correspondence theories) and socially co-constructed (such as in coherence theories). Theoretical constructs such as this, borne from complexity theory, could serve as a means to resolve ontological differences such as that between the realism of postpositivism and the relativism of social constructivism. This study will explore many more ways complexity theory may generate parallel agreement among correspondence and coherence theories.

**Autobiographical narrative inquiry**

Autobiographical narrative inquiry is a specific form of narrative inquiry that is itself “an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 17). It is a methodology that acknowledges the fact that all research is conducted amidst people living storied lives and, as such, people’s storied lives may themselves serve as the source of important research. They do so because narrative inquiry is “an exploration of the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 18). At its core, narrative inquiry is deeply relational as it considers all of these narratives in relationship with each other and as they relate to participants’ developing experience. This also calls forth an ethical commitment to relationships, to live collaboratively, and to responsibly consider how composing, re-composing,
and negotiating stories will ultimately affect those who come into contact with them (Noddings, 1984). The process of narrative inquiry can be understood through four key terms of living, telling, retelling, and reliving (Clandinin, 2013). Living a particular story is what every person does as the experience of their life unfolds. Telling a story is what we do when we want to communicate that experience to others. Living and telling stories are the two common starting points for narrative inquiry with most narrative inquiries beginning with some form of telling stories. As researchers come alongside participants in narrative inquiry, and inquire about lived and told stories, they engage in retelling. The process of retelling often leads to a reliving of stories whereby “we restory ourselves” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 34) in ways that generate observable personal, institutional, social, and cultural changes. These potential changes ultimately serve as justification for narrative inquirers, and distinguish narrative inquiry as something more than the recording of stories. Clandenin (2013) describes three types of justification that best serve narrative inquiry. The first is *personal justification* which allows readers to understand a narrative inquiry in more depth as they see the researcher’s personal relationship with each text that makes up the overall study. In this study, it will be important for me to explore my changing identity as a literacy educator throughout my career. The second is *practical justification* which describes the possible ways a narrative inquiry might change or shift professional practice. This study will explore how children’s engagement with literacy, and identities as literacy learners, might shift under a novel theoretical account of literacy development. There will also be practical implications for how educators may best respond to the literacy development needs of learners in their care. The third is *social justification* whereby theory, social action, and policy may be influenced as a result of knowledge constructed through narrative inquiry. This study aims to explore a novel theoretical framework for language and literacy development. In turn, this work will hopefully provide greater opportunity for engagement with literacy on the part of children who are often marginalised by popular pedagogical approaches to literacy. All together,
these justifications will bolster this study’s narrative view of language and literacy development as explored through the inquiry of my own experience of the temporality, sociality, and the locations of language and literacy development over the course of my career. As this narrative inquiry unfolds, I hope to challenge the dominant story of the skills-oriented, meaning-oriented, and balance-oriented approaches paradigm that continues to frame language and literacy development. What makes this study an autobiographical narrative inquiry is the fact that I will focus solely on my own narratives rather than those of participants whom I wish to study. What will be acknowledged throughout is that “the past is always told from the present time, place, and relationships” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 195) and how my present self is interpreting and framing the remembered events of my inquiry. As an additional ethical consideration, any reference to children will be to either general populations or to composite narratives of individuals. The field of my autobiographical narrative inquiry becomes my personal and professional history with language and literacy development. My field texts will be composed of the story of my experience with language and literacy development as an early years French Immersion educator along with personal and professional notes, journal entries, correspondences, professional development materials, planning documents, pedagogical resources, media articles, scholarly articles, and other such texts that provide insight into my experience. Periodically throughout this study I will leave the field in order to analyse and interpret, at a distance from my story, relevant research connected with my field texts at the moment I leave the field. I’ve decided to label these moments in my autobiographical narrative inquiry “Critical Moments”, and I intend to number them as they arise. Critical Moments will thus serve as interim research texts that will ultimately result in the final research texts I wish to present to public audiences. One way in which I will deviate from the conventions of autobiographical narrative inquiry is that I choose to operate from a set of research questions rather than a “research puzzle” (Clandinin, 2013). Although final research texts generated through narrative inquiry “are intended to engage audiences to rethink
and reimagine the ways in which they practice and the ways in which they relate to others” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 51), the primary audience of this autobiographical narrative inquiry is myself and so I feel comfortable responding more directly to research questions in situ rather than through a post-hoc reflection that narrative inquirers generally welcome.

**Ethics**

This study’s principle ethical considerations revolve around how students and teachers are treated within the French Immersion education program. On the part of students, this study considers how students’ identities as storytellers are sometimes marginalized by theories and practices associated with one or more of the three paradigmatic orientations to literacy pedagogy. What is valued as literacy, and what is valued as text, are instrumental in either fostering or suppressing social practices, gender identities, and other forms of personal expression. On the part of adults, this study considers how professional identities may be marginalized by policies, mandates, and other pressures that are a part of life as a teacher. Of particular concern is how this takes place within French Immersion education.

As a practitioner-researcher, I wish to adopt a position of “joining-with” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) as my autobiographical narrative inquiry brings me into contact with my past self, former students, French Immersion and English educators, as well as parts of the academic community. Rather than detached descriptions of events, or false promise of objective interpretation, this study will be conducted in the spirit of an “interpretive bricoleur” who “understands that research is an interactive process shaped by one’s personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity and those of the people in the setting” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 12). In so doing, this study avoids actions or interpretations that inadvertently appropriate as I “join-with” the subjects of my story in an attempt to learn from them rather than speak for them.
This work invariably brings me into contact with the children and adults whose own storying of their worlds have inspired my research questions. I cannot tell my story without writing about them and, in some cases, sharing parts of their stories. It should be noted accordingly that all of the data that is presented throughout this study—including photos, transcripts, and copies of children’s work—were not collected as part of this study. They are not presented in this study as research, but rather as evidence of my researching the history of my career. They are a part of my re-collection of events and artifacts gathered over the last 10 years. Great care has been taken to remove any identifying information such as the proper names of people and places, as well as any facial features or identifiable physical characteristics.
Chapter 4: Ten Years a Teacher—My Career in the Making

Figure 2. Photograph taken on the last day of university classes 2008.

This is a photograph I like to share whenever I am invited to tell stories about my time in French Immersion classrooms. I like it for many reasons—the least of which being that it reminds me of a time when I had hair—but the thing that stands out the most is my excitement at having completed my bachelor of education degree and being ready to start my career. As I recount this over ten years later, staring back at my former self, I like to think that I have maintained that excitement throughout my career. I probably wouldn’t be writing this if I hadn’t. That isn’t to say that my excitement, like a flame, has always burned as bright as it seems to in the photo above. There have been moments where it has felt like a dimly lit candle that I’ve had to shield from the wind. But it has always been there, fuelling my journey through the trials and tribulations of teaching. It is that sense of “being ready” which I have felt far less consistently throughout my career. That feeling hasn’t always been there for me, with good reason. I probably wouldn’t be writing this if it had. The children I have had the honour of working with over the
last decade have challenged me to constantly rethink what “being ready” really means. They have also shown me that the very notion of “being ready” for them is itself not an entirely common stance. I have learned, for example, that some educators think the very opposite, expecting children to “be ready” for school and, in my experience, this can become unnecessarily oppressive. I tend to agree with Freire’s (1970/2018) statement that “those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly” (p. 60). My story as an educator, therefore, is a story about the many ways I have re-examined myself, hopefully with some excitement.

As I recall the feelings I had when the above photo was taken, I’m reminded that the rest of my story will come from the same kind of recollections. This has caused me some trepidation as I wasn’t initially sure I could faithfully tell the whole story. What parts might be missing? Could I get the details in proper order? Would I be able to construct trustworthy meaning from my recollection of events? The answer to this last question, I have discovered, is ultimately “yes”, and the reason for this is because story “is the type of discourse composition that draws together diverse events, happenings, and actions of human lives into thematically unified goal-directed processes” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). In essence, it is precisely the omission of some details in the service of the theme or goal of the storytelling that legitimizes it. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) point out, “people live stories, and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones” (p. xxvi). To tell a story requires the storyteller to be selective, though not misleading, about what is important to the narrative. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) explain that “every representation, therefore, no matter how faithful to that which it tries to depict, involves selective emphasis of our experience” (p. 39). The value of a story, thus, relies less on its completeness but rather “on its capacity to provide the reader with insight and understanding” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 20). My insecurity about recollecting my experience has
now shifted to a confidence in being able to re-collect experiences that will help me gain insight into, and construct understanding around, language and literacy development. The above photo is one of the many artifacts I have re-collected—that is, collected again—in order to tell this particular story.

The above photo serves one last purpose as I prepare to share my story. It marks a new beginning. It captures the moment I left my last class of the semester, fulfilling all the requirements for my bachelor degree in education. It captures the moment I would begin a transition from finding a home in the halls of the university to finding a home in the halls of an elementary school. I would go from being a “teacher candidate”, as we were called then, to just “teacher”. That photo was in fact taken at the first possible moment I could really call myself that: a teacher. But the reality was that I still felt more like a student. The above photo reminds me that the question at the top of my mind was “How do children learn how to read and write?” The following story represents the professional journey I took in response to that question. But before I can faithfully jump into the start of my career in the days that followed that photo, I have to jump back into the foundations of understanding that were created before it was taken.

**Part 1: From Pre-Service to Full-Service Teacher**

After that photo was taken, I left the university with a sense of language and literacy development that was already informed by multiple perspectives. The first of these perspectives was of course my own, derived from my experience growing up in French Immersion public schools. These included leveled readers, spelling tests in English and their French counterparts—“dictées”, worksheets of varying kinds that demanded the filling in of blank spaces with sound-letter correspondences, and flashcards with frequent words. Related to the flashcards was the cutting and arranging of words as shown in Figure 3.
My experience of language and literacy development was validated in the first university course I took on the subject. The course text was a book titled *The Essentials of Teaching Children to Read: What Every Teacher Needs to Know* (Reutzel and Cooter, 2005). In it, Reutzel and Cooter promote the notion of the “Big Five” areas of reading acquisition—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—that are consistent with my experience as a young student in elementary school. Some of the suggested activities in the book are the same or similar to activities I did growing up. While the theory and practice put forward by Reutzel and Cooter (2005) felt familiar and sensible, there was something that nagged at me as I explored their approach: I did not like reading in elementary school. I never found it challenging, but I always avoided it if I could. This tension I felt led me to Critical Moment 1.
### Critical Moment 1

**Tension:** The theoretical and practical approach of Reutzel and Cooter (2005) very much aligned with my experience of language and literacy development as an elementary school student. While I became a reader and writer with little difficulty, reading and writing were activities that I did not like and actively avoided.

**Key questions:** Is this the best way to go about reading instruction if children like me end up avoiding reading altogether? How could their approach change so that children like me would remain interested in reading?

**Resolution:** A large part of what put me off reading as a child was how prescriptive every activity felt. Reutzel and Cooter (2005) seem to carry on this position as they advocate for programs and activities that have singular or very limited ways of being. For example, they share a cloze procedure for improving reading comprehension that not only requires students to guess at each missing word (for which there is only one right answer) but also suggests that teachers follow a deletion formula (e.g. take away every 10th word) when preparing a text (Reutzel & Cooter, 2005, p. 105). They are also advocates of Basal Readers which limit students’ text selection based on assessment of their reading performance. The only sticky note I placed in the whole book is on page 190 where the authors included the following comment in the margin: “The reading professional will select and evaluate instructional materials for literacy, including those that are technology based” (Reutzel & Cooter, 2005, p. 190). While this was in the context of evaluating basal reader programs, it got me thinking about how classroom teachers could break away from basal readers and apply those evaluative criteria to children’s literature. Even a basal reader program such as Scholastic’s Literacy Place which features children’s literature could be improved upon as there would be total flexibility in text selection and reading activity. This would create more opportunities for students who feel constrained by prescriptive activities to engage meaningfully with reading.

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The following year I would be introduced to the work of Regie Routman. In her 2003 book *Reading Essentials: The Specifics You Need to Teach Reading Well* Routman provides a perspective that differs from that of Reutzel and Cooter. I found her perspective fascinating as there was much there I was not familiar with, yet it aligned more with my growing desire to be more authentic in my practice. In a reading response assignment, I wrote that Routman’s ideas “helped me search for other professional texts (journals, books, articles etc.) that have deepened my interest in literacy learning and have allowed me to broaden my understanding about current literacy teaching issues” (Arbez, 2007, p. 2). At the same time, Routman (2003) aggravated me in similar fashion to the way Reutzel and Cooter (2005) aggravated me as her writing style was very much in a prescriptive tone. Further to this, she provided no in-text citations, endnotes, or footnotes to support the things she was explicitly telling educators to do. The only way to dig a
little deeper into Routman’s pedagogical approach was to jump to her meagre “Notes” section at the end of the book which resembled endnotes but were not cited in-text in any way. My frustration led me to write:

Unfortunately for those who are genuinely interested in understanding how students learn, and wish to seriously consider student learning in practice, Routman fails to answer the most obvious of questions surrounding her methods: Why? Topic headings such as “Conduct Informal Reading Conferences” and “Teach Rereading as the Single Most Useful Strategy” don’t indicate a thoughtful reflection and objective analysis of current theory and practice as much as they indicate the way Regie wants you to do it. The tragedy is that when you probe the depths of her reasoning and question her own methodology (which she ironically advocates at the beginning of the book), she keeps the gate locked and throws away the key. (Arbez, 2007, p. 2)

My exploration of, and reflection on, Routman’s book is what led me to Critical Moment 2.

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**Critical Moment 2**

| Tension: | Regie Routman’s 2003 book *Reading Essentials: The Specifics You Need to Teach Reading Well* introduced me to ideas about literacy that were more in line with my interest in authentic practice. She also broadened my understanding of what literacy pedagogy could be. However, her writing style was very prescriptive and in many ways less transparent about why we should follow her instructions than some of the programs advocated for by educators and researchers such as Reutzel and Cooter (2005). |
| Key questions: | Is a particular approach that I agree with still valuable if it is overly prescriptive? What type of evidence could I share to support my professional decision-making? What even counts as evidence? |
| Resolution: | As I read through Routman’s book I discovered ways of teaching and learning that seemed to be an improvement over the ways I was taught growing up and had seen in my first practicum. Things like sharing your own reading life with students added important context and a sense of authenticity to building a culture of reading within a classroom community. I also appreciated Routman’s critical perspective towards the research used to support various types of reading instruction. Routman (2003) asked a question I had already been wondering as she writes “How can we as teachers know what research we should pay attention to and what research we should ignore?” (p. 6). She goes on to state, “just because there’s research doesn’t mean we shouldn’t question it” (Routman, 2003, p. 7); and this was something I felt gave teachers an extra measure of power, agency, and discretion. This was especially true given the number of... |
educators who I would hear say something like “research shows that …,” without further qualification or explanation. The irony of Reading Essentials is that Routman does not offer much in the way of supporting research. There isn’t even a reference section! The hypocrisy of this irked me, but at the same time it inspired me to read more broadly as I searched for “evidence” and began to think critically about which evidence I valued. The same month I handed in my reading response assignment I discovered Michael Pressley’s conference paper “What the future of reading research could be” (Pressley, 2006). This was a thought-provoking paper for me in a number of ways. First, it introduced me to the idea that there were groups of educators who held opposing views, and that they debated them openly and in sometimes hostile fashion. Pressley (2006) referred to this as “a war between whole language and those who thought that skills instruction needed to be driving reading instruction, especially beginning reading” (p. 2). Second, his suggestion that neither side had really “taken the tactic of going out and studying grade 1 classrooms that were doing a really good job, that were producing better reading and writing achievement than other grade 1 classrooms” (Pressley, 2006, p. 2) led to a convincing appeal to “balancing skills instruction and holistic experiences within their classrooms so that some children receive a greater dose of skills and others are more completely immersed in holistic reading and writing” (p. 12). Lastly, his critique of the “No Child Left Behind Act” and the Report of the National Reading Panel: “Teaching Children to Read” made me realize that it was unwise to blindly trust authority, and that a necessary part of my work as a teacher was to fully understand what was being included or omitted as evidence for classroom practice.

My experience with Routman’s (2003) book was influential in the way I was approaching literacy pedagogy. Not only were her ideas inspiring to me as they were more professionally liberating and student-centred, but her writing style also caused me to hone and focus my critical thinking skills. Her book also made me angry. Angry at the fact that I agreed with many things, but that there was little to no proof offered to back it up. When I thought about how I would support some of the claims I agreed with, I realized that I also had little to no proof worth sharing. I was angry that Routman’s inability to back herself up in her book revealed my own impotence in the same area. I didn’t want to feel like that, and I didn’t want to answer any criticism of my own pedagogy with “well, I’m doing Regie Routman …” or “well, this is a program my school division is implementing …,” thus deflecting any responsibility to the “experts” who were telling me what to do or the people in charge who were telling me what to do. I felt teachers were better than that. I felt I was better than that. So I tried to get better at understanding the reasons and justifications educators had for their pedagogical choices. Some
educators were always quick to say “research shows that … ” as a way of supporting a claim, and my first thought upon hearing that is always “Really? What research?” I found Michael Pressley’s paper on the heels of asking myself that very question. In November of 2007 I typed “reading research” into Google scholar to see what came back. Luckily for me, those two words were in the title of Pressley’s 2006 paper “What the Future of Reading Research Could Be” and I came to understand that I wasn’t the only one who thought that the whole business of supporting research was a bit of a mess. What he did make clear was that current literacy pedagogy was characterized by three camps: in his words the “pro-skills instruction” advocates, “pro-whole language” advocates, and educators like himself who advocated for a “balanced” approach (Pressley, 2006). The messiness that came with all of that, Pressley would help me realize, is something that you could nonetheless navigate and it was not only a worthy endeavour but a necessary one as well.

As I was cultivating this stance leading into the final term of my degree, I was introduced to the work of Katie Wood Ray through her 2006 book Study Driven: A Framework for Planning Units of Study in the Writing Workshop. I felt an immediate kinship with her perspective as she was able to effectively demonstrate authentic engagements with children while also connecting her ideas with other influential published research. In her writing she was doing many of the things I was aspiring to do, and I could see a way of being that very meaningfully tied together theory and practice. In her introduction to the book, Ray writes about an exciting opportunity she had to chat with favourite poet who had inspired her study of poetry with children. Ray then writes of her encounter:

When I finally finished my somewhat effusive outburst, she asked me if I knew they had newly developed curriculum guides and lesson plans to go with many of the anthologies I’d just spoken of with such affection.
My heart sank just a little. (Ray, 2006, p. xi)

I saw myself in Ray’s reaction to the mention of curriculum guides, and I approached the rest of her book openly—albeit critically—in search of my better self on other pages. I found it in twelve words printed at the beginning of Chapter 3: “What have you read that is like what you’re trying to write?” (Ray, 2006, p. 35). Never before had I thought about the relationship between reading and writing more deeply. While using reading interests as models for writing seems obvious on its face, it is not self-evident pedagogically. I was under the impression that constructs such as a poem or an essay lived outside of the pages they were printed on as objects with a formula. Children would be taught how to write a poem, and then they would execute that formula to the best of their ability. Writing could be “fun” when the content you ran through the formula was interesting and engaging to the children. If you really wanted to “get wild” you could let the children pick the content themselves. Katie Wood Ray turned this on its head for me, and this led to Critical Moment 3.

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<th>Critical Moment 3</th>
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<td><strong>Tension:</strong> Until this point I had been looking at how the content of language and literacy activities could be more student-centred, I had not considered how processes could be more student-centred. Katie Wood Ray’s 2006 book <em>Study Driven: A Framework for Planning Units of Study in the Writing Workshop</em> challenged my thinking in this area, especially as she explores the question: “What have I read that is like what I want to write?”</td>
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<td><strong>Key questions:</strong> How can children generate, for themselves, writing conventions through the study of beloved texts? What does it mean to “study” writing?</td>
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| **Resolution:** Katie Wood Ray opens Chapter 4 with “I don’t think Gary Paulsen, beginning a new novel, thinks to himself, ‘Okay, let me get started on some *narrative* writing today.’” (2006, p. 53). Yet, this is precisely how some writing workshops are introduced in elementary classrooms: “Today we will be working on expository writing … ” or “Today we will be learning about writing poetry … “ Even if the intention is to explore rich authentic examples of expository writing or poetry writing, the process of writing in those ways was still, in my mind, more or less dissociated from any example, not to mention the fact that there are many ways one could engage in expository or poetry writing. Ray (2006) goes on to state that good writers don’t refer to their own writing as “expository”, or “persuasive”, or “narrative” and that “these words simply aren’t operational for people who write. They aren’t the terms writers use to talk about or think about the writing they are producing” (p. 53). Ray’s framework of gathering texts, setting the stage, immersion, close study, and writing under the influence helped me understand that ultimately good reading begets good writing. Formal, grammatical, orthographic, and stylistic
conventions can come from carefully attending to, and talking about, quality pieces of writing with children. So powerful a change was this that I began to take note of this perspective elsewhere. At the same time I was reading Ray’s book, I was given an article by Frank Smith (1999) titled “Why Systematic Phonics and Phonemic Awareness Instruction Constitute an Educational Hazard”. On page 152 I highlighted “The most effective literacy teacher is the author of the book a child is enjoying reading,” followed by “Significant clues to new words, including their pronunciation, come from words that are known already. They, not phonics generalizations, are the most reliable templates for how new words should be understood and pronounced” (Smith, 1999, p. 152). It should come as little surprise that Ray’s writing would echo Smith’s since his name did grace Ray’s reference section, albeit for another manuscript. Nonetheless, it reinforced for me at the time that children’s interactions with texts could be the starting point for curricular planning.

I felt like the connection I made between Ray (2006) and Smith (1999) opened up new possibilities for how I could live out reading and writing with children in the classroom. At the same time, I was nearing graduation and I still felt like there was a large gap in my understanding. When I asked myself the question “How do children learn how to read and write?”, I often found myself adding “… I mean really learn?”. All of the pedagogy I had explored up until that point discussed the kinds of behaviours teachers could have, the kinds of behaviours that children could have, and the relationship between the two. But what was happening “behind the scenes” of those behaviours? I wanted to know what was going on in the minds of children and how their cognitive abilities changed throughout literacy learning. I felt like there was something about what children were thinking, or more precisely how they were thinking, that could illuminate reading and writing development, but I was unsure where to start. Then, upon a second reading of Frank Smith’s (1999) paper, a passage I had already highlighted seemed to stand out in a different way. In discussing how deceptive phonics is, Smith (1999) writes, “written language is not a code for speech; it is an independent representation of language” (p. 152). There it was! Written text was really language, and so if I was going to understand what was happening in the minds of readers and writers I would have to know something about the human capacity for language. With my pen I scrawled a large star on either
side of the highlighted passage to signal its importance above all the other highlighted passages. Then, I set out to unravel the mysteries of language and the mind.

The book that became my crash course in linguistics and cognitive psychology was Steven Pinker’s (1994/2007) *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*. The subtitle alone spoke directly to my interest at the time, but to say that this book completely changed the way that I thought about … well, *thought*, would be an understatement. For an undergraduate student like me—wondering about how the uses of language and literacy that I could observe arose from activity in the mind that I couldn’t observe—this book was a tour de force and unlike anything I had read up until that point. The opening lines of the book read thusly:

As you are reading these words, you are taking part in one of the wonders of the natural world. For you and I belong to a species with a remarkable ability: we can shape events in each other’s brains with exquisite precision. (Pinker, 1994/2007, p. 1)

These words managed to capture my sense of awe and curiosity and I read voraciously through the rest of the book, learning a great many things that felt like they were finally beginning to answer my questions about learning. I mean *really* learning. This prompted Critical Moment 4.

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<td><strong>Tension:</strong> My experience with language and literacy development came largely from education trade books that discussed optimal teacher and student behaviours. These texts did not offer much in the way of what was going on in the mind of language and literacy users, and so I felt there was a gap in my knowledge that I needed to explore. Frank Smith (1999) pointed to written text as language, and this prompted me to look deeper into the relationship between mind and language as a means of better understanding reading and writing. Steven Pinker’s (1994/2007) <em>The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language</em> challenged my thinking in this area.</td>
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<td><strong>Key questions:</strong> How does language work in the mind? How is language acquired? What is the relationship between oral language and written language?</td>
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<td><strong>Resolution:</strong> The first and most undeniable fact presented in the book is that all humans have some form of language, and our collective predisposition to learn language at an early age has been shaped over time by evolutionary processes. This comes with the realization that language...</td>
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is something that comes naturally without any explicit instruction, whereas reading and writing only develop with some form of instruction. But how do either of these relate to the mind? The first of these, language, seems to use arbitrary sounds as vocal representation for a type of thought organization that Pinker (1994/2007) calls “Mentalese”. That is, thoughts and concepts are made up of a different kind of “stuff” than language. Pinker provides the following sentences to help illustrate part of this phenomenon:

- Sam sprayed paint onto the wall.
- Sam sprayed the wall with paint.
- Paint was sprayed onto the wall by Sam.
- The wall was sprayed with paint by Sam. (Pinker, 1994/2007, p. 71)

Upon hearing them, it would be likely that all four would be understood as meaning the same thing, or that the same thing was represented by all four utterances. Yet, they are four distinct linguistic arrangements. For someone to understand them all as the same thing, there needs to be a “thing” separate from the language itself that could be used as a point of comparison. Each of the different utterances could be compared to the “thing” to see if each represented that “thing” or a different “thing”. The “thing” in this case is a construction of “Mentalese” that does not rely specifically on language for its organization. This idea was both illuminating and disruptive at the same time. After all, my inner voice was not all that different than my spoken voice. I used words in my head all the time. Why wouldn’t my thoughts be in English or French as well? Simply put, humans have complicated and organized thoughts even before they have acquired language and the idea of “thinking in your own language” does not hold up to the evidence against it. I would encounter illumination and disruption many more times throughout the book as it touched on ideas such as universal grammar, cross-cultural language use, the mental lexicon, the parsing and pronunciation of speech sounds, pragmatics, infant language acquisition, genetics, cognitive modules and brain areas, and the fallaciousness of the term “bad grammar”.

The previously hidden world of the mind at work with language and literacy was now coming into view, although the change in perspective came with many more questions that the book alone could not answer.

*The Language Instinct* (Pinker, 1994/2007) is of course not without its own foibles. Despite receiving the William James Book Prize from the American Psychological Association, there are still valid criticisms of the book such as its over-reliance on principles of linguistic nativism.

Nonetheless, it broadened my understanding of language and its relationship to the mind, and it introduced me to many more fields of research that would prove fruitful in my continued exploration of how children learn to read and write.

At the end of the last day of classes, I sauntered out of the university with a budding understanding of what literacy life could be like in the classroom. My perspective was informed
by the likes of Reutzel and Cooter (2005) whose work resonated with my personal experience becoming a successful, while at the same time reluctant, reader and writer. Routman (2003) showed me that language and literacy learning could be more authentic than what I experienced, and both she and Pressley (2006) demonstrated the value and necessity of a critical stance toward research that is taken for granted as “evidence” or “proof” of particular pedagogy. Katie Wood Ray (2006) was an inspiring champion of curriculum generated from interactions with quality texts, while Smith (1999) drew attention to the fact that those quality texts were representations of language rather than visually coded speech sounds. Pinker (1994/2007) elucidated the relationship between language and the mind while also providing exceptional insight into the development and functioning of both. Altogether, I left the university with a sense of excitement at what could be, but also a sense of unease about not yet feeling “ready”. As I opened the doors to leave the education building, I still carried with me the weighty question “How do children learn to read and write?” Then as I exited the building my excitement won out, rendering me weightless, and “click!” it was time to get on with my first position as a classroom teacher.

Part 2: From Firsts to Frustration

I considered myself fortunate to be nervous for that first week of school in the fall of 2008. Although I had just graduated with my bachelor of education the spring before, I was one of only a handful of graduates who were starting the year with a permanent full-time contract as a classroom teacher. The job security that came with my position did provide some comfort as I knew that permanent status meant I was trusted to be myself. Any sense of comfort I felt from that quickly dissipated when I shifted my focus to the task of preparing myself for a classroom I never thought I would be teaching in. I chose to be there. I just didn’t think I would ever choose to be there, and my choice would have huge ramifications for the way I was going to approach language and literacy. I chose to teach in a French Immersion bilingual program.
French Immersion was not a part of my plan when I decided to become a teacher. Sure, I was a product of the French Immersion school system, but I didn’t think that that fact alone would qualify me to teach there. Nor did I take on invitations by the university to certify myself for French teaching through a series of exams and/or language courses. In an e-mail correspondence with a professor of mine on the topic of fall job opportunities I wrote, “While I would like to keep French immersion teaching an option, I haven’t thought enough about what I want a French immersion class to be like in order to know how effective I can be there.” (D. Arbez, personal communication, February 6, 2008). It really was not a part of my decision-making process. After I signed my contract, I began to interview for positions at different schools within the school division. Three schools got back to me, each with a position to offer. The first was an English Grade 1 position at an inner-city school. The second was an English Grade 2/3 position at a progressive school in an historic neighbourhood. The third was a French Grade 2/3 position in a dual-track French and English school. It was not until I was presented with the offer that I had even really considered it seriously. In fact, because the school was dual-track I had gone there initially to interview in English which eventually turned into a French interview when the principal noticed I was bilingual. On paper it should have been an easy position to decline. My contract did not require me to take on a French position, and I was unfamiliar with contemporary French Immersion pedagogy as all of my practicum experiences were in English. Yet, I was not prepared to immediately brush it away. The thing that was nagging at me, and preventing me from closing the door on that opportunity, was that French Immersion is where I came from. Not only that, but my family is of French heritage. I kept thinking about what it would mean for me to turn my back on all that as I considered the pros and cons of each position. Ultimately, I couldn’t help but choose the French position. I felt it was right for me, despite the additional anxiety it caused me. My desire to “be ready” became more complicated as I was now considering a completely different language of instruction. And what
about language and literacy learning? How would working in a bilingual program change my approach? I was not sure, but I got started on finding out. In an e-mail with my principal several months before I would officially start, I put forth some of those efforts and insecurities:

…lorsque je me trouve avec du temps libre j’utilise ce temps pour faire de la recherche pour l’année prochaine. Déjà, par exemple, j’ai fait des recherches au sujet de la littérature de jeunesse en français (duquel je ne savais pas beaucoup). Et comme vous le savez déjà, je veux renforcer mon français. C’est peut-être un petit peu naïf, mais je veux vraiment être préparé pour que je puisse enseigner avec confiance dès que la première journée. […] when I have some free time I use that time to do some research for next year. Already, for example, I’ve researched the topic of children’s literature in French (of which I didn’t know very much). And as you know already, I would like to strengthen my French. It’s maybe a little naïve, but I really would like to be prepared so that I can teach with confidence starting from day one.] (D. Arbez, personal communication, June 12, 2008)

In order to bring myself up to speed on what was expected in French Immersion, I decided to look into the provincial curriculum documents at the time. I thought this was my best shot at finding a distilled version of French Immersion pedagogy that I could digest in pieces between shifts of my full-time summer job. I was able to get a copy of a Kindergarten to Grade 4 support and implementation document that addressed all learning outcomes at each grade level (Éducation, Formation professionnelle et Jeunesse Manitoba, 2001). The document was organized by grade, and each grade was divided into “Production” [production] and “Compréhension” [comprehension]. Both of those were divided into “Orale” [oral] and “Écrite” [written] so that each grade was essentially composed of four parts: oral production, written production, oral comprehension, and written comprehension. This type of organization was already a marked difference from the English Language Arts curriculum at the time which was
organized around six language arts—listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing—that served the exploration of five general learning outcomes (Manitoba Education and Training, 1998). This difference struck me as odd. Was there something fundamentally different between language learning in French and language learning in English? Exploring these documents led to Critical Moment 5.

**Critical Moment 5**

**Tension:** Choosing a French Immersion position with no prior experience seemed daunting. In preparation for my position I decided to look at the language arts curricula for both French Immersion and English. Their differences and inconsistencies were problematic for me as I was responsible for teaching both.

**Key questions:** What are the expectations for language and literacy learning in French Immersion? What type of pedagogy is suggested by the provincial department of education? How is this similar or different to curriculum in English as well as my own understanding of language and literacy development?

**Resolution:** The preliminary pages of *Français langue seconde–immersion, 1re–4e années: Document de mise en œuvre* (Éducation, Formation professionnelle et Jeunesse Manitoba, 2001) made me think initially that there had been some progress in French Immersion pedagogy since I was in elementary school. Sections such as “une approche centrée sur l’apprenant” [an approach centred on the learner] and suggestions such as learning happens best “quand les situations d’apprentissage tiennent compte des intérêts et des besoins des élèves” [when learning situations take into account the interests and needs of the students] made me feel like children’s experience in French Immersion could and should be different to that of my own (Éducation, Formation professionnelle et Jeunesse Manitoba, 2001, p. xii). These seemed reminiscent of the things I had been thinking about from Routman (2003), Ray (2006), and Smith (1999). However, skipping ahead to the suggested strategies for instruction lead to a different picture of practice. For example, in the Grade 1 section on written production a suggested activity was to show the children an invitation card “déjà remplie” [already filled-in] before having the children filling-in their own (Éducation, Formation professionnelle et Jeunesse Manitoba, 2001, PÉ–1er – p. 2). This was more like the suggestions of Reutzel and Cooter (2005) and certainly contrary to any notion of authentic texts as teachers. Switching to the English language arts curriculum yielded some interesting differences. Its organization suggested that teachers should consider how reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing and representing all bear on communicative goals. A learning outcome, thus, would have suggestions for all these kinds of activities. This gave the curriculum a more integrated feel. There also seemed to be more opportunities for work with authentic texts, certainly in reading where some activities required the language of read-aloud books to serve as models for varying kinds of word practice (Manitoba Education and Training, 1998, Grade 1 – p. 90). Nonetheless, a more child-centred suggestion to write an “All about me” book was not supported by the suggestion to seek inspiration from autobiographical picture books or illustrated memoirs but rather to fill in a blackline master template found at the back of the book (Manitoba Education and Training, 1998, Grade 1 – p. 14). In many ways the “war” on pedagogy that Pressley (2006) described was alive on the pages of both the French and English curricula as they would sometimes say something on one page that contradicted the suggestions on another page. This left me feeling a bit lost, and at times confused about how I should proceed.
in my own classroom. In the very least there were suggestions in both documents that I agreed with and so there were supports I could draw from in both languages.

Overall, there were some things that the French and English curricula agreed on, some things they seemed to disagree on, and a general difference in approach that was more transmission oriented on the part of the French curriculum and more interactionist on the part of the English curriculum. The whole thing felt a bit cloudy, murky, even … messy. But rather than reach for a pre-packaged program that advertised the way out, I decided it would be necessary to navigate my way out by unifying suggestions in the French and English into one approach to literacy. I also decided that I would use my current understanding of literacy pedagogy, informed by the likes of Routman (2003), Ray (2006), and Smith (1999), as a lens through which I could conduct my decision-making around what to include or omit.

**School 1: Year 1.** The influence of this could be seen in my beginning of year information handout for parents as I wrote:

> Each and every one of our lessons and experiences in the classroom will be anchored to real world objects, people, and events. Having these as our starting point allows us to *study* rather than work, providing students with richer and more comprehensive possibilities for learning. (Arbez, 2008, p. 1)

The year was officially underway and I was in the process of shaping my own pedagogical approach to language and literacy. What I hadn’t considered, however, was the ways in which all the other educators in the building had shaped their own approaches.

Some at the school where I worked had spent decades thinking about how to teach reading and writing. Others were not much farther along in their career but seasoned professionals nonetheless. My status as a first-year teacher drew varying degrees of support from
other staff members although all seemed interested in how I was going to fare that year. Early in the year someone noticed that I was developing all of my own instructional materials and mentioned that everyone on staff shares their resources in a large digital archive that was created around four years prior. The archive itself was organized by grade and language, then within each grade there were subfolders for each curricular subject. I was both surprised and elated that everyone would be so open and generous with their own materials. I was also excited to get a look into how others were approaching reading and writing and to hopefully start up some conversations around their inspirations. I dove eagerly into the archive and started in the “French Grade Two and Three” folder followed by the subfolder “Français”. The first document I found was a worksheet for the picture book *Benjamin fête l’halloween* [Benjamin Celebrates Halloween] (Bourgeois, 1996) which is shown in Figure 4.
Figure 4. Accompanying worksheet for the book *Benjamin Fête l’Halloween*.

My heart sank just a little. I opened the very next document in the list. It is shown in Figure 5.
Benjamin va à l’école

Nom ____________

Encercle la bonne réponse.

1) Benjamin se prépare pour aller à:
   a) la maison  b) à l’école  c) au magasin

2) Benjamin a __________ avant d’aller à l’école.
   a) a très faim  b) mange beaucoup  c) n’a pas très faim

3) Le ventre de Benjamin est rempli...
   a) de chiens  b) de nourriture  c) de grenouilles

4) Le professeur de Benjamin s’appelle...
   a) M. Hibou  b) M. Canard  c) Mme Chatte

5) Benjamin fait un dessin
   a) pour lui  b) pour ses deux parents  c) pour ses amis

Fais le dessin de ta partie préférée de Benjamin va à l’école.

Figure 5. Worksheet for Benjamin Va à l’École.
Although someone teaching Grade 2/3 had taken an interest in Paulette Bourgeois’ series of books featuring a turtle named Benjamin, I’m not sure this type of work is what Ray (2006) would define as part of “Close Study” (p. 19) of gathered texts. Nor do I think it is the kind of elevation Smith (1999) had in mind for Paulette Bourgeois when he talks about an author as “the most effective literacy teacher” (p. 152). There were certainly many more documents to be found within the folder, but unfortunately I can’t say there was much more of substance. Frequent word lists, thematic workbooks, worksheets, templates, and reproducible sections of French literacy programs made up the bulk of the content. While it would have been great to think of this archive as a repository of ideas that people would pick and choose from on an as-needed basis, I would quickly discover that each folder served as the main reading and writing content for the majority of classrooms at the school. One teacher at the school went as far as to have every document in his grade folder reprinted each fall so that he could deliver the same content and assignments at the same time each year. Shortly after I explored the contents of the archive for the first time, I went to the school’s resource teacher to ask about how people went about reading instruction. “We do GB+ here” is what I was told. “GB+” referred to the French-language version (Groupe Beauchemin, 2003) of the PM Benchmark program (PM Benchmark, 2003), which was also used in English at the school. I was also given a levels comparison chart in case I wanted to explore another leveled reading system and needed to know how it compared to others (see Figure 6).
# Leveling System Comparison Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Levels</th>
<th>Fountas &amp; Pinnell Levels</th>
<th>Grade Levels</th>
<th>PM &amp; PM Plus Levels</th>
<th>PM Benchmark Kits 1 &amp; 2</th>
<th>Reading Recovery®</th>
<th>DRA</th>
<th>Reading Stages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>Readiness</td>
<td>Magenta 1</td>
<td>Starters 1</td>
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<td>A1</td>
<td>Early Emergent</td>
</tr>
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<td>B</td>
<td>K.5</td>
<td>Readiness</td>
<td>Magenta 2</td>
<td>Starters 2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Early Emergent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>Preprimer</td>
<td>Red 1</td>
<td>3-4</td>
<td>3-4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Early Emergent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
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<td>Preprimer</td>
<td>Red 2</td>
<td>5-6</td>
<td>5-6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Emergent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Preprimer</td>
<td>Yellow 1</td>
<td>7-8</td>
<td>7-8</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Primer</td>
<td>Blue 1</td>
<td>9-10</td>
<td>9-10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Emergent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Primer</td>
<td>Blue 2</td>
<td>11-12</td>
<td>11-12</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Emerald 1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Emerald 2</td>
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<td>17</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Gr. 2</td>
<td>Ruby 1</td>
<td>19-20</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>L</td>
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<td>Gr. 2</td>
<td>Ruby 2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
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<td>Sapphire 1</td>
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<td>O</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Gr. 4</td>
<td></td>
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<td>26</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Fluent</td>
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<td>28</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Gr. 5</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>Gr. 5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>Adult Contemporary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6.** Reading levels comparison chart.
In the span of just a week, I felt inundated with some harsh realizations about where I sat pedagogically within the grand scheme of the school’s professional culture. Although my acute newfound sense of identity was the product of some pedagogical disagreement, the most overwhelming sense I felt at the time was loneliness. This led to Critical Moment 6.

### Critical Moment 6

**Tension:** My understanding of language and literacy development in French Immersion felt isolating. The programs and activities in use at the school were so pervasive that it was a challenge for me to feel like I belonged. This is a difficult thing to do already as a first-year teacher, but it is exacerbated by a sense of pedagogical disconnect.

**Key questions:** How could I preserve some of the beliefs about language and literacy that I had cultivated in preparation for this position? How influential would the rest of the school’s professional culture be on my own practice? What was the cost of standing out?

**Resolution:** Although I had made my mind up about commercial programs while still in university, I found myself in a professional culture that was saturated with those programs and as such they couldn’t be dismissed so easily. I sought instead to learn about them, and from them, so that I could better inform my own practice. After all, I was working with intelligent and well-meaning educators whose students were still learning to read and write. Additionally, the teachers who relied the most on either GB+ or PM Benchmark programs seemed to also be the ones who were the most confident and outspoken about reading development. I would hear about “beginning”, “middle”, and “end” of grade reading levels and how it was possible to know where every student was at with their reading. Running records were proof of performance. These programs claimed to be authoritative, and so they provided a sense of authority. When I started to look into the support documentation, certain paradoxes started to emerge. In the *Guide d’exploitation pédagogique* [Instructional implementation guide] for the GB+ program, it said:

> Nous disions aussi plus haut que cette collection s’inscrit dans une vision. Elle ne devrait pas être utilisée seule et de façon mécanique. Ce serait trop facile de donner tout simplement ces livres à lire aux élèves, dans l’ordre, et de contrôler leurs lectures. Pour que cette série porte vraiment ses fruits, il faudra que cet enseignant lettré orchestre une classe qui donne le maximum à chacun des enfants, quel que soit le niveau culturel de ceux-ci.

[We also said above that this collection is part of a vision. It should not be used alone and mechanically. It would be too easy to just give these books to read to students, in order, and to control their readings. For this series to really bear fruit, it will be necessary that the well-read teacher orchestrates a class that gives the most to each of the children, on whatever cultural level.] (Groupe Beauchemin, 2003, p. 6)

So, on the one hand we have the suggestion to not do what is “too easy”, yet the entire marketing of this program is that it makes reading instruction and assessment easy. Generally speaking, educators who use programs like these do so precisely because it allows them to control students’ readings by giving out the pre-organized books in order. To suggest that the program should be used otherwise, or that “La valeur de chaque aspect de cette vision dépend de l’organisation et de la qualité de l’enseignement qui s’y trouvera.” [The value of each aspect of this vision depends on the organization and the quality of instruction that surrounds it.] (Groupe Beauchemin, 2003, p. 6) is disingenuous. Similarly, the *PM Benchmark Kit Teacher’s Notes*
(Nelley & Smith, 2000) provides a one-line caution that “It is recommended that the PM Benchmark Kit be used only for assessment” (p. 6). That would be simple enough if it weren’t for the fact that on the previous page, before we can heed their thoughtful caution, the creators of the program write:

Information can be used for:
- Providing students with constructive feedback
- Organising students into groups of similar learning needs
- Planning programs
- Reporting to parents/caregivers
- Transferring information within and between schools
- Developing school policies for literacy learning
- Presenting data for class or school accountability
- Purchasing resources

(Nelley & Smith, 2000, p. 5)

I can appreciate that what Nelley and Smith mean here is that they don’t want students to see the texts in the kit before they are used to collect information on a running record, or perhaps not to use the texts as part of the classroom library. However, when a teacher uses the information they gather with the kit to do any of the suggested items in the above list, are they not using the PM Benchmark kit for more than just assessment? It seemed to me to be exactly the case when resources purchased were additional sets of leveled readers, or when it was reported to parents that their child was reading “below grade level”. There were too many inconsistencies and contradictions for me to adopt any of these programs wholesale. The problem though was that these programs addressed real concerns that teachers had: assessment, reporting, and planning. How would I do these things without the program?

I ended up referring to these programs as the “Chef Boyardees” of the literacy world. They offered a pre-prepared, canned facsimile of what literacy development was about. All I had to do as a teacher was heat and serve. I could see the appeal. Like a can of Beeferoni, it was quick, convenient, and comfortable. But it was no “timballo di maccheroni”. Sure, opening a can of Beeferoni and heating it up was technically “cooking”. And eating it would surely fill an empty stomach. However, if it was my job to get the most people interested in eating, to season the food to their tastes, and to provide the healthiest option, I’m going with the timballo every time. Before I’m charged with getting a bit too “high falutin” in my tastes, of reaching for something that not everyone might have access to, I’ll just ask which dish you’d expect in an Italian restaurant?

Would you accuse a trained chef of being “naïve”, “idealistic”, or “over-achieving” if she wanted
to serve the timballo? What would you think of a chef who served Beefaroni? If I sound a bit disparaging it is because the pain I felt at having been called “naïve”, “idealistic”, and “over-achieving” in repudiating the programs at my school has still not entirely faded. At the time, the feeling was much more salient and I came to understand that if I was going to find my way around those programs I was going to do it on my own or not at all.

At school I was attempting to implement some of the ideas I had carried into the year from Routman (2003) and Ray (2006). I had created some flexible groups for literature circles around reading interests such as construction, the solar system, and the theatre. The theatre group would even go on to write a play for the whole class to perform at our winter concert. I also was keen on introducing the students to original French authors and illustrators. One series that had just came out the year before was the *Frisson l’écureuil* [*Scaredy Squirrel*] books by Mélanie Watt. Rather than pre-teach narrative structures such as “beginning”, “middle”, and “end”, we used the first Frisson book as a way to talk about story events and their relationship. We talked about things like how the structure of the book showed the progression of Frisson’s emotions from negative to positive. This inspired the children to write their own “Frisson” books like “Frisson chien” [*Scaredy Dog*] and “Frisson tortue” [*Scaredy Turtle*] that explored feelings the children wanted to overcome in their own lives. While each of these projects had aspects that were overly prescriptive or formulaic, they were an honest attempt to live out what I believed about literacy learning. Outside of school I had picked up from where I left off with Pinker (1994/2007) and continued to read widely in the cognitive sciences. Pinker’s (1999) book *Words and Rules* would flesh out the idea that language was largely about a repository of word “stuff” in memory called the “mental lexicon” combined with a mental grammar of creative rules that operated on it (hence the title of the book). In wondering how words came to exist in the mental lexicon, I turned to the work of Paul Bloom and his 2002 book *How Children Learn the*
Meanings of Words. In it he argued that word learning was the conditional result of a multitude of cognitive abilities including the capacity for categorizing and referencing sensory experience, the ability to store arbitrary mapping of sounds/gestures to concepts, a theory of mind, the ability to make token/type distinctions, and a sensitivity to syntactic cues (Bloom, 2002). I continued to be fascinated by this work as the inner workings of the mind was uncharted territory to me. What was still unclear, however, was the connection between the age old capacity for human language and the more recent cultural invention of reading and writing. Bloom’s work led me to the French cognitive neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene whose book chapter “Evolution of Human Cortical Circuits for Reading and Arithmetic: The ‘Neuronal Recycling’ Hypothesis” (Dehaene, 2005) would go a long way to explaining the connection between oral speech and written text while also introducing me to the fascinating world of brain imaging studies. This led to Critical Moment 7.

Critical Moment 7

Tension: As I mined the cognitive sciences for a more comprehensive understanding of what goes on in the mind during language and literacy use, I felt a little bit like Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole into Wonderland. The world of linguistics, psychology, and neuroscience was fascinating, odd, and sometimes unsettling. The further I read, the more difficult it became to think critically about what I was reading. With no frame of reference, and a tenuous grasp of each discipline, it became increasingly tempting to accept certain well-argued statements as “truth”. There was potential in the understanding I was constructing for exciting pedagogical advances, but there was equal potential for misguided classroom adaptations.

Key questions: How much could I trust the research I was getting into? How could this particular research, especially neuroscientific research, be integrated into pedagogical planning? What connections could I make between language learning and literacy learning?

Resolution: The work of Pinker (1994/2007; 1999), Bloom (2002), and Dehaene (2005) offered interesting insight into language and literacy use. Pinker (1994/2007) argues that language use is an instinct that has been evolutionarily selected for. This meant to me that all children were by default language learners, from birth, and my job was to attend to the conditions of their individual lives that influenced their language development. This countered a popular notion at the time that children were like “blank slates” that needed to be filled up with knowledge, and my job was to transmit that knowledge to them in as efficient a manner as possible. Pinker (1999) also made clear to me that language use was about the relationship between words and word parts stored in the mental lexicon and the operative rules of a mental grammar. Bloom (2002) elucidated how that word-stuff gets into the lexicon in the first place. His theory of word learning based on the capacity for categorizing and referencing sensory experience, the ability to store arbitrary mapping of sounds/gestures to concepts, a theory of mind, the ability to make
token/type distinctions, and a sensitivity to syntactic cues provided a complex yet intelligible look at how parts of the mind work together in the service of language learning. In addition, Bloom (2002) draws attention to the fact that the cognitive abilities involved in language learning “exist prior to language learning; they are not the result of it” (p. 261). Dehaene (2005) takes things further by providing information about brain activity associated with language and literacy. His “neuronal-recycling hypothesis” (Dehaene, 2005) is monumental in bridging the gap between brain functions that have been selected for by millions of years of evolution and a brain that functions for recent cultural inventions such as writing that are too new to have influenced our brain’s evolution. Dehaene (2005) points to an area of the occipito-temporal sulcus called the “visual word form area” (VWFA) which is “highly attuned to words in the subject’s acquired script” (p. 142) despite no evolutionary basis for such attuning. Dehaene (2005) argues that the VWFA, or parts of it, have been “recycled” in the service of recognizing written text. Further to this, “the VWFA is activated by both real words and pronounceable pseudo-words, more than by consonant strings” (Dehaene, 2005, p. 143) suggesting specialization for written language. Taken together, they sketched a rough path from larger real-world behaviours to inner mental modules (Bloom, 2002; Pinker, 1994/2007; Pinker, 1999) as well as from inner mental modules to the finer details of neurophysiological responses (Bloom, 2002; Dehaene, 2004). I felt empowered by the sense that I could conceptually “zoom” in and out from things like classroom conversations to brain activity and have some explanation for what was happening. It also helped me to explain things that I had trouble explaining before. For example, I believed that sight-word flashcards were relatively ineffective at helping children learn to read/write particular words, especially new words. I could now explain that a word in the absence of creative rules of use would deprive children of important connections to the mental lexicon that strengthen memory (Pinker, 1999). I could also add that flash cards are completely disconnected from a child’s personal sensory references, that in the absence of a narrative they couldn’t exercise their theory of mind, and that the lack of contextual information removed syntactic cues that were essential for remembering words such as determiners, conjunctions, and prepositions which were often at the top of many frequent word lists (Bloom, 2002). I could finish by saying that the use of pseudo-words for practicing reading would activate the brain less than real words, and that real words in context activate the brain even more (Dehaene, 2005). These types of explanations were different than those that often came from education trade books as they were not attached to any particular pedagogy and so they could not be dismissed as a matter of professional or personal preference. As such, they also ruffled a lot of feathers when colleagues would invite me to share them. I don’t blame them for getting agitated. Regarding the flash cards, some people simply “saw them work” and so how do you explain that? I didn’t know and it definitely shook my confidence. What’s more is that I really didn’t know if I could fully trust the conclusions of all of this research because I had no real way to critically evaluate it. I felt like giving up on it all sometimes and just packing away all my books and articles. In my darkest moments of self-doubt I would remember that this research, while far from perfect, had more things it could explain about my experience than things it couldn’t explain about my colleagues’. This small difference made it feel “worth it” again.

As the school year continued on from winter to spring, I began to realize that the stifling professional culture at my school was part of a wider cultural pattern across the school division. There were already indications to this as the school division had its own mandated assessment
program that teachers were to administer at the beginning of the year. This assessment program mimicked very closely the commercial literacy programs that were in use at my school. In fact, the Grade 3 French reading assessment used a book from the GB+ series. Every Grade 3 French Immersion student in the whole school division had to read that same book, and a running record was administered whereby the teacher was instructed to mark 1 point for some miscues and 0.5 points for others. For example, the addition of a word that wasn’t present in the text counted as 1 miscue, whereas pronouncing a word in English counted as 0.5 miscues. A child who, after reading this text of 152 words, got 17 or more miscues was labeled as “needs support”. A child with 9 to 16 miscues was “developing”, and a child with 0 to 8 miscues was “independent”. The school division then collected this data from every school and used it to inform policies and professional development initiatives.

One of those initiatives was a division-wide professional development workshop in April, 2009 presented by Beverly Tyner, a literacy consultant from Tennessee. Her “Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model” (Tyner, 2004) was in vogue because “differentiation” (i.e. providing different learning experiences for different learners) had regained popularity with educators who were looking to respond to policies of classroom inclusion and socio-cultural trends of increased immigration that were initiated throughout the 1980s. Tyner’s model also made some appealing promises. In her book, which accompanied the professional development workshop, she writes:

The Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model presented in this book will give each student a chance to receive the reading instruction he or she deserves. In addition to addressing student needs, the model also supports teachers by presenting an easy-to-implement instructional model that incorporates research-based strategies essential to early literacy success. (Tyner, 2004, p. 1)
Terms like “addressing student needs”, “easy-to-implement”, “research-based”, and “literacy success” are attention getters. In order to make good on those, Tyner created a model that is like a 5 x 5 matrix: 5 instructional strategies (rereading, word bank, word study, writing, new read) that each develop over 5 stages (emergent reader, beginning reader, fledgling reader, transitional reader, independent reader). Interestingly, Tyner also “fires shots across the bow” of basal reading programs as well as guided reading. With regards to basal reading programs, she writes:

“A basal reading series was never meant to provide a complete program, only a starting point” (Tyner, 2004, p. 2), followed by, “Children in the early stages of literacy development have unique needs” (p. 2). The next paragraph had me scratching my head a bit as I read:

High achievers are capable of reading the weekly story before it is introduced; therefore, these students flourish in spite of the system. Average students probably fare best within the basal reading model, although they too are limited by reading opportunities. Struggling readers, on the other hand, are the clear losers in a basal-only classroom. (Tyner, 2004, p. 2)

Are there really any winners? Also, what happened to the unique needs of children? Regarding guided reading, Tyner had a bone to pick with Fountas and Pinnell (1996) whose guided reading program “is most appropriate for those students who already have mastered basic decoding skills” (Tyner, 2004, p. 3), allowing her readers to infer that perhaps Fountas and Pinnell’s program was not appropriate for those students who had not yet mastered the same skills. I was reminded at this point of Reutzel and Cooter (2005) and their emphasis on skills, and it seemed like Tyner (2004) was falling into the same category of “pro-skills” that Pressley (2006) had outlined. It behooves me to add at this point that at the bottom of page 5, Tyner included a note along with a figure of her model that read, “Note: Book levels are based on Reading Recovery”. This reminded me a bit of the contradictions I noticed in the GB+ and PM Benchmark programs,
and I was beginning to feel like Tyner’s model would struggle to break the mould. I took exception to several ideas, such as the levelling of vowel patterns so that they are instructionally presented in order of difficulty. Was the word “make” really a “Level 1 ‘A’ vowel pattern” while the word “ball” was “Level 2” (Tyner, 2004, p. 153)? I wasn’t convinced, and I didn’t see much of a way I could integrate Tyner’s model or adapt it to the type of study we were doing in my classroom.

The week after the Bev Tyner workshop, I would have the opportunity to experience professional development that was entirely different. I attended a conference titled “The Reggio Inspired Care and Education Conference” which featured pedagogical approaches that were inspired by educators from the Reggio Emilia region of Italy. The keynote speaker was Lella Gandini who was most noted for being a co-editor of the hugely influential book *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education* (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). Gandini’s keynote address was centred on the topic of respectful learning environments. She provided examples of how educators in Reggio Emilia observed children at play, documented the various things going on in the school, interpreted their documentation together as colleagues, and the different ways children communicated learning. These ideas spoke to me. Observation, documentation, interpretation, and communication were a far cry from the culture of assessment, recording, grading, and reporting that had dominated my year. The other workshops were equally inspiring, and for the first time all year I felt like I wasn’t alone. Although there were no other teachers from my school in attendance, I did bring back with me the work of Carol Anne Wien (2008) and Louise Boyd Cadwell (2003) so I could continue to think about how I could draw inspiration from Reggio Emilia. Those two weeks of professional development that included the Beverly Tyner workshop one week followed by the Reggio conference the next week led to Critical Moment 8.
**Critical Moment 8**

**Tension:** During a short two week period in the spring, I felt like I experienced two pedagogical extremes. On the one hand was Beverly Tyner’s model that stressed things like “needs” and “skills”, whereas the Reggio inspired approach emphasized the child as the “protagonist” of their learning and the child as “communicator” of their understanding. These two approaches used very different language to talk about children and learning despite both claiming to be in the best interest of children. Were they compatible? Having met enthusiasts for both approaches in such a short time made me think that Tyner folk weren’t going to be inspired by Reggio Emilia, and that Reggio folk weren’t interested in a five-stage model. The former represented the culture of where I currently was, while the latter represented the culture of where I wanted to go. But who would I become?

**Key questions:** How can there be such different pedagogical perspectives? What motivates them? How would these two approaches affect my understanding of language and literacy?

**Resolution:** After the Tyner workshop and the Reggio conference, I was surprised at how differently educators could look at children and learning. Tyner (2004) writes that “Literacy standards are on the rise, and those students who fail to reach high literacy levels are doomed to failure both educationally and economically” (p. 1). Here, words like “standards”, “fail”, “high literacy levels”, and “economically” promote a perspective on learning as competitive, meritocratic, and for the purpose of accumulating wealth. Wein (2008) writes that a Reggio-inspired approach shows “the values of relationality, reciprocity, and collaboration in schools, of inviting children and teachers to be protagonists of their own teaching and learning and of creating emergent curriculum that propels learning and sustains community” (p. 161). Here, words like “relationality”, “reciprocity”, “collaboration”, and “community” promote a perspective on learning as cooperative, nurturing, and for the purpose of strengthening communities. Tyner’s message was about learning skills to succeed in the world “out there”. Reggio-inspired educators talked about making meaning of the world for ourselves. I worked in a school that very much valued Tyner and approaches like hers, but I really valued Reggio-inspired approaches and others like them. With such a divide between approaches I felt like Pressley (2006), caught between “skills” and “meaning-making”, figuring out how I would navigate this mess. Although I was much more aligned with Reggio-inspired educators, I was hesitant to choose a side. There must be some commonality, some small point at which these approaches could agree. In one of the sessions I attended at the Reggio conference, the presenter, Lydia Hedrich, commented that in order to work most effectively with children, it was important to “respect their innate abilities without respecting their innate limitations” (D. Arbez, personal notes, May 8, 2009). I felt like I could apply this to the dilemma I had with competing approaches. I remembered that Tyner (2004) wrote about the need to go beyond basal readers and guided reading, the GB+ program (Groupe Beauchemin, 2003) advocated for a vision that went beyond their program alone, and even Reutzel and Cooter (2005) recommend a “comprehensive literacy instruction” that includes much more than skills. Whether other adherents of those programs and approaches take those authors up on their invitation is one thing, but I figured that integrating Reggio-inspired pedagogy into my classroom was my way of “going beyond”, “extending my vision”, and “including more” in my work with children. It was my way of taking Tyner (2004), GB+ (Groupe Beauchemin, 2003), and Reutzel and Cooter (2005) at their word, without respecting their innate limitations.
It was not easy trying to live beyond the commercial programs that were featured all throughout my school. Despite trying to cultivate my own identity as a language and literacy educator, the culture at the school would sometimes overwhelm me and throw me off course from the direction I wanted to go. I shared this feeling with a former professor of mine earlier in the spring:

While there are some teachers who have created interesting experiences for their students, I feel that the focus has shifted from placing the students first to placing the statistics first. This culture comes with pedagogical consequences and pressures that have reached a tipping point for me. I left the university quite confident about my identity as a teacher and have since felt extreme pressure to conform to the teaching styles at my school. (D. Arbez, personal communication, March 1, 2009)

My entire first year of teaching was a tumultuous shifting between the expectations of the school culture and my own growing identity as an educator. If I was metaphorically navigating the seas of pedagogical differences, the waters were rough and I couldn’t see land. I thought that my sense of unease could more or less be explained by the fact that I was teaching for the very first time. Of course things would be difficult, and there was a lot of learning for me to do. Naturally I would encounter different pedagogical perspectives and have to construct ways of being in my own classroom that were informed by those perspectives. Some of the challenges I felt would surely resolve themselves as I got past my first year. The last day of class arrived and amidst the feelings of loneliness, frustration, and moments of general chagrin there was another feeling that began to surface: excitement. This was my classroom, I remembered, and I looked forward to doing it all again next year.

School 1: Year 2. The extra time that the summer months afford allowed me to further my professional exploration of language and literacy in a number of ways. I had already spent
time investigating Steven Pinker’s *Words and Rules* (1999), and by reading Bloom (2002) I was able to think through how words come to be learned. Dehaene (2005) helped me go further by explaining how words might be processed neurologically. But what about the “rules”? In order to make better sense of those, I turned to the work of Ray Jackendoff. His 2007 paper “A Parallel Architecture Perspective of Language Processing” revolutionized the way I thought about language and provided a picture of language processing that was consistent with the type of pedagogy I was exploring. Jackendoff’s model, which he called the “Parallel Architecture”, suggested that language processing amounted to a form of parallel processing rather than serial processing. Rather than my ears hearing sounds, then processing the syntax, then generating meaning, the Parallel Architecture proposed the idea that as humans hear a string of speech sounds, they call up phonological, syntactic, and semantic information from the mental lexicon *at the same time*. Further to this, the information called from the mental lexicon is organized into multiple drafts of potential meaning, based on the ways the phonological signal could be parsed. To illustrate this, Jackendoff (2007) uses the phonological sounds (shown here in the International Phonetic Alphabet) “ɪtsnətəˈpərənttsəkʃəliəʧaɪld” which could sound as either “It’s not a parent, it’s actually a child” or “It’s not apparent, it’s actually a child”. He claims that as a person hears “ɪtsnətəˈpərənt”, they will call from their mental lexicon information for “ɪts nət ə ˈpərənt” (It’s not a parent) as well as “ɪts nət əˈpərənt” (It’s not apparent) creating two simultaneous drafts of meaning that exist in the listener’s mind right up until the last word “ʧaɪld” (child). At that point, the listener is going to select the more probable draft of meaning which in this case is often “It’s not a parent, it’s actually a child” because it is more common to compare a noun (parent) with another noun (child), leaving “It’s not apparent, it’s actually a child” to collapse in memory as a less likely alternative. But context is key, and the Parallel Architecture allows for the reality that any draft of meaning could win out if the listener’s experience adds weight to it, altering what “comes to mind” more readily. The auditory trick of
parsing the phonological stream of sound into comprehensible chunks intrigued me. Pinker (1994/2007) had already disabused me of the potential for pre-literate phonemic awareness when he wrote:

> Because sound waves are minutely sensitive to the shapes of the cavities they pass through, this coarticulation wreaks havoc with the speech sound. Each phoneme’s sound signature is colored by the phonemes that come before and after, sometimes to the point of having nothing in common with its sound signature in the company of a different set of phonemes. That is why you can’t cut up a tape of the sound *cat* and hope to find a beginning piece that contains the *k* alone. As you make earlier and earlier cuts, the piece may go from sounding like *ka* to sounding like a chirp or whistle. (p. 179)

Single letter phonemes are simply not perceptible in oral speech and so it doesn’t make much sense to begin early reading instruction with such notions. There are, however, other perceptible segments of oral speech and to understand what they are I read the work of Usha Goswami and Johannes Ziegler. Their paper “Becoming Literate in Different Languages: Similar Problems, Different Solutions” (Ziegler & Goswami, 2006) provided ground-breaking insight into how educators, especially literacy educators, should think about the relationship between sounds and script. The first thing that they make explicit is that learning to read alphabetic languages is not as simple as matching sounds to letters. In fact, a language’s orthographic transparency—the consistency with which letters match to sounds—varies considerably and they cite research that shows English and French as having very low transparency. The implication is that:

> Children who are learning to read less orthographically consistent languages, like English, cannot use smaller grain sizes as easily, because inconsistency is much higher for smaller grapheme units than for larger units like rimes. As a consequence, English-speaking children need to use a variety of recoding strategies, supplementing grapheme–phoneme
conversion strategies with the recognition of letter patterns for rimes and attempts at whole
word recognition. (Ziegler & Goswami, 2006, p. 431)

For example, teaching children that “a” makes a long sound and a short sound is near
incomprehensible especially to pre-readers who are largely used to parsing out speech sounds.
Instead, Ziegler and Goswami propose a “grain size theory” approach whereby different amounts
of letters that consistently correspond to a single sound should be learned. While this creates
more sound-symbol correspondences for English or French language students to learn overall,
attention to grain size allows for more efficient learning than if things were muddled with lessons
about long and short vowels. This is because “the slower average rate of learning to read in
English does not seem to occur because of variations in teaching method across different
countries. Rather, it seems due to the relatively low orthographic consistency of English”
(Ziegler & Goswami, 2006, p. 432). These new understandings about language processing and
the parsing of English and French speech led to Critical Moment 9.

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<th>Critical Moment 9</th>
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<td><strong>Tension:</strong> There are some tenets of language and literacy development that have been entrenched for so long they are almost taken for granted. One of these is reading as a sequential act of decoding written letters to sound, and then sound to meaning. Another is the idea that teaching phonemes, as in “a” has a long and short vowel sound, is not only effective instruction but the most important instructional practice to target for beginning readers. The work of Jackendoff (2007) as well as Ziegler and Goswami (2006) challenged those long-held tenets. They also challenged my understanding of the relationship between languages.</td>
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<td><strong>Key questions:</strong> How might language processing fit into approaches to reading? How do humans parse speech sounds? What relationship might French and English have within the mental lexicon?</td>
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<td><strong>Resolution:</strong> Jackendoff’s Parallel Architecture proposed a radical departure from mainstream approaches to generative grammar by suggesting that language processing involved three generative engines—phonology, syntax, and semantics—rather than one, and that all three were processed in parallel. This meant that access to the mental lexicon, and the construction of meaning, was not sequential. The idea that a listener would hear speech, parse out words in the speech signal, process their syntactical relationships, then process some semantic meaning was no longer tenable. The Parallel Architecture suggested that speech sounds prompted phonological, syntactic, and semantic information from the mental lexicon all at once, and was processed in the form of multiple drafts of meaning as speech unfolded. That processing was also aided by the fact that each of the three generative engines were linked to the other via <em>interfaces</em>.</td>
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that allowed information from one engine to influence the processing of information in another. For example, intonation of speech sounds can alter syntax as in the example “My principal told the student that everyone liked when pizza was for lunch.” A speaker could pronounce this using intonation boundaries such as [My principal told the student][that everyone liked when pizza was for lunch], changing their voice slightly so that a listener has the impression that a student was told that everyone liked pizza for lunch. However, the same speaker could pronounce this phrase as [My principal told][the student that everyone liked][when pizza was for lunch], suggesting a student that everyone liked was told when pizza was for lunch. In this case of principals and pizzas, intonation interfaces with syntax and changes the indirect object of the sentence from the student to the student that everyone liked. Although Jackendoff never intended for his Parallel Architecture to be applied to literacy, the connections in my mind were pretty clear. To begin, the generative engines Jackendoff outlines in his model are consistent with cueing systems often associated with reading instruction. His phonological engine was like the grapho-phonics cueing system, the syntactic engine like the syntactic cueing system, and the semantic engine like the semantic cueing system. With regards to the grapho-phonics cueing system, I got to wondering if letters and sounds needed to be together. Thinking back to Smith’s (1999) argument that “written language is not a code for speech; it is an independent representation of language” (p. 152) alongside Jackendoff’s idea of multiple generative engines made me question whether or not written text could be its own generative engine that interfaced with the others. For example, by changing qualities of written text I could change phonological structures especially WHEN I USE CAPITAL LETTERS TO SOUND LIKE I’M RAISING MY VOICE. Or, I could use small stylistic differences in letter presentation to change semantic meaning: aren’t I swell. In any event, at a time where the predominating mantra at my school was “decoding first, comprehension second”, Jackendoff’s work validated for me that there were multiple ways to meaning-making that could begin from multiple starting points. Ziegler and Goswami’s (2006) work fleshed out Jackendoff’s phonological generative engine by looking in part at how speech sounds were processed. According to Ziegler and Goswami (2006) operating at the level of the phoneme, as is characteristic of phonics instruction, produced too many inconsistencies for effective reading development to take place. Their “psycholinguistic grain size theory” posits a move beyond phonemes into structures that more closely resemble syllabic patterns like onset and rime. They suggest that “English-speaking children need to use a variety of recoding strategies, supplementing grapheme–phoneme conversion strategies with the recognition of letter patterns for rimes and attempts at whole word recognition” (Ziegler & Goswami, 2006, p. 431). This led me to immediately question the wisdom of Tyner’s (2004) Level 1 and Level 2 “a” sounds, as well as the oft-taught long and short vowel sounds. After all, the letter “a” can make much more than two sounds. The previous sentence being a prime example where “after”, “all”, “make”, and “than” represent four distinct sounds for the letter “a”. That is, if you wanted to think of it that way. Ziegler and Goswami (2006) helped me understand that it simply wasn’t intuitive or useful to do so. In addition to dismantling the ideas of sequential language processing and the effectiveness of direct phonics teaching, Jackendoff (2007) and Ziegler and Goswami (2006) also inspired me to rethink the relationship between English and French. Jackendoff (2007) in his presentation of the mental lexicon as having bits of phonology, syntax, and semantics available for recall made me think of how multiple drafts of meaning could include multiple languages. This would explain, for example, why the French word for “seal” was such a beguiling word for French Immersion students whose dominant language was English. The French word “phoque”, often pronounced phonetically as fɔk, routinely incites laughter and misuse in elementary French Immersion classrooms as it is identical to the English pronunciation of “fuck”. This makes sense within the Parallel Architecture because the phonology “fɔk” would make a call to the mental lexicon for all possible syntactic and semantic pieces of information. Contrasting the two drafts
of meaning “fʌk – NOUN – [aquatic animal]” and “fʌk – INTERJECTION – [bad word]” becomes entertaining because of the extreme disparity in their use and meaning. It nonetheless is a prime example of parallel processing at work that has meaningful implications for French Immersion education. Ziegler and Goswami’s (2006) attention to different “grain sizes” such as the rime of a syllable made me think about how this creates orthographic consistency within languages, but also across languages. A sentence such as “She received praise for her picture of the fair” would be confusing for a child who is taught about the vowel digraph “ai” as it is not consistently used here. Even adding a rule about “pesky r’s” only confuses the matter further. However, the rimes “aise” and “air” are pretty consistent with other words like “raise” and “repair”. Even more than this, “aise” in the English word “praise” is pronounced the same as “aise” in the French word “chaîse”. This meant to me that operating at the level of the rime, in addition to other “grain sizes”, allowed for simultaneous study of multiple languages. When students would be looking at “aise” as a rime in English, they were also strengthening their ability with French words like “chaîse” [chair], “fraise” [strawberry], and “malaise” [discomfort]. These kinds of cross-linguistic connections could not be as easily made at the level of the phoneme which characterized the kind of phonics instruction I felt pressure to pursue at my school.

I began the year with even more confidence in the approach I wanted to take to language and literacy in my classroom. One of the things borne from my research during the summer was a small journal I created for each student titled “Symboles de sons” [Symbols of sounds]. The influence of Jackendoff (2007) and Ziegler and Goswami (2006) was clear in both the organization and intended use of the journal (see Figure 7).

![Figure 7. Front cover and inside page of the journal "Symboles de sons".](image)

The representation on the cover was clearly influenced by Jackendoff’s (2007) conception of the mental lexicon, while the inside pages reflected understandings constructed from Ziegler and
Goswami (2006). I encouraged the children to record words they found in texts they read, or texts I read to them, in the lined squares. Each page, however, was intended for words that had the same phonological “grain”, as well as some related “grains” that produced similar sounds. The “grains” were placed into the connected circles on the right-hand side of the page. A properly filled page would look something like what is shown in Figure 8.

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 8. An example page from the journal "Symboles de sons".*

In order to find the “grains” within the words we discovering, we would do word analyses together. This consisted of filling out a syllable tree as in Figure 9.
Figure 9. An example of a word analysis.

In order to pool our work together, we also substituted a “word wall” for a “word garden” that was organized based on the different “grains” we found. Since we used the French word “graine” [seed] instead of “grain” to talk about the phonological units we were recording in our journal,
the children were excited to visualize the “graines” in our “word garden” using plant imagery as seen in Figure 10. The “graines” would be written down on a brown paper cutout of a seed, from which a green stalk would grow. On the stalk were leaves that had different words we found in books and other texts we read that had the “graine” inside the word.

*Figure 10. Photograph of our "word garden".*

For whatever reason, my work with the children in this area garnered some unexpected attention from my colleagues. Teachers, support staff, and educational assistants showed interest in our word garden, as well as the accompanying journal and method of word analysis. I wish, however, they would have taken more of an interest in our study of book versus movie versions of stories. Our readings of *Coraline* by Niel Gaiman and *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak were contrasted with viewings of their movie adaptations. We had rich discussions
around our favourite parts of each book and how they compared to their on-screen representations. We teased out both writing conventions and conventions of cinematography and talked about how they change our perception of events. I wish we could have talked more about that, but I wasn’t going to turn down collegial conversation, especially the kind that reflected positively on the work I was doing. I suppose what drew them in was that our “word garden” did not look all that dissimilar to the rows and columns of French sounds plastered all over the walls in nearly every classroom (see Figure 11).

![Figure 11 - Examples of popular French sound cards. These would be printed in large format and displayed on the wall in most classrooms.](image)

There was a point of commonality in the way that we all were making visible some of the sound-letter correspondences our students were experiencing. At the same time, there was also enough difference in the way that we were living that out in our classroom that people took notice. It
probably helped too that the “word garden” was on a wall clearly visible when you walked past the doorway. In most of the conversations I had about the “word garden”, I would ultimately touch on the “research” I was exploring that informed my decisions. This fact, that there was “research” out there that supported what we were doing, also piqued some people’s interest. Eventually, one of the resource teachers invited me to share some of my thinking around the research I was exploring in a small lunchtime presentation for her, another classroom teacher, and the principal who were all curious about what I was doing. I was both flattered and somewhat nervous at the invitation. I would have to make my questions and my understanding visible in a way that made me feel vulnerable. Would all of the work I had done seem like hogwash? By contrast, I also had the wonderful feeling that my identity was shifting and that for the first time I had some small value as a staff member at that school.

By the time I was due to make my presentation in May of 2009, I had continued reading deeper into research regarding literacy education, linguistics, psychology, and neuroscience. There were at least eighteen different thinkers that had influenced my understanding of language and literacy development. In addition to Pinker (1994/2007; 1999), Jackendoff (2007), Bloom (2002), Ziegler and Goswami (2006), and Dehaene (2005), I started filling in gaps I felt I had in my understanding. I read Dehaene’s paper that he co-wrote with his colleague Laurent Cohen where they first made the case for the “Visual Word Form Area” (Cohen & Dehaene, 2004). This made clearer how parts of the brain are “recycled” in the service of culturally imposed activity, and even illuminated the neuronal basis for behaviours such as letter reversal in reading and writing. Being curious about retrieving items from the mental lexicon, I turned to the work of Willem J. Levelt and his colleagues who created a model for lexical access for speech production (Levelt, Roelofs, & Meyer, 1999). What intrigued me about their work was the claim that “upon selection of a lemma, its syntax becomes available for further grammatical encoding, that is,
creating the appropriate syntactic environment for the word” (Levelt et al., 1999, p. 4). Like Jackendoff (2007) showed in speech perception, Levelt et al. (1999) left room for the parallel processing of lexical information in speech production. In addition to this, their model also incorporated processes of “self-monitoring” lending further credence to the notion of multiple drafts of meaning that Jackendoff (2007) alluded to. Ned Sahin and his colleagues conducted intracranial electrophysiology in order to measure brain activity in relation to lexical access (Sahin, Pinker, Cash, Schomer, & Halgren, 2009). Their work provided stunning results that showed “the location, behavioral correlates, and timing of the components of neuronal activity in Broca’s area suggest that they embody, respectively, lexical identification (~200 ms), grammatical inflection (~320 ms), and phonological processing (~450 ms) in the production of nouns and verbs alike” (Sahin et al., 2009). What is stunning about this is that the participants who are producing speech in this way are actually reading a printed word. That is, when someone is asked to read out loud, the first thing they are likely to do is retrieve lexical entries that include syntactic and semantic information. Sahin et al. (2009) acknowledge that despite the spatiotemporal nature of their investigation (i.e. it shows a sequence of events), it sits within an overall stream of language processing that “as a whole surely exhibits parallelism, feedback, and interactivity” (p. 449) thus further confirming aspects of the Parallel Architecture (Jackendoff, 2007). Connecting all of this back to the interests of literacy educators was the work of Kenneth Goodman. His landmark paper “Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game”, published in 1967, seemed to presage all of this. Working only from some study of Chomsky—and without the benefit of neuroscience or contemporary psycholinguistics—statements such as “[the reader] searches his memory for related syntactic, semantic, and phonological cues”, and “If no guess is possible, [the reader] checks the recalled perceptual input and tries again” (Goodman, 1967, p. 135) seemed right in line with the concepts of lexical access and drafts of meaning. Naturally I wondered if the other aspects of the whole language movement were equally supported. Marilyn
Adams (1998) helped, in part, by offering a perspective that tempers extremism when it comes to multiple cueing systems. I also explored the work of Don Holdaway as he was an inspiration for Routman (2003). I was pleased to learn that his own research highlighted the importance of literacy learning mimicking the process of language learning, especially when it came to shared reading experience (Holdaway, 1979). This reinforced the ideas I was trying to integrate from Reggio-inspired educators, and it also provided practical vision for the ways language processing could be extended to literacy. With all of these additional researchers on the table, I needed some sort of bearing on where all of this research was taking me. I wondered, for example, whether some of the ideas I was exploring were really evident in other classrooms. I was happy to discover that Michael Pressley and his colleagues had already investigated effective literacy instruction in their book *Learning to Read: Lessons from Exemplary First-Grade Classrooms* (Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001). What I appreciated about the book was that the authors tried to be explicitly impartial as they observed first-grade classrooms in search of exemplary reading instruction. I say “tried” because in practice the book read as a restrained sort of preachiness for “balanced”, somewhat skills-oriented, pedagogy.

Nonetheless, there was much in the book that resonated with me such as the following passage:

> As we reflected on what was reported by the teachers, we also noted what was not mentioned by them. Despite the fact that there are many publishers of reading instruction materials, we were struck that there was little mention of commercially published reading instructional materials by the nominated-effective first-grade teachers. (There was more mention of use of basal materials by the special education teachers.) These effective first-grade teachers seemed to focus on children’s needs more than on commercial planning and delivery. (Pressley et al., 2001, p. 43)
I felt sometimes that any disagreement I had with the authors was perhaps more due to their interpretation of what they observed rather than what really happened, and their perspective enriched my own regardless. Another important perspective that helped me think critically about what I was reading was found in the 2000 book *Misreading Reading: The Bad Science That Hurts Children* by Gerald Coles. Coles (2000) took popular “research” head-on in an attempt to disabuse readers from the temptation to take it at face value. He wrote:

Invoking science for solutions to literacy problems has a strong appeal partly because important scientific contributions in this century have helped us understand how people read and how reading should be taught. Compared with other avenues for obtaining knowledge, science is also relatively more systematic, formal, and objective. On the other hand, there have been and are good reasons for skepticism about scientific explanations and solutions. (Coles, 2000, p. xvi)

Coles would also add weight to Pressley’s (2006) assessment of the research history as being marred by conflict between skills-emphasis approaches and whole language approaches. I would learn from Coles (2000) some important critical thinking tools such as how to evaluate certain research methods and the all-important caution that “correlation does not equal causation”. I further refined my critical thinking skills by reading Steven Strauss’ 2005 book *The Linguistics, Neurology, and Politics of Phonics: Silent “E” Speaks Out*. Strauss’ book was in large part a response to the increasing trend of using neuroscientific research to support literacy programs that featured phonics. As both a linguist and neurologist, Strauss is able to deftly evaluate some of the more challenging research involving neurophysiology and demonstrate how misinterpretations, or outright misuse, of neuroscience can arise. I was shocked to see that Richard Allington made himself available to write the forward to the book, although I was heartened by his opening statement:
I’ll bet Steve Strauss and I wouldn’t wholly agree on just what constitutes an “ideal” instructional plan for developing children’s reading proficiencies. I’ll bet our plans would diverge in the area of children’s decoding development. Nonetheless, we both agree that the legislation and mandates endorsed by entrepreneurial neophonics advocates reflect little of the substantial empirical evidence concerning effective literacy instruction and even less of what scientific research has documented about how best to teach children to read proficiently. (Allington, 2005, p. ix)

To round out my growing critical reflections on research is the work of Paul Howard-Jones (2008) whose work examines the challenges associated with integrating neuroscience and education research. Howard-Jones (2008) eschews the idea that research can connect activity in the brain directly to behaviour and offers what he calls a brain–mind–behaviour model that enables cognitive neuroscience to be interpreted and conducted with greater attention to social interaction and construction. This in turn would lead to less “brain-based” pedagogy and the “neuromyths” that often characterize it (Howard-Jones, 2008). Looking back on all of this in preparation for my presentation, I couldn’t believe all of the reading I had done over the last ten months! How would I be able to share all the thinking that surrounded it? This led to Critical Moment 10.

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<td><strong>Tension:</strong> As I approached the day of my presentation, I had to contend with the diverse ideas I was trying to hold together. If I was going to share anything meaningful about the reading I had been doing over the last 10 months, I would have to find a way to distill my understanding into something I could easily communicate and that would convince my colleagues that I was justified in the approach I was taking to language and literacy.</td>
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<td><strong>Key questions:</strong> How could I connect research projects from 18 different researchers? How could I make clear the ways that their ideas had challenged my thinking?</td>
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| **Resolution:** I gathered books and articles and thought about what made each special to me. I thought about how each revealed to me previously unknown parts of the inner workings of our minds and brains, while others were able to confirm those inner mental processes with observations about behaviours in the classroom. If I could describe a single overarching theme that drove my inquiry into this varied research it would be to explore the unseen. Trade books,
curriculum documents, and commercial programs all centred their efforts on what you could see the teacher doing and what you could see the students doing. Emotions could still be seen through body language, and even ideas were exchanged in public ways through speech and writing. But what about *thoughts*? What of the biological hardware that sketched the boundaries of “innate ability” and “innate limitation” I heard spoken of previously? These were areas that were not explored in my pre-service teaching, yet the scientific promise of their understanding was beginning to fuel pedagogy more and more. Celebrations of “brain-based” programs, and “evidence-based” practice dominated approaches to literacy instruction that were making me feel stifled, isolated, and marginalized as a beginning teacher. This presentation would be my reaction to that. In an effort to find direction, I went back to some notes and drawings I had created the month prior (seen in Figure 12). I was attempting to put all the pieces together, much like a patchwork quilt, to show how all of the ideas I was reading about could be working together. With Jackendoff’s (2007) Parallel Architecture as the starting point from which other pieces of research were added on, what emerged was a model of language and literacy use and development. This would become the subject of my presentation, and the way I would synthesize all the research I was reading into some presentable form. I began to refer to it as my model of literacy, and I sorted out how I would put together findings from eighteen researchers (seen in Figure 13) into one single model (seen in Figure 14). This model became the justification I presented for the development of the “word garden” as well as other experiences like our study of books versus movies. It also became a launching point for other ways I wanted to live out language and literacy learning in French Immersion.
Figure 12. Notes and sketches attempting to connect various lines of research into a model.
Building a model of literacy

Education
- Michael Pressley
  - Best Practices
- Richard L. Allington
  - Best Practices
- Ken Goodman
  - Psycholinguistics
- Don Holdaway
  - Acquisition Learning
- Gerald Coles
  - Reviewing Research
- Marilyn J. Adams
  - 3-Cueing System

Psychology
- Noam Chomsky
  - Generative Grammar
- Steven Pinker
  - Language Instinct
- Paul Bloom
  - Meaning of Words
- Ray Jackendoff
  - Parallel Architecture
- William J. M. Levelt
  - Lexical Access
- Johannes Ziegler
  - Grain Size Theory

Neuroscience
- Usha Goswami
  - Phonology
- Stanislas Dehaene
  - Visual Perception
- Laurent Cohen
  - Visual Perception
- Paul Howard-Jones
  - Mind-Brain Ed
- Steven L. Strauss
  - Reviewing Research
- Ned T. Sahin
  - Sequential processing

*Figure 13.* Slide 17 of my May 2010 presentation. It depicted all of the researchers who informed my model of literacy up until that point.
Figure 14. Construction of my model of literacy, May 2010. Each successive picture shows the addition of theoretical components based on the research cited below the picture.
My model of literacy was well received, and the resource teacher who initiated this meeting commented that I should consider doing a graduate degree. I was elated by the response and it fuelled further inquiry. The work of Stanislas Dehaene led me to another researcher who was part of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in France, Emmanuel Dupoux. My interest in Dupoux’s work on multilingualism was a next step at directly connecting my understanding of language and literacy with the French Immersion teaching context I was in. Dupoux collaborated on two papers that provided neuroscientific findings in support of behaviours that were common in French Immersion. The first paper (Dehaene-Lambertz, Dupoux, & Gout, 2000) describes how speakers of different languages apply their native language’s phonological properties to any speech signal. While not entirely novel an idea, what is interesting about their research is that it showed participants’ inability to perceive certain speech sounds when they violated their native language’s phonological properties. The implications for learning in French Immersion were that beginning learners of an additional language could sometimes literally not hear parts of speech that are crucial to language learning, and that the slowing of development in both English and French in the first several years of school was likely due to the restructuring of phonological expectations on the part of French Immersion children. The second paper (Darcy, Peperkamp, & Dupoux, 2007) showed that over time, strategies for processing speech that came from more than one language could co-exist. Their study demonstrated that the dominance of native language strategies was highest in beginning learners, and decreased with additional language proficiency, suggesting a developmental trajectory. Again, while not entirely novel a perspective for French Immersion teachers, Darcy et al. (2007) add that “the combined results of these experiments suggest that within a few years of exposure to a second language, learners can build a separate system for the processes of L2, without modifying the L1 system, and are able to switch from one to the other depending on the language they are hearing” (p. 429). This additive perspective on language
learning was not as common among my French Immersion colleagues and would cause me to
question prevailing ideas about which children were “able” to learn in French Immersion
classrooms. Dupoux’s work with his colleagues also gave me the first indication that maybe
being bilingual wasn’t about trying to learn and use two separate languages as close to native-
like usage as possible. Rather, perhaps a person’s developing understanding and use of multiple
languages existed as one entity as the languages fuse within the mental lexicon in interesting and
diverse ways. French Immersion children, therefore, were not English dominant speakers trying
to become as close to native-like as possible in French. They were instead developing their own
language profile that included the fusion of multiple languages into one lexicon that afforded
them communicative ability in wider social contexts. This also raised concern for me about who
was able to identify as part of the French community, which tended to regard native French
speakers as the only “real” members. With the school year nearly in the rear view mirror, I found
these connections to French Immersion to be an exciting new area to investigate.

Things overall seemed to be coming together as the school year was closing out, and I
wish I could say that I ended the year on a high note. What was at the top of my mind in those
last few months, however, was the experience of losing a student to the English program for the
first time. The practice itself was itself pretty common at my school, almost facilitated by the fact
that as a dual-track school a change in program did not mean a change in building or a distancing
from the friends a child made in French Immersion. It was more akin to a switch in classroom as
might take place in any other school. Well, a switch had been made for a student of mine, closer
to the end of the year, and I wonder even to this day if a different set of supports would have
helped that student remain in French Immersion. Rumblings of a possible switch started at the
beginning of the year when the divisional reading assessments in French and English both turned
up a result of “Needs Support” for this particular child, with the additional qualification that she
was reading “below grade level”. That last part was important because it triggered all sorts of additional supports that were reserved for students who were specifically “below grade level”. Had I been teaching a Grade 1 class, supports would have likely included time in the Reading Recovery program or remedial instruction groups with the resource teacher. Because I was teaching Grade 3, the potential consequences of any reading delay were considered more dire and the level of support increased accordingly. The resource teacher assigned to my classroom took a look at this child’s score on the divisional reading assessment and suggested something I had never even heard about: this child, according to the resource teacher, needed to go a separate divisionally-run “learning centre”. This is the point at which I have to admit that a wiser, more-confident teaching self would have flat out said “no way”. However, it being my second year, and not really having any idea what the implications of time at the learning centre really meant, I took up the resource teacher’s offer to enroll this child in a 55-hour program at the learning centre which was intended to “catch her up” in reading. This entailed sending the child to the learning centre—a fully separate school within the division whose student population consisted of a rotating and transient number of students from other schools in the division—each day after lunch. The child would be bussed to the learning centre where she would participate in a small class of up to four children with two adults (at least one of whom was a certified teacher) who would engage the students in a variety of literacy-related activities. Starting in the fall, my student was required to attend this program every day for over five weeks as she fulfilled the initial 55-hour commitment. It was difficult for our community to say goodbye to her each day, especially after hearing her share stories about how she didn’t enjoy her time there. It was also difficult for me as there was a lot of time she was missing from the classroom and this meant sometimes having to juggle my schedule in ways that disrupted the day so she wouldn’t miss out on certain experiences. What made things worse was the increasing realization that the learning centre was really just a glorified commercial program delivery system. When I finally got to visit
the learning centre with my student in a sort of student-led conference type of check-in, I was shocked by what I saw. It felt like one of the purest distillations of commercial pedagogy that I had ever seen. There was the “JETS” program for staying on task (see Figure 15), “Spelling Connections” (Gentry, 2007), the “Benchmark School Approach” (Gaskins, 2005), the “Small Group Differentiated Reading Model” (Tyner, 2004), a healthy dose of the PM Benchmark program with running records conducted regularly, as well as a number of computer programs that were specially designed to help with reading and writing.

![Figure 15. JETS program student card.](image)

There were even repositories of other leveled reading programs that sat on shelves but were only used periodically. Every single activity the child participated in was selected from one of these programs, and each child would cycle through at least four activities a day or more depending on their level of engagement. As I looked around the school I couldn’t help but notice that, between the programs, resources, staffing, bussing, and building requirements, the operating costs of the learning centre had to be well into the millions of dollars. All of this on the wholesale promise to
“catch kids up”. We approached the end of my student’s 55-hour program and it was clear that she was not catching up, at least not in the way the folks at the learning centre anticipated. In a meeting with me, learning centre staff, and my school’s resource teacher, we discussed next steps for this child. The learning centre staff informed us that she was making some improvement, as evidenced by her reading levels, but that she was still “below grade level”. The good news, we were told, was that the learning centre offered a second round of remedial instruction that would extend this child’s time to 80 hours in the program. In one of my rare displays of criticism during those beginning years of teaching, I asked the learning centre staff “Why should we trust that more time at the learning centre will make any more of a difference than it already has?” As though I had just questioned whether water was wet, I received a rather flippant and condescending “Because research shows that, clearly, the 80 hours is more beneficial”. At this point I’d had it. “What research?” I snapped back. “Excuse me?” they asked. “What research was used to determine the effectiveness of this program?” I elaborated. “Well, just a couple of years ago our program was studied and they found that the 55 hours was effective, but the 80 hours was even more so,” they explained. Now channeling my inner Gerald Coles I asked, “What methods did they use to draw that conclusion?” “I don’t know, but I think I have a copy around here somewhere. Look, if you’re that interested I can send you a copy,” they offered. Sensing the rising tension in the room, the resource teacher from my school suggested that since we saw some progress, it wouldn’t hurt to continue up until 80 hours. Not wanting to seem like an overly combative “new teacher”, with nothing more than a healthy dose of skepticism and little to back it up, I conceded to the extra time. My student began again the next term, and I did eventually receive a copy of the executive summary of the final report of the research study the learning centre staff member told me about. It wasn’t encouraging. In fact, from a research perspective it was a self-serving hot mess. For example, in a table of reading assessment results for grade 3, the number of samples used to evaluate the 55 hour program
versus the samples used for the 80-hour program did not match the overall totals they provided for grade 3. Even accounting for the number of students who may have continued from the 55-hour program to the 80-hour program didn’t correct the discrepancy. So the authors of this study selectively chose from the students who had made progress in order for their results to look more impressive. This was done in every section of the summary from grade 3 through grades 4, 5, and 6. I didn’t know whether to feel angry or sad that someone thought this was acceptable. These numbers were affecting the lives of children in a very real way. When my student finished her 80 hours we had a final meeting with the learning centre staff. They had seen some improvement again, but my student was still hovering just below grade level. Since not even the learning centre could bolster her reading level, the answer was clear in the minds of the experts there: French Immersion was getting in the way of her literacy development. Learning two languages, it was opined in this meeting, would probably take too much time away from necessary practice in this child’s dominant language. The recommendation was made to the mother of the child that French Immersion was “too challenging” for someone with her child’s needs and that she should consider the English program at our school. She agreed and the school moved her child immediately the same week. I only checked in once with my former student’s new teacher to see how she was doing in the English program. She wasn’t making any progress, I was told, but it was still a fresh transition. Plus, according to her new teacher, it was going to take some time to “catch her up” now that French was out of the way. Having heard that before, I wondered to myself jokingly how many hours she thought that would take and whether it might be more than 80. I wouldn’t ask her, of course, but it did leave me with questions for myself. What did I do wrong here? How could I have let this happen? Was it really as dire a situation as people were making out? This left me to close out the year on Critical Moment 11.
Critical Moment 11

**Tension:** I had experienced one of the most intense intervention programs that the school division provided. It was also one of the purest applications of commercial literacy programs that I had ever witnessed. At the school in which I taught, some teachers would comment on how they wished their classroom could be the same as those at the divisional learning centre. One of my students had to endure 80 hours there, which occupied half-days for weeks at a time. While the centre boasted remediation that accelerating reading performance upwards of two “grade levels”, my student did not seem to benefit from the experience in the same way. In the end, the French Immersion program was identified as the reason why this student was having difficulty and her transfer to English was viewed as a way of alleviating additional demands that the French language placed on her.

**Key questions:** What conditions were necessary for transfer from French Immersion to English? What types of students could and could not be a part of the French Immersion program? What could I do to make sure that students stayed in French Immersion, despite various challenges?

**Resolution:** Thinking back over the year, there were some clear areas where I think I could have made more of a difference. The most glaring was that I could have opposed the program extension at the learning centre. I chose otherwise, against my better judgement, because I wasn’t as sure of myself as everyone else was as sure of the learning centre. It’s possible that my student would not have done any better being in my classroom rather than extending her time at the learning centre. What is certain, however, is that for many of the days that she spent at the learning centre it was the only literacy instruction she received. I usually had my writing and reading workshops in the afternoon, although I made an effort to switch French language arts activities to the morning when she was at school. I couldn’t always do the same with English language arts, and in fact I rarely did. Perhaps this was another way I could have better supported her. I also thought about how I could have used some of my free time at recess or lunch to get in some extra shared reading. I knew from experience, however, that this type of thing was frowned upon at my school. It was an insult to use our union-won uninterrupted lunch break for work purposes. And besides, what child would really want to sacrifice their own free time for the same purpose? I also thought about how I could us my time more effectively in-class. I wanted to challenge myself to go beyond the guided reading groups and the workshop model for writing that I had established. Then inevitably my thoughts would shift to the reasons why a student would be transferred out of French Immersion at all. Dehaene-Lambertz et al. (2000) and Darcy et al. (2007) demonstrated that difficulty in learning two or more languages would be expected, but also that additional languages had no deleterious effects on a person’s native language. I certainly couldn’t accept that the French language itself was too much for any child to learn. Would some educators really make the argument that some children only had the capacity for one language? What would even be the basis for that argument? Also, whether children in the English program wanted or not, French would be taught to them at some point as a part of the basic French program. Nonetheless, at my school there was already an established culture of moving children with extreme socio-emotional or academic needs out of French Immersion and into English. My student wasn’t the first transfer from French Immersion that year, and she wouldn’t be the last in my remaining years at the school. She would, however, be the last student of mine to transfer out of French Immersion as well as the last one to spend time at the learning centre. That much I was sure of.
School 1: Year 3. The summer of 2010 brought many joyous memories, the most notable of which was my wedding day. Between the wedding in July and the honeymoon in August, the summer provided a welcome reprieve from the concerns I had at school. It also forced me to take a break from the extra-curricular research I was doing. My partner and I were also preparing to move out of our apartment and take possession of our first house in September. This transition meant that I reserved the bulk of my free time in the fall to projects we wanted to complete around the house before we fully settled in. As the school year began, school was not my top priority for the first time in my career. Unfortunately, I would discover in this year that I would also not be the top priority for the school. As it happens, this particular year remains the worst of my career. Not because of any one event, or any particular trauma I or the children faced. What this year represents is a convergence of many kinds of systematic pressure that got the best of me. It represents a degradation of my identity as a teacher and a regression in my commitment to the children in my classroom. This was a year for me where teaching was less of a calling or even a profession, but more of a job. I would prefer not to talk about it, but it is an important part of my story. If anything, it shows that careers don’t develop in straight lines and it helps to remind me that all of life’s experience helps shape who we are.

The year started out, as the previous two years, with a heavy focus on the school division’s assessment program. For the French Immersion teacher, this meant prescribed activities for numeracy, English literacy, French literacy, and social-emotional skills each with their own booklet for recording performance on all of these activities. It was only my third year administering this assessment program, but each year the demands seemed to grow. There were more activities, and more data collection that needed to take place. With a class of 22 students, it took the first two months to get through each activity with each child. The workload was so large that the school division provided a small number of days with a paid substitute to look after the
class while the assessments were being administered to individual students, usually in a pull-out method. The rest of the time, assessments were conducted with the help of resource teachers, or they were administered at times where children were occupied with other work. This meant that silent reading periods, or independent working periods were prime targets for individual assessments. It also meant that on some days, silent reading periods and independent working periods were extended beyond a reasonable time frame so that an extra assessment could be completed. The first week of November brought with it a hard deadline for submitting all of the data collected from the assessments. The results, as recorded in each booklet, would need to be transferred to a “bubble sheet” that could be read by special machines at the divisional office. A class of 22 students, with four assessment booklets each, required the filling out of 88 sections of bubble sheet, some more than a page long. The division claimed that this data was used to determine where professional development needed to take place, and what a swath of divisional consultants should be working on in order to support teachers. The division also encouraged teachers to use the data generated from this assessment to inform planning. I have to say, I found that a challenging thing to do when I didn’t believe in assigning a numerical “reading level” to children. How informative was it to know that one student was level 21 while another was level 17 when I wanted them to connect with authors and illustrators and stories that resonated with their personal experiences? For the most part, I ignored the results of the assessments because I didn’t trust them to show me who the students really were. I also resented the fact that it used up precious time at the most crucial part of the year for establishing relationships with students. Inevitably in mid-December, a full month and a half after the assessments were submitted, we would receive a “classroom profile” based on the data collected in September and October. Administrators would receive the same profiles as well as school-wide data for successive years. This would inevitably colour our January staff meeting in which the virtues of such data were extolled if not distorted. This year’s meeting in January had a particularly interesting
interpretation of the data as the teaching staff was told that there was a problem with the math results. The data showed that the percentage of Grade 2 students who were at “grade level” in math was in the high 70s, whereas last year the percentage of Grade 2 students at “grade level” was in the mid-80s. This showed a downward trend, and the staff was invited to share ways that we could improve math instruction at the school. This invitation was taken seriously and a few people recommended the implementation of some math programs they had recently heard about, as well as some guest speakers they would like to invite to the school. No one seemed bothered by the fact that last year’s grade 2 children were completely different than this year’s grade 2 children, and that there should be no expectation of similar performance. Similar comparisons were made for English literacy and French literacy, although both of those were consistently high enough that they weren’t of concern. Well, I was concerned. I was concerned about how that data was being interpreted and subsequently used to influence pedagogical development. I was also concerned about how it portrayed children and whether they were really being advocated for through that analysis. I’d had enough.

This school year also brought about a position change for me. I was told that I would be teaching one of the grade 4 English classes for part of the school cycle. This was because the grade 4 teacher was required to teach Basic French but was incapable of doing so, according to administration. So as a way around that, I would be responsible for teaching that class their Basic French while the grade 4 teacher would teach part of my English language arts. Initially I thought this could actually be a great opportunity to do some team teaching. In our first meeting together, I brought up how it could be exciting for us to use our respective language arts time to extend upon projects and inquiries taking place during other parts of the day. The allotted time for our switch amounted to about 30 minutes every second day, and that wasn’t really conducive to the type of project work that often came with exploring the language arts. For example, I had a
wonderful collection of original French rhymes called *100 comptines* [100 nursery rhymes] by Henriette Major which touched on a wide range of subjects and ideas. I thought maybe if the grade 4’s were working on something in science or social studies, I could find a rhyme in this collection that was related so we could explore the French language while also extending their knowledge of whatever concept they were working through. We could also have fun comparing French and English words within the same topic, thus touching on a bit of phonology, syntax, and semantics. This type of approach, however, required at least some co-planning and ideally a bit of co-teaching. My colleague was less than enthused. Basic French was regarded by most English teachers at my school as something you had to do because it was mandated within the curriculum. There was no interest in extending that beyond the bare minimum requirement, and it didn’t seem worthwhile to do extra planning for it, especially for my colleague. Besides, she had already decided on a “poetry unit” that she was going to start the year off with and was especially keen on creating a “diamante” poem with the students (seen in Figure 16). So I went off and did my best, for 30 minutes every second day, to help those grade 4 students develop an appreciation for the French language, to see that you could communicate with it, and most importantly that you could play with language and have fun learning it. The challenge for me, if I’m being honest, is that as the year went on, our teaching exchange became more and more of an inconvenience. It became a time of my day that I started to dread. The children were wonderful, but every time I stepped into the classroom I felt a recurring sense of starting over with them. This was because the culture of that classroom was different than the culture of mine. Those grade 4 students had developed a very specific way of being with their teacher, and my way of being was different enough that there were many moments we shared that were disorienting. For example, if I noticed a student was not engaged with a particular activity I might say something like “I’m noticing that you haven’t started on your job. Is everything OK?” Some children didn’t know how to respond to that because their expectation in such a situation
was a warning about getting an “X” on their behaviour chart. So my relatively benign display of concern would elicit a range of behaviours from starting to work immediately, to having a discussion about a problem usually unrelated to the task at hand, to escalations in maladaptive behaviour. Those last two took time to process together: time that I would have been afforded as the classroom teacher, but not as the Basic French teacher within the confines of our arrangement.
Figure 16 - “Diamante” poem worksheet. Taken from the school archive of reproducible documents.
On some of busiest days of the year—filled with project deadlines, or classroom visitors, concert practices, or any other number of other unforeseen demands—that 30 minutes seemed so insignificant that the best thing to do was to just play tourist and “do as the Romans do”. Print out a worksheet, get through 30 minutes, then get back to my classroom community. I’m ashamed at having done so on more than one occasion. At the end of the year, I told the principal of the school that I didn’t feel comfortable teaching Basic French in other classrooms as it took too much time away from my own. I told her that I would be happy to help any of the English teachers plan their Basic French time, but that I would not assume responsibility for teaching it myself. I’d had enough.

At the beginning of the year, the French Immersion Kindergarten teacher approached me to arrange a “reading buddies” period where my Grade 3 students would pair up with her Kindergarten students to engage in language and literacy activities. She said that what she was really looking for were some older students who could help her students complete small activities she prepared. My students could read any written text to them, and the students could work collaboratively in pairs to complete whatever task it was. In this way, my students would serve as a model for French language use while also getting some language practice in a social setting. It all sounded reasonable enough. And seeing as how it was Kindergarten, I knew there would be more opportunity for play-based activities which I also thought would benefit my students. So we planned to get together once every six-day cycle for about 30 minutes to an hour in the morning depending on what the activity was. Our first get-together involved a brief introduction followed by some shared reading amongst the pairs of children. This went well enough and so we decided to do the same thing the following week. The week after that we arrived anticipating doing the same thing, but the Kindergarten teacher asked if we could change plans as she had another activity in mind. With the children waiting patiently on the carpet, I
agreed and she presented everyone with a small printed booklet about colours. Each pair of
children were invited to colour in the pages together and practice reading the words (see Figure
17 for sample pages).

![Sample pages from the booklet "Les couleurs" [the colours]. Taken from the school's
digital archive.](image)

*I was a bit surprised that this would be our activity for the day and as I got to know the colour
booklet the children were filling out I was increasingly disappointed in it. The first thing I
questioned is why there were illustrations to colour in at all, especially seeing as how they
seemed to be hand-drawn by an adult anyway. I also wondered why every object was
anthropomorphised and given a face. Did the flower and the ball, as seen in Figure 16, really*
need a face? Then there were smaller discrepancies that were nonetheless frustrating. The ball, for example, was a stereotypical beach ball that is most often multicolored. Many of the children attempted to colour it as such, ignoring the text that told them it was blue. The flower was supposed to be coloured in “rose” [pink], and I wondered why the person who made the illustration did not at least draw a rose which would have been a nice way to make connections between the colour word and the word for a specific kind of flower. Although I’m airing some grievances here, I did not want to come off as judgmental of my colleague so I asked if maybe we could get back to the shared reading for next week’s period. She agreed, especially since it was still early in the year and we were both deep into our divisional assessments and didn’t have much free time to plan other activities. When November rolled around we seemed to be slipping back into booklet territory. The Kindergarten children were working on clothing, and so their teacher wanted us to help. For that booklet, we needed to colour and cut out labelled pictures of clothing (seen in Figure 18) and glue them individually onto the pages of the booklet. The remainder of our year was an alternation between shared reading and booklet work. The thing that frustrated me the most about it was that I let it happen. I allowed myself to justify the whole thing by saying that our class was there to help them. Who were we to dictate the terms of that help? I should have fought for more engaging and meaningful experiences. The reality was that I was fighting to keep my excitement for teaching from being extinguished. I’d had enough.
The thing that made teaching at my school difficult for me was that the professional culture there devalued things like creativity, originality, collaboration, and critical reflection. Unfortunately for me, those were the things that also characterized my best teaching self. In my third year there I came to understand that the reason for devaluing those things was because they were dangers to the overall mission of the school division. The school division followed a very

*Figure 18. Labelled pictures of clothing for the booklet "Les vêtements" [Clothing]. Taken from the school’s digital archive.*
rigid top-down model of administration, and they had a considerably inflated bureaucracy in order to support it. Teachers, who occupied one of the bottom rungs of the hierarchical ladder, were seen and treated as the disorderly tenants of the vision upper administration was trying to implement. I certainly felt that first-hand. For example, I was almost forbidden from attending the Reggio conference in May of 2009. When I initially asked my principal whether or not I could attend, she looked up and down the brochure and gave me an unequivocal “No.” As I was walking back to my classroom feeling defeated, I turned over the brochure and noticed the name of my school division in the list of sponsors. I turned around and went back to her office, this time asking why I wasn’t allowed to attend even though our school division was a sponsor of the conference. Even then she was reluctant to allow it, so she told me she would make some phone calls and let me know. I only received confirmation that I could go when I stopped by the office on my way out at the end of the day. This was a tightly run ship and there was no room for even the faintest whiff of mutiny. I tried to branch out, to challenge myself, by joining the division’s “inquiry project” in the 2009-10 school year. This was a group of educators who would meet periodically to discuss the theory and practice behind inquiry-based models of teaching. While some thought-provoking conversations took place, it seemed as though the “inquiry project” was a means for the school division to systematize inquiry-based teaching and learning—which generally valued freedom of choice, flexibility, and co-construction of understanding—into a prescriptive process that suited their needs. The most glaring problem that they tried to get around was that inquiry-based teaching and learning was completely antithetical to their divisional assessment program. That is, unless you did inquiry their way. In a year-end reflection on the “inquiry project”, I ended up writing:

I applaud the division for their continuing effort in bringing about awareness and promotion of Inquiry as an important approach to learning and teaching. Having said that,
however, I feel that at this present time the division’s self-interest in a number of policy areas places a serious limit on the possible range of honest professional discussion that can be had with respect to Inquiry in a public setting. (D. Arbez, personal communication, April 12, 2009)

The divisional assessment program had grown increasingly more demanding in these first three years of my career. It was one of the most contentious points of labour strife in the division, and it was nearing unsustainability from an implementation standpoint. What was frustrating to the point of anger was that the assessments didn’t seem to amount to anything. All that work was being done for little to no benefit to instruction and learning. After this year’s rounds of assessment I reached out to our union president to see what the deal was. Over the phone he told me, “I have at least three large binders here full of evidence that says these assessment programs provide no measurable benefit to teachers or children”. “But,” he continued “we have our hands tied by one small problem …” That problem was a clause in teachers’ contracts that said they “shall execute the orders of the superintendent”. Our division, I learned, was the only school division in the province that had this clause. This meant that if the superintendent wanted us to implement the assessment program, use its findings within report cards, and communicate those results alongside the purpose of the program to parents and families, anything to the contrary violated that clause and opened your contract to termination. I learned that this clause was negotiated into the contract after a large 2003 labor dispute over the assessment program that resulted in litigation between teachers who were protesting the program and the school division who was trying to suppress them. Although I wasn’t even aware of that conflict when I started teaching in the fall of 2008, the tension that arose during that period had never really dissipated and definitely coloured the relationship between teachers and the administration of the division. The severely threatening emails I would receive at the end of October when it came time to hand in
the recorded data made much more sense now. The program-oriented divisional learning centre also made more sense now. My school was certainly not representative of all schools in our district or division and I know for a fact that some were better, while a few were worse. It was, nevertheless, a place where I felt bogged down pedagogically and beaten down morally and emotionally. After nearly three years, I could empathize a bit more with my colleagues who would talk in terms of “that’s my job” and “that’s not my job” as well as the ones who would ask me to “stop talking about school” in the staffroom at lunch and take a break instead. The school division cultivated this way of being, purposefully it seemed, and I had had enough of having enough of things. One evening, during spring break, I turned to my wife who was now pregnant with our first child and said “I have to get out of this place or else I’m going to have to quit teaching”. This led to Critical Moment 12.

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**Critical Moment 12**

**Tension:** After three years of teaching, I was seriously considering quitting altogether. The systematic pressures and demands of my current school division were eroding my identity and sense of self-worth as a teacher. They were also causing me to become lax in my practice and apathetic in my professional inquiry. What good was it to build a rich learning environment where children were the protagonist of their learning when the very next year they would be considered the antagonists of their schooling? Where was the sense in getting to know children’s reading interests when the divisional assessment program was assigning them a numbered level anyway? I was cautioned by close family and friends not to take my full-time permanent contract for granted as the market was getting tighter for open teaching positions. I also felt that mobility within the division was senseless since the problems I encountered were systematic and many of those problems existed in other schools to varying degrees. I also had a model of literacy that I had created which was beginning to collect dust. I had aspirations for what a French Immersion classroom could be. I just needed some sort of support that wasn’t available to me in my current school, but I didn’t really know what I was missing.

**Key questions:** Is it possible for teachers to grow as professionals in an isolated setting? What are the effects of school level and division level policy on teachers’ development? How is classroom pedagogy affected by overall professional culture at a school?

**Resolution:** This third year of teaching brought me to my breaking point. It’s not that people were particularly malicious or even rude. Most people were pleasant enough to work with. It’s also not because they didn’t care about their students. They did. It’s not about the amount of work full-time teaching ended up being. It was that I couldn’t be myself, and worse, the things that I thought made me a good teacher had no capital in this educational environment. I found some solace in the materials I was reading, and on the rare occasion I encountered educators like me at a conference or professional development workshop. Those weren’t sustaining enough, however, and teaching started to become something that was frustrating and effacing. There were
teachers out there who were fortunate enough to begin their careers in places that nurtured their professional selves, and I’m sure there were teachers out there who were stronger than I, who were able to withstand external pressures while still growing professionally. The place I was in, however, was a dead end. One thing I struggled with as I contemplated leaving the profession was that I couldn’t say that the school itself was a bad place to be. It just wasn’t a good place for me. And if I was going to give the students my best, I need a place that would allow me to do that. So, I made it one of my top priorities for the following year to start looking into finding a job outside of my current school division.

School 1: Year 4. I began this year, not unlike the last, with another major life event. Our daughter was born on September 13th, 2011. With the birth of our first child came a joyful and profound sense of responsibility. In those first few weeks I asked myself all sorts of existential questions, but chief among them was what I wanted to make of my career and what lessons could I share with my daughter in the future about this moment in my life. My resolve to leave my school was hardened, but I also grew in ways that allowed me to not get so bothered by the constraints of my current teaching position. Making the most of a difficult situation was something I learned quickly in those first few weeks of parenthood, especially at 12:00 am, 2:00 am, and 4:00 am when the demands of the world required me to overcome my own discomforts whether I liked it or not. While a primary focus of this year was to get out of the school division, it was also a year where I got back into some of the things that made me feel good about teaching.

One of the larger projects we worked on as a class was an anthology of rhyming stories in English and French. The children had developed an interest in the work of Dr. Seuss and delighted in the silliness and absurdity of many of his stories. Although Dr. Seuss’ work wouldn’t have been my first choice as a study, his books were plentiful around the school and they did have a very polished sense of rhythm and rhyme. As we read through his books, one of the more important observations the students made was that Dr. Seuss was good at choosing words that rhymed and made sense with the story. Word choices could be silly, of course, or
even made-up, but they couldn’t confuse the reader too much. It was trickier than it seemed! We
applied some of these ideas to our writing in English first, then did the same for writing in
French after. The result was an anthology we titled “Elle rêvait de la Terre” [She dreamt of the
Earth] (see in Figure 19)

*Figure 19. Cover for our anthology of rhyming stories.*
The opening lines of the English story “Fuzzy Wuzzy” is a great example of how students took Dr. Seuss’ writing to heart (see Figure 20).

*Figure 20. Title page and first page of the story "Fuzzy Wuzzy".*
The same effects could be seen in the French stories as well (see Figure 21).

*Figure 21. Title page and first page of the story "Pépin Lapin" from our anthology.*
In the end, we created an anthology of stories that the children were proud of, that were delightful to read, and that showed the understanding they constructed from their study of Dr. Seuss.

When it came to reading, I mentioned to the children at the beginning of the year that I was thinking of putting together some guided reading groups with them. To my surprise, my announcement was met with a series of groans and complaints. Apparently “guided reading” was a loaded term, and I was getting a lot of resistance to the idea. I invited the children to share with me what they didn’t enjoy about guided reading so I could understand why it bothered them, and so they could help me plan for guided reading in a way that worked for them. The floodgates opened and I wrote down all of their comments. I ended up with nearly five pages of heartfelt reflections on their guided reading experience before entering my class, and from it I gained some of the most powerful insights into children’s reading experience at my school. Here are a few of the comments that touched me the most:

- We always got books that were way too easy for me and it was embarrassing because it made me feel like they were for younger kids
- I’ve felt frustrated because we were on levels and it wasn’t fun. It wasn’t fun for the people on the leveled books when others were on chapter books. Why couldn’t we all read the same kind of books?
- I felt like they weren’t being fair because they were treating the ones at “M” nicer than someone who was in the lower levels. The “M” readers got to read more, and the lower ones didn’t have much of a choice about what they wanted to read (and the books were boring). Some people stayed in the same level all year.
• It wasn’t fair because some people could read chapter books but they were stuck in the leveled books. I felt kind of jealous because others could read chapter books, and so could I, but I couldn’t read them at school.

• When we were in grade 1 we had a reading log and there were different levels and you could ask to change your level but often they would say no because you haven’t read all or most of the books in your level. It was unfair that you had to read most of the books in the level before you could keep going.

• When we were doing guided reading in second grade, I was in the yellow group, and when we were doing it sometimes I was reading it right, but I wouldn’t get the activities right so the teacher told me to switch groups. I felt mad and frustrated because I had to go to a different group.

• The teachers wouldn’t let you go a level higher to know more words. They would keep you in one level for a long time until you got really good at it. I felt frustrated because I felt that I was already good at it but they kept me there for longer.

• When we did guided reading last year, the teacher just chose people in groups because she just felt that she had to put the right people in the right groups, but the teacher didn’t see how good we really were. I felt not that great because the teacher didn’t see me when I was really good.

• When I was on A, I was basically on the other ones but they kept me back there and made me read the books a whole bunch of times. Other students were moving up but I felt like they were making sure I stayed down.

• When we were doing guided reading in the first grade, I was in the blue group, and sometimes when we were reading the books, sometimes it was too easy and sometimes it
was too hard. I would ask for books that are my type but they made me read harder books and I felt mad and I felt immature because I couldn’t read the books I wanted to.

- In grade 1 we had guided reading every day but some of us didn’t even read in 30 minutes. We just did work. I felt kind of mad and kind of sad.

Not only was I floored by their candor and moved by the range of emotion their comments captured, I could now see why they were so upset. This led to Critical Moment 13.

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<th>Critical Moment 13</th>
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<td><strong>Tension:</strong> When I mentioned that I would put together some guided reading groups, the students were up in arms at the prospect. They brought with them experiences of guided reading that were so powerful, they literally groaned and complained when I brought it up for the first time. I wanted them to look forward to our guided reading time, but it was clear that we would have to unpack their past experiences first.</td>
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<td><strong>Key questions:</strong> How do children feel about common approaches to guided reading? What is their experience like? What sorts of things can I include or avoid in order to make it a positive and enriching experience?</td>
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| **Resolution:** The comments the children shared with me were powerful. They were powerful for me, but also powerful for them. There was an energy about the room, as the comments poured out, that was raw and sobering. Some of the children were surprised to hear of similar feelings and experiences, while others responded to comments with nods of agreement and sometimes comforting hugs. They were bonding. The one that nearly brought me to tears was the boy who said “I felt not that great because the teacher didn’t see me when I was really good.” This was tragic and painful. The act of reading should never feel that way. When the children were finished sharing, I told them that together we would set a few rules about guided reading that would make it a better experience than what they had just shared. The first rule, I explained, was that there would be no leveled books because I didn’t have any. The children literally cheered with what I could only describe as an emancipatory joy. Their comments suggested to me as well that they had a fairly nuanced understanding of which books were “just right” and so we had some conversations about how to choose a book as well as what some of their reading interests were. We developed some groups based off of reading interest and the children seemed pretty good at self-organizing into groups that satisfied their individual needs. One of the groups was the “Dr. Seuss” group which would eventually inspire our author study. I always believed that overly prescriptive and hierarchical organization of reading activity was disengaging for a large number of students, but I felt like I walked away from our conversation with true insight into children’s experience. It also seemed to affirm for me the detriment of using leveled texts. This prompted me to do some further research in the area, and I found an interesting article by Glasswell and Ford (2010) titled “Teaching Flexibly with Leveled Texts: More Power for Your Reading Block”. What I appreciated about the article, although it remains in favour of leveled texts, is that the bulk of the message boils down to two things: make sure that children are reading appropriate texts, and try to have them reading what they call “real-world” texts most of the time. A passage at the beginning of their article really resonated with me:
As teachers and researchers, we are also concerned about a seemingly growing inflexibility in the use of leveled texts in and across reading programs. Our concern is that in maintaining a focus on assigning numbers or letters to texts as labels that represent their “difficulty,” we can lose sight of what matters in reader–text interactions. Although we would argue that some attention to text difficulty is needed, taking a simplistic approach to a complex phenomenon is hindering teacher judgment and masking the transactions that occur between a reader, a text, and the social context in which they read. (Glasswell & Ford, 2010, p. 57)

I shared their concerns about leveled texts, and the children made evident the consequences of masking transactions between reader, text, and social context. Dzaldov and Peterson (2005) write:

> We have observed teachers in many schools who are creating classroom text collections organized by book levels, rather than creating literature based classroom libraries that are organized by genre, author, or theme. We seem to be in the midst of a leveling mania … (p. 222)

I had never heard the term before, but I thought that “leveling mania” was an apt description of how leveled texts were valued at my school and across the division. Dzaldov and Peterson (2005) go on to discuss some important features of children’s texts that are important to consider when assisting children in selecting texts, but they also fall short of doing away with leveled texts altogether. I, however, was firm in my decision not to include leveled texts in my classroom, and I was grateful for some insight into the ways others were using them.

My model of literacy had not changed throughout this year, although I continued to read a few articles here and there that extended some of the research that informed the model. This most often meant studies in the neuroscience of reading. At the heart of the model, however, is the work of Jackendoff (2007) and the most interesting research I ran into came from a brief interaction I shared with him. In September, on a whim, I sent Ray Jackendoff an email to thank him for his newest book *Meaning and the Lexicon: The Parallel Architecture 1975-2010* (Jackendoff, 2010) and to share how the Parallel Architecture had influenced my understanding of language and literacy development. I was pleasantly surprised to get a response in which he mentioned that he hadn’t heard of anyone pursuing the line of inquiry I was taking in associating the Parallel Architecture with literacy. He added that he had a graduate student who was studying with him and Maryanne Wolf, and that I might be interested in corresponding with her. Lastly he
was curious about how I was thinking about the Parallel Architecture with respect to literacy since I didn’t really go into detail about it. I wrote back explaining the connections I had made between the Parallel Architecture, Bloom (2002), Dehaene (2005), and how I viewed orthography as a possible fourth generative engine. He responded a couple of days later with enthusiasm for my interpretation of his work and encouraged me to look into graduate studies at Tufts University. This exchange was very validating for a number of reasons, but primarily it meant in some small way that I wasn’t completely “out to lunch” in my analysis. If the linguist and theorist whose work formed the basis of my model of literacy was in some agreement with the direction I was heading in, I knew there was value in pursuing it further. Meanwhile, I did reach out to his graduate student and she seemed equally interested in what I was doing. She also passed along an article by Hoover and Gough (1990) in which they outline the “simple view of reading” which she said was a dominant theory in the field despite not adhering to it herself. As I read through the article I recognized the theory immediately as it talked about “skill in decoding” and “linguistic comprehension” as the two components of skilled reading (Hoover & Gough, 1990). This paper truly did represent a dominant theory I encountered in my teaching practice, namely that reading was a product of decoding and comprehension. I then wondered about non-dominant theories of reading and that’s when a search turned up a very intriguing paper written in 1969 titled “Towards a Transactional Theory of Reading” by Louise Rosenblatt. What made Rosenblatt stand out was that she was a professor of comparative literature, not associated with anything directly related to the education of young children. Her ideas eventually caught the attention of educators and reading researchers because of her interest in the relationship between the text and a reader. For me at the time, the juxtaposition of Hoover and Gough (1990) with Rosenblatt (1969) led to Critical Moment 14.
### Critical Moment 14

**Tension:** Hoover and Gough (1990) articulate the basis for the dominant perspective that reading is about decoding skills and comprehension skills. As a teacher, I noticed this perspective in a lot of the commercial programs available at my school and in places like the divisional learning centre. It was also the way that my colleagues at school talked about the way children read. Rosenblatt (1969) offered something important, and I think somewhat disruptive, to the notion that reading could be viewed as “simple”.

**Key questions:** How could the “simple view” of reading be informed by a “transactional theory” of reading? How would my model of literacy align with ideas from either?

**Resolution:** Hoover and Gough (1990) did something in their paper that seemed to me to be phenomenally problematic. They suggest that reading, however complex it may actually be, can be understood in simple terms. They write:

> The simple view does not deny that the reading process is complex. Linguistic comprehension is certainly a complicated process, whether accomplished in reading or auding; and decoding, as evidenced by the extreme difficulty some have in acquiring it, is also no simple matter. The simple view simply holds that these complexities can be divided into two parts. (Hoover & Gough, 1990)

Why do this? From a research perspective it seemed borderline irresponsible. It would be like saying that crossing a river by car is complex, but that those complexities can really be divided into two parts: building a bridge across the river and driving the car across the bridge. Sure, building a bridge is certainly a complicated process, and operating a motor vehicle is no simple matter, but understanding river crossing in these two ways could be a major contribution to our understanding of transportation. Predicated on spurious logic, it at least makes basic sense. But if the idea is truly believable, well then I have a bridge to sell you. Hoover and Gough’s (1990) “simple view” was believable, however, and there were no shortage of literacy programs for sale that made good on their view that reading amounted to decoding and comprehension. Rosenblatt (1969) offered something different enough that should have given Hoover and Gough some pause before thinking of reading so simplistically. Rosenblatt (1969) writes:

> In information theory, the listener is said to have "decoded" the "message" when he has reconstructed the sounds and has recognized the patterns of words. This view is understandable when it is recalled that information theory is concerned with such matters as the transmission of utterances over, for example, the telephone. But, of course, workers in this field are quite ready to admit that in any actual communication, the process must be carried through to an interpretation of meaning. And even on the level of recognizing the sounds, evidence exists to demonstrate that the listener's present expectations and past experience are important. (p. 37)

Consideration of those past experiences and present expectations carried by the reader led Rosenblatt to conclude that reading a text is a transaction between the reader and the text as the reader constructs meaning. I’m sure Hoover and Gough, were they aware of this work, would have been compelled to sort these transactions into the comprehension part of their theory claiming that transactions as Rosenblatt describes them are still separate from decoding letters into sounds. Rosenblatt (1969), however, suggests that they are much more intimately related than one might expect when she writes:
The transaction involving a reader and a printed text thus can be viewed as an event occurring at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader. The transaction will involve not only the past experience but also the present state and present interests or preoccupations of the reader. It stresses the possibility that printed marks on a page will become different linguistic symbols by virtue of transactions with different readers. (p. 45)

While I think that Rosenblatt was talking here about skilled readers who may interpret certain words or passages differently, this phenomenon of printed marks becoming different linguistic symbols can manifest itself quite literally with beginning readers. This is evidenced by certain miscues such as additions or substitutions of words that arise from the reader’s expectations but nonetheless make sense with the rest of the text. For me as a teacher, Hoover and Gough’s (1990) “simple view” was oversimplified and led to the type of experiences I heard from my students regarding guided reading. The “simple view” did, by contrast, echo the duality of Pinker’s (1999) “words and rules” theory which partly informed my own model of literacy. I felt though that my model eschewed such dualities such as “words and rules” and “decoding and comprehension” by adopting a Parallel Architecture perspective that, while being more complicated than a two-part system, was still simple enough in its structure and organisation. Rosenblatt’s (1969) work was also evidenced by my students’ commentary on guided reading as the comments seemed to explicate the kinds of transactions early readers have with texts. Her work also affirmed parts of my model, such as the drafts of meaning that are confirmed or collapsed as the act of reading unfolds.

I was starting to regain a sense of purpose in my teaching, and I was emboldened in my efforts to make greater theoretical sense of language and literacy development. I was also committed to taking a risk and exploring employment opportunities outside of my school division. Under the advice of a former professor, I reached out to another school division that seemed better suited to the types of pedagogy I wanted to explore and the path of professional development I wanted to take. After a series of meetings with superintendents, principals, and human resources staff from the prospective new school division, it felt like my moving there was going to be a good fit for both myself and them. They showed an interest in my teaching practice, as well as support for any graduate study I wanted to undertake. My experience interacting with members of this other school division was warm, inviting, and supportive and I knew without a doubt that this could be an exciting and rewarding change for me. They eventually offered me a full-time permanent contract, just as the one I had in my current school
division, but I had to get over one particularly nerve-wracking hurdle. My current division required letters of resignation to be submitted by the 1st of April, while the other school division could only offer me a contract to sign some time towards the end of May. That month-long period without the security of a contract seemed daunting, but I went ahead with my plan anyway. I submitted my resignation to my current school division, to which the human resources representative cautioned me rather unscrupulously that if I went ahead with this that I could never come back as I would be blacklisted from employment. At that point, whatever hesitation I might have had quickly dissipated and I couldn’t get my letter in her hands any faster if I tried. I did spend several weeks worried that something might change and that I would be left with no job come next fall. In the end, my worries were misplaced and I eventually signed a new contract with this other school division who was excited to have me there. I would finish the school year feeling sad at having to leave the children and the community that I had been a part of for the last four years, but happy that new and exciting possibilities were on the horizon. I felt free. I felt like cheering in the same way my students cheered when I told them there would be no more leveled readers. By the time the last day of school came around, I was already thinking about the first day of next year: the first page of a new chapter in my career.

The last four years at this school brought with it many memorable firsts: my first teaching position, my first classroom, my first day of school as a teacher, my first experience teaching in French Immersion, my first student that transferred to English, my first experiences of a variety of approaches literacy, and my first attempt to synthesize my understanding of literacy into one coherent model. Those firsts, however, would flow into an increasingly large sea of frustrations that nearly had me quitting the profession altogether. I learned a lot in those first four years and despite several moments of anguish there were many ways I emerged from the experience as a better teacher. For that I’m grateful. Now it was time to look ahead a few new firsts: the first
time I would teach in a different classroom, the first time I would have to get to know a new staff and school community, and the first time I would feel like I could be myself.

Part 3: From Transmission to Transformation

The switch to a new school division probably singlehandedly saved my career. What I wasn’t entirely ready for was how it would also catapult it to new heights. The pace of my professional and personal life in the following years would increase dramatically, sometimes out of opportunity and sometimes out of necessity. My understanding of language and literacy greatly expanded as I connected with people who were curious about the same inquiries I brought with me to this new teaching context. I was privileged to work with, and learn from, many colleagues and friends who challenged my thinking and modeled some of the best qualities of an Early Years education that I could ever fathom. I lived through more powerful experiences during this period than in any other during my career—certainly more than I have space to include on these pages. Nonetheless, I hope to convey how the following years greatly influenced and shaped my understanding of language and literacy development and how I could see that understanding reflected back through children’s engagement.

School 2: Year 1. I ended up accepting a grade 1/2 multiage French Immersion position at a dual-track school that had an impressive reputation throughout the city for employing more progressive pedagogical approaches. It was a place that one of the local universities had a partnership with, and in fact I remembered spending time there as a part of an undergraduate school experience program associated with many of my classes. It was a place that welcomed many other visitors from other schools and school divisions who wanted to see first-hand some of the practices that were taking place in many of the classrooms. There was also a group of educators there who considered themselves Reggio-inspired, although few of them existed in French Immersion. In short, this was a school that was welcoming of new ideas, happy to engage
in broader pedagogical conversations, and a place where I could begin to rebuild my identity as an educator.

In the weeks leading up to the first day of school, I remember peeking into a few of the rooms that were already set up and being in awe at the thoughtful and inviting spaces teachers had created for their students. It was very different for me to wander around a school and feel inspired at nearly every turn. I was excited at what I might be able to learn here and happy that there was a group of teachers who were clearly living out some of the pedagogy I had hoped to understand better. I was lucky that this school division had a mentorship program whereby new teachers could partner up with existing teachers in order to pursue a variety of professional inquiries. The principal of the school suggested I sign up for the program, and since it was all voluntary I would have to approach someone about being my mentor. He suggested the name of a teacher who he said he thought I’d get along with, so the week before school started I took up his recommendation and asked that teacher if she would be interested in being my mentor. I explained my previous experience with the inquiry project in the last school division I worked in and how I was interested in the play-based learning I heard she practiced in her classroom. She hesitated initially, probably sizing me up as another “fish out of water” who wasn’t totally aware of what he was asking for, and said that I should take a bit of time to think about whether or not her teaching style was something I felt comfortable exploring. Out of respect for her suggestion, I acknowledged that maybe it would be a good idea to think it over and I walked back to my classroom, which was just a few doors down. There wasn’t much thinking for me to do as I had seen what her classroom was like and got a bit of second-hand information about her teaching practice from the principal. So I basically let the clock run for about 25 minutes or so before I walked back, said I’d thought it over, and would be honoured to spend some time talking about teaching together. She agreed and so we scheduled our first meeting together. When the day of
our meeting arrived, the expectations of our principal were realized as we connected both professionally and personally. We discovered that our beliefs about children and our overall pedagogical stance was the same, and we exchanged ideas primarily around play and my mentor told me about a time of her day called “explorations” whereby students would engage in uninterrupted play that would spark inquiries into all sorts of cross-curricular topics, allowing for more authentic and purposeful ways of studying and learning. Our conversation naturally turned to literacy where I felt more comfortable sharing all the questions I was thinking about and some of the research I had done previously. This in turn sparked some of her questions and by the end of our conversation, we had managed to co-construct some understanding around how we wanted to explore play and literacy as well as a more equal power dynamic given the mentor/mentee labels we were assigned. We joked that the names sort of sounded like “manatee” and so before we left our meeting we agreed that we would be “manatees” which were more equal partners in their learning than a “mentor” and “mentee”. Thus the “manateeship” was born, and our work together had an immeasurable lasting effect on my understanding of language and literacy. Our “manateeship” led me to Critical Moment 15.

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<th>Critical Moment 15</th>
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<td><strong>Tension:</strong> Pedagogically, I had been interested in ways of including more student voice and student interests in learning experiences. At my last school this looked like planning inquiry projects and using students’ reading interests to inform activities such as guided reading. The “manateeship” challenged my thinking as my colleague demonstrated how she repositioned the roles of student and teacher throughout play-based learning experiences.</td>
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<td><strong>Key questions:</strong> What sort of planning was involved in a more Reggio-inspired, play-based learning environment? What were the roles of the teacher and the student throughout the process of learning? What adjustments would I have to make, if any, for learning in a French Immersion context?</td>
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| **Resolution:** One of the topics of our first meeting was the idea of “transmitting” information to students and a common belief in education that to teach means to give information to students who then have to remember it. In its most clinical and transparent form this looks something like a teacher standing at the front of the class with children seated at individual desks. The teacher then writes something on the board which then the children must recite or copy down. The children will then at a later time be asked via written test to recall the information that was provided to them previously. Both of us rejected a transmission model of teaching and learning, but that discussion got me thinking about how much of an influence this model may have had in
my teaching previous to this year. When I saw my colleague working along children at play—
documenting their questions, helping them articulate their thinking out loud, and intentionally
planning spaces, time, and resources in ways that challenged their thinking—I, in turn, thought
about those inquiry projects I had done previously and how transmission-oriented they may have
been. I was intrigued by how much control and power the children had over their learning, and
how little talk there was about curricular learning outcomes. My colleague helped me to
understand two important things that would allow me to work in more meaningful ways with my
own students. The first is to trust children. Trust that children’s default setting is to make sense
of their world. So, if you have thoughtful spaces filled with supplies that intentionally spark their
creativity they will learn as they explore and engage with those spaces and supplies. The second
is the idea of “uncovering curriculum” rather than “covering” curriculum. That is, children’s
questions about the world often lend themselves to what we would consider traditional curricular
areas of language arts, science, social studies, and math among others. When a child builds a
ramp to roll a car down, they are doing science in order to exploit gravity in moving the car,
mathematics if they want to measure the speed of the car, and language arts if they are choosing
to record or label some of this information—not to mention all of the talking that happens around
such activities. As a teacher, I had to look and listen carefully to how children were uncovering
these things in what looked like simple play experiences to others. These ideas not only opened
up my teaching practice generally, but they also created room for new possibilities with language
and literacy. When I trusted children to uncover curriculum through play-based activity, there
were opportunities for talking, small-moment writing, and reading that deepened understanding
and enhanced sense-making. For example, Figure 22 shows a bird nest that two boys had built
together after they spotted a bird nest outdoors. Their creation was informed in part by a non-
fiction book they found (seen open to the left of the nest) where they learned that some birds use
bits of found string and paper to build their nests. Figure 23 shows part of a movie theatre that
some children had constructed out of blocks. They chose to do some writing to create a label for
the concession stand where you could buy popcorn. This type of language and literacy work was
new and exciting to me, and something I would continue to build on. What I would also discover
is that French was not a barrier to these kinds of experiences and play-based learning in French
Immersion was very much doable.
Figure 22. Nest made by two students during an explorations period.
The “manateship” provided a collegial way to explore new pedagogical directions and it was a steady influence throughout the year. Another such influence was a program established by the school division for all grade 1 educators called “The Early Literacy Education Series”. This was a program that connected Grade 1 teachers with experts in the field of literacy education so that they could conduct professional development around language and literacy development. We were fortunate enough to have one of my former university professors as the leader of the sessions for Grade 1 teachers at my school. When I thought back to the influences of Routman (2003) and Ray (2006) that came from his courses in my undergraduate study, I was excited at how those perspectives would be expanded upon and added to almost five years later. Participating in that group was a very nurturing and rewarding experience for me because it formalized the kind of research activity that I had attempted on my own all those years in my
previous school. This group met over four separate sessions and discussed many different ways of supporting emergent literacy learners while drawing from contemporary literacy research. I was introduced to a range of fascinating ideas that would challenge my thinking about what literacy was and what it could be. In our first session I learned from Husbye, Buchholz, Coggin, Powell, and Wohlwend (2012) that literacy could be much more than just reading and writing. They shared that “the term literacies includes various practices for recording meanings, whether with pencils, laptops, puppets, toys, or cameras, or other materials” (Husbye et al., 2012, p. 82). In our second session I learned from Kathy Short (2012) that stories mattered. According to Short (2012):

> Stories are thus much more than a book or narrative—they are the way our minds make sense of our lives and world. We work at understanding events and people by constructing stories to interpret what is occurring around us. In turn, these stories create our views of the world and the lens through which we construct meaning about ourselves and others. (p. 9)

Helping children find and share their stories was therefore paramount to helping them make sense of the world. In our third session I learned from Brown, Kim, and Ramirez (2012) that reading written text is not really a linear sequential activity of going left to right, reading each word as it comes along. Their research which combined a miscue analysis with eye movement tracking revealed that a beginning reader may pause at words they don’t know or can’t pronounce and scan around the text for information that could help them. Their notion that “miscues (substitutions, omissions, insertions and corrections) are not a problem in reading but a means to understand the strategies readers use (sampling, predicting, confirming, correcting, integrating)” (Brown et al., 2012, p. 218) meant that teachers could focus more attention to those strategies, rather than feeling compelled to help children sound out words when they pause or seem stuck. Our last session focused on documenting the literacy learning of one student in our
classroom with the purpose of demonstrating their growth as a learner. This part of the Early Literacy Education Series was the most powerful for me. It was the first time I had really carefully documented children’s learning. In my previous school, the bulk of my “evidence” for student learning were artifacts of student performance: the divisional assessment data, my own data recording sheets, students’ draft writing, project work and so on. This was the first time I used photos, videos, and audio recordings to also document a child’s thinking and ongoing sense-making as evidenced by their open questions and reflections. I was able to share a story of student learning that I still think about to this day as it continues to inform my practice. So meaningful a story was it for me at the time that those who know me today have probably heard it more than once. Nonetheless, it bears repeating here in part because it was also a demonstration of how my own thinking was shifting regarding language and literacy development.

*Up, up, and away!: The story of an emerging grade 1 reader.* I was enthusiastically interrupted by a grade 1 boy in my class one morning as he exclaimed, “M. Dave! M. Dave! I’m rich!” This was exciting indeed as I knew that he and his mother were living below the poverty line. Curious, I asked how he got so rich. “I have all this money from my other school!” he replied. Now my curiosity changed to suspicion and as he pulled out a wad of crinkled bills from his backpack I could see the logo of a popular after-school tutoring company. He explained that they taught him how to read there, and that when he did well he got some of their proprietary money to spend at a makeshift store within the tutoring centre that had small toys and other prizes. Reading had certainly been a challenge for this child, as it tends to be for many grade 1 children. He began the year already thinking of himself negatively as someone who couldn’t read, and this showed in his reluctance to engage with any kind of reading material at school.
That was, until he discovered Lois Ehlert’s *Planting a Rainbow* in our classroom library (see Figure 24).

![Planting a Rainbow by Lois Ehlert](image)

*Figure 24. Cover for the book "Planting a Rainbow" by Lois Ehlert.*

It reminded him of his time gardening with his mother during the summer, and his world started to open up. This made me think of Short (2012) and the importance that our own personal stories play in making sense of the world. At first he would attend to the colours on each page, naming them as he went along, and this continued into his working diligently on making further sense of the other images and words. This reminded me of both Husbye et al.’s (2012) attention to other literacies and how this child’s experience of gardening was such a big factor in how he was making sense of the text, not to mention all the non-textual cues such as the wonderful illustrations. I was also reminded of Brown et al.’s (2012) caution that there was much more going on when a child was not actively trying to sound out words. He sat with that book every day for a few weeks, sometimes with my help and sometimes on his own, until he felt confident enough to ask to read it for the class. What progress! But the day he came to tell me about his new school was also the day his attitude about reading started to change again. He told me about
the worksheets he had to fill out at the tutoring centre and the sounding-out strategies they taught him there. At school, his reluctance to read was starting to creep back in as he would avoid any unknown texts for fear of not being able to pronounce any of the words. As a class, we had begun collecting reading strategies that moved beyond sounding out words, but I wanted to find a way to really challenge this particular child’s sense that reading itself meant sounding out words. So, I restructured our reading strategies anchor chart in conversation with the class to show that meaning-making was the central focus of reading (see Figure 25).

Figure 25. The restructuring of our reading strategies to place more emphasis on meaning-making.

We also explored different kinds of texts and discussed different kinds of cues, other than words. Some of the children were getting into comic strips, and so for fun I decided to challenge their
thinking about how pictures help tell a story by drawing a quick sketch of a boy playing baseball (see Figure 26).

![Figure 26. My drawing of a boy playing baseball.](image)

I invited the children to tell me what they saw in the picture and they immediately said a boy playing baseball. I asked them what made them think he was playing baseball, and one student replied that he had a baseball bat and he was going to hit a baseball. I asked how he knew that the boy was going to hit a baseball and another student said it was in the air where we couldn’t see it. Continuing my line of questioning, I asked how they knew a baseball was there if we couldn’t see it. The children wasted no time in identifying the lines on the page as indication that the boy threw something in the air. We joked about how it could be things other than a baseball, such as a watermelon, and laughed at what the next frames might be like. The whole conversation was no more than five minutes or so, but it left a greater impact than I could have predicted. A couple of weeks later, the boy who was visiting the tutoring centre outside of school came to me and asked if he could read the book *Hop on Pop* by Dr. Seuss to the whole class. I was surprised at his confidence, but happily agreed to make time for him to do so. When I asked
him why he was interested in reading this book to the class he mentioned that it was a book he had been figuring out at the tutoring centre. I was curious about how he had figured it out, and he told me about a page he came to that he couldn’t sound out (see Figure 27).

![Figure 27. A page from Dr. Seuss' *Hop on Pop.*](image)

He said he couldn’t sound out the words on the page so he decided to look at the pictures, even though it wasn’t a strategy that anyone at the tutoring centre asked him to do. He said in the moment he remembered the anchor chart of our reading strategies. Then, when he looked at the lines next to the dog, he remembered our conversation a while back about the boy hitting a baseball and how the lines showed there was something up in the air. He said the lines next to the dog must have meant that he had jumped up or something, and then he figured out that the first word on the page was “up”. I was so blown away by his story that I almost forgot to hit “stop” on my audio recorder that had captured it all. I couldn’t believe that a quick conversation about a silly drawing I made became a pivotal turning point in how this child was able to make sense of a text.
I was eager to share this documentation, and this child’s story, as a part of the Early Literacy Education Series since it demonstrated so well many of the ideas we had discussed. It also affirmed for me that the ways I was challenging myself and shifting my thinking were making a difference for children in my classroom. This led to Critical Moment 16.

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<th>Critical Moment 16</th>
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<td><strong>Tension:</strong> After spending the first four years of my teaching career digging deeper and deeper into the mental processes and brain activity associated with language and literacy use, I was being confronted with powerful ideas about things going on outside the heads of learners. My experience in the Early Literacy Education Series challenged the very notion of what “literacy” was, and it pushed me to think more about how my model of literacy could account for that.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Key questions:</strong> What is “literacy”? What did my experience with play-based learning teach me about language and literacy development? How would my model of literacy have to change to accommodate for my changes in understanding?</td>
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<td><strong>Resolution:</strong> My experience with the Early Literacy Education Series made me realize that my model of literacy was heavily focused on the cognitive processes involved in making sense of written texts. Although I had considered Rosenblatt’s (1969) transactional theory of reading as a way of expanding my understanding to include socio-cultural influences in reading written text, it wasn’t until I read Husbye et al. (2012) that I began to challenge what a “text” was. I had never thought of things like a puppet show or a video as a “text”. It was certainly true, however, that language was involved in these other kinds of texts and that taken in the context of storytelling, they were powerful tools for communicating. Short (2012) pointed out that most of the sense-making we do about the world is through stories, and so it made sense to include other kinds of texts as Husbye et al. (2012) advocated for because they might be more accessible to some children than written texts. At a time when I thought my idea of “orthography as a fourth generative engine” was pretty nifty, here were people envisioning forms of literacy that went beyond reading and writing. I would have to account for this somehow in my own conception of what literacy was. Brown et al. (2012) nonetheless affirmed for me some aspects of my thinking, such as parallel processing of information and the multiple drafts of meaning that are involved in sense-making of texts. Documented stories of children’s literacy work in my classroom provided the practical evidence that my changing thinking around literacy was making a positive difference in their literacy lives.</td>
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As if I wasn’t lucky enough to be a part of both the “manateeship” and the Early Literacy Education Series, there was another initiative of the school division that provided additional opportunities to think through language and literacy development. This one was called “teacher talk” and it was structured as release time that teachers could take with a colleague or group of colleagues for the purpose of discussing educational theory or practice. I was fortunate this time
to connect with another teacher in French Immersion. She had been at the school for a few years already, and was one of the few people in French Immersion at the time who was exploring the same sorts of pedagogical questions I was. She identified as a Reggio-inspired teacher, and was also experimenting with a play-based “explorations” time in her classroom. Our time together was much more limited than the time I had in the “manateeship” or the Early Literacy Education Series, but we touched on two important things that helped me in my growing understanding of language and literacy development. The first of these were different ways we could document children’s learning. In particular, we focused on systematic ways we could use voice recording of children to inform our planning and assessment. This work is what inspired me to capture the story of my student at the tutoring centre using voice recordings. The second thing we worked on was the integration of the French language through play-based activities. We discussed different kinds of language that we might hear from our students such as interactive language (expressions that arise while interacting in the moment with people or objects), reflective language (expressions that arise when talking about a prior experience), descriptive language (expressions that arise to describe and make sense of what is happening or has happened), and artefacts of language (recordings or writings that have preserved language use and demonstrate understanding). The time I spent thinking through these ideas of documentation and French language use helped make clear how play-based learning and expanded notions of literacy were possible in a French Immersion classroom. This led to Critical Moment 17.

### Critical Moment 17

| **Tension:** | For a long time, all that I had really seen of French Immersion education came from my experiences growing up and my time in my previous school. This meant that learning in French Immersion was characterized largely by teacher transmission of information and the use of commercial education programs. I had been already working to break free from that, but my “teacher talk” partner and colleague in French Immersion showed me some exciting directions that could go. It challenged some ideas I had about what needed to happen in French Immersion so that children could learn an additional language. |
| **Key questions:** | How does French fit into play-based learning? How can different forms of documentation show student learning? How do different forms of language use help language |
Resolution: French Immersion can seem like a daunting educational project. Many view it as all of the demands of the English program, PLUS the learning of a whole other language on top of it. That idea comes with a sense of pressure to have to make more of the same instructional time, and that often leads French Immersion educators to seek out practices and programs that promise to reduce demands. Transmission-style teaching is tempting because it is viewed as efficient and generally reduces some of the planning and assessment burden from teachers. The time I spent with my colleague during “teacher talk” really turned that upside down as we looked at ways play-based learning experiences aligned with additional language learning. Our discussions around documentation of student learning through photos, videos, and specifically voice recordings shifted our observations away from indications of memorized language structures to noticing the purposeful use of the French language for making meaning. A French “dictée” might tell you whether certain spellings had been memorized, but the label-making that sometimes occurs while children are at play can tell you about the spelling, the pronunciation, as well as contextual use. Documentation of French language use can also be revisited with the students so they can hear themselves and others, notice new things, or elaborate on language use that was already shared. My “teacher talk” partner and I also looked at the kinds of language children used. One thing we noticed about French Immersion was that it often encouraged “descriptive” language because so many common nouns and actions were not yet a part of children’s vocabulary. We felt it was important to encourage other kinds of language such as reflective language or interactive language, even if some names of things needed to be shared in English. So instead of spending all of our time helping children figure out the names of things in French, we explored language that allowed them to ask a question, take turns with a friend, or share feelings so that the French language seemed like a more natural part of the learning the children were doing. One of the things that I appreciated the most was that these ideas meant I could “let go” of my own bias towards having periods where the expectation was “French only”. It was beneficial to the students to have the basic expectation that French was the first option while English would be sometimes used to fill in blanks or to get a point across. What I noticed was that communication throughout the day was much more fluid and effective while the use of French actually increased.

One other opportunity for deeper thinking about language and literacy presented itself to me in the form of a graduate cohort that the school division was setting up in partnership with a local university. What was advantageous about the cohort was that I was able to do the bulk of my coursework alongside colleagues at my school and throughout the division, and the university agreed to hold some of the courses at one of the schools in our division so there was less travel on the part of teachers who were still working full time. Becoming a graduate student meant that I could also now study language and literacy development in a formal academic setting with full access to all of the most contemporary research. Without a doubt this was going
to greatly impact my teaching practice and challenge the model of literacy I was working
towards. To my delight, one of the first courses on offer was called “Research in Language and
Literacy Development”. How fortuitous! I would be able to jump right into graduate studies and
start with exactly the thing I wanted to focus on. Just prior to starting this class, I had updated my
model of literacy only slightly (see Figure 28) to solidify orthography as another generative
engine, to show that there were formation rules which affected lexical access, and to show that
orthography, phonology, syntax, and semantics were all connected via informational interfaces.

![Figure 28. My model of literacy as of December 2012. This is a re-visualization of my 2010 model that includes arcing lines which represent interfaces, as well as bi-directional arrows representing lexical access/formation as well as language and literacy production/perception.](image-url)

I was excited to see how this first course would challenge my thinking and help me to broaden
my understanding. It did not disappoint. I learned about Shirley Brice Heath (1982) and her
pioneering ethnographic work that led her to coin the term “literacy event”. I learned about Brian
Street (1993) who took the idea of a literacy event further in his development of the term
“literacy practice” to signal the social uses, conceptions, and meanings of the literacy behaviours
observed in any literacy event. I learned about Hamilton and Barton (2001) who were situating literacy within the larger socio-cultural context of an individual’s lifeworld and the different domains within that lifeworld. I learned about the “New London Group” and their work developing the idea of “multiliteracies” (New London Group, 1996). I learned about the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) who put forth a social-semiotic approach to communication as well as advanced the notion of “multimodality”. I also learned about the work of Jim Cummins (2012) for the first time, and his “interdependence hypothesis” was a ground-breaking contribution to additional language acquisition and French Immersion pedagogy. There was even more than this, and it seemed like every week my perspective on language and literacy development was revolutionized. This course, and the readings and discussions therein, led to Critical Moment 18.

### Critical Moment 18

**Tension:** I hadn’t really thought about it before this course, but my ideas and concepts about language and literacy development had to do mostly with how language and literacy was processed. The opportunities afforded to me after I switched school divisions helped me push past a processing-centric perspective, but this course really challenged me to think about what it was that was being processed in the first place.

**Key questions:** How is literacy defined in the contemporary research literature? What type of definition of literacy should I adopt? How might this connect with my current model of literacy?

**Resolution:** It was becoming abundantly clear that reading and writing were no longer cutting it as the sole proprietors of what educators thought of as literacy. The New London Group (1996) as well as Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) were making convincing arguments that semiotic systems other than oral speech or written text should also be considered literacies given their increasing value as means of communication and sense-making. This type of expanded notion was enticing to me because it resonated with my experience of children using things like illustrations, music, and movement to make sense of their world and to communicate ideas. Accepting a perspective of literacy that went beyond reading and writing also had its dangers. This was in many ways uncharted territory and it was easy to get lost. If many other things like music and dance could be a “literacy” could anything be a literacy? Where was the line drawn? In order to sort things out for myself I thought about my model of literacy. At its core was the Parallel Architecture which was a parallel processing model of language. I wondered whether there was insight there that I could apply to the problem of sorting out what was literacy and what was just another modality. My final paper for the course did just that as I carved out a definition of literacy within the larger domains of communication and multimodality. My definition at the time started first from the understanding that whatever literacy might be, everyone agreed on the fact that it was a form of communication. As such, it was transmitted through “channels” which were our senses (see Figure 29). These channels then encoded
information into modes. Modes were also a locus for decoding information back through sensory channels. For example, the mode of speaking made use of the vocal channel to encode information while it also used the aural channel to decode it (see Figure 30). A mode would then generate a signal which was a physical artefact of some kind that was interpretable by another communicator. A communicator using the mode of speaking, for example, could produce a signal in person that requires the immediate attention of other communicators and that dissipates immediately after being produced. The mode of speaking could also produce a signal in the form of a voicemail which is not temporarily and spatially constrained in the same way (see Figure 31). With this communication framework of channels, modes, and signals established, the narrow view of literacy as reading and writing can then be plotted (see Figure 32). An expanded definition of literacy would ideally make use of all sensory channels as ways of making meaning. However, an expanded view of literacy would also maintain a flexible boundary over which modes channels could constrain themselves to. For me at the time, this meant that modes who could exhibit properties of language (such as a syntax) could be considered modes of literacy (see Figure 33). In the end, a Parallel Architecture perspective of literacy saw all sensory channels available to an expanded set of modes that demonstrated the characteristics of language. A mode that did so could be called a “literacy” despite not employing written text. Literacies, under this model, were not necessarily languages unless they met the more stringent criteria for being a language. The signals produced from modes that were considered “literacies” could then all be identified as “texts”. A portrait or a dance routine could be considered “texts”, for example (see Figure 34). It was my best attempt at synthesizing the thinking I had been doing in this course and finding a workable solution to how I would create boundaries for myself in practice as to what I would define as “literacy”.

Figure 29. Communication through the senses. Communication begins by transmitting information (a message) through a communication channel (our senses).
Figure 30. Channels to modes. Channels are constrained to modes that utilize channels as means of encoding and decoding information.

Figure 31. Modes to signals. - Sensory channels have been constrained to a particular mode which has produced a signal that can be interpreted by other communicators.
Figure 32. The narrow view of literacy. Literacy as reading and writing is plotted on this model as using particular channels for activating a single mode.

Figure 33. A broader view of literacy. This perspective includes all sensory channels and an expanded repertoire of modes that demonstrated the characteristics of language.
This first year in a new school and new school division was a life changing experience. I had entered a very rich professional culture that encouraged critical reflection and professional inquiry in ways that benefited me greatly. The “manateeship” was instrumental in my beginning understanding of play-based learning, Reggio-inspired learning environments, and expanded notions of literacy. The Early Literacy Education Series allowed me to connect practice and theory at a level that I had only ever attempted before but could never achieve, all with the added bonus of doing it alongside my other grade 1 colleagues. The “teacher talk” program allowed me to connect with another French Immersion teacher, and this was instrumental to opening my mind to the potentials for progressive French Immersion pedagogy. Beginning graduate studies in this year opened the door to the most contemporary research on language and literacy development and provided me with additional time and space to work out how I would situate
my own theory and practice within all the amazing work I had been introduced to. If that weren’t enough professional excitement, I also had two teacher candidates in my room: one for the whole year, the other only for a short time due to her personal health issues. I also welcomed an undergraduate exchange group from France, and made three different presentations to staff, professional development groups, and school board members. It was a much welcomed change of pace from my last position, and it breathed new life into my career. In an end of year reflection that I needed to submit to the school division I wrote: “It’s not just that the environment and the people make me happy, but it is that I feel now, more than ever before in my career, that I can be myself and that that matters” (Arbez, 2013, p. 7).

**School 2: Year 2.** The summer afforded me some time to process all of the exciting things that had happened during the previous school year. My wife and I had also welcomed our second child in June, and so the extra time with family was very much welcomed. Our daughter was now approaching 2 years old, and while everything else was shifting and changing in my professional career, I had the wonderful pleasure of living with these amazing beings and watching them grow and develop. Without diminishing the full richness and joy they brought to my life—of which I could go on about for hours—it was especially captivating to see how their language was developing. Those first words truly do seem miraculous. I felt incredibly privileged to be a part of that. While my newborn son was still sorting out some babbles, my daughter had already become quite loquacious. She was also very articulate and well-spoken for her age, but some delightful idiosyncrasies would remind us that language learning is always ongoing. One of our favourite expressions of hers at the time was “haymaise” instead of “mayonnaise” as in “Papa, can you put haymaise on my sandwich?” It was such a gift to hear these types of expressions and to be present throughout their appearance and eventual disappearance as language continued to develop. This was a whole new perspective on language
learning that I had never had before in my life, and one that I really would not have known well in my work as a teacher or researcher. As I attended to my children at home and nurtured their language development, the ways we would play with speech and texts would affect the way I played with speech and texts in my classroom. I never thought that having children was an important part of being a teacher—and I still don’t believe it is a requisite part of being a good teacher—but it sure seems to hone your intuitions around and sensitivities to language development. This is especially true when working with students whose first few years were not as nurturing as they could have been. I was lucky that I came to the start of each new school year with insights from my own children, and this school year was no different.

As I was still in a Grade 1/2 multi-age French Immersion classroom, I had an excellent opportunity to continue expanding my practice with students who were already familiar with the ways we learned through “explorations” time as well as our writer’s workshop, which by the end of the year became “storytelling workshop” based on a suggestion in Husbye et al. (2012). Storytelling workshop was a place where the students and I could explore alternative forms of storytelling that were not focused solely on reading and writing. Children’s play was of course fertile ground for stories, and often led to many forms of storytelling. One child in particular was very interested in dinosaurs as he had just seen the movie Jurassic Park at home. He would take toy dinosaurs and play out harrowing tales of conflict and escape. One day he wanted to share his story with the rest of the class, and so he mounted a sort of makeshift play using the toy dinosaurs (see Figure 35). This was his “Jurassic Park” story, and the first time he had shared anything with the class during storytelling workshop.
After his presentation, he wanted to record his story in other ways and chose to make a drawing based on the play he had done with the dinosaur toys (see Figure 36). What was significant about this development was that this particular child was a very reluctant writer. He was also a student who had an individualized education plan that addressed some maladaptive behaviours we were helping him work through such as extremely violent outbursts. Some days we were surprised by the kinds of things that might trigger a violent response, but his frustration with writing was something that would predictably do so. Although he wanted to dictate the general text of the story, the fact that he created a labeled drawing with a title as well as patiently dictated the words of his story amounted to a huge step forward.
Some children enjoyed making a variety of characters out of plasticine and so we experimented with techniques of stop-go animation (see Figure 37). The popularity of the technique grew and soon children were writing storyboards and creating elaborate backgrounds in order to tell their stories (see Figure 38). Again, these were ways for many students to who had difficulty writing to find their way into storytelling. Ultimately, these students would come to choose writing pieces that would serve their storytelling. A stop-go animation, for example, required some preparatory organization and that came in the form of a written and illustrated storyboard. Children would ask to create them, not as a hurdle to get over, but as a necessary function of the type of storytelling they wanted to do.
Figure 37. Early attempts at stop-go animation. Hervé Tullet’s book *Jeu de paysages* serves as a changeable background.
Another type of storytelling our class was involved in was puppetry. This was something we did with my colleague from last year’s “teacher talk” and her class of grade 3 and 4 students. We would visit each other and pair students up with puppets in order to tell stories in French. It was amazing how free and engaged the students were with their storytelling, and both my colleague and I were impressed with the effort students were making in using French. There was something about the puppets that made students feel less vulnerable in taking risks with French. There were also small writing engagements like script writing that the children did collaboratively as a means of supporting their puppetry (see Figure 39).
Our class also took a liking to the story *L’île du dragon* [The Dragon’s Island] by Nancy Montour and Benoît Laverdière. The story is about an affable dragon who sets off to find an island all to himself. In order to explore the emotional journey that the dragon took, I invited the children to retell the story using movement. With our bodies we were able show and experience some of the major events and emotions found within the book. This was especially useful from a French language learning perspective as many of the words that were somewhat challenging initially, were made much more accessible through movement (see Figure 40).
Figure 40. Using movement to retell the story *L’île du dragon*.

My colleague from the “manateeship” was also doing movement activities with her grade 1 and 2 students and so we thought it would be fitting to bring our classrooms together in the study of movement. Our focus at the time was how we could use it as a language of storytelling, despite the contentiousness of calling it such. We would meet in the gym and play music to which the students would freely move. Almost naturally their movements would be narrative, showing actions and events that unfolded in a sequence. Some students would find each other within the sea of moving children and group together so they could move in relational ways, depicting fights and friendships. My colleague and I would document their movement using photo and video and we would gather the children to reflect on the ways their movements told stories. In particular, we made associations between the types of movements children were making and specific concepts or clusters of words in an attempt to conventionalize our movements for storytelling purposes. I also ended up partnering with the French Immersion Kindergarten teacher to do some similar activities with her class. It was exciting that these expanded definitions of literacy were shared and valued by other teachers at the school. It seemed that the inclusion of multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) and multimodality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) were not only increasing the amount of storytelling that was taking place, but
they were also enhancing the quality of storytelling as children were able to access richer meaning through a variety of senses.

I didn’t have any graduate coursework directly related to language and literacy development this year, but as a grade 1 and 2 teacher I was invited again to some professional development sessions that focused on early literacy. There were two sessions, and one of the sessions on reading assessment really caught my attention. The thing that stood out the most to me was the use of the term “parallel”. In discussing how children learn to read, the presenter shared the work of Goodman and Goodman (2014a) who used the term parallel to explain two phenomena. The first was that oral language and written language were parallel language processes that made meaning in similar ways. I couldn’t help but agree as this fit very nicely with my model of language and literacy processing with orthography as a generative engine. The second is that Goodman and Goodman (2014b) discuss how a reader, when interpreting an existing text, is actually generating a parallel text in their mind as they transact with the published text. Goodman and Goodman (2014b) write:

> In a transaction, both the reader and the text are changed. Readers, as they read, construct their own texts parallel to the published text with which they are transacting. The reader’s text makes use of the reader’s experiences, values, culture, background knowledge, insights, and language. It is the reader’s text that the reader comprehends. (p. 63)

I identified this idea as further evidence for the possible multiple drafts of meaning inherent in my model of language and literacy processing. The fact about the multiple drafts of meaning inside a readers mind, just as the parallel text that Goodman and Goodman (2014b) suggest, is that they are neither confirmed or denied by an external arbiter of their validity. Drafts of meaning are amplified or collapsed in working memory depending on what the reader deems to be the most reasonable interpretation. The experience, values, culture, and background
knowledge that Goodman and Goodman (2014b) refer to seems to be at least partially recorded in the content and relative synaptic strength of entries in the mental lexicon. Then, in a discussion about the integration of cueing systems, a very interesting model was shared that I had never seen before (see Figure 41).

![Figure 41](image)

*Figure 41*. A theoretical model of how reading works. Reproduced from Leland, Lewison, and Harste (2013, p.44)

This model of reading, shared from Leland, Lewison, & Harste (2013) was very resonant with my own understanding. Here I saw another representation of semantic, syntactic, and graphophonemic cues that all worked together within an instance of reading. Although visually this model did not represent any sort of parallelism in processing—and according to the authors
the width of each ring is correspondent to its value within reading—I saw similarities to my own model. One difference I noticed, however, resulted in Critical Moment 19.

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<td><strong>Tension:</strong> I was happy to have some of my notions about language and literacy development affirmed by the work of Goodman and Goodman (2014a). In particular, the relationship between oral language and written language as parallel processes, and the parallel text generation that is akin to multiple drafts of meaning, were ideas found in linguistics, neuroscience, and psychology and rarely encountered in the educational research literature. Leland, Lewison, and Harste (2013) added to this by detailing a model of reading that bore many of the same characteristics as my own model. There was, however, one part of their model that greatly challenged my own and that was the inclusion of pragmatics as something that contextualizes the whole process.</td>
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<td><strong>Key questions:</strong> What role does pragmatics, or socio-cultural factors, play in the processing of language and literacy? How can those factors be modeled so that they show how they are operational?</td>
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<td><strong>Resolution:</strong> Leland, Lewinson, and Harste (2013) write that “the pragmatics system is not shown as a separate ring because we see it as the social context that surrounds and permeates the other systems” (p. 43). This made me think somewhat of the transactional nature of Goodman and Goodman’s (2014a) perspective which likely owes its views in part to Rosenblatt (1969). But even more than that, I thought about Heath (1982), Street (1993), and Hamilton and Barton (2001) who had carved out more precisely what that social context was like. Although they continued to be influential in my thinking, I hadn’t found a way to incorporate their work into either my model of language and literacy processing or my definition of literacy. For as much as their ideas were pertinent to my growing understanding of language and literacy development, they continued to be intangible and difficult to incorporate concretely into any sort of model. Not that they had to be, per se, but it helps to be able to visualize it in some way. Leland et al. (2013) found a way to do so, and they borrowed the linguistic term “pragmatics” as a portmanteau for all things socio-cultural, but the presentation and explanation of pragmatics within their model leaves something to be desired. They say that pragmatics permeates all the other systems but it is not clear how. How might the experience, values, culture, and background knowledge that Goodman and Goodman (2014a) highlight affect cueing systems? I believed that they did, but I couldn’t put my finger on how they were all connected exactly. How could a pragmatic problem such as a reader who didn’t see reading as time well spent connect with the processes involved in making sense of text? How could a teacher navigate those kinds of pragmatics and what type of change could they expect? I didn’t have an immediate solution to all of this, but it was at the forefront of my mind.</td>
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The school year once again came to a close and I had left it with more questions about language and literacy than when I had started. I was encouraged by the multiliteracies work I was exploring in my class and with other colleagues. There were in fact many others at our school who were also doing this type of work, and it felt like there was a critical mass of teachers
who were pushing the boundaries of what literacy was. I wish I could have collaborated with more of my colleagues as there was some really masterful work going on throughout the school that I felt I could have learned from. Nonetheless, I had expanded my own understanding around language and literacy and I could see how that was facilitating meaningful storytelling amongst my students. French Immersion was no impediment to this work as a few of us in the French Immersion program were all working towards a pedagogy of multiliteracies. I was still wondering, however, about the direct connections between children’s socio-cultural contexts and their language and literacy processing. I also hadn’t fully grappled with the implications of Cummins’(2012) work for French Immersion learning. Any meaning-making I would do around these issues would have to wait in part until next fall.

School 2: Year 3. When I spoke over the summer with friends and colleagues from outside of the division, I couldn’t help but gush about the exciting learning that was taking place at my school. I was also proud that there was a small group of French Immersion teachers that were taking on Reggio-inspired, play-based, and multiliteracies pedagogies. Invariably, however, my excitement would be dampened by people’s perceptions. “You’re lucky,” they would say, as though I had won the prize of getting a job at my school. Often the response would be more dismissive, with charges that “it all sounds nice, but I don’t know that you could get away with it at a real school.” I don’t know what that meant, exactly, but I do know that working at my school came with both admiration and stigma. The school itself had a reputation throughout the city—built from its partnerships with the university as well as active participation of its staff in a variety of professional communities and associations—as a place where more progressive pedagogy was being practiced. It was definitely different, wonderfully different, but different enough that educators who visited our school couldn’t help but feel a sense of disconnect. Even if they aspired to the kind of learning that was on display, it was difficult to find a path to it. I
didn’t begrudge educators with the attitude that what was going on wasn’t like “real school”. In fact, I could relate to it. It wasn’t that long ago that I too held a position in which it was difficult to see how I would make a meaningful shift in my pedagogy that was sustainable. As such it came as no surprised that those who were most cynical about the work I was doing at this school were other French Immersion educators. For them, not only was it not “real school” but it could never be “real school” because the demands of the French Immersion program were too great to experiment with Reggio-inspired, play-based, and multiliteracies pedagogies. I understood, but having lived in both worlds I felt like I was in a position to say something meaningful about that. Although I hadn’t foreseen it, this year became in large part about how I would try to communicate a different vision for French Immersion learning, especially as it related to language and literacy development.

Every October there is a province-wide professional development day that sees a plethora of workshops on offer for teachers to follow their professional goals and inquiries. I saw this as a great opportunity to engage in critical discussions around French Immersion pedagogy, and I consider myself lucky to have been able to do so as a presenter for the Canadian Association for Young Children. In preparation for my day-long workshop, I revisited the work of Jim Cummins (2012) whose “interdependence hypothesis” had challenged my thinking regarding additional language learning. In exploring his work I found an earlier paper of his titled “Immersion education for the millennium: What have we learned from 30 years of research on second language immersion?” (Cummins, 1998). This paper was particularly powerful for me because it was essentially a summative evaluation of French Immersion learning in Canada. Although it was already a decade and a half old when written, many of the observations Cummins made seemed to apply to French Immersion education as I knew it in the moment. According to Cummins (1998), French Immersion education was characterized by students’ strength in
receptive skills and weakness in expressive skills, high attrition rates, transmission-oriented teaching, lack of opportunity for students to exercise creativity and cooperation, and a lack of original French children’s literature. These were all things that should improve, and Cummins’ (1998) remedy resided in the theories of linguistic interdependence and additive bilingualism. The first of these states that as long as there is sufficient exposure to two languages, proficiency developed in one language will transfer to proficiency in the other. The second states that additional language learning occurs additively with no harmful effects to the learner’s dominant language development. These, to me, were revolutionary ideas in French Immersion and went a long way to allaying fears of exploring new pedagogical directions. More progressive approaches that were Reggio-inspired, play-based, or inclusive of multiliteracies were still a hard sell, even if Cummins’ (1998, 2012) theories were accepted. There is a very real professional anxiety in French Immersion that dual language learning is much more demanding—some would say twice as much—than monolingual learning and that part of the teacher’s job was to find ways to get it all done. This makes transmission-oriented teaching methods appealing because they appear to provide an efficient direct injection of knowledge. There is another component as well that I don’t think gets talked about very much, and that is the component of cultural heritage. In our province, French language speakers are a minority and French language education has been a hard fought right. Changing things about French Immersion education is therefore sometimes like changing the family recipe for tourtière: it’s messing with tradition that is an important part of the community’s identity and cultural heritage. Surely there were threads of progressive education within French culture, and as part of the preparation for my presentation I decided to investigate. That’s when I came across the work of Roger Cousinet (Raillon, 2008). No one in the French Immersion community seems to know about him, but his life’s work is both informative and inspirational. The most concise way for me to describe him is that Roger Cousinet is to France what Loris Malaguzzi is to Italy. UNESCO lists him as one of the 100 most
influential educators in the world putting him in the company of thinkers like John Dewey and Maria Montessori (Morsy, 1997). Beginning in the 1920s, he would champion pedagogy that was child-centred, saw play as a child’s primary work, and children as natural scientists who were trying to make sense of their world (Cousinet, 1959; Raillon, 2008). Cousinet believed in giving more authority to learners, and he was a proponent of flexible group work within schools that was based on students’ interests. These ideas predate the work that came out of Reggio Emilia, all the while responding appropriately to Cummins’ (1998) calls for reform in French Immersion. I couldn’t help but include his ideas in my workshop if only to show that there are prominent French educators who have pushed the boundaries of pedagogy in ways that resonate with other progressivists. If I could get this far in shaping a vision for French Immersion pedagogy, there would always be educators within and outside of French Immersion who would claim that French Immersion, regardless of pedagogical approach, was not for every student especially those who had challenges with language, literacy, or behaviour. Researchers such as Genesee (2006) have noted that “many, if not most, students who experience difficulties in immersion are compelled to transfer to an English program” (p.37). After my experience losing a child to the English program a few years back, this was an issue that I was passionate about. Even at my new school I had to fight for more than one student who presented challenging behaviours to stay in French Immersion. As Genesee (2006) points out in no uncertain terms “at present, there is insufficient evidence to support decisions to exclude at-risk students from immersion on an a priori basis” (p. 37). The convergence of all of these ideas led to Critical Moment 20.

**Critical Moment 20**

**Tension:** French Immersion education has long been stigmatized as “elitist” and “traditional”, and often thought of as slow to embody educational change. Cummins’ (1998) characterization of French Immersion education in Canada resonated with my experience of French Immersion education, both as a student and later as a teacher. Although I had a strong sense that Reggio-inspired, play-based, and multiliteracies pedagogy was beneficial to student learning, I wanted to
be able to make the case that this type of pedagogy was also effective in French Immersion classrooms.

**Key questions:** What support is there for student-centred pedagogy in French Immersion? Is there a tradition of such pedagogy within French culture? What types of students are welcome in a more progressive approach to French Immersion?

**Resolution:** My invitation from the Canadian Association for Young Children to be a guest speaker at this year’s annual professional development day in October allowed me a great opportunity to critically discuss French Immersion pedagogy with other French Immersion teachers from around the province. What I wanted to confront was the recurring impression of French Immersion education as transmission-oriented, conservative, and individualistic (Cummins, 1998; 2012). Many French Immersion educators see these characteristics as often necessary in delivering curricula for two languages in what appears to be more work in the same amount of instructional time allotted to monolingual programs. Cummins’ (1998) interdependence hypothesis and additive bilingualism principle offered the theoretical basis for a French Immersion program in which “the separation of languages that characterizes most immersion programs should become less rigid as students progress through the elementary grades” (p. 38). As a corollary to this, Genesee (2006) shares research showing that:

> …what is important in learning to read French as a second language is fundamentally the same as what is important in learning to read English as a first language, and what is important in learning to read in an immersion program is essentially the same as what is important in learning to read in an English-only program. (p. 23)

This positions dual language learning, such as that in a French Immersion classroom, as much more interrelated and flexible than commonly thought. What that flexibility provides is room for a student-centred approach that values children’s communicative needs as the source of language learning rather than a race to cram in as much language practice in both languages as possible. While I had been crafting an approach to French Immersion education that was Reggio-inspired, play-based, and inclusive of multiliteracies, these were ideas borrowed from Anglophone colleagues or, in the case of Reggio-inspired practice, Anglophone translations of Italian ideas. It was important, especially in the French minority community in our province, for educators to see that those ideas were more universal and inclusive of French educators. The work of Roger Cousinet (Raillon, 2008) took this one step further by showing that there were French educators who were pioneers in more progressive pedagogies. For example, Cousinet (1959) wrote:

> L’apprentissage scolaire permet à l’écolier de travailler selon son propre mode, oblige le maître à travailler selon un mode nouveau. Les rôles sont inversés. L’écolier n’est plus astreint, par sa soumission, son « application », à collaborer avec le maître qui enseigne ; le maître est invité, par sa compréhension, à collaborer avec l’élève qui apprend. L’école n’est plus le lieu où le maître veut et où les écoliers doivent, il est désormais le lieu où les écoliers veulent (à condition, faut-il le redire encore, qu’ils aient quelque chose à vouloir), et où le maître doit.

> [School learning allows the student to work in his own way, forcing the teacher to work in a new way. The roles are reversed. The student is no longer constrained, by his submission, his "attention", to collaborate with the teacher who teaches; the teacher is invited by his understanding to collaborate with the student who is learning. The school is no longer the place where the teacher wants and where students must, it is now the place where students]
If one of the biggest complaints from French Immersion educators is that there are very few resources of French origin, here is a powerful one that can inspire pedagogical change from within French culture. It should also be mentioned that a new vision for French Immersion education is for all students. Genesee (2006) notes that “at-risk students with academic and language learning challenges can acquire substantial communicative competence in French while maintaining parity in their academic and language development with similarly challenged students in all-English programs” (p. 36). There simply isn’t the justification any longer for students to be transferred out of French Immersion for academic or socio-emotional reasons, nor would I suspect that any French Immersion educator would feel compelled to if motivated to live out a more progressive vision of French Immersion education.

The day of my workshop finally arrived, and it was a day filled with interesting and engaging conversations. I’m sure not everyone was convinced of my vision for French Immersion education, but I was happy that the message was out there.

This led to my participation in a mentorship program hosted by a French Immersion school in a rural part of our province. For the first time I was positioned as the mentor, although after the “manateeship” I would never really be comfortable with those kinds of power imbalances. The school was exploring the kind of teaching and learning that was going on at my school, and so I was partnered with a beginning teacher at that school and we were given release time to visit each other’s classrooms and engage in professional dialogue. Those discussions then led to an invitation to present some of my thinking to the whole staff of the school, and I was happy to make the case once more for reform in French Immersion pedagogy inspired by Cummins (1998; 2012), Cousinet (1959), and Genesee (2006) as well as the work that I and some of my colleagues were undertaking at our school.

Back at the school we had welcomed another undergraduate partnership with a local university, and to my delight there were a few undergraduates who were interested in French Immersion. I had the great pleasure of welcoming two of them into my classroom for an eight-
week period. Although I had already welcomed a number of teacher-candidates into my classroom as a part of their pre-service training, I was excited to engage with undergraduates who were there as a part of their coursework and in a more open and curious state of mind as they were tasked with connecting their experience in my classroom with the ideas they were making sense of in their language and literacy course. I hoped that these undergraduates could see the influence of Cummins (1998; 2012) on my morning meeting, of Cousinet (1959) on our “explorations” time, and Genesee (2006) on our sense of inclusivity and community. What impressed me about these undergraduates was how they came in with a more transmission-oriented approach to working with children and were able to leave after such a short time with much more of a student-centred perspective. One of the undergraduates was kind enough to share with me her final reflection that she submitted at the end of her course, and I was completely touched by how much she valued the experience as well as how much of her thinking resonated with the changes in French Immersion pedagogy I was trying to practice. I was told later that she was considering anew the possibility of teaching in French Immersion. Overall, as I looked back at my engagement with practicing and pre-service teachers in French Immersion, I was feeling good about the fact that the message was getting out to others that French Immersion could go beyond common perceptions.

Then in April there was a large professional development day for French Immersion teachers throughout my school division. The topic of the day was the work of Roy Lyster who is a celebrated researcher within French Immersion professional circles. I wasn’t too familiar with his research, although I had heard the name several times in conjunction with instructional approaches to “rétroaction corrective” [corrective feedback] in oral language learning. Whatever mysteries there may have been for me were dispelled as Dr. Lyster was the guest speaker for our day together as French Immersion staff. In anticipation of the day, and in response to the hype
that surrounds Dr. Lyster’s work, I read one of his oft-cited studies “Corrective Feedback and Learner Uptake: Negotiation of Form in Communicative Classrooms” (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). In it he categorizes the kinds of feedback that teachers give to students learning French in French Immersion classrooms immediately after they have made an oral “mistake” in French. He and his colleague then studied the effectiveness of each form of feedback in causing a student to use the “correct” utterance after the feedback. The results of this study apparently rocked the French Immersion world because they showed that the least effective form of feedback was a teacher’s correct recasting of a student’s erroneous utterance such as [Student: “C’est le girafe” Teacher: “On dit, la girafe”], which was a common practice. Lyster and Ranta (1997) therefore argued for using the other forms of corrective feedback that their analysis suggested were more effective.

So pervasive was Lyster’s work in this area that it continued to inform provincial curricula (Éducation Manitoba, 2010) and I had even seen specific results from his 1997 study (Lyster & Ranta, 1997) in a variety of professional development presentations. Lyster himself brought up results from that study in his presentation that day in April. However, upon closer inspection his results leave much to be desired and I often found myself questioning why people were taking it so seriously. At its most damaging, his instructional suggestions seemed to be the antithesis of the kind of pedagogy I hoped for in French Immersion. This led to Critical Moment 21.

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<td><strong>Tension:</strong> I had spent significant parts of the school year engaged in conversations around French Immersion pedagogy. Specifically, I was trying to share a different vision of French Immersion pedagogy that promoted more flexible language learning (Cummins, 1998; 2012), child-centred perspectives (Cousinet, 1959), and inclusivity for all learners (Genesee, 2006). Roy Lyster’s work was disruptive to this, and to make matters worse it was very popular among French Immersion educators. His presentation in April for French Immersion staff in my school division provided me with the opportunity to think more deeply about how his ideas were affecting French Immersion education and what my position would ultimately be.</td>
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<td><strong>Key questions:</strong> What were some of Lyster’s key contributions? How did he advocate for his ideas to be practiced in classrooms? What evidence was there for these practices and Lyster’s underlying research?</td>
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<td><strong>Resolution:</strong> Roy Lyster has achieved near-legendary status in French Immersion education as someone who has demystified French language acquisition with respect to teacher feedback. His...</td>
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1997 study with colleague Leila Ranta (Lyster & Ranta, 1997) was a landmark in showing that French Immersion teachers provided different kinds of corrective feedback and that not all feedback resulted in students’ improvement of French language use. Two findings in particular stood out. The first was that the common practice of recasting student utterances with correct forms was the least effective corrective feedback in terms of encouraging students to immediately produce correct forms. This was revolutionary for French Immersion teachers who were predisposed to transmission-oriented forms of instruction such as recasting. The second finding was that the most effective form of corrective feedback was something called “elicitation” whereby the teacher invited the student to reformulate their utterance either by offering an incomplete utterance [Student: “le chien courir” Teacher: “le chien…”], by directly reflecting on the target language [Teacher: “How do we say X in French?”], or by directly asking students to reformulate their utterance. According to Lyster and Ranta (1997), this type of feedback had a 100% rate of uptake. 100% uptake! The amazement and jubilation at this finding was real, and it was a finding that Lyster was not shy about during his presentation to our staff. But while others seemed to celebrate this fact and think about how they can use this feedback more often, my question was what is “uptake”? Looking into his study for an answer reveals a bit of creative statistics. The word “uptake” was a clever way for Lyster and Ranta (1997) to really mean “times when a student tried the utterance again after feedback”. So 100% uptake meant that students, after receiving an elicitation, tried to reformulate their utterance 100% of the time. It says nothing of whether or not the “uptake” included correct forms or not. No, if an “uptake” resulted in the reformulation of an utterance with the correct language form, that was called “repair” (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). So then it becomes reasonable to ask how much did elicitation result in repair, since that is ultimately the goal of corrective feedback. The answer is a less impressive 46% of the time. Now, I’m not a gambling man but if I was at a poker table trying to decide whether or not to put all of my money in the pot on a 46% chance, I don’t think I would take the risk. This result looks worse when considered with the three other forms of feedback that generated the most uptake: “clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback, and repetition, which led to uptake 88%, 86%, and 78% of the time, respectively” (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 56). When combined (t=261) and corrected for instances of repair (t=100), the result is a 38% rate of correct reformulation on the part of students. This may be considered a relative improvement in French Immersion, considering all of the combined feedback that was studied led to 27% repair, but it didn’t necessarily inspire confidence. Not in me anyway. Instead, I was starting to question this whole corrective feedback business altogether. The rest of Lyster’s presentation was no more inspiring as he touched on a few ideas that gave me pause. The first was an utter obsession with the attainment of “native-like” usage of French. It seemed like anything less was a failure of the education system. But what does “native-like” really mean? I can say from experience having lived and worked with native French speakers from across the country that many of them would be judged by Lyster as not having attained “native-like” language use in French. Of course French Immersion educators want their students to speak fluidly and effectively in French, but becoming a perspicacious maven of the French language doesn’t generally help with that. Lyster advocated for transmission-oriented ideas like delivering language instruction alongside content instruction—as though they were separable to begin with—while throwing in nuggets of pseudo-wisdom such as “a teacher cannot correct a student, only the student can correct themselves. All we do is provide feedback that may or may not elicit a self-correction” (D. Arbez, personal notes, April 2014). I just didn’t see learning as “correcting” anything, and was worried at the pernicious influence that such language would have. It was when Lyster showed us how to “doctor a text just a little bit”—by changing the verb conjugations before presenting it to students in the service of instructional goals—that I just about had it. Why do this? Why change the thoughtfully selected words of an author so you can practice a verb tense? Were there no
original texts that exemplified the same verb tenses? In the end there wasn’t much I got from the day that I felt fit with, or seriously challenged, my vision for French Immersion pedagogy and my understanding of language and literacy development.

With much of my attention focused on issues of French Immersion pedagogy, I might have forgotten about how Leland et al.’s (2013) inclusion of pragmatics in their modeling had previously challenged my own thinking about how I could account for socio-cultural effects on language and literacy development. In particular, I still hadn’t found a way to connect the work of Heath (1982), Street (1993), and Hamilton and Barton (2001) to my own modeling. Luckily, an amazing experience unfolded at the beginning of the year that would go a long way to helping me sort all of it out.

**It’s the only notes that play the right tune: The story of an emerging Grade 1 writer.**

One of the new grade 1 students to my class showed me right away that music was a big deal in her world. I routinely played guitar and sang with the class throughout the day, and this particular child enjoyed listening and participating along. So much so, in fact, that every now and again she would specifically ask me to play something on the guitar that we had sung before. I wish I could say that that enthusiasm and engagement extended to other classroom activities. It would have been especially useful when it came to writing as this child showed a fairly high level of resistance to most things pencil and paper. The first couple of weeks of entries in her journal didn’t include much more than the date and every now and again a small picture. At storytelling workshop there was nary a written word in sight as this child preferred other modes on offer, especially the musical instruments. In the third week of school she surprised the class by offering to share a story she created using the piano called “the dog story”. What was surprising about it was that she also had three sheets of paper, filled with illustrations that went along with her musical piece. One by one she played four invented melodies. At the end of each
of the first three melodies she would pause to show one of her illustrations while the fourth melody had no accompanying illustration (see Figure 42). I, along with the rest of the class, was curious why the last melody had no accompanying illustration. In group conversation afterward about the meaning of her story—which was not evident to the rest of the class based on the melodies and drawings—she encouraged the class to “find the message” as she repeated the last five notes of the final melody multiple times.

*Figure 42. Illustrations that accompanied the "Dog story".*

The children guessed at messages like “I love my puppy” and “We took it for a walk”, but these were not what she had in mind. With every failed attempt at “getting the message”, I could sense her increasing frustration until finally one child asked “You gave it away?” “YES!” she exclaimed. “See?” she asked as she played once more the last five notes of the fourth melody and spoke in rhythm “I–gave–her–a–way”. She explained how her family had adopted a golden retriever but over time they learned that some people were allergic. She shared how sad it was to give the dog away and explained that the last melody of her song did not have an illustration because the dog was gone. “Wait. This was your dog!” one of the children exclaimed as they realized the emotional implications. I asked the author of “the dog story” why she chose the notes that she did. She replied, without hesitation “Because it’s the only really notes that played the right tune I wanted … it just sounds more sadder.” The class was touched, and some friends
of this child consoled her afterward. I think everyone felt like they knew her a bit better, and she certainly seemed to feel better for having told her story. Telling that story seemed to change something for her. It allowed her to share something that, for any of us, would have been difficult to put into words. The fourth week was not like the first three as that child, now a more confident storyteller, started to open up to writing more and more. Her journal entries started to fill up with invented spellings that went with her illustrations, and she was more willing to share her writing and the personal stories that went with it. That’s how we learned in one of our sharing circles that her father passed away two years prior in a work accident. I thought later on about Kathy Short (2012), what it meant to “live storied lives” (p. 9), and how this child’s storied life was impacted by a recurring theme of loss. Music seemed to help with this as many of this child’s stories would either start from, or incorporate, melodies and rhythms that she experimented with. I didn’t really know why music was of particular interest, although I didn’t think too much of it either. Children come to school with many different talents and abilities and I thought my job was to primarily pay close attention to those, and to offer experiences that respond accordingly. Then one day, some weeks later, she came up to me as I was putting away my guitar and asked “Do you know how to play the song Michelle by the Beatles?” “Désolé, je ne sais pas comment.”[Sorry, I don’t know how] I replied “Mais je connais la chanson” [But I know the song] and I sang a few lines of the chorus as confirmation. “Pourquoi?” [Why?] I asked. “Well, it’s a song my dad used to play for me on the guitar.”

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<td><strong>Tension:</strong> My experience of “the dog story” taught me some important things about language and literacy development. It was my most visceral experience up until that point of how “storied lives” (Short, 2012, p. 9) came to bear on children’s use of language and literacy. It challenged me to think about how seemingly value-neutral things like a pencil become value-laden as children approach them with their life’s stories.</td>
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<td><strong>Key questions:</strong> What was it about music and illustration that allowed the author of “the dog story” to craft her narrative? In what ways do students’ life stories affect language and literacy processing?</td>
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<td><strong>Resolution:</strong> “The dog story” was a powerful example for me of how a pedagogy of</td>
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multiliteracies allows children to find their voice as storytellers. This in turn builds positive identities that can transfer positive engagement to different literacies. What was even more interesting to me was how the author’s experience of giving away the dog affected the type of storytelling that she gravitated to. There was a relationship between the socio-emotional complexity of her lived experience and the communication structures she employed in telling her story. Her feelings of sadness and loss seemed to modulate her choice of modality as well as the transparency with which she shared her story. Her piano melodies and illustrations invited the rest of us into her story without really knowing the meaning. It was safer to play the melodies and show the illustrations as though they were coded representations of more difficult messages that she wanted to share. Those messages held hard truths that were difficult to say, in the same way it is difficult to deliver bad news to a friend. Even after she was done sharing “the dog story” and the class was interested in the meaning of it all, she refused to make herself vulnerable and explain it with words. If it was that easy, she probably would have done that in the first place. Instead, she repeated valuable notes of the final melody until someone “got it”. Only then did she open up about all the details that we didn’t quite get from the original storytelling. I understood better now what Leland et al. (2013) meant when they said that pragmatics is “the social context that surrounds and permeates the other systems” (p. 43) of their model, including graphophonemics, syntax, and semantics. In the case of “the dog story”, pragmatics could explain how graphophonemics were shut down by the author in favour of other modes of meaning-making. I couldn’t help but wonder what would have happened if those other modes were not present. Would “the dog story” have existed if the piano wasn’t there? What other modes might I have been missing that would have helped other students with their storytelling? The amount of potential literacies prohibited me from including all of them in some form in my classroom so that I could guarantee each child’s voice was heard. How could I choose? My experience of “the dog story” taught me that part of the answer was found by listening to children’s stories. It came from getting to know the students’ interests and life experiences, and from connecting with families. Children’s stories can give a sense of whether they participate more in gestural, visual, aural, or spatial means of meaning-making and sometimes they can point directly to particular modes. Making space for those modes in the classroom lets those children know that they are valued, and it creates an educational environment in which learners can transfer their successes from one literacy to another in the grander scheme of their developing identities as storytellers.

The year felt full of important lessons for me regarding the changing nature of French Immersion pedagogy, as well as my changing understanding of language and literacy development. Some of the opportunities and experiences I lived through were predictable while others were unforeseen. The two biggest surprises of the year came near the end. The first was that my wife and I discovered we would be welcoming our 3rd and 4th children next fall as my wife was pregnant with twins. The second was that I was told by my school’s administration that I would be switching to Kindergarten at the same time.
School 2: Year 4. I didn’t want to teach Kindergarten this school year. I was happy in my grade 1 and 2 multiage classroom, and I wasn’t a fan of big life changes. I didn’t want to teach Kindergarten, but I’m glad that I did. I consider my time in Kindergarten as having provided many gifts including a greater perspective on emergent language and literacy, a more authentic experience of play-based learning, and the opportunity to have as a teaching neighbour one of the greatest educators I have ever met.

I thought children’s play as storytelling was pretty straightforward. As they played, they would enact stories and events using the materials at hand. What I didn’t see initially was how deep their stories ran through their personal experiences, and the power of storytelling to make meaning and change perceptions of the world. My Kindergarten colleague down the hall saw and knew these things and I am indebted to her for helping me understand them. It was a stroke of professional luck that I got to work so closely with her at all. As it happened, it was her 32nd year of teaching and the last of her career. You wouldn’t know it, however, from spending time in her classroom where wonder and imagination were ever-present and children’s thinking and learning were made visible everywhere. It helped that we were similar types of people: not overly outgoing but happy to contribute to the community, enjoyers of quiet lunches, and deeply committed to the children in our classrooms. We got to talking almost every day about the different things going on in each other’s classrooms and in retrospect those conversations were some of the best professional development I’ve experienced. One of the most thought-provoking things that my colleague got me onto was the work of Vivian Paley. Paley’s ability to tease out the stories of young children and foster growth and learning through them was truly masterful. Her book The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter: The Uses of Storytelling in the Classroom was an enlightening exposé into how stories can transform lives. It taught me that so much of the storying work that children do through play is intimately connected to their identity. Paley’s
story about her student Jason (Paley, 1991) is an example of how that identity is negotiated through storytelling over the course of long periods of time. Paley (1991) opens her book with the statement “A day without storytelling is, for me, a disconnected day” (p. 3). She goes on to explain that the children’s stories are imbued with their thoughts and feeling and that this is an important thing to pay attention to. Paley (1991) writes:

Amazingly, children are born knowing how to put every thought and feeling into story form. If they worry about being lost, they become the parents who search; if angry, they find a hot hippopotamus to impose his will upon the world. Even happiness has its plot and characters: “Pretend I’m the baby and you only love me and you don’t talk on the telephone.” (p. 4)

This was a level of appreciation for children’s stories that I had not yet considered. Previously I had thought of children’s stories as creative, thoughtful, and even entertaining, but I had not really honoured them as windows into larger processes of meaning-making. “The dog story” from last year shifted my perspective on this somewhat, but it wasn’t until I read Paley that I realized “the dog story” was more the norm than the exception when it came to storytelling: it was just a matter of whether I was listening or not. This led to Critical Moment 23.

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<td><strong>Tension:</strong> I valued children’s stories for their creativity, thoughtfulness, and playfulness. I did my best in previous years to make room for children’s stories, and to provide ways in which they felt most comfortable sharing them. But was I really listening to them? “The dog story” was powerful for its emotional weight and this made it stand out in a different way than other stories. Vivian Paley’s work made me question whether stories like “the dog story” were exceptions or whether they were closer to the norm than I had previously thought.</td>
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<td><strong>Key questions:</strong> What do children’s stories tell me about their thoughts and feelings? How can I live out the type of storytelling that Vivian Paley practiced?</td>
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<td><strong>Resolution:</strong> I had considered myself a pretty observant and thoughtful educator prior to my time teaching in Kindergarten. I had in the past made room for student voices, especially in the area of language and literacy development. Upon reading Vivian Paley’s books I slowly came to realize that it wasn’t just some stories that reflected really powerful meaning-making, but rather that all children’s stories do. Even the most fleeting and disjointed of student stories say something</td>
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about their thoughts and feelings. *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter: The Uses of Storytelling in the Classroom* (Paley, 1991) really made this point, and taught me that it was necessary and worthwhile to pay close attention to each and every story that unfolded in the classroom. This was further emphasized by Paley’s (2004) book *A Child’s Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play*. She wrote “play is the glue that binds together all other pursuits, including the early teaching of reading and writing skills” (Paley, 2004, p. 8). I had felt this previously when I taught Grade 1 and 2, but I had not been able to articulate it. I thought of Husbye et al. (2012) and their use of the term “Storytelling Workshop” instead of “Writer’s Workshop” and how multiliteracies pedagogy naturally invited more play in the creation of stories. I was also introduced to Karen Wohlwend’s 2011 book *Playing Their Way into Literacies: Reading, Writing, and Belonging in the Early Childhood Classroom*. Wohlwend (2011) writes “We can now recognize play as a literacy for creating and coordinating a live-action text among multiple players that invests materials with pretended meanings and slips the constraints of here-and-now realities” (p. 2). My perspective had shifted considerably now as I saw all play as storytelling, and all storytelling as important windows into children’s meaning-making. It was no longer whether stories were telling me something about the children involved, but rather what were those stories telling me. This was a subtle but important shift in my thinking that allowed me to better respond to my students. At the same time, I still had to figure out how I would go about making these stories visible and living them out with children, especially in Kindergarten where I had no previous experience. Paley (1991) again offered guidance as her stories about children’s stories emphasized the dictation and dramatization of stories in her nursery class. Offering a clear glimpse of her pedagogy, Paley (1991) writes:

> I listen to the stories three times: when they are dictated, when we act them out, and finally at home, as I transcribe them from my tape recorder. After that, I talk about them to the children whenever I can. (p. 3)

Here were four actions I would make an effort to include in my work with Kindergarten children. I knew I would invite children to dictate the stories that were taking place in their play, I would provide time and space for children to dramatize their stories, and I would do my best to record them so I could process them at a later date. I would also make an effort to discuss children’s stories in ways that helped us unpack some of the underlying thoughts and feelings that motivated them. My Kindergarten colleague across the hall also pointed me to Patricia Cooper’s 2009 book *The Classrooms All Young Children Need: Lessons in Teaching from Vivian Paley* which was a compelling review, synthesis, and ultimately a guide to Paley’s work. Cooper’s book provided important refinements such as keeping dictations to one page only and suggestions for directing a dramatization. I felt more and more like I was up to the task of reviving play as a source of meaning and fairness (Cooper, 2009).

One of the things I did just a few days before school is I built a stage in my Kindergarten classroom (see Figure 43).
Not only was it a fun place to play, it was also the place where the bulk of our stories were
dramatized. Many stories graced the stage, and all of them reflected meaningful ways children
were storying their lives. I wish I had time and space to share the varied ways those stories
played out, but there was one in particular that I thought was worth including.

The force awakens: Reimagining stories in Kindergarten. It all started with an argument
over who was the strongest Jedi knight. A small group of boys were waving around imaginary
lightsabers in an epic fight to the death. “You’re dead! I got you!” “No way! I dodged it!” was
usually how the real battle began. Then came the long list of reasons why one was stronger than the other. Sometimes the combatants would resolve to join forces, while other times they would agree that neither could really die, what with their connection to the Force and all. Today was different, however, as one of the boys suggested, “well what if you were my dad, then I could just kill you”. I recognized this as a plot point from the most recent Star Wars movie Star Wars: The Force Awakens that had come out a few months prior. To my surprise, over half of the five- and six-year-old Kindergarteners in my class had seen the movie in theatres and they all seemed captivated with the villain of the movie, Kylo Ren. When I gathered the class together at the end of our explorations time, I asked why Kylo Ren was the overwhelming favourite. I was told that he was the strongest one and that he could do anything he wanted. The scene where Kylo Ren kills his father Han Solo was a scene that stood out in the minds of the children as evidence of Ren’s power. “I wish I could kill my dad,” said one of the children. This passing comment didn’t seem too out of place for anyone but me. This is probably because it sat within a growing trend of increasing violence in children’s play. Pretend killing was a way of trying to assert control over events, and I noticed children’s problem solving within their play frames was becoming increasingly violent. Children in my classroom were borrowing strategies from movies like Star Wars: The Force Awakens, Jurassic World, and Spiderman, from video games like Five Nights at Freddy’s, and from television shows like The Walking Dead. These were the stories children were bringing into the classroom, and the often horrifically violent events depicted in them were the subject of meaning-making. While I wasn’t shy about letting my students explore violent stories in the classroom (provided they weren’t physically harming each other), what made those explorations problematic with my students in Kindergarten was that they had a much more difficult time separating reality from fantasy. For example, the child who sat and watched The Walking Dead with his family each week believed that his dad’s day job was a zombie hunter. When I alerted the parents to this assertion in a meeting at the beginning of the year, they seemed
surprised. We spent the next ten minutes of the meeting explaining to their child that the show wasn’t real, nor were zombies, and that the guns his dad kept in the house were for hunting animals like deer. When one of the children said “I wish I could kill my dad” they weren’t just being flippant, but were rather expressing a desire to use a strategy that they had seen work. At that moment I saw an opportunity to unpack some thoughts and feelings surrounding that scene, but rather than having a frank, authoritative discussion I turned instead back to stories. We started first with the child who wanted to kill their dad and invited him to be Kylo Ren. Then we invited someone else to play the role of Han Solo. As the children took their places before re-enacting the death scene, I asked the class what they thought Kylo Ren was feeling in the moments just before he killed his dad. The children identified feelings of anger and sadness. Then, the two boys re-enacted the scene and in a quick instant Han Solo was dead. “OK,” I said to the child who was Kylo Ren. “You killed your dad, and now he’s gone forever. How do you feel about it?” “I’m sad,” the boy said. He elaborated that he was sad that he wouldn’t get to play his favourite board game with his dad anymore and it was something that he would miss. Then I asked “Did Kylo Ren seem happy after he killed his dad?” The children commented on how he seemed pretty angry for the rest of the movie after that, and so probably not. “What might have made him happier than killing his dad?” I asked. “Give him a hug!” one of the children shouted. “Did you want to come up and show that?” The next part of our dramatization was a series of children who came up in pairs to show what they would have done to make things better with their dad. They reimagined Kylo Ren doing things like giving hugs, handshakes, doing deep breathing, and one child opted for one of our classroom strategies and said, “I feel sad when you tell me to clean my room”. Then I asked the children, “Which one is harder to do when you’re sad or angry, be violent like Kylo Ren or do one of the strategies that you just showed?” One of the children astutely pointed out that their younger brother, who was a toddler, sometimes “went crazy” like Kylo Ren when he was feeling mad. We discussed how being violent, or having a
tantrum like a younger sibling, was easier because it didn’t require much control. “He’s not strong at all!” one of the boys said with regards to Kylo Ren. I looked up at the clock and realized we were a few minutes behind our scheduled time outdoors. I thanked the children for such a great discussion and I invited them to put on their outdoor shoes. It was time to get back to playing.

As a graduate student, I had enrolled myself into a readings course the previous year which afforded me the flexibility to explore specific questions I had regarding literacy. I was particularly keen on revisiting my model of literacy processing and my definition of literacy so that I could start to tie up any loose theoretical threads and see if I could apply it to my teaching practice. The first place I started was my definition of literacy.

One thing that I wanted to resist was any reductionist account of literacy. I read through Sumara and Davis (2006) as well as Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler (2008) and decided that literacy was best understood as a complex system which was “spontaneous, unpredictable, irreducible, contextual, and vibrantly sufficient – in brief, they are adaptive” (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 77). It meant that instead of thinking in terms of strict processes for language and literacy use, I would now think about the conditions under which language and literacy emerge. Sumara and Davis (2006) emphasise “that while complexivists embrace the notion that both subjects and subjectivities are shaped by context and culture, they extend this by attending to the ways in which culture is tied to both biology and ecology” (p. 44). This appealed to me especially because I had read so widely in the cognitive sciences and the idea of connecting culture to biology and ecology fit well with the way I was connecting research. Literacy, therefore, is a complex system.

Definitions of literacy were often contentious things that separated well-meaning educators into pedagogical camps, such as those observed by Pressley (2006), and I wanted my
definition of literacy to start from a place of agreement. The more I read, the more it seemed like the place where educators of varying perspectives could agree was that literacy was, if anything, a form of communication. So I dove into communication theory and realized very quickly that it “is not yet a coherent field of study” (Craig, 1999, p. 120). There were many theories on offer, each seeming to specialize in its own way for a very specific communicative problem. One theory that stood out, however, was the transactional model of communication developed by Dean Barnlund (2008). At the heart of the model is the notion that “any conceptual device which might give order to the many and volatile forces at work when people communicate deserves attention” (Barnlund, 2008, p.56). Barnlund used the word “cues” to refer to those conceptual devices and outlined different types of cues that could factor into communication. These could be public cues available to every potential communicant, such as the arrangement of furniture in a room, a highway billboard, or even ambient temperature. There are also private cues available only to an individual, such as music through headphones, the contents of a jacket pocket, or personal thoughts. Add in the more conventionally understood verbal and non-verbal behavioural cues, and it was clear that Barnlund’s model would do well to honour the richness of meaning-making that I associated with literacy. Literacy, therefore, was communication.

Not all communication is equal, however, and if the word “literacy” was going to mean something specific, then there would have to be some way of determining which forms of communication were literacy and which were not. Whenever I thought about this, I would hear the words of Gunther Kress (2010) suggesting that “there is a current fashion to use the term ‘literacy’” (p. 96) when referring to modes of communication, noting specifically that “‘literacy’, whatever the prefix (e-, media-, mobile-, computer-, visual-, emotional-) becomes ever more vague the further it is extended” (p. 102). I also thought of Frank Smith (1999) and his contention that “written language is not a code for speech; it is an independent representation of
language” (p. 152). I felt that if literacy was going to be its own distinct form of communication that it had to be grounded and mediated by an already well established and distinct form of communication: language. Not too many people would argue with Smith’s assertion that writing is an independent representation of language, and so if I wanted to extend my definition of literacy to things beyond written text I had to make sure that other things I wanted to call literacy were also independent representations of language. To be clear, literacies other than writing were not languages themselves nor should they be referred to as such. But they could be language-like, in the way that Frank Smith (1999) might characterize written language, or they could be involved in “languaging” as Halliday (1985) would understand it. Literacy, therefore, was independent representations of language.

Although it may seem that linking my definition of literacy so closely with language was restrictive, in practice became much more liberating. The result was a shift away from thinking about how literacy is restricted to the coding of oral speech, as in writing, to thinking about how other modes of communication can expand to become more rich in their communicative power. Literacy is therefore multimodal (Kress, 2010), in that every mode of communication holds a measure of language potential and most communications utilize more than one mode which are in relationship. Modes can be visual, aural, gestural, haptic, proprioceptive, kinesthetic, or olfactory in the way they invite us to make meaning with our senses, but they are only operating as a literacy when they are at least language-like in the way they communicate. Literacy, therefore, was multimodal.

The characteristics of literacy described above were grounded in people’s lived experiences and accounted for by the context of their lives. Context provided depth in meaning and understanding that was otherwise absent when analysing communicative acts in isolation. The context that surrounds literacy has layers, however, and this created an excellent opportunity
to integrate the work of Heath (1982), Street (1993), and Hamilton and Barton (2001). Heath (1982) suggested that listening to a bedtime story, reading street signs, or watching television ads were all examples of literacy events, a term she coined to label “occasions in which written language is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies” (p. 50). Street (2000) put forward the concept literacy practices as a way to capture “underlying conventions and assumptions around literacy events that make them work” (p. 21). Literacy practices are more of a conceptual abstraction, allowing researchers to explore issues of power, identity, and participation within and across cultures. As Street (2000) comments, “you can photograph literacy events but you cannot photograph literacy practices” (p. 21). Stretching further, I read the work of David Barton (1994) who talked about context as a form of ecology. Barton (1994) used the metaphor of ecology to discuss literacy as a complex system in which niches, balance, and diversity were applicable to literacy just as they were to the study of something like forest ecology. I went further by adding succession, abundance, and adaptation as applicable ecological concepts for literacy analysis and saw the ecological framework as more than just metaphor. These three layers of context, of course, all featured social relationships as necessary qualifiers of experience. Literacy, therefore, was socially situated.

From here, I turned my attention to language and literacy processing itself and how I would be able to analyse it. With the amount of research I was weaving into my understanding, I decided it was best to think of language and literacy use as composed of five levels of processing which I called the structural level, textual level, event level, practice level, and ecological level. At the structural level, Jackendoff’s (2010) Parallel Architecture takes centre stage and analysis can be done on the structural units (from generative engines such as phonology, syntax, and semantics), formation rules of those units, interfaces between them, and the potential drafts of meaning that occurred within an instance of language and literacy use. At the textual level,
elements of Kress’ (2010) social semiotic approach to multimodality factor in as the forms and functions of a text are considered within its overall design. At the event level, Barnlund’s (2008) theory of communication helps map the landscape of available cues, how they are encoded and recoded, the value of different cues, as well as the overall transaction between meaning-makers. At the practice level were Street’s (2000) notion of literacy practices that were rounded out by Bordieu’s (1990) sense of “habitus” that embody elements of identity and power. Lastly, the ecological level borrows terms from Barton’s (1994) work in the study of ecosystems—through concepts of habitat, adaptation, niche, diversity, balance, and succession—and applying it to language and literacy use. Put together, I called this a “bio-cultural tool for literacy pedagogy” as seen in Figure 44.

<table>
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<th>A bio-cultural tool for literacy pedagogy</th>
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<td><strong>Analytical level</strong></td>
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<td>Ecology</td>
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diversity, balance, succession.

*Figure 44.* Theoretical structure of a proposed bio-cultural tool for literacy pedagogy.

For my readings course, I applied my definition of literacy and bio-cultural tool to the analysis of my student who made sense of the book *Hop on Pop* at the tutoring centre. In practice, however, there was another opportunity for me to try on this new theoretical organization. At my school, Kindergarten teachers had the flexibility of creating their own report cards as we were not bound by provincial templates. When it came to create the March reports that my Kindergarten colleague and I used to comment on literacy, I used my definition and analytical tool as the lenses through which I reported progress. On the cover (see Figure 45) I was able to make some strong statements about literacy, play, and learning that I felt framed the page on literacy (see Figure 46).
Learning in Kindergarten

Each child develops in his or her own way. Differences between children are normal, and the range of difference is quite wide. Paying attention to these differences allows us to create "developmentally appropriate" experiences for each child.

Play is the work of children. Different kinds of play help children think through problems and ideas that they are trying to make sense of. Playing allows children to construct understanding, foster relationships, and further their development in all areas.

Literacy is a way of communicating. When children use writing, music, movement, or visual art in similar ways to spoken language, they are communicating through literacy. Healthy literacy development includes more than writing.

Numeracy is the ability to process mathematical information. Children develop numeracy by constructing understanding about numbers, patterns, shapes, and probability. This is done best in authentic and playful contexts.

Kindergarten is a time when these abilities and ways of being emerge. Children need time and space to experiment with strategies that they invent. They might invent a strategy for turn-taking, invent a spelling of a word, or invent a way of organising materials. Kindergarten children are successful when they feel comfortable inventing and using their own strategies.

Figure 45. Cover for Kindergarten report card, March 2016.
Figure 46. Literacy page for Kindergarten report card, March 2016.
I was happy with how the reports turned out as I felt they communicated the complexity inherent in literacy while also making accessible the richness with which each child engaged in literacy. Each of the boxes on the literacy page provided relevant information, and they also represented areas where I as a teacher could make some professional decisions around how best to support literacy development. They were also well received by parents who told me that I “really knew” their child, a compliment I consider of the highest quality. It was also the first time I had parents tell me about how they shared their reports with extended family members. While there are some things I would change about them now, overall I felt I was moving in the right direction. On the heels of this work I was also invited to share my thinking as a guest speaker in a graduate-level language and literacy course at the local French university and the response I received there furthered my resolve that these ideas made sense in a French Immersion context.

This year ended up being a much better year than I had envisioned at the start. What was a daunting professional change to Kindergarten in the midst of a large personal change in welcoming twins to our family turned out to be an enriching gift that has had a lasting impact on my theoretical understanding and pedagogical practice. As the year was coming to a close, the personal changes within our immediate and extended family began to greatly outweigh any professional progress I was making. After some deliberation with my wife, we decided I should take a leave of absence to look after our children, help my wife with her transition back to her own profession after a series of maternity leaves, and to help my aging in-laws whose needs were also increasing. I applied for a leave, was accepted, and would say goodbye to this school that made such a difference in my career and that I will forever cherish.
Part 4: From family man to frontman

One year turned into two and before I knew it, it was time to focus on my career again and head back into the classroom. I accepted a position at a smaller school within the same division in a grade 2 and 3 multiage French Immersion classroom. What was nice about this school, and a first for me professionally, was that it was a “French milieu” school with only French Immersion classrooms. That change in atmosphere was refreshing because it shifted the dominant language among staff from English to French, despite many of the staff having English as their dominant language outside of school. This change in school, and singular focus on French Immersion, also meant that I could more fully embrace my identity as a French Immersion teacher. In the professional circles I travelled in, and within the professional development opportunities I experienced, this was not something I would always advertise. French Immersion had a reputation, especially among some critically-minded progressive English program teachers, that I didn’t always want to confront. But my days of quietly minding my own business were coming to a close as my role and identity as a French Immersion teacher were changing.

School 3: Year 1. The staff at my new school were an amazing bunch of teachers who impressed me with the ways they were organizing their classes and spending their time with students. As I walked through the halls I could feel parts of Reggio-inspired pedagogy, a value for play-based learning, and an interest in multiliteracies. The overall approach at the school was student-centred and staff members seemed generally open and curious about how to push French Immersion pedagogy forward. It was also the youngest group of teachers that I had worked with, and I realized that I was no longer one of them. Now approaching a decade of service, and with a little dusting of white in my beard, I was one of the “experienced” teachers. I had never thought of myself that way, and I don’t really intend to anytime soon. But I can’t control perceptions and
as the third highest ranking staff member in terms of teaching years, I couldn’t blame others for seeing me that way. I remember being asked to help plan one of the first staff meetings of the year, and part of that was an invitation to lead a small team-building activity. This struck me as somewhat odd since I didn’t really know anyone there and hadn’t yet established any relationships. People weren’t entirely sure who I was and, frankly, I was trying to figure that out myself. The truth was that it felt more like my very first year of teaching than anything else. I was coming back after a two year hiatus and there were a lot of questions swirling in my head about how I was going to approach the year. I had just as much insecurity, if not more, than even the first-year teachers on our staff had. I had to set up a new classroom, get to know a whole new learning community, and find my place amongst the professional culture at the school that was going in exciting directions. This year ended up being characterized by experiences that affirmed many of the things I had worked hard to develop in my career, while also pointing at larger pictures of practice that I wanted to involve myself in.

One day early in the year I was sitting in my classroom after school pouring over some documentation and thinking about the kinds of engagements I wanted to prepare for my students the next day. As I was planning the next day’s explorations I was greeted by one of the second-year teachers who was teaching Grade 1. She had stopped by my classroom because there was this “mentorship program” that the school division offered and she wondered if I would be her mentor. I was elated as I thought back to myself in that first year after my transfer. “The mentorship program is AMAZING! Of course I would!” I said. I added that the only condition was that it felt like a more equal collegial inquiry. We both would follow professional questions together as we explored ways that our pedagogy could be improved. Although nothing will compare to my time in the “manateeship”, my Grade 1 colleague and I engaged in some interesting conversations around reader’s and writer’s workshops and how to engage more
students in literacy activities of all kinds. My colleague was handed a copy of *Talking, Drawing, Writing: Lessons for our Youngest Writers* (Horn & Giacobbe, 2007) and she wasn’t sure how to make sense of it. Neither did I. On the one hand it seemed inclusive of multimodality as the title suggests, but on the other it seemed to organize talking, drawing, and writing into a formulaic and linear process (also suggested by the title). We decided together to set it aside and try something different. I introduced my colleague to the workshop model proposed in Lucy Calkins’ (2001) book *The Art of Teaching Reading* and together we adapted it for a more multiliteracies oriented classroom. The subject of an opening minilesson, for example, could be any kind of “text” that we saw as fit for the storytelling that children were interested in doing. My colleague discussed how her class was interested in puppets, and we discussed the use of “The Muppet Show” and some of Jim Henson’s interviews as “mentor texts” for puppetry. My class at one point was very interested in dramatic storytelling with no voices. This lent itself to minilessons inspired by Charlie Chaplin movies. We talked about these “mentor texts” as important sources of convention that can be used in children’s own storytelling. After a minilesson children would be free to craft their stories while the teacher would conference with individuals or small groups in response to their needs. At the end of a workshop there would be a time for sharing, where we could unpack some of the challenges or celebrate some of the progress that students were making. In this way, instead of guiding children from talking to drawing to writing as though they are all means to an end, we developed something a little more responsive and dynamic. It affirmed for me that literacy is a complex system and that children’s storied lives don’t unfold in lock-step ways. Neither does their development. It also affirmed a growing sense that approaches to literacy pedagogy were not things that you do in your life, but rather ways that you live out your life.
I was happy to see that “teacher talk” was still a thing that the school division offered, and I was fortunate to be in a “teacher talk” group with three very thoughtful teachers. Our conversations covered topics such as bilingual education, multiple literacies, emergent literacy, as well as cross-curricular integration and they were always anchored by heartfelt reflections on our experiences with children in the classroom. There were deep and meaningful questions being asked and I felt proud that this thinking was informing French Immersion pedagogy at our school. Those conversations helped me think through events that year which led to a powerful and transformative class project.

**Shattered: A collaborative art project in grade 2 and 3.** November 6\(^{th}\), 2018 is a day that I won’t forget. It was the day that I walked into my classroom and felt the chill of cold air. I looked around the room and noticed right where the cold air was coming from. It spilled in from a large gaping hole in one of our windows. Shattered glass littered the floor inside our classroom and the ground outside. I looked up at the clock. 20 minutes until the children arrived. I had to trade in my normal morning preparations for some time with the broom and dustpan. I alerted the school’s custodian and he tackled the outdoors while I tidied up the indoors. As I followed the trail of glass across the floor of my room, I found the culprit. It was a large chunk of concrete, presumably from the parking lot, that someone had thrown through our window the night before (see Figure 47). This wasn’t a unique experience at our school, but it was jarring nonetheless. In the minutes before the first bell rang, children crowded outside around the window watching the custodian board it up with plywood, wondering what was going on.
The children came into the room filled with questions. At our morning meeting, I showed them the rock and explained what happened. The children didn’t know what to make of it. Why would somebody do this? Sensing the priority of this event in the students’ sense-making, I took out a large piece of lined paper and did my best to provide some space for the students to process what they felt. I asked them, “Qu’est-ce que tu dirais à la personne qui a brisé notre fenêtre?” [What would you say to the person who broke our window?] To my surprise, the very first thing someone suggested was “I’d ask him what he was feeling”. I was floored by the immediate expression of empathy after such a transgression. “Comment sentez-vous?” [How do you feel?] I asked. “Triste.” [sad] “Fâché.” [angry] “Frustré.” [frustrated] “Choqué.” [Shocked] We took all of these ideas and created a haphazard shared writing piece that tried to capture the whole event (see Figure 48).
Although we didn’t intend for it originally, it ended up sounding like a bit of poetry written for the person who broke our window. So we titled it accordingly as “La personne qui a cassé notre fenêtre” [The person who broke our window]. After that, we went about our day and the window was replaced before the end of the week.
The story of the broken window, however, was not so ready to go away. It would creep up every now and again in the months that followed and it was always accompanied by wonderings such as “Are they coming back?” “Are other windows going to get broken?” and eventually “Do you think we’re safe?” When I started hearing questions about safety, I couldn’t ignore the legacy of the broken window any longer. I decided to get the children together, now months later, to discuss how they felt about our window. It was a lot of the same responses I got in November. A central question that we hadn’t answered was “Why would someone do that?” In order to help answer this we turned to storytelling. We gathered at the beginning of a storytelling workshop and I asked the children what they think the person felt when the broke our window and why. There were interesting theories that emerged, such as anger at friends who mocked him, sadness at a difficult home life, and frustrations both big and small. I invited the children to get together in groups and dramatize one of the reasons provided. We placed the rock, which we had kept, in the middle of the stage and invited the groups to come up one by one to dramatize the reason why that person threw the rock. One interesting suggestion that someone had was that there should be no dialogue. We also decided that we knew the scene was over as soon as someone touched the rock. So we played out potential moments before the rock was thrown, over and over, exploring anger, sadness, and frustration. Afterward, we decided to hang onto some of this thinking in our sketchbooks by drawing what the moment just before the window broke looked like. I thought about ways we might be able to use different kinds of art to capture this moment, but I was struggling to find something that made sense. I asked one of my “teacher talk” colleagues who was active in the local arts scene whether she knew of any artists who could serve as a mentor for this project. She gave me a short list of artists that included the likes of Louise Bourgeois who explored themes such as death, but the one that stood out to me was Cornelia Parker. Cornelia Parker was known for exploring violence in her installation work, and her piece *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* is regarded as one of her most iconic works.
of art (see Figure 49). It depicts the moment at which a garden shed was violently exploded, holding the moment in stasis so that it could be experienced and contemplated.

![Image of Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View by Cornelia Parker](image.jpg)

*Figure 49. Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* by Cornelia Parker. Currently the property of the Tate museum in London, United Kingdom.

I showed her work to the students and they were captivated. They wanted to do the same thing, and capture the moment that our window was broken.
I invited the children to engage in a small moment writing piece around what they thought the person was feeling and why they wanted to break our window. This was meant to accompany the drawings they had already made. In the meantime, I salvaged some old windows from a non-profit building supply store and brought them to the classroom. In order to gather the pieces for her exploded shed, Cornelia Parker had the British army physically blow up a shed with military grade explosives. I figured the least we could do was break some windows. I set up a tarped area on the stage in our classroom and we gathered the widows, some safety gear like goggles and gloves, and our writing pieces about why that person broke our window. Once set up, the children were invited to again do some role-playing by taking the rock and smashing the windows in the way they thought the person who actually broke our window felt (see Figure 50).

*Figure 50.* Taking turns smashing windows with the rock that broke our classroom window.
I gathered the broken shards of glass and the frames, and we set off to plan our installation. We studied many of Cornelia Parker’s works and noticed that great attention was payed to the placement of each piece. Wanting to do the same, the students agreed that we should make our installation look like the rock had just exploded through the window and we planned layers of glass that would help us achieve this effect (see Figure 51).

*Figure 51.* The first two layers of glass on paper templates denoting positioning relative to the window frame. We used 30-pound fishing line to hang the pieces of glass.

The end result was a striking installation that represented a moment in our lives that touched us so deeply (see Figure 52).
After completing this installation, I invited the children to do some reflective writing on how they felt about our window after the creation of our art, and to record those reflections orally. “Je me sentais frustré…J’ai trouvé la paix par brisé la fenêtre, et ça m’a fait calme” [I felt frustrated…I found peace by breaking the window, and it made me feel calm] one student shared. After having gone through the experience of contemplating a range of reasons and feelings associated with breaking the window—in effect, storying the broken window—and physically hearing, seeing, and feeling the rock go through glass, many of the children expressed that they now “knew” what that person felt like and they were no longer worried about the safety of our class or the other windows in our room. For some, the pain of having our window broken
remained, but it now also reminded them of the joy they experienced making our collaborative art piece. We left it up in our room for the remainder of the year, and shared it with the larger community at our school’s celebration of the arts evening in June. As the year closed, the children didn’t want to let go. “Where is it going to go next?” they would ask me. I didn’t know. The installation would almost certainly have to move, but the story surrounding it was much more immobile. It was also now a story of triumph and a story of finding peace.

I would close out the school year with a presentation at a local university, in a graduate class that was exploring ways of cultivating rich learning experiences. It was an amazing class: one I wish I had the chance to take when I was doing my graduate coursework. I was invited as a guest speaker to talk about the different experiences I had lived out with language and literacy in my classrooms over the years. I told the story of Hop on Pop, “the dog story”, the story of our broken window, and a few other cherished stories that showcased the amazing ways children made meaning of their worlds and storied their lives. It hit me afterward that the same thing applied to my career. It was a career of stories, and the most valuable lessons that I have learned have come through the ways I have storied my career in anticipation of future classrooms and future stories. Stories have helped me make sense of the world, and in particular the language and literacy lives of children. The story I’m telling right now embodies years of thinking, exploring, experimenting, and critical thinking that have shaped my understanding of language and literacy development. And yet, that sense-making is far from over. For now, however, my storytelling must come to a close as I have officially caught up with the moment in time that I sit and type these words. I await new opportunities in the fall as I take on, for the first time, the challenge of not being a classroom teacher at all. I will be taking my stories with me into a new position as a learning support teacher—a lifeline for those on the front lines, and hopefully a
frontman for the kind of vision in French Immersion education that I feel is already in the making.
Chapter 5: Discussion

In writing this autobiographical narrative, I have attempted to weave together two larger stories into one: my evolving understanding of language and literacy development, and my co-evolving identity as a French Immersion educator. Within the history of my career these two stories are very much inseparable as one informs the other. In order to properly answer my research questions, however, it will be necessary to tease them apart and analyse their contents for lessons that can inform future ways of being and stories in the making. I will first consider how my professional experiences, both inside and outside of the classroom, have shaped my understanding of language and literacy. How do cross-disciplinary connections evolve over time, and how do they complexify my theory of literacy? How am I able to effectively communicate my understanding and does it allow for the escape from the constraints of contemporary literacy pedagogy? Second, I will consider my growing acceptance of a French Immersion teaching identity as I explore new pedagogies related to language and literacy education. Does my theory of language and literacy align with a vision for French Immersion education? Who am I as an educator within all of this and does it need to be French Immersion specific?

Theorizing Language and Literacy

If there was one professional inquiry that remained constant over the years it has been my interest in language and literacy development. I left the university in 2008 with very different notions of what literacy was than I do now as I sit to write this chapter. A significant part of that journey from then until now had to do with the critical moments in my career that challenged my thinking and caused me to continuously refine my understanding. I will now review the 23 critical moments scattered throughout my autobiographical narrative and how they contributed to my evolving theory of language and literacy.
**Critical Moments 1–4: Setting the foundation.** These critical moments framed my time as an undergraduate student and pre-service teacher. With only my own elementary education as a reference for literacy learning, the first exposure I had to any kind of contemporary literacy pedagogy was from Reuztel and Cooter (2005). Their focus on skills-oriented activities made sense with my experiences growing up, but it also brought back feelings of disengagement that I didn’t want to create for my own students in the future. I was then introduced to Regie Routman (2003) and my perceptions of what reading instruction could be like in a classroom changed. Routman (2003) suggested things like sharing your own reading life, involving children in the organization of the classroom library, creating warm and comfortable places for children to read, and having children read from quality children’s literature. Her book was filled with things that added authenticity to reading, and it felt like children would be more engaged by her approach. One other thing I appreciated was that she was the first trade book author I had ever encountered that explicitly told her readers to question research. Routman (2003) very much felt like it was on opposite ends of a spectrum to Reutzel and Cooter (2005), and Pressley (2006) helped me understand that this was partially true. He observed that there were “pro-skills” and “pro-whole language” people that tended to dominate literacy research and pedagogy. In this light, Reuztel and Cooter (2005) felt very much like “pro-skills” researchers and Routman (2003) felt very much like a “pro-whole language” researcher. Pressley (2006) then offered up a third group that he called “balanced literacy” as a response to the sometimes extreme dichotomization and partisanship that occurs with the other two groups. He argued that they each had valuable tenets that could inform literacy, and so taking a “balanced” approach meant that you could respond to student needs by combining the best of both. Katie Wood Ray (2006) made an excellent case for authentic children’s literature as the source for studying the writing craft. Her question “What have I read that is like what I want to write?” was hugely influential for me. She taught me that good reading and good writing were intimately connected, and it was clear that Pressley would
probably lump her in with Routman (2003) in the “pro-whole language” group. Frank Smith (1999) was certainly no stranger to that group, although I wasn’t aware of his role in founding whole language at the time. When I read the passage “the most effective literacy teacher is the author of the book a child is enjoying reading” (Smith, 1999, p. 152), this resonated with Ray’s (2006) message and I started to see myself as a potential “pro-whole language” kind of teacher. But something was still missing. Reutzel and Cooter (2005), Routman (2003), Ray (2006), and Smith (1999) all discussed the various behaviours that teachers and children would exhibit in ideal circumstances. None of them talked about what was going on in the minds of children. I wondered what was really going on when children were reading and writing. Frank Smith’s (1999) article revealed a possible line of inquiry when he wrote “written language is not a code for speech; it is an independent representation of language” (p. 152). Language—I needed to learn about language if I wanted to know more about literacy. Steven Pinker (1994/2007) demystified all things language-related for me while also introducing me to an exciting mixture of cognitive sciences. I graduated from the faculty of education with a foundation in literacy pedagogy that detailed a spectrum of approaches with “pro-skills” on one end, “pro-whole language” on the other end, “balanced literacy” somewhere in the middle, alongside an underlying capacity for language that I had yet to connect with reading and writing.

**Critical Moments 5–6: Curricular connections.** When I decided to take the leap into French Immersion teaching despite job offers elsewhere, I wasn’t sure what the expectations or demands were or if they were any different than those of the English program. Although I had my own concept of what literacy was, as informed by my undergraduate degree, it was somewhat disconnected from the local teaching context I was about to enter. I decided to consult with the provincial curriculum documents to see what their recommendations were. These documents were authoritative and I hoped they would provide clear guidance. I discovered,
however, that the French Immersion French language arts implementation document (Éducation, Formation professionnelle et Jeunesse Manitoba, 2001) made theoretical and philosophical claims around child-centred pedagogy that were not always consistent with some of their more transmission-oriented and skills-based lesson plans. The English language arts curriculum document was an interesting counterpoint (Manitoba Education and Training, 1998). It integrated reading and writing with listening, speaking, viewing, and representing in a more authentic way that focused more on making meaning than it did on learning skills. But, just as in the French language arts document, there were lesson suggestions and activities that didn’t always seem to fit with the conceptual organization of the rest of the document. Taken together, the French language arts and English language arts documents seemed to straddle either side of what Pressley (2006) would call “balanced literacy”: the French document more aligned with a skills orientation and the English document more aligned with a meaning orientation. Their respective inconsistencies did, however, leave room for either a skills-oriented or meaning-oriented interpretation. At the school I was teaching, the dominant way of interpreting either curriculum document was through commercial literacy programs. I couldn’t get on board with those programs because, for the most part, the ways of being they promoted were contrary to the lessons I learned from Routman (2003) and Ray (2006) and the impact it seemed to have on my students. These Critical Moments helped me situate the French and English curricula, as well as a number of commercial literacy programs, within my understanding of language and literacy development. They also challenged me to situate myself within it all.

**Critical Moment 7: Cognitive connections.** Pinker (1994/2007) opened up a whole new world of research for me as he drew on a multitude of cognitive sciences to explain the complex phenomenon of human language. It was different from the type of research and information I received from education trade books and professional development workshops and it sparked my
curiosity. I followed up with Pinker’s (1999) *Words and Rules: The Ingredients of Language* and a picture of language emerged that included word-stuff stored in the mental lexicon, the operative rules of a mental grammar, and a “mentalese” that these connected to. This raised interesting questions that led me to Paul Bloom (2002) and Stanislas Dehaene (2005). Bloom (2002) explained how words got into the mental lexicon, and Dehaene (2005) explained how the brain’s neuronal circuitry was recycled in ways that allowed for reading and writing. This was exciting to me as I could then make connections from brain activity through cognitive modules to classroom behaviour and back again. Their work also provided me with ample evidence to support ideas like the rejection of decontextualized word learning, and the relative ineffectiveness of practicing pseudo-words on reading development. What I found especially refreshing about the research I was reading was that the researchers were there to offer explanations for phenomena they found interesting: nobody was trying to sell me something or tell me how to do my job. As a result, important cognitive processes became clearer and that helped me to greatly refine my understanding of language and literacy.

**Critical Moment 8: A deepening divide.** It was a just a matter of happenstance that I took part in two very different professional development experiences within the span of two weeks. This made the contrast in their approaches even more salient in my mind at the time. Beverly Tyner’s focus on skills and standards could not have been more different than Reggio-inspired educators who talked about emergent curriculum. Tyner wanted children to avoid economic failure while Reggio-inspired educators wanted children to make meaningful connections to their community. These positions were another instance of the skills-oriented and meaning-oriented groups crashing into my world and widened the gap between them. Every time I encountered this dichotomy of orientations in my professional life I became slightly disoriented. I wanted to give perspectives serious consideration, but that required me to swing in one direction to entertain a
set of ideas then swing back in another direction to entertain a different set of ideas. Pressley’s (2006) invitation to “balanced” literacy was appealing if only to avoid the fatigue of going back and forth between orientations in an attempt to make sense of language and literacy development. Instead, I started to resist the whole paradigm and started to search for ways around skills, meaning, and balance orientations.

Critical Moments 9–10: A Parallel Architecture perspective. My understanding of language use and processing were deepened as I continued to follow lines of inquiry through the cognitive sciences. Pinker’s fuzzy ideas of “words”, “rules”, and “mentalese” as the main components of language were brought into sharp focus through the work of Jackendoff (2007) and his Parallel Architecture. Jackendoff’s (2007) model would opt instead for the generative engines of phonology, syntax, and semantics. Perhaps the most radical part of the Parallel Architecture came from the fact that those generative engines processed language in parallel instead of sequentially. Jackedoff (2007) also demonstrated how this was possible through information interfaces that existed between the structures used by each of the generative engines. Lastly, he showed how all three types of structures were stored together in the mental lexicon. The work of Ziegler and Goswami (2006) would further explain how phonology was processed and this seriously challenged some long-held beliefs about the alphabetic principle and phonemic awareness. Ziegler and Goswami (2006) demonstrated how operating at the level of the phoneme led to too many sound-letter inconsistencies in languages like English and French and suggested that it was far less effective than paying attention to the onset and rime patterns within syllables. Their work, by itself, changed some of my classroom practices which I noticed made a difference for students. Further inquiry into brain activity related to reading (Cohen & Dehaene, 2004), lexical access (Levelt et al., 1999; Sahin et al., 2009), the psycholinguistics of reading (Goodman, 1967; Holdaway, 1979), cueing systems (Adams, 1998), best practices in literacy
instruction (Pressley et al., 2001), and a healthy dose of critical reviews of research (Coles, 2000; Howard-Jones, 2008; Strauss, 2005) started to fill in more pieces of the puzzle. There were enough components to my understanding of language and literacy development that I felt it was possible to synthesize them into a single model. Of note was my desire to include orthography as a fourth generative engine. This model valued parallel processing, drafts of meaning, and a whole host of processing features that challenged beliefs taken for granted by skills-oriented, meaning-oriented, and balance-oriented educators alike.

**Critical Moments 11–13: Failing French Immersion.** Outside of the work I was doing with children in my classroom, my model would be indirectly tested through my experiences in a remedial learning centre as well as some partnerships with teachers at my school. The learning centre represented the purest distillation of commercial literacy program delivery that I had ever witnessed. There were programs for reading, programs for writing, programs for behaviour, and programs in books, on paper, and on computers. The 55-hour and 80-hour programs they offered were the last line of defense in what they viewed as extreme reading and writing failure on the part of grade 3 to grade 6 students. The school division was so confident in the results of the learning centre that it became a multi-million dollar enterprise. Their approach at the learning centre, however, contradicted some of the core concepts of my model of literacy such as the necessary contextualization of reading and writing experience as well as the parsing of phonology into onset and rime patterns. But, according to them, if their program wasn’t able to help a student, nothing would, and their own internal action research study suggested positive impact across all grades. A student of mine participated in the full 80-hour extended program and still managed to walk out “below grade level” in both reading and writing. The explanation: French Immersion. According to the experts at the learning centre, French was too hard and detrimental to her development, so out she went to the English program. At no point did anyone
question whether the learning centre was really what it made itself out to be. No one thought twice about the fact that their action research study showed that my student’s experience was not unique, and that many other children left the centre no better off than when they go to it. No one questioned how statistics were manipulated to make the program look more successful than it actually was, and no one dared to question the authority of the commercial programs that were employed at the centre. Back at my school, my model was indirectly tested by some partnerships I had with other teachers at the school. In particular I witnessed how learning in Kindergarten was becoming academicized and how French Immersion education was characterized by the transmission of information by teachers for the purpose of building skills. The themed booklets my grade 3 students worked on with their Kindergarten partners contradicted again things I understood about language and literacy development. The interface between the picture of the beach ball and its associated text was fractured and confusing. It led children to fill in the beach ball with multiple colours rather than a singular blue which was demanded by the text. This type of choice on the part of the children could be assessed by an undiscerning educator as “below grade level” behaviour. The problem in some of their eyes: French Immersion of course. When I had a group of students share with me their heartfelt stories about guided reading in previous years, I was already at a breaking point. The cause: again, French Immersion. I felt like I had finally started to break free of the current paradigm in literacy education, but French Immersion education at my school was trying to beat me back into submission. If I wasn’t going to quit teaching altogether, I would have to drag French Immersion education with me as I explored the frontiers of my understanding in language and literacy development.

**Critical Moments 14-16: Transacting rather than transmitting.** For a long time, my understanding of literacy was coloured by the “simple view” of reading popularized by Hoover and Gough (1990). Even my model, inspired by Jackendoff’s (2007) Parallel Architecture, still
featured processes of decoding and comprehension even though they were less linear and the boundaries between them were much more blurred. Rosenblatt (1969) changed my perspective as her transactional theory of reading put a reader’s past experience and expectations on the table as factors in the meaning-making process. Interestingly, this realization didn’t change the physical structure of my model as much as it changed my interpretation of it. The transactional nature of reading made sense to me as I thought about the multiple drafts of meaning that were generated through my model. It also explained the personal nature of lexical access and how some words and word structures “came to mind” more readily for some, and not so readily for others. When I switched school divisions and participated in the “manateeship” I could see those transactions between children and texts much more clearly, especially when the children were at play. My time in the Early Literacy Education Series at my new school also broadened my notion of what a transaction could be. Husbye et al. (2012) made a convincing argument that children had a more complex sensory experience of stories, and it challenged me to think about the types of “texts” children could or should transact with. Could they be a piece of music, or a dance routine? My definition of literacy expanded as I considered texts outside the context of reading and writing. Short (2012) reinforced the importance of this as she pointed out that most of the sense-making we do is through stories. Why limit children to only one form of story? Brown et al. (2012) also contributed to my understanding by showing that the physical act of reading is even itself non-linear, and that meaning-making is a complex construction. Although I hadn’t made any visual changes to my model, my theorizing now accounted for a student’s past experience and current expectations and interests as influential on processes of language and literacy use. I also saw other potential generative engines in the form of literacies outside of reading and writing.
Critical Moment 17: Prevailing French Immersion. I owe it to one of my French Immersion colleagues my renewed sense of hope in French Immersion education. Our experience as “teacher talk” partners opened my eyes to more progressive ways of being with children in French Immersion. I developed methods of documenting children’s language and literacy use. I shifted from more common paper-based and project-based assessment techniques to including more analyses of photos, videos, and voice recordings. Using those forms of documentation also changed the types of language and literacy use that I was valuing, providing richer and more accurate reflections of children’s learning. “Pedagogical documentation”, as my colleague referred to it, was also consistent with my expanding definition of literacy and my growing interest in the ways children transacted with texts. Pedagogical documentation allowed me, for example, to capture the powerful story of my student who made sense of Hop on Pop at the tutoring centre. Without it, I might have had a very different impression of that student’s abilities. My “teacher talk” colleague and I also discussed different types of language used throughout the day, and this added bit of complexity allowed me to be more mindful of the way I was engaging students with the French language. Overall, it was a great relief to no longer feel like I was running counter-current to French Immersion pedagogy, but rather like I was helping to develop new directions for it to flow. Evolving conceptions of language and literacy development were not language-specific.

Critical Moment 18: Redefining literacy. One of my graduate courses really challenged my notion of what literacy was, and what I could label as a “literacy”. The New London Group (1996) as well as Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) really shifted my perspective to a much more panoramic view of what could be included as literacy. The idea of multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) and multimodality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) opened a seemingly limitless set of possibilities for what could be considered literacy. But there was a risk in exploring this
newfound territory in that the more you attribute to literacy, the less value it has as a concept. If everything could become a “literacy”, was anything truly a “literacy”? I began first from the perspective of human communication and carved out a space for literacy as a clearly defined subdomain of communication. I acknowledged that literacy could make use of all of our senses, but that those senses would be employed in modes that made use of language structures. Those modes would generate a variety of texts that were then interpretable by others. This redefinition resulted in practical changes like my experimenting with play, music, and movement as storytelling.

**Critical Moment 19: Socializing literacy.** When I saw a model of reading by Leland et al. (2013) it immediately reminded me of my own. For example, there were elements of phonology, syntax, and semantics processing. They also included something in their model that I didn’t have in my own: pragmatics. This was something that I had always thought about ever since I read Rosenblatt (1969), but I never really found a meaningful way to incorporate the socio-cultural context of language and literacy users. The evidence was mounting, however, especially with the work of Heath (1982), Street (1993), and Hamilton and Barton (2001) which I very much agreed with but also put in the “add this later” pile. Although I could sense it on some level in my work with children—the obvious idea that socio-cultural circumstances affected language and literacy use—it remained a separate yet related part of my definition and model of literacy. Leland et al. (2013) found a way to work it into their model, but having it represented as an almost ethereal background noise to the act of reading was unsatisfactory to me. I wanted to make direct connections. I wanted to be able to draw a line from someone’s personal experience right through to something like the way they process syntactic structures. I felt like those connections existed, I just couldn’t pinpoint them yet.
Critical Moments 20-21: Unveiling French Immersion. My career path afforded me with a few opportunities to speak publicly about French Immersion education. Of particular interest to me was to share some ideas that were not common knowledge amongst most French Immersion educators but that allowed for an important shift in the way French Immersion approached language and literacy development. The first two of these ideas came from Jim Cummins (1998). His theory of additive bilingualism showed that dual language development could occur at no cost to the development of a dominant language. This meant that French and English were not adversaries jostling for precious instructional time throughout the day. Cummins’ interdependence hypothesis went even further by stating that in fact while a child was learning one language in a dual language learning environment, they were also at the same time developing the other language. This meant that languages did not need to be so rigidly separated as they often are in French Immersion education. This also made sense with my model of literacy as the mental lexicon would be able to connect units of phonology, syntax, and semantics from multiple languages into singular entries. The semantic entry for \( \text{Animal CAT} \) could simultaneously interface with the phonological units /kat/ and /ʃa/ (“cat” and “chat” respectively). Genesee (2006) would add to Cummins’ insights by declaring that they applied to all students regardless of their socio-emotional or academic needs. This challenged the common practice of transferring students out of French Immersion because of perceived challenges with the French language. It was difficult for some of these ideas to percolate in the consciousness of French Immersion teachers because there were many other voices with many other insights about how to approach French Immersion. A very notable voice was that of Roy Lyster. His research in corrective feedback is renowned throughout French Immersion education (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). While his analysis of teacher feedback was interesting, it came packaged in a set of assumptions that I felt held back French Immersion education from any meaningful reform. To begin with, his number one suggestion for corrective feedback—elicitation—only worked 46%
of the time according to his own study. But then there was this whole idea of being “corrective” in the first place. Is that how we really speak with people? It certainly wasn’t how I wanted to position myself in relationship with my students. No wonder even the best corrective feedback works less than half the time. In a presentation of his I attended in 2014, he also advocated for pretending you didn’t understand a student by saying “Je ne comprends pas” when they spoke erroneously in French, changing the words of an original text to suit your instructional goals, and making sure that English and French instructional time were separated. The photos and videos that he shared of exemplary classrooms looked very much like they were transmission-oriented environments as there was always a teacher at the front of the class and students neatly seated at rows of desks or in rows on the opposite side of teachers across large tables. I wanted people to know instead about Roger Cousinet (1959) and his respect for children, as well as his repositioning of the teacher as a collaborator alongside children’s inquiries. I wanted people to know about Cousinet’s flexible grouping of children and inclusion of play (Raillon, 2008). I wanted them to know that the history of French education revealed more natural and effective language and literacy development than they may have thought.

**Critical Moments 22–23: Social interfaces.** Up until I heard “the dog story” I hadn’t been able to reconcile the influence of socio-cultural experience with my model of literacy. Through “the dog story”, however, I could trace how a painful memory (giving away a pet) was difficult to share using a frustrating mode (writing), and so a whole set of structures (orthographic cues) were inaccessible. It didn’t have to do with the tools specifically as the student used paper and pencil to make her drawings. It also didn’t have to do with representing something painful because the student combined illustrations with piano melodies as a way of doing so. Rather, I suspect the difference came from the *interfaces* between her past experience, the mode of writing, and its associated lexical structures. I think that the pain and loss of giving away the dog
wasn’t interfacing well with writing because the student may have thought that either she couldn’t do a proper job of communicating it with written words, or that written words simply wouldn’t be able to do a proper job no matter what. The written text “I gave her away” seems like a very sterile vehicle for her sense of loss compared to the lone melody she played in the absence of an illustration. The former is a weak interface for communicating loss whereas the latter is a strong interface. And if you had a really important story you wanted to tell, were telling it in front of a group for the first time, and wanted to look competent telling it, which one would you be inclined to choose? Had that student written the words down and read them to us, we probably would have gotten her message more easily, but we would not have gotten her meaning as clearly. I could see it now. There were social interfaces. Past experience and current socio-cultural conditions interfaced with the generative engines of my model in the same way that each of the generative engines interfaced with each other. I noticed how the student was still languaging with the piano melodies as the pitches and rhythm of the last melody interfaced with the phonology and semantics of the words “I gave her away”. The rhythm interfaced with phonology as they were played according to syllable structure: “I–gave–her–a–way”. The pitches interfaced with the semantic structures as she played the last five notes in ascending order (indicating motion) and ending specifically on the seventh note of a major scale without any resolution (indicating tension). Maybe I’m making too much of it. She surely wouldn’t be able to articulate her choices in the way I just explained, and I doubt she was very conscious of those decisions. It was, nevertheless, the way she felt about it. When asked why she chose those notes, she did say: “Because it’s the only really notes that played the right tune I wanted … it just sounds more sadder.” You don’t have to know Western music theory to know what feels “more sadder”. My experience in Kindergarten with the Star Wars boys seemed to confirm some of this. They had generated the following semantic relationship:
These semantic structures basically read as “If the dad makes his son angry, the son should kill the dad”. This construction, or something like it, was effectively impressed upon their memory by the dramatic scene of Kylo Ren killing Han Solo. One of the boys played with this construction when he and his friend couldn’t decide who killed whom in their lightsaber duel. He tried to reposition his friend as his dad so that his friend would become “killable” as indicated in the above semantic structure, thus giving himself an advantage in the duel. Another boy played with that reality when he expressed “I wish I could kill my dad,” substituting himself for Kylo Ren and his dad for Han Solo. As a whole class, we acted out different solutions that ultimately challenged their semantic construction that was previously called up in drafts of meaning as a desirable option. Instead of killing, expressed semantically as Then([Cause(Person,SON,[State(DEAD(Person,DAD)])]) we acted out how to:

- Then([Action(HUG(Person,SON,Person,DAD))]); give your dad a hug
- Then([Action(INHALE(Person,SON))]); take a deep breath
- Then([Action(SPEAK(Person,SON), Content([Cause(Person,DAD,[State(BE(Person,SON, Feeling,ANGRY)])]))]); telling your dad how you feel

By re-storying the conditional choice to kill we were able to reframe it as less desirable, and provide other semantic constructions to call up in future play scenarios. I’m confident that our play generated these new semantic constructions within the lexicon because for all intents and purposes those re-storied events really happened. At least, in as real a way as Kylo Ren killed Han Solo and generated this problem to begin with. Our bodily movements interfaced with dramatic storytelling which interfaced with semantic structures as we lived out new experiences
and generated new potentials. The experiences that emerged from “the dog story” and the Star Wars boys were small windows into how storying as sense-making affects language and literacy systems, and how language and literacy systems may affect storying as sense-making. Social interfaces were another element that I could consider in facilitating engagements with language and literacy and they helped me reconcile how socio-cultural influences were directly connected to language and literacy processes.

Over the course of my career, significant developments have occurred in the way I have theorized language and literacy. It began with an understanding of literacy pedagogy as being categorized within three orientations: skills orientation, meaning orientation, and balance orientation. In this way, literacy was largely about reading and writing, and reading and writing were about representing oral language. Now, I understand literacy as a complex system of generative engines that process a multitude of cues in parallel, leading to multiple drafts of meaning on the part of language and literacy users. This new conceptualization of literacy resists current paradigmatic categorization into the three orientations because the nature of parallel processing and the way that information interfaces along brain activity, mental processes, individual behaviour, socio-cultural processes, and ecological conditions requires a perspective that is unconstrained by skills, meaning, and balance orientations. In fact, it is not possible to be skills-oriented while understanding interfaces just as it would not be possible to be meaning-oriented while understanding parallel processing—and with skills and meaning orientations rendered useless so too is the search for balance between them. Where literacy for me was once the representation of language through reading and writing, I now understand it as a form of “languaging” that occurs in multimodal ways within the social context of past experiences and present expectations. To remain theoretically or practically within the constraints of the three
orientations seems untenable as they promote unnecessary constraints on the ways children
develop identities as meaning-makers and storytellers within their own lifeworlds.

**Identifying as a French Immersion Teacher**

When I joined the faculty of education as an undergraduate in 2006, I would not have
predicted a career in French Immersion. Although it has been tumultuous at times, I’m happy I
chose that path and I’m happy I stuck with it. My story has revealed to me certain themes that
were essential in helping me construct a positive identity as a French Immersion educator, and I
wish to explore those here. While some of them will apply only to a French Immersion context,
others will most certainly apply to any teaching context.

**The “othering” of French Immersion.** French Immersion is commonly seen as one of
two major education programs in my province, the other being the English program. Parents with
children nearing school age, or newcomer families from other countries, must contemplate which
of the two they would like to enrol their children in. This is the first point at which French
Immersion is “othered”. French Immersion is positioned as an alternative program to the more
mainstream English program. Provincially, enrollment is around 13.6% and it has been climbing
for the last 5 years (Canadian Parents for French, 2018). Parents often see the choice as “French
or no French” and that reality is often lived out for students in the province. It was certainly
something I felt in my first few years of teaching in a dual-track school that had both English and
French Immersion classrooms. English classrooms, for the most part, had or wanted nothing to
do with the French language. This was evidenced in my co-teaching with an English grade 4
teacher in School 1. To me though, the notion of “French or no French” is a false dichotomy.
Rather, in my view it is “How much French?” as the English program has an official French
component from kindergarten all the way through grade 12. This fact is often overlooked at the
time of entry into the school system, and I can say with certainty that many English program
teachers do not incorporate French language learning, as mandated by the province, into their classroom communities. French Immersion is “othered” by French Immersion advocates as well. They often advertise the French Immersion program as a way of increasing the likelihood of future employment, a boon for cross-cultural travel, and as a more cognitively enriching experience. French Immersion then comes off as “elitist”, and this is exacerbated by school communities that transfer French Immersion students with socio-emotional or academic challenges out of the program into the English program. I experienced this first-hand, having one of my own students transferred early in my career. This has led to a sense that French Immersion is a more demanding program, and as a result, requires the kind of pedagogy that can more efficiently deliver more instruction in the same amount of time as the English program. This simply isn’t true, and my story is evidence of that. My identity as a French Immersion educator has been at its weakest when I had the greatest sense of “othering”, either by marginalizing French Immersion as an alternative program or as an elitist program. My identity was challenged by circumstances which prevented me from exploring pedagogical directions that break free from transmission-oriented teaching motivated by a false sense of having to get more out of daily instructional time. I’ve been able to grow into my identity as a French Immersion educator by realizing that every teacher in the province is a French teacher in one way or another. At least they should be. My identity is strengthened when I can explore pedagogy— with French Immersion or English program colleagues—that responds to children first before it considers the language of instruction, especially when the French language is seen as “another” or “the other” burdensome language. I’ve been proud of French Immersion when it adapts to the needs of its most challenging learners and shows that although French Immersion shouldn’t be for everyone it can be for anyone.
**Bilingualism must be more inclusive.** In the French Immersion program there is a near obsession with the quality of French that gets used at every grade level. Attaining “native-like” usage is the gold standard, and there is a lot of anxiety and insecurity on the part of teachers and students about coming up short. There’s no time to waste in a French Immersion classroom where the French language is sacrosanct. I definitely felt this during a professional development presentation by Roy Lyster, one of Canada’s foremost scholars on bilingual education. Many French Immersion educators looked to Lyster for ways they could increase French language proficiency. I have never adopted the extreme concerns shared by some of my French Immersion colleagues, and my identity as a French Immersion educator has been predicated somewhat on challenging what it means to be bilingual. Are current preoccupations with “native-like” status warranted? What does it mean to be bilingual? François Grosjean, co-founder of the Cambridge University journal *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* and author of the book *Bilingual: Life and Reality* (Grosjean, 2010), defines bilinguals as “those who use two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives” (Grosjean, 2010, p. 4). This would appear to many French Immersion educators in my province as too “loosey-goosey” of a definition that allows for people who have not attained “native-like” proficiency. When Grosjean (2010) is confronted with the idea that bilinguals are those who are fluent in both languages, have no accent in either language, and do not let one language slip into the other, he comments:

… most bilinguals are simply not like that. They may not have acquired their languages in childhood, spoken their languages in the home, or lived in two-language communities. Many have not been schooled in all their languages, many have an accent in one of their languages, and more often than not one language does interfere with the other. If one were to count as bilingual only those who can pass as monolinguals in each language, one would have no label for the vast majority of people who use two or more languages regularly but
do not have native-like fluency in each. According to the fluency definition, they are not bilingual, and yet they are not monolingual either, because they live their lives with more than one language. (p. 20)

Of course proficiency and fluency are important for communicating in another language, especially if you want to be understood, but they are not themselves the definition of bilingualism. French Immersion education needs to welcome this perspective as it evaluates its own effectiveness and considers pedagogical reform. Even more than this it needs to embrace the fact that for many students, especially in the community that I teach, French is a third or sometimes fourth language. As a French Immersion educator, I identify as someone who welcomes students as bilingual, or multilingual, as long as they are using those languages in their daily life. Proficiency and fluency come as we work through authentic forms of communication, but never should a student feel like French is not worth using when they could in fact use it. Nor should they be derided as not really bilingual until they seem like a monolingual speaker in French. Part of the problem also comes with restrictive notions of French culture in my province. The French language was brought to my province by early fur traders in the 18th century, and many French families in the province trace their heritage back to these original fur traders and their settlement in the province. So prevalent is this as a matter of French identity in the province, that there is an annual 10-day festival every year that celebrates the French community’s fur trade heritage. The festival has also been recognized officially by the national Commissioner of Official Languages for its promotion of French heritage in my province. The problem is that this heritage, while an important part of the province’s history deserving of celebration, is not shared by a significant number of French families including my own.
Figure 53. Pierre and Berthe Arbez, circa 1893.

Figure 53 shows my great-great-grandfather and great-great-grandmother Pierre and Berthe Arbez who immigrated to Canada in 1893 from the département de Jura in France. This was over 20 years after the Hudson’s Bay Company transferred their territory in the West to Canada, after the fur trade had ended. They established a farm 100km from where I currently live and at no point had anything to do with a “voyageur”, the joining of my province into confederation, or the business of the Hudson’s Bay Company or Northwest Company. I share this only because when the famed week in February eventually comes and everyone trots out their “ceinture fléchée” and celebrates “French” culture, I don’t feel included. I enjoy the history of the fur trade, but I sometimes feel like French culture in my province is misrepresented by a part of the French community that assumes token status for the rest of us. My identity as a French Immersion educator is built on being more inclusive than that: of valuing other cultures and histories that have contributed the French community in my province as well as those who have no history in a French community but want to be a part of this one.
Critical friendships are essential for professional growth. It is hugely important to feel like you are not alone. This is a general life lesson, to be sure, but it is especially true in teaching. The sense of connection or isolation a teacher feels can take different forms, but at some point there needs to be at least one person you can go to in order to untie a cognitive knot or make sense of something that happened in the classroom. I don’t mean an outside friend or a family member, or a sympathetic colleague in another school division. There needs to be one person in the building who knows you, gets where you’re coming from, and is willing to act as a critical friend. My first three years of teaching did not include such a person, and I was lucky in my fourth year of teaching that there was someone who at least wanted to hear what I had to say. My fifth year of teaching brought about the life-changing “manateeship” experience and from there I would engage with a variety of colleagues who shared the same questions as I, and who made me feel like I was a part of something a bit bigger than myself. Eventually I would be invited as a critical friend for others, although I’m always focused on what each and every person I meet can teach me, regardless of their background or experience. My identity as a French Immersion educator could not have grown were it not for the friends and colleagues who helped me reflect on theory and practice over the years. My identity exists as part of a network of educators who are also focused on the same kinds of professional questions, who have similar professional goals, and who are committed to thinking critically about the kinds of changes that could benefit French Immersion education.

Professional freedom leads to greater flourishing. Working with children in a classroom, on the front lines of education, is a complex and demanding task. It can feel frustrating and ruinous at times, while most other times it is joyful and rewarding. The stakes are high, and the decisions teachers make can greatly affect what is considered to be a vulnerable demographic within our society. As such, universities do their best to prepare teachers while
schools and school divisions do their best to support them. But that preparation and support are value-laden, and my story highlights how different approaches can elicit very different results. In the first school I worked, support looked like the digital archive of printable activities, the divisional assessment program, and the learning centre and commercial literacy programs. In the second school I worked, support looked like an active mentorship program, an early literacy professional learning group, release time for the purpose of professional dialogue with colleagues, and encouragement in pursuing graduate studies. The first made me want to quit the profession while the second completely revitalized my career. The major difference between the two was the level of professional freedom each school and school division was comfortable giving its teachers. The question of how much professional freedom to allow teachers stems from a very real problem: some teachers make mistakes and bad things happen. I’m talking about perceptions of wasted class time, lagging student progress, ineffective classroom management, or lack of adherence to curricula. Under these kinds of circumstances it is tempting for those in power to label a teacher as incompetent. It’s like having a package delivered, only to open it up and realize that the contents are damaged and there is no return policy. You try to find a new way of being with what you have, and in the case of my first school division that meant increasing rules and regulations that limited choice and coerced a certain type of behaviour. Compliance was even written into the contract! But this lack of trust, which erodes professional freedom, comes at the cost of something very valuable in any organization: wisdom. Wisdom is what allows teachers to interpret, balance, and respond to the needs of children. Wisdom is cultivated through the development of traits like loyalty, courage, fairness, generosity, and self-control among many others. How do you even make a rule for something like self-control? It’s oxymoronic. Trends like performance accountability based on student test scores, or packaged instructional programs with step by step directions, stifle wisdom. Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe (2010) write in their book *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do the Right Thing*:
… tighter rules and regulations, however necessary, are pale substitutes for wisdom. Aristotle might say that we need rules to protect us from disaster. But at the same time, rules without wisdom are blind and at best guarantee mediocrity—forcing wise practitioners to become outlaws, rule-breakers pursuing a kind of guerrilla war to achieve excellence. (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010, p. 10)

My identity as a French Immersion educator comes from a demand for, and great appreciation of, professional freedom and the wisdom it cultivates. The truth is that teachers don’t begin their careers as out of the box, “plug and play” professionals. It takes time to develop and hone skills that make a positive and lasting difference in children’s lives. Some people are shocked, for example, at the way famed educator Vivian Paley began her career. Barbara Mahany, who interviewed Paley, reported:

She’d gotten into teaching she candidly admits because, “Ohhh, I couldn’t think of anything else. Sad to say, I hadn’t considered anything else either.” And for the first 13 years that a bunch of kids called her “Teacher,” she did her job the easy way. “I wanted to get through the day as quietly and quickly as possible.” She followed the teacher’s guides, passed out the mimeographed sheets, even had a time-out chair when it came into vogue. (Mahany, 1995, para. 82)

It is important to recognize the time and space—the freedom—required in becoming your best teaching self. It also comes with the responsibility of using that freedom for critical reflection and professional growth. The story of my career revealed to me how important this was, and as a French Immersion educator it is even more so as it becomes increasingly difficult to staff French Immersion classrooms.
My autobiographical narrative inquiry, and its interwoven stories, have helped me make sense of some important issues in my career. With respect to language and literacy development, I have learned that the current foundation for literacy pedagogy comes from the paradigmatic constraints of skills-oriented, meaning-oriented, and balanced approaches. This paradigm is reflected in professional development opportunities, trade books, and curricular documents with competing orientations sometimes paradoxically packaged together. These tensions between orientations, as well as the oversaturation of support materials that are all offering their own interpretations, are hinting at a state of paradigm paralysis. The cognitive sciences reveal a rich source of information and inspiration that can help shift thinking away from the current paradigm. Communication theory, linguistics, psychology, semiotics, and neuroscience can offer confirmation or denial of some of the current paradigm’s most unchallenged axioms while also providing evidence for conceptual pivot points into new lines of inquiry or understanding about literacy. French Immersion education could especially benefit from such rich perspectives as it grapples with two languages of instruction, a diversifying student population, and hopefully more responsive pedagogical practices. The landscape of communication, and the way we tell our stories, has permanently changed as well: technologies are being democratized and globalization is providing access to greater numbers of people. Multimodality and multiliteracies must be staples of this new reality, and the way that socialization affects literacy development—even at the most rudimentary levels of processing—must also not be ignored. I have learned these things within the context of French Immersion education, and certain conditions need to prevail if French Immersion is going to be a place where these insights into language and literacy development will be able to flourish. French Immersion needs to resist the way it is sometimes “othered” within the larger education system. French Immersion educators should be able to find connection with all educators in the province, as the French language affects us all, and find common pedagogical questions, beliefs, and practices that they can share as we all work towards
better responding to the needs of children. Who we accept as bilingual, and as members of the French-speaking community, needs to shift towards a more inclusive vision, and French Immersion education can easily facilitate this. French Immersion educators need to be encouraged to think critically, and to do so alongside friends and colleagues so that they can exercise professional freedom and develop the kind of practical wisdom that will strengthen and sustain the program. I am proud to call myself a French Immersion educator under these conditions and excited for the future direction of language and literacy learning.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

While I hope that this study has brought to the surface some novel insights, critical questions, or points of theoretical and practical intrigue, I’m also hoping that you as the reader have some sense of having heard these stories before—a sense of familiarity with some of the themes or events that unfolded. After all, we all make sense of the world through “storied lives” (Short, 2012, p. 9).

If this story is like your own, then I hope that as you journey through your own circumstances you can see a few pathways that I have already travelled, and find some guidance that can help you rise in the face of some challenges that will eventually come.

If this story seems completely foreign to you, then I hope you now know that this is a story that some people live out, and that we can always show more compassion for our colleagues whose stories seem very different from our own.

If this story has presented elements of both the known and unknown, then it serves as an exciting opportunity for sense-making: the spirit of which I’ve tried to hold onto throughout my career and the inspiration with which we all story our lives. Others’ stories have certainly helped me: for it is the stories of children and adults making meaning in their worlds that helped me grow into my identity as a French Immersion teacher. I have learned how to be, and what needs to be, in a vibrant and flourishing French Immersion program. I will now be less shy about reinvesting time and effort into sustaining that reality. Others’ stories have also taught me just how rich and complex the use of language and literacy can be. In re-collecting some of those stories I have learned that meaning-making through language and literacy begins first with a singular consciousness. That consciousness could belong to an individual, or a group of individuals, who bring with them past experiences and present expectations that are pieced
together in a socio-cultural mosaic of memories that act as a template of the world. When those experiences and expectations are called to mind, they colour the types of structures we have stored in the individual or collective lexicon with different values. Structures are then brought in parallel into working memory as larger drafts of meaning are constructed for communicative or imaginative purposes. Those drafts of meaning are then shared through our senses and are conversely interpreted through our senses which are parsed in parallel into working memory for the purpose of generating larger drafts of meaning that are coloured by past experiences and present expectations (see Figure 54).
Figure 54. My current model of literacy. The star in the centre represents a consciousness (either singular as in the single star, or plural as in the multiple points on the star). The consciousness is affected by a mosaic of memories that invoke past experiences and present expectations. Those memories interface with the mental lexicon, as represented by the gradient transition. The mental lexicon also interfaces with our sensory experience. Cues stored in the lexicon or experienced through our senses are processed in parallel via generative engines, represented here by a circular band that includes the generative engines for oral language. This model sits within the larger transactional contexts of literacy events, practices, and ecologies (not represented here).
All of the elements involved in these communicative transactions—experiences and expectations, parallel generative engines, and sensory signals—all interface with each other, sharing meanings and strengthening the meaning-making process. And that meaning-making, as rich and complex as it is, can be analysed through structures, texts, events, practices, and ecologies of literacy. Lastly, it feels appropriate to provide a summary definition of what literacy is, exactly. Here’s my attempt:

"Literacy is a complex system of human communication that uses the parallel processing of language structures as the basis for sharing and constructing drafts of meaning from combinations of multimodal semiotic resources that are valued differentially across social and physical environments."

If that definition sounds about as satisfying as furniture assembly instructions, I think I might agree with you. But at the same time, I believe it to be true, at least provisionally. Even more than that, my definition of literacy breaks free from the current paradigm of skills and meanings (and attempts to balance them out), to a new paradigm where skills are meanings and meanings are skills. My current understanding is that they are part of a métissage that cannot be undone. Take the rather banal example of a young reader who has paused in his reading because he has come to something he doesn’t know. Is he without skills? Is he without meaning? Is he without an optimal combination of the two that would allow him to carry on? It is my contention that it is none of the above. Rather, that reader is employing all of his skills and all of his meanings as a unified force at that moment of transaction with the text. It is in their relationship as one, in the way that they interface, that we can discover the catalysts for the most powerful transformation and development. This, for me, is the new paradigm and the landscape of a new reality that my definition seeks to map out. So I invite you to breathe life into that otherwise dull and utilitarian
definition, as I now will set off to do, through your work with students in the teaching contexts you find yourself in: in short, through your story.
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