

**"I Wanted to Lie About My Level"
A Self Study: How My Daughter's Experiences with Leveled Books
Became a Lens for Re-Imaging Myself as a Literacy Educator**

by

Darla Chase Forbes

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
The University of Manitoba
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

Master of Education

Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

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Abstract

The conceptualization of this thesis was born out of a conversation that occurred between my six-year-old-daughter Madeline and me. During this conversation she shared that she did not want to return to school because she felt as if she was the worst reader in the class, based on the book level she was assigned to read in her grade one classroom.

My concern and discomfort with this conversation prompted me to begin keeping a parent literacy journal, following in the tradition of other parent literacy researchers (Crago & Crago, 1983; Bagbhan, 1984; Bissex, 1980; Martens, 1988). In addition to recording Madeline's home and school literacy experiences, this journal became a place for me to question and challenge my own ideas and beliefs about literacy education. As I began the process of writing the story I had documented with the data from my literacy journal, it became apparent that my educational story as a parent and early years teacher was closely intertwined with Madeline's experience. My own questions, concerns, ideas, and thoughts provided the basis for re-imagining my own literacy program in my future classroom. I have, therefore, grounded my study in the methodological paradigm of narrative, self-study.

Reviewing the scholarly research about leveled books and the reading instruction paradigm into which they fit, and then systematically analyzing data derived from my parent literacy journal, has led me to patterns and themes that address issues of: identity, purpose, beliefs, reading models, public reinforcement and external rewards, and power.

Acknowledgements

It has taken me over five years to complete my graduate studies requirements in order to obtain my Master of Education degree. As I draw near to the end of this learning journey I am filled with excitement and relief. There is also a small pang of sadness that this time in my life is over. I have met many wonderful people who have helped me to challenge and strengthen my ideas and beliefs. My graduate courses have been fantastic. I eagerly anticipated each class. I am grateful to have been able to work with so many wise and dedicated professors. Writing my thesis has been a difficult and frustrating experience at times but has afforded me the opportunity to intensively think through ideas and concepts that are pivotal to me as a person and as a teacher. There are many people I wish to thank for their support through this process.

To my husband, Mike. I could not have undertaken this journey without your support. You have completely supported me every step of the way. You willingly gave up your own personal time to provide me with opportunities to work. You have made endless late night coffee runs and listened endlessly to me talk about this project. I love our life together - thank-you, thank-you, thank-you!

To my best friend, Shannon Silvestri. On one of my most discouraging days you showed up at my door with coffee and flowers and a card reminding me that this was a story worth telling. You truly understood the passion behind this process because you lived a similar leveled book experience with your own little guy. Thank-you for the times you added my children to your own crew so I could have extra time to work.

To my special friend, Leanne Nazer-Bloom. Your own PhD studies and defense were inspirational to me and I have appreciated all of our conversations about the process. You also provided me with my first full writing day to 'get started' by taking my girls and spending the day with them. Thank-you also for sharing your time and 'word-smithing' talents with me!

To Ellen Kornelson, computer-wizard and fabulous friend, extraordinaire. I realize when I first asked you for 'some computer help' you were completely unaware of exactly how limited I was in this area. Thank-you for not screaming and walking away from this project when it quickly became clear. I can truly say this thesis would never have gotten to print if you had not come on board and so willingly helped me. Thank-you for all of the time you have selflessly contributed to this project. I promise I will get a new computer program for future writing projects...one that will allow me to double space and add page numbers.

I am also grateful to my parents, Gary and Dianne Chase. Thank-you for all the time you spent with the girls so I could write. I know the girls loved the extra time they got to spend with you and I appreciate your commitment to helping me complete my thesis. Thank-you!

Thank-you also to my mother-in-law, Twyla Forbes. You committed one night each week for almost three years to our family so I could attend graduate courses. Thank-you for your investment in our family.

Thank-you to my advisor, Wayne Serebrin. It is hard to put into words what your support has meant to me. I am fortunate to have had you as a professor almost fifteen years ago in my undergraduate studies. Your exceptional knowledge and passion for teaching and learning inspired me back then and continues to do so today. Over the past five years you have been my friend, boss, mentor, advisor, and master teacher. Despite your insanely busy schedule you have always made time to support me and my learning. Thank-you for supporting this idea from the day I first talked to you about it and for helping it come to life.

I am also grateful for the other members of my thesis committee, Professor Gregory Bryan and Dr. JuliAnn Kniskern. Your enthusiasm for this project and helpful comments and suggestions were very much appreciated.

Lastly, thank-you to my three lovely daughters: Madeline, Emma Kate and Sadie. You continually teach me new things every day. I love you all. A special thanks to Madeline for so willingly letting me share her story.

Introduction

It was a bright, sunny morning in the fall of 2005. My six-year-old daughter Madeline and I were on our way to her weekly gymnastics class. My cheerful mood kept me from noticing that she was unusually quiet and sullen that Saturday morning. After we had driven for a while her voice sadly piped up from the backseat.

“Mom, I don’t want to go back to school on Monday.”

This statement was so unexpected that it took me a minute to comprehend what she was saying.

“I thought you liked school. Why would you say that?”

“I am the worst reader in the class.”

“What! What would make you think that?”

“Everyone else is on Level B or higher. I am the only one still on Level A.”

“It’s embarrassing and I don’t want to go back.”

This thesis was borne out of the above conversation. Although this conversation became the “critical incident” (Newman, 1998) that most challenged my thinking at the time it occurred, the topic of reading practices was something I had been reflecting upon, having just completed my graduate coursework. Early in my MEd program, I had been asked to write a personal statement articulating what I hoped to learn and accomplish through my course of studies. My statement dealt almost entirely with literacy learning. Previous to my graduate work, as an early years teacher I knew my theoretical understanding of literacy had never fully aligned with my classroom practice. As well, although I felt confident in my beliefs about how children learn to

read and write, I often seemed to falter when I tried to articulate my views to others. I knew I needed to both connect the theoretical underpinnings of my literacy beliefs with my practices and be able to clearly articulate and explain these beliefs and practices to colleagues, parents and administrators.

My conversation with Madeline launched an exploration of a specific reading practice that has swept through schools in Manitoba - the use of leveled books for reading instruction. I began this exploration with the following questions: What are leveled books and where have they come from? What is the basis for leveling books? Why are they so prominent on the school landscape? What effects are leveled book programs having on children? Are there children who do not experience success in such programs? Are these programs an effective way to teach children how to read? What does success with leveled books really mean in terms of literacy learning? Will sorting children into levels help them become confident and proficient readers in the future? Are children learning to read for a meaningful purpose in these leveled book programs? And on a personal level, as a mother, I wanted to help Madeline preserve her identity as a reader, even though she was not experiencing the “success” with leveled books that many of her classmates were enjoying.

I have informally challenged my ideas about literacy since the first day I started teaching. The tensions between my beliefs and the established practices dictated by the private school in which I was teaching, became too difficult to reconcile and I made the decision to leave. From there I went to a teaching position in a public school and taught a nursery program. Again, I ran into challenges between my beliefs and practice. I co-taught with a woman who had been teaching the nursery program for over fifteen years. She had created a very traditional

program that I was expected to follow. Although I was able to share some ideas with her and believe I did contribute to building some rich experiences with the children, the program was basically hers, and the parents seemed to embrace it. The program was built largely around an alphabet study in which individual letters of the alphabet were taught separately with letter activities every day. Instead, I wanted to be helping children to participate in authentic language experiences rather than isolated skill experiences. Once more, I felt I needed to leave a teaching situation frustrated and disheartened. I began to wonder if there was a school in which my literacy beliefs and practices would be supported.

I acknowledge that as an educator I have been unable to educate parents about what is important in literacy learning, specifically learning to read. I honestly wonder if when parents are adamant about their children learning to read in a certain way (often how they were taught) how successful I will be in helping them to understand alternative ways of enabling their children to grow into what I would consider to be “strong” readers.

Literature Review

To deepen my own understandings of reading instruction methodologies, I begin this thesis with an examination of the research literature on literacy teaching methodologies. The question about how to teach reading has been at the center of a debate that has raged for centuries. As the North American landscape changed from one composed mostly of small towns to one based on growing urban centers organized around industrial and commercial interests, the traditions of literacy lessons and schooling no longer served society. The search began for new methodologies. Four distinct methodological groups still vying for control today emerged: humanists, child-centered proponents, scientific managers and the social reconstructivists. Although tenets from each of these domains have appeared in the literacy landscape at various times, Shannon (1988) explains:

Social, economic, and political circumstances and the public's fascination with business, science, and behavioural psychology have enabled advocates of the scientific management position to dominate American reading lessons since the 1920s through the nearly universal use of commercially prepared basal reading materials. Although the rhetoric of the humanist (e.g. classic literature) and the child-centered (e.g. stories appropriate for grade levels and interests) approaches appear in basal materials, the central focus of basal lessons is on the systematic, even standard, delivery of instruction along a fixed sequence of reading and language skills with periodic use of standardized tests to monitor student progress through the materials. (as cited in Shannon, 1990, p.14)

Although Shannon penned these words twenty years ago, they still accurately describe the current educational climate in which we live. Continuous reports about the “current reading crisis,” suggesting illiteracy numbers are on the increase, have led to demands from parents and administrators for “more accountability.” This accountability is usually framed in terms of testing or measurable outcomes such as “levels.”

Think back to your own reading instruction. If you are like many of my generation it would have resembled the following scenario. The teacher would have divided the class into three groups, each group consisting of students of roughly the same ability level - homogenous ability grouping. The reading groups may have had cute names such as squirrels, blue jays or rabbits. It would soon become clear that the squirrels (or whatever name they were given) were the best readers in the class. Similarly, the blue jays after a few reading sessions would have come to realize they were the middle or average readers in the class. And before long everyone in the class knew that the rabbits were the worst readers. Everyone knew that when the rabbits went up to the front of the classroom to sit on the carpet and read with the teacher, it would be a long, painful process of pauses and choppy, fragmented reading.

In the lower grades, “rabbits” often didn’t even get to use one of the graded readers that the other groups were using. Their time would often be spent drilling with flash cards or chanting phonics rules. The other two groups would be sitting at their desks quietly completing pages of seat work which might include teacher-made worksheets, commercial workbooks or other tasks that stressed isolated skills such as phonic blends, syllable counting or letter sound identification. In the two other groups of students, those who completed their work first might then get to take out a book of their choosing and do some quiet reading, if there were books in

the classroom. In this model, the readers who most likely needed to be reading and practicing reading continuous text, such as whole stories, were least likely to have this opportunity.

Although many of us probably remember this reading experience, I wonder how many of us actually remember the stories we were exposed to from this reading.

This model has characterized reading instruction in North America for the last sixty years (Goodman, Freedman, & Murphy, 1988). As a teaching model it was problematic for a variety of reasons. First, learners were grouped in ways that made it obvious to them whether they were or were not successful learners. Allington (1995) writes that this sorting of children into groups could be hugely damaging to some children. Another reason this teaching method was problematic was that it did not trust learners to make decisions. The students in this model were passive. The teacher was in control of virtually every aspect of the process. The reading materials were predetermined with little or no choice for students, right down to the number of pages that they were expected to read in a session. A reading program such as this was based on reducing learners' experiences to a small subset of the total reading experience; teaching them that they needed to learn discrete skills (phonics, sight words, etc.) first before they could attempt the whole reading act in all of its complexity (Cambourne, 1988; Larson & Marsh, 2005). This model also assumed that children progressed in similar ways and acquired specific skills in particular sequence (Larson & Marsh, 2005). While it is accepted that no two children learn to walk in the exact same way or in the exact same time frame, society seems to think that every child should learn to read in the exact same manner and in the exact same time frame. As a result of this societal expectation, educators and parents treat literacy teaching in a very different way from how we view children's language learning in and outside of a school context. "When

children learn to talk they are not expected to wait until they have all the systems and the sub-systems in place before they are allowed to talk with others" (Cambourne, 1988, p.37). If this were the case, children would not be interacting through talk for many years - perhaps never. And yet, we don't look at the acquisition of literacy in schools at all in this way.

It might seem as if I have digressed from the discussion of the current use of leveled books to a discussion of an old model of reading instruction. The reason I chose to write about this model is two-fold. First, many parents and educators can relate to the above scenario, since many of us went through that process. And while most of us did learn to read, I would argue that this was in spite of the shortcomings of the instruction we may have received. Frank Smith (1978) addressed this point long ago when he wrote, "In the two-thousand year recorded history of reading instruction, as far as I have been able to discover, no-one has devised a method of teaching reading that has not proved a success with some children" (p. 4). Perhaps the question to be asked about the generations of people who were taught with the above method is not so much, can they read, but rather, knowing how to read, do they choose to do so and how well do they read? Jackson (2003) writes that 42% of college graduates never read another book after college.

The second reason I addressed the above reading model is that it is really not far removed from the current leveled book phenomena in widespread use today in Manitoba. While today's teaching behaviors may have shifted slightly, the substance is much the same. The underlying methodological philosophy is grounded in the same cognitive, psychological theory (Cambourne, 1988; Larson & Marsh, 2005) which assumes that children progress in similar ways and acquire specific skills in sequence.

Leveled Texts

Turning back to leveled texts, I'd like to present a closer examination of them. Leveled texts have become a major component of reading instruction in many Early Years (kindergarten to grade 4) classrooms in Manitoba and throughout North America. Leveled texts generally refer to reading materials that represent a progression from more simple to more complex and challenging texts (Brabham & Villiaume, 2002). Brabham and Villiaume (2002) write:

Different text progressions use different leveling criteria. Some are based on readability formulas. Others apply multiple criteria related to language predictability, text formatting, and content. Still others present progressions of letter sound relationships. These progressions also reflect varying degrees of precision. Some progressions provide estimates of grade-level difficulty (e.g., gr. 3); others use smaller increments (e.g., gr. 3.2); still others depart from grade levels and order texts using letters (e.g.; A-W) or numbers (e.g.; 1-20). (p. 438)

The multiple and varying ways in which books are leveled illustrate that unless parents have actively researched and educated themselves about the particular leveled book schema their children are working within, they can not truly know what the progression through book levels means. What is the basis for a child being placed at a certain level? Similarly, when children progress rapidly through certain levels, what does this really mean? Parents seem to have "bought into" the concept of text levels being synonymous with children's growing sophistication as readers.

There are two major categories of leveled books. The first category uses children's literature that has been assigned a level, in an attempt to match individual children with the appropriate book difficulty (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; 1999). The second category uses books

written for the sole purpose of teaching reading skills through a progression of text difficulty (Pitcher & Zang, 2007).

Quality of writing is not a consideration in this second category of books. In fact, in a study undertaken to determine whether these leveled texts were of high quality from a linguistic perspective, Pitcher and Zang (2007) utilized criteria suggested by British educational linguist Katherine Perera. According to Perera (2005), early reading books such as leveled texts, must meet three requirements in order for them to be considered “good books.” These requirements include: supporting children as they begin to read; showing children that reading is enjoyable; and offering good models for children’s own writing (as cited by Pitcher & Zang, 2007). In addition, Perera (2005) identified two other key linguistic features of good story books for beginning readers: they must have a recognizable story structure with a satisfying ending and make use of rhythmic and natural-sounding language (as cited by Pitcher & Zang, 2007). Pitcher and Zang concluded their study by noting:

It is indeed challenging to produce interesting, well structured stories written in rhythmical, natural-sounding language while using only a strictly controlled vocabulary and endeavoring to repeat the most important words frequently enough for children to become familiar with them. (Pitcher & Zang, 2007, p. 50)

The researchers then state that it is crucial for classroom teachers to include in their classroom libraries other types of texts such as trade books and magazines so that students’ reading experience can be made truly enriching and enjoyable. Personally, I wonder why educators use leveled text sets at all, rather than using already available, excellent children’s literature for facilitating reading and reading instruction.

Fountas and Pinnell (1996, 1999) have widely promoted guiding reading and the need for leveled text sets to be used during this instructional practice. Fountas and Pinnell (1996) write, “guided reading is an instructional setting in which a teacher has brought together a small group of children who are similar in their reading behaviors at a particular point in time” (p. 11). The teacher is then able to select a text that enables the children to use what they already know in terms of what to do as readers and to extend their “processing power” with a few new challenges (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999). The guided reading process adopts the following pattern. The teacher selects a slightly challenging text for the group she is working with. She offers a brief story introduction and then the children in the group read the text simultaneously, silently at their own pace. During this time, the teacher expects to observe behavior and interact with individuals to “reinforce or support effective problem-solving behaviors” (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999, p.12). Afterwards, the teacher facilitates and engages the readers in a discussion of the story and makes teaching points based on observations of the children’s reading strengths and weaknesses. In classrooms where guided reading is practiced, often children are expected to use the leveled books during independent reading time as well. This means that these students will be told the level at which they can read, and then will be expected to choose books from a basket of books at that certain level. For example, children who are told they are reading at Level G could only choose books from the basket designated as the Level G basket. The rationale is that during independent reading with leveled texts, students practice and become fluent in their use of effective reading strategies (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999).

Dzaldov and Peterson (2005) point out that the desire to provide texts that students can read without feeling “frustration” is well supported by research (see Brabham & Villuame, 2002; Clay, 1991). In addition to the idea that leveled books help the teacher match books to children

appropriately, many teachers might have been drawn to the “leveling mania” (a term used by Szymusiak & Sibberson, 2001) for a variety of other reasons. Leveled book sets are commercially available and schools and school districts often seem willing to include money in the budget for their purchase. The same materials are then available across schools in a division or district. Assessment is easy in that teachers and parents always have a sense of the level at which each child is reading, according to the criteria determined from the text set being utilized. Larson (2002) argues, however, that “by relying on commercially produced materials, teachers and administrators can shift responsibility from self-accountability to the pre-packaged materials and the reason for continued underachievement to students” (p. 67). In these times of intense teacher accountability and pressure to raise reading test scores, commodified leveled literacy materials seemingly offer “objective” and ongoing evidence of children’s reading performance. But control over these assessments is in the hands of commercial publishers who are far removed from the classroom and outside of the control of the classroom teacher, who obviously is better placed to know the individual needs of each class member.

Some potential problems with leveled books:

A) Narrow sociocultural selection of books to choose from

An inherent problem with leveled books is that when matching children to appropriate book levels, the diversity of students’ social, cultural, and experiential backgrounds is not, indeed, cannot be taken into account. Leveled books produced for mass consumption cannot be designed to take into consideration the individual differences of each student reader. Dzaldov and Peterson (2005) agree, complaining that all the different criteria that might be used (readability formulas, criteria related to language and predictability, text formatting and

content; or progressions of letter-sound relationships, etc.) fail to take into account, “the interests, motivations, background experience and knowledge, or the sociocultural identities of the readers in the determination of book appropriateness for individuals” (p. 223). Concerned that the exaggerated attention to text levels had created a situation where students have an unnecessarily narrow selection of books to read, Dzaldov and Peterson (2005) undertook a small scale research project, examining 30 randomly selected texts, each determined to be at level G following the leveling scheme found in Fountas and Pinnell’s Matching Books to Readers (1999, p. 314-324). The study was conducted to determine whether books within one specific level, or basket, would provide “enough variability in terms of topic, theme, genre, and sociocultural meanings to provide rich and varied reading experiences” (Dzaldov & Peterson, 2005, p. 224). In addition, they examined whether there was uniformity of G-level materials in terms of books and print features, language and literacy features, and text structure. The texts they chose came from a variety of sources, including texts used regularly in Reading Recovery programs, texts from different publishers, texts written as children’s literature, and texts written for instructional reading. Although Dzaldov and Peterson did find that there was uniformity in terms of characteristics related to book and print features, as well as literary features, they also found there was no variability in terms of sociocultural features. They expressed their concerns in terms of some of the following examples: under representation of female characters, no texts portraying characters of low socioeconomic status, and so forth. The issue they raised is that some students might be drawing on limited background knowledge to make sense of the selected texts. Dzaldov and Peterson argue: “A text that reflects one student’s experience may be at an appropriate level for that student. A student whose sociocultural experience is far removed from that of the characters in the text may feel frustrated when reading it” (p. 227).

B) Choice

As mentioned above, when leveled book baskets start to replace the more usual groupings of books by author, genre or theme (to name just a few), and children are directed to only select texts from certain baskets, their choices are severely limited. When this occurs beyond specific reading instruction time, it is especially disconcerting. As a mother and teacher, I want my daughter Madeline, her peers and the students in my own classroom to have a selection of reading materials that will enrich and develop their backgrounds and experiences, feed their interests and motivate them to continue learning and exploring the world around them. When this choice is limited to a basket of books organized around a certain level, choice is effectively eliminated. Harste (2006) writes, “Which of the demonstrations in a written language event learners attend to depends on the interest and experience of the language learner rather than the age or cognitive state the child is thought to be in” (p. 8). Although some text features such as sentence and word length might play a role in determining text difficulty, there are many other factors within the reader-text interaction that account for a text’s level of difficulty for any particular reader. Booth (1998) supports this view,

When a child chooses a book, she or he takes responsibility for learning. Children usually select a book because they are interested in the topic. Therefore, whether the book reflects their reading ability may be secondary, since interest can motivate a child to read a book that may be difficult. (p. 60)

When teachers know their students and work hard to help support students with what Watson (1997) refers to as “supportive and workable” texts that truly engage the reader, the reader is willing to work hard, with whatever additional supports might be necessary, to make sense of the text. When students read texts in which they are engaged, they are developing a

positive and authentic taste of what literacy might mean for them in their lives. They are not just learning to read, they are learning to read *something*.

C) Commercialization of reading

As the leveling books phenomenon has increased over the last few years, many companies have been profiting. Houghton Mifflin, Scholastic, and many other firms have tapped into the explosion of the leveled reading market by creating and selling text sets to schools. Renaissance Learning, a Wisconsin firm that saw revenues of US \$114-million in the 2004 fiscal year, sells software that ranks thousands of published titles, but also provides subscriptions for electronic quizzes--short, content-oriented multiple choice tests--so teachers can monitor children's progress up the literacy ladder (Lorinc, 2006). Pierce (1999) writes, "As I look at what publishers are offering us--and I believe they are responding in part to what they think we want -- I am concerned that quality children's books are being drowned out in a sea of leveled readers" (p. 373). Other critics have weighed in on the matter, complaining that the titles in the leveled reading series are publisher-driven books that tend to be bland, lacking in creativity and are mediocre literature (Lorinc, 2006). Irvine and Larson (2001) observe that: "commodified literacy materials have been criticized for the limited view of literacy they promote and because they often attempt to script teachers' behaviors, deskilling them in the process" (p. 45).

D) The Reading-Writing connection

In the mid-1980's, writing achieved a stronghold in the elementary language arts curriculum that it had never held before. Led by educators such as Donald Graves (1983) and Lucy Calkins (1986), teachers began to view all attempts by children to make sense through

writing as legitimate. Graves and Calkins helped effect a change in thinking about the psycholinguistic notion of “error” as a window into children’s thinking, allowing teachers to worry less about perfect spelling and grammar and more about the quality of thinking and problem solving evidenced by the students’ attempts at writing. Process writing had children writing for genuine audiences and for real purposes. Process writing also helped us to see reading and writing as inherently intertwined, each supporting and informing the other (Pearson, 2002; Wilson, 2002). And yet, process writing is much harder to find in Manitoba early years classrooms today than in previous decades (Dr. W. Serebrin, personal communication, November 4, 2007). It is possible that the pervasive and high status of guided reading instruction in classrooms has crowded out writing instruction and that reading and writing are being viewed as a separate literacies. Yet, we know writing is a language form and “...not only are language forms defined by their interconnections, but they are learned when these interconnections are realized by the learner” (Cambourne, 1988, p. 183). Every time a child writes, that child is reading. Likewise, every time a child reads, that child is learning about writing (Wilson, 2002). Cambourne (1988) clearly articulates why the reading-writing connection is so important:

The reading which occurs in association with writing is of two kinds. Firstly, there is the reading and re-reading of the written text as it is being constructed, or reading which accompanies the text. Secondly, there is the sum total of all the reading that the writer has carried out prior to writing the actual text. Whenever writers sit before a blank page and begin to write, they call upon this knowledge that the reading of other texts has stored in their linguistic data pools. This is reading which precedes the writing of a text. (p. 186)

Given the important role of quality written texts in children's writing, it is imperative that children are being exposed to excellent literature (songs, poems, stories and books) that will serve as a model for their writing. Wilson (2002) writes, "To teach writing divorced from a rich reading program is to feed writers a nutritionally poor diet" (p. 169). Fletcher and Portalupi(1998) claim that the writing children do can only be as good as the classroom literature that surrounds and sustains it.

Leveled books were never meant to replace quality children's books in the classroom. They were never meant to be more than one piece of the whole literacy curriculum. Yet, clearly they have gained popularity well beyond the realm of the small literacy instruction periods and the Reading Recovery programs they were originally intended to serve. But, if leveled books constitute the bulk of children's reading, we have to ask ourselves what kind of readers are children becoming?

What is Reading?

In order to advance an argument in support of the use of good quality children's literature, as opposed to the use of leveled texts, I would like to return again to the topic of reading instruction. What constitutes "good" reading instruction has been a question that has divided educators, researchers and society. I believe that in order to talk about strong reading instruction models, I first need to closely examine what the scholarly research has said about the reading process.

Earlier in this literature review I explained why reading instructional programs that view reading as a set of skills needing to be mastered (as often is the emphasis with leveled books), are not effective programs to teach children to become effective and efficient readers. I believe

that most educators accept that reading is more than decoding words on a page. Educators also generally recognize that effective and efficient readers do not always read each and every word accurately all of the time, but rather, that reading involves considerable approximation.

Cambourne (1988) writes, “freedom to approximate is an essential ingredient of all successful learning” (p. 70). Yet, accurate word reading is a central feature of instruction with a leveled reading series. Students generally move up to the next level only after supposed mastery of the current level has been achieved. Mastery is demonstrated by achieving an extremely high level of word accuracy. If we believe correct pronunciation of each and every word does not in itself constitute successful reading, the question becomes, what does? Goodman’s (1965, 1967, 1996) research helped clarify what happens during the reading process, as readers read to make meaning. He asserted that when a reader is reading a “real text” there are many cue systems available to the reader, with the primary cueing systems being: graphophonic (letter-sound relationships), syntactic (using sentence structure or the flow of language), and semantic (meaning-making). The idea that readers have multiple cues to draw upon while reading in the context of a story as opposed to reading words on a list explains why the reader can recognize and read many more words in context. Wilson (2002) explains:

This view of the reading process involves the reader sampling the text by drawing upon the visual information, or what the eye sees, predicting the text by drawing upon non-visual information the reader has about language and about the world, and finally, confirming that the meaning made fits with the overall meaning being constructed within the whole text. (p. 3)

Goodman's (1965, 1967, 1996) work with cue systems helped shift the view of reading away from the ability to simply name all of the words of a text correctly, to a view of reading as a meaning making process. Harste (2006) explains that "just as 'mistakes' in oral language could be used to understand the rule systems children were inventing while learning language, so 'mistakes' (Goodman called them miscues) in reading could be used to understand the cue systems involved in reading" (p. 9). Goodman (1965, 1967, 1996) asserts that many oral reading errors (miscues) are indicative of the reader working hard to construct meaning. When children are exposed to a reading program in which success means reading each word perfectly, it is possible that the process of making meaning breaks down. Smith (1978) cautions:

A common characteristic of poor readers at high school is that they read as if getting every individual word right were the key to reading. But the more they try to get every word right, the less they will see, the less they will understand, and the worse their reading will be on every account.

Chomsky (1972) concurred that "when readers depend too heavily on visual information in the text, the reading process breaks down" (as cited in Harste, 2006, p.10). The work of Goodman (1965, 1967, 1996) and other psycholinguists encouraged reading educators to value literacy experiences that focused on making-meaning. Although their work helped further the understanding about what happened during oral reading, questions still remained about how the process of comprehension occurred.

If reading is about meaning construction and not just accurate word-calling, then comprehension is a key condition for reading. Despite my own passion and love for reading, there are certain texts that are difficult for me to comprehend. One such text is instruction manuals. If one of my children receives a toy that requires assembly, I am in trouble if I need to

rely on the instruction manual. While I know the purpose for the instruction manual, and diligently read the instructions, often I find myself reading it again and again. After multiple readings, I invariably am still uncertain about how to put the item together. Sometimes I feel even more confused after multiple readings. Have I been successful at reading the manual? I can identify and pronounce each individual word and even accurately read the instructions aloud to my husband. But I don't believe I have truly "read" this text. If I were to re-read each page slower, concentrating on specific phonic blends, looking specifically at middle sounds of words, or even stretching the sounds of letter patterns, would this increase my reading success? Not likely. Is what I have described any different from what many children are asked to do at school, when they are asked to "read" texts which have been written to teach reading skills rather than tell a story that is meaningful to the particular child or informing what he or she would like to know (Cambourne, 1988)? In the case of leveled books, children could be deemed "readers" in such a decoding/accuracy reading model, but they might not be "reading" in the sense of making meaning. Engagement with a text should be for the purpose of constructing meaning-- bringing meaning to and taking meaning from the text.

If comprehension is important to reading, it is important to examine the process of how comprehension occurs. Cambourne (1988) explains that the process of making connections happens in large part when the reader is able to construct a text which matches what the author of that particular text intended. Meek (1988) articulately stated that reading doesn't happen in a vacuum. Educators and parents need to move away from understanding literacy as a psychological ability (something done inside our heads) towards an alternative view of literacy. Wilson (2002) writes: "In recent years... language has been seen as social process. Language (listening, speaking, reading, writing) develops in social contexts as particular people engage

with particular activities throughout their daily lives” (p. 6). Due to the fact that language is “learned interactively as individuals engage in social contexts” (Wilson, 2002, p.6), language is not, nor can it ever be, neutral: “There is not one way of using language that is equally attainable by all and equally right for all contexts” (Wilson, 2002, p.7). Grouping children in homogenous reading instruction groups, at a single level, does not guarantee that literacy will be seen as a social process. In fact, in most such groupings the children are still being treated as individuals working on identical skills. Reading instruction in this context is still largely a psycholinguistic processing of skills (Gee, 2001a).

Moving Forward

We are living in high-tech, global, “new capitalist” times (Gee, 2001c). Children in school today will be entering future lives that we cannot even envision right now. We do know, however, that a focus on early learning that translates to later learning is more crucial than it ever has been before (Gee, 2001c). Our children are going to need to be innovative, question-asking, problem-solving, critical thinking people. How can we as educators best prepare our students for their futures? How can I as a mother and teacher best plan reading instruction in a way that will position my students and my own children to be “agents of text rather than victims of text” (Harste, 2006, p.18)?

As I sought to find alternative ways to approach literacy instruction, I kept returning to the idea of literacy as social process. Street (1984,1993) describes the traditional skills based model as an “autonomous model of literacy.” Viewed as a continuum (Larson & Marsh, 2005), rather than as opposing points of view, autonomous models define literacy as a unified set of neutral skills that can be applied equally across all contexts (Street, 1995). Advocates of this

perspective believe there is no need to adjust instruction for different contexts of use or for diverse learners (Larson & Marsh, 2005; Street, 1995). At the other end of the continuum is the ideological model. Ideological models define literacy as social practice grounded in social, historical, cultural and political contexts of use. In this view, the nature and meaning of literacy is constructed in the specific social practices of participants in particular settings for particular purposes. This model “locates reading and writing in the social and linguistic practices that give them meaning” (Larson & Marsh, 2005, p. 20). Street’s (1984, 1995) ideological model and the idea of ideological reading models generally support the Barton and Hamilton (1998) definition of literacy that I embrace:

Literacy is primarily something people do; it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text. Literacy does not reside in people’s heads as a set of skills to be learned, and it does not just reside on paper, captured as texts to be analyzed. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and is located in the interaction between people. (as cited in Larson & Marsh, 2005, p.10)

Therefore, the final purpose of my review of the literature has been to help me clearly understand what literacy viewed as social process means, and what it might look like practiced in my own classroom.

As I sought to find out more about the concept of literacy as social process, I found that writing from proponents of New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Gee, 2001a, b, c ; Street, 1984, 1995; Luke & Freebody, 1999) can be found throughout the current literature. Luke and Freebody (1999) write:

Literacy education is ultimately about the kind of society and the kinds of citizens/ subjects that could and should be constructed. Teaching and learning just isn’t a matter

of skill acquisition or knowledge transmission or natural growth. It's about building identities and cultures, communities and institutions. (p. 5)

Key ideas around literacy as social process

Reading involves purpose

Reading is more than reading words correctly. It is about constructing meaning. We don't read unless there is a particular purpose. This is true of all life situations. One reads a newspaper for a certain purpose. A recipe card is read for a very different purpose. One would read a book about gardening for a purpose quite different than one would read a fiction novel. And yet, classrooms seem to be places where purposeful reading does not always happen. In some classrooms, children are asked to read books that have no purpose beyond "practicing reading" such as leveled texts. Just as someone who had absolutely no interest in gardening would likely not choose to read a gardening book, students in classrooms should not be required to read books that do not offer them any personal purpose in their life, beyond reading practice.

Children should learn that reading has rich, authentic purposes. Children who love dinosaurs should be immersed in all types of books about these amazing creatures. Children who love art should be exposed to books with different types of illustrations and also non-fiction books about different art techniques. I believe that classroom reading should link to the children's lives. Wilson (2002) writes:

Classroom reading activities that are ends in themselves, such as busywork, textbook exercises, or trifling activities completed at the end of a book, will never inspire children to be lifelong readers. Reading a book at level 3 because one is at level 3 is not a compelling reason to read. (p. 8)

Literacy involves different discourses

Related to the notion of purpose is the idea that people use language differently in different situations. The language register two friends having coffee at Starbucks might use would likely be different than the register they would use at a formal dinner party. Similarly, the register members of a book club would use while discussing a book would be different from the register they would use while cheering on marathon runners.

Using language in different ways, depending on the social context relates to Gee's (1999) notion of Discourse. Gee has divided the concept of discourse into two separate ideas, identified by uppercase and lowercase D/d. For Gee, Discourse (with an uppercase D) is:

...a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or social network or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful role. (p. 131)

Gee (2001b) explains that discourse (with a lowercase d) refers to language in use.

Both Wilson (2002) and Gee (1999, 2001b) write that in order to gain membership in a social group, one must learn the language of the group. Gee (1999, 2001b) describes Discourses as being 'identity kits' one adopts to become a member of a particular group. Each identity kit comes complete with the appropriate costume, devices, and instructions on how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize. I can't help but wonder how different the social groups are within classrooms in which the discourse is limited to talk about leveled books, as opposed to the discourse and social groups that can be established around real text, written for real purposes.

Methodology

The construction of the methodology for this study has also not followed a predictable pattern. After considering different options that might fit, I have drawn upon the research methodology of narrative, self-study.

The day Madeline shared her anxiety and stress about her reading level at school, I sensed that a unique and important journey of learning was beginning for both of us. Although I could not predict what this experience might entail, I knew that my protective “mothering” instincts had been awakened and I wanted to help support Madeline through this experience in the most supportive manner possible. In the tradition of other parent literacy researchers (Crago & Crago, 1983; Bagbhan, 1984; Bissex, 1980; Martens, 1998) I began a parent journal.

This journal first took the form of a coil-bound notebook, but I later transitioned to recording entries on the computer where it was more time efficient to record words, actions and my thoughts about the events that were unfolding. As Russell (1995) describes, “this experience of seeing my thoughts emerge through my fingers to return to my brain through my eyes introduced me to a very powerful strategy for making sense of experience” (p. 7). Events and conversations that I chose to write about were varied. I tried to record all conversations about leveled books that I participated in or heard Madeline participating in. I wrote about specific school literacy activities that Madeline shared with me. I recorded my observations from volunteering in the classroom. I tried to capture literacy events that happened in our own home. At first I only recorded conversations or wrote about events I witnessed or overheard. However, as the experience unfolded, I also started to record my own thoughts, ideas, questions and

concerns in the journal entries. Later as I sought to tell the story I had chronicled, these personal reflections became problematic for me. I realized that some of my thoughts and ideas had shifted and changed throughout the experience. Sometimes it was painful for me to include my own words as part of my data. In hindsight, I could see there were times when I clearly tried to exert my power over Madeline. There were places where I could see how I might do things differently; better, if I could. It was tempting to want to “change my words” to better reflect my current understandings and yet I realized that those initial ideas and thoughts were part of my raw data. These ideas and thoughts were what challenged me to explore this topic further, to dig deeper into this situation.

As the experience unfolded, it became clear that my data fit a story framework. Clandinin and Connelly (1990) suggest:

Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. Therefore, narrative inquiry is the study of the ways humans experience the world. Teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and others' stories. (p. 2)

The realization that narrative inquiry seemed like the best fit for my data was a comfortable discovery. I was going to use the story as it had unfolded to make sense of different literacy worlds (at home and at school). Although Clandinin and Connelly did not include “mothers” in the above quote, I believe that my dual roles of mother/teacher in the story has helped me gain better understandings of the literacy events that unfolded in our story. Dyson and Genishi (1994) support the use of story in educational research:

Stories help us to make sense of, evaluate, and integrate the tensions inherent in experience...Stories help us transform the present and shape the future for our students and ourselves so that it will be richer or better than the past. (p. 242-243)

I recently attended a fellow graduate student's thesis defence. In her study she made the case that in order for an individual to have a reading identity, that person must have a written record of his or her reading story. Although I am still grappling with whether I believe this to be true, I have recently found myself feeling excited about the fact that I will have a document to present to Madeline at a later date that chronicles her early reading story. Yet, this is where complexities arise. What began as Madeline's story has really merged into my story built upon Madeline's experiences. The progression of this process has moved me away from a case study about Madeline, towards a discovery of my own literacy beliefs and practices. In defining self study, Clandinin and Connelly (2007) write about "the kind of self-study where a researcher sets out to study something else and in the process of doing so learns something about themselves" (p. 589). I was surprised to see how much this had happened in my work.

As I further explored narrative self study, it became clear that three of the required criteria for narrative inquiry were present in my work. "For us, narrative inquiry is a multi-dimensional exploration of experience involving temporality (past, present and future), interaction (personal and social), and location (place)" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2007, p.576).

The main characters in this story, Madeline and myself, both clearly fit all three of the above mentioned criteria. Dimensions of both of our past lives are clearly present. The data collection took place in the present- questions were formulated about how what was learned might affect future practice. Interaction and location are also prominent throughout our story.

Our story began with the opening story of this thesis-- my concern with what was happening to Madeline at school. The reason I first sought to examine this issue more closely was for the purpose of helping my daughter. I did not want her caught in a potentially damaging learning situation. However, the deeper examination of this incident has led me to explore larger

issues, including the tensions around the practice of literacy teaching that have been present for me throughout most of my professional life.

One element of surprise for me was how difficult it became to separate the different roles I played in this study. I realized from the outset that my two key roles, mother and early years teacher, would likely create tensions for me as they came into conflict with each other. However, I had not anticipated how difficult it was going to be for me to assume the role of researcher. In this role, I was required to step back and distance myself from my data. I needed to look at my data from a more “objective” and distanced stance. This is a possible limitation of my study. Although I tried to assume this researcher stance, one might ask, how truly “objective” and “unbiased” I could be when examining data derived from Madeline’s and my experiences. However, while this might be a limitation of this study it might also be the study’s greatest strength. Given that I am Madeline’s mother, I know her better than any other researcher could. I am privy to her life both at school and at home. Given that this is also a self-study, where I systematically tracked my thinking and feelings over time, I also have been able to critically analyze data that I understand in a very full way as a researcher.

The process I undertook in the data collection and analysis consisted of the following steps. I ended my data collection for the purpose of this study so that I could begin the process of analyzing the data for themes and patterns and begin writing my thesis. I created a huge web on chart paper, charting the most salient ideas from each journal reflection. Upon completion of this chart, I closely examined each individual chart entry and tried to decide how these ideas fit into the story of Madeline’s literacy journey. Certain pieces that I felt did not directly link to Madeline’s literacy story were eliminated. It became clear that I still had too much data to work with. Again I had to choose which aspects of Madeline’s story to eliminate. For example, the

story explaining that Madeline was having trouble seeing at school, and the subsequent purchase of her eyeglasses was eliminated. Although difficulty seeing could possibly link to perceived difficulties at school, it was not significant to the larger story of this study, so I eliminated it. I also found that certain stories repeated ideas already expressed in other stories, so I streamlined the number of stories to reduce redundancy. Once I was satisfied that the entries selected fit together to create a narrative that comprehensively and honestly represented Madeline's experiences, I began to weave in my responses to Madeline's literacy story as it unfolded. I attempted to read our story from an outsider's perspective; being open to surprises in the themes and patterns that appeared. As mentioned earlier, this was somewhat difficult, since I was now looking at my own thoughts and concerns and trying to analyze ideas of my own that I knew had already shifted. As I constructed themes and patterns from the data, I wrote them down on individual recipe cards, each theme/pattern idea coded in a different marker color that would be representative of that theme/pattern. Once this step was complete, I was surprised to find how many of the themes and patterns were interwoven and connected throughout the data. Many times many different colors represented the same data.

I have sometimes felt uncomfortable discussing my ongoing work with friends and other educator researchers. I have felt concerned that by using my own daughter's experiences as my data, my study might be deemed too narrowly focused. However, now I could clearly see that there were many sophisticated themes and patterns supported by my data, all worthy of exploration and theorizing. My goal was not to produce a work that might be reproduced or even transferred to other research studies. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have stated that narrative research studies rely on criteria other than validity, reliability, and generalizability. I set out to closely examine a literacy practice Madeline was being exposed to at school and how

this practice related to Madeline's literacy practices at home. In the process, I ended up reexamining my own ideas and beliefs about literacy learning and began to re-imagine what my future classroom practice might look like when these beliefs were connected to my classroom practice.

Madeline's Story

Prior to the conversation which began this thesis, everything seemed to be going very smoothly for Madeline and her transition from kindergarten into grade one. She was excited about school in the mornings, had lots of friends in her class and had spoken highly of her teacher from the first day of school.

Two years prior to this conversation, I had almost the exact opposite conversation with Madeline. I had been doing a project for a University graduate course looking at the topic of assessment. I had been teaching a nursery class in a suburban school. At the time, assessment was a controversial topic within the division and in educational circles around our city. My division had implemented standards testing, testing that started in nursery school with three- and four-year-old students. Although I was vehemently opposed to this testing, I was still required to call in a substitute teacher for a few days near the beginning of the school year so I could individually test my students outside of the classroom.

During this time I read Goodman and Owocki's(1996) book, *Kidwatching*. It explored ideas of how teachers could implement natural, authentic assessments with the children in their classes. Many of the assessments consisted of interviews with children. I eagerly experimented with some of the interviews, with Madeline as my cooperative participant. One of the first questions I asked her was if she considered herself a reader. I can still remember the quick, confident "Yes," she gave.

In truth, I didn't really need those assessments to tell me that. Madeline had been exposed to rich literacy experiences from the time of her birth. We had walked to the local

library daily. From very early on Madeline was a book lover. The first books she was drawn to were ones with prominent faces of babies. Madeline was read to daily. At the age of two, she insisted that we fill her crib and later on, her bed, with books. Sometimes it was almost impossible to find a place for her to lie among the books. She could fill long stretches of quiet time just looking through books. She learned early on that “reading” was enjoyable and brought her pleasure.

At the time I conducted the reading interview with Madeline, she was not independently reading, but she was confident in her reading abilities. In a report I had written regarding Madeline’s reading profile, I documented the following characteristics about her at the age of four years, three months:

- Madeline is very confident in her growing ability as a reader
- She has developed a love of books and especially enjoys the opportunity to choose her own books from the library each week
- She has developed strong book handling knowledge (this was demonstrated by being asked to show various things such as the front of the book, the words, where does one start reading, etc.)
- When being asked questions about things she does not deem important (or things she thinks are irrelevant and obvious) she grows bored and restless. She enjoys talking about actual stories but not pointing to a first page or a last page, etc.

I later went on to write the following about my hopes and wishes for Madeline in terms of future reading instruction at school:

My hope for Madeline when she starts school is that she will be in a classroom with a teacher who loves reading and passes that enthusiasm onto her/his students. I hope the classroom will be filled with wonderful children's literature where children can immerse themselves. I hope Maddie will have many opportunities to interact with real texts. It would break my heart if I ever heard her talking about herself as a reader in relation to 'what level she is reading at.'

(graduate course assignment, 2003)

Thus the conversation (at the beginning of this thesis) that took place in the car that bright sunny morning in the fall of 2005 was very unsettling. I had not thought I would ever be having such a conversation. I always knew it would be a possibility that Madeline would be exposed to reading through the use of leveled books, given their widespread popularity. However, I had always believed that the literacy experiences she had at home would override any impact that a leveled reading program might have on her. Furthermore, I had always assumed that if Madeline was exposed to a leveled reading program, she would skip through the levels easily, owing to the language and literacy exposure she had been afforded at home.

November, 2005

I am noticing more and more that Madeline is talking the "language of levels." Today she jumped into the van after school and the first words out of her mouth were, "*Guess what level Kathy is on. Level E!*" I often hear her and the two other girls we car pool with discussing the levels different children are at in their respective grade one classes. The two girls we car pool with are sisters. Clara is in a different grade one class from Madeline. Her sister, Andrea, is in grade two. There is admiration in their voices when they talk about the children who have

attained a high level. Madeline feels comfortable enough with the girls to share that she “*needs to catch up.*”

Andrea is an expert on the leveled reading program since she went through it the previous year. She shared that she was the first one in her grade one class to complete the levels.

Madeline and Clara often ask her questions and today they were curious about what happens at the end of the leveled books. What did Andrea read when she was completely done reading through the levels? Clara says that she can’t wait to be at that point and Madeline dejectedly said, “*It will be a long time before I am finished all the levels.*”

November, 2005

I noticed that Madeline seems to know the specific levels of many children in her class. Curious about this I ask her, “What level is Regan at? What level is Simon at? What level is Allan at?” With each child I named, she quickly responded with such certainty that I was certain she was correct each time. I then started asking about her friends from the other grade one classes. Again, she was able to tell me the level that almost every other child was reading at.

“It’s easy to know what level other kids are at. They talk about it all the time. I can see the certificates. If I don’t know what level someone is at, I just ask her. I didn’t know what level Sarah (a friend from another class) was at so I asked her at recess. I wanted to lie about my level though. I knew I shouldn’t so I said I forgot. But Starr told her anyway. She told the girls in that class that Tara and I are the only ones still on Level A.”

November 23, 2005

Maddie excitedly jumps into the van.

“Guess what I got today!”

“A new library book? Your class picture?”

After a few guesses she impatiently produces a little yellow paper with a sticker on it. It is a typed generic certificate that says: **Congratulations. You have read all the Level A books.**

Madeline’s name is hand written on the line and it is signed by the Educational Assistant who runs the leveled reading program for Madeline’s class. Madeline beams and proudly shows it to me and the girls from the car pool. Clara and Andrea kindly congratulate her. I also congratulate her but then remind her that she doesn’t need a certificate to tell her she is a good reader.

“We already know this by all the wonderful books you read.”

My diatribe falls on deaf ears as the talk in the backseat turns back to school and specifically leveled books. The girls start talking about the other children who received certificates that day. I can’t help noticing the relief and happiness that is evident in Maddie’s voice and demeanor. She is no longer a Level A reader.

Upon arriving home that afternoon I got swept up in the busyness of after school routine. In the mad rush to complete homework, make supper, and occupy a busy twenty-one month old, school papers became strewn messily across the counter. At one point, I noticed the certificate lying amidst a jumble of notes to be looked at. I shuffled everything out of the way with the intention of looking through them all later. A few hours later, after supper was over and I was

tidying up, I noticed the certificate had been moved from the counter to the fridge. It had been proudly hung front and centre with a magnet.

Many thoughts flooded over me. How could I best support Madeline in this situation? How could I help her to see that levels were not what I believed to be a meaningful indicator of reading proficiency, while still supporting her “progress” and the success she felt after earning her first certificate?

November 24, 2005

Madeline’s dad arrived home the previous evening after the girls were in bed so the next morning Maddie showed her dad her certificate while eating breakfast. Together, Mike and I asked her to explain how a student actually earned a certificate. How had it been determined that she was ready to advance to Level B?

“Well, you get to read with Mrs. Ballany a few times a week. She comes and calls you out to read with her. When you have read five books from your level perfectly, you are ready to go onto the next level. I was close a few times before but I kept messing up a word.”

“Sometimes people read a word that isn’t quite what is written on the page, but the story still makes sense. Would that be okay?” I asked.

“No! You have to read each word exactly that is written in the book. That’s what she is watching for.”

I feel surprised that an educational assistant is running this program and determining the level of each child. This practice has such tremendous implications for children. Why are the instruction and placement decisions being left to someone who may have little educational background in

literacy instruction? I have noticed that every time we discuss levels and leveled books, Mrs. Manness (my pseudonym for Madeline's classroom teacher) is never mentioned. I wonder what role she plays in this program and how she feels about it. Is the level each child is assigned somehow reflected in classroom practice or decisions she makes in the classroom?

November 28, 2005

Today Madeline came home from school with a note outlining the home reading program that will be starting. According to the note, every day each child will be bringing home two books to read at home with his or her parents. The books the children bring home will be from a leveled series and will be dictated by each child's current reading level. Since Madeline is at Level B, she will be selecting books from a basket labeled Level A, B and C. This home reading program does not sit well with me. We do a lot of reading together at home and have a collection of wonderful books to choose from at our fingertips. In addition to the book collection we own, we make weekly trips to the local library and choose fifty books each week. By the time the week is over, almost every one of those fifty books has been read at least once. So, it made sense to me that we would just continue reading these books and skip reading the 'little books.'

"Mom, I need to read these. You have to write down when I have read them and sign the home reading form."

"Let's just read our own books and I will write down and initial those ones."

"No. That is not the way it is supposed to be done. Mrs. Manness said we have to read these books. I can quickly read these books and then I will read the real books."

The fact that Madeline is calling our other books the “real books” in contrast to the leveled books she is bringing home from school indicates to me that she notices a difference between the two. As previously discussed, leveled books are typically books written for the purpose of exposing children to high frequency words and simple and repetitive grammatical structures. The story is generally lacking or non-existent. As a result, authentic reading strategies that children might utilize are limited.

“Do you like reading those books?”

“No they are pretty boring. But I need to read them to catch up to everyone else.”

I am feeling caught in a precarious position. I want to be supportive and respectful of Madeline’s ideas, yet strongly believe that she would benefit more from reading authentic books that would allow her to utilize a host of reading strategies and help build her confidence. I am aware that Madeline has noticed the widening gap between her level and the level of many of her friends. She seems to think that practicing reading these books will help her to move forward along the book level continuum.

December 2, 2005

At play group this morning the conversation took an unexpected turn. I’m not sure how the topic came to leveled books, but at one point there were about five different moms discussing the subject. Most of the other moms seemed pleased with the progress their children were making with the leveled book program. I voiced my concerns and the fear I had that Madeline was going to be “turned off” reading because of the experience she was having with leveled books. I was completely caught off guard when my friend, a mom of a boy in a different class, indicated that she knew exactly what level Maddie was at. For the first time I started to

understand the pressure that was on Madeline's young shoulders to move up through the levels and not be identified as a low level reader. For a minute I found myself feeling the heat of comparison amongst the moms of the grade one children. One of the moms in the group had previously asked me my opinion regarding the "Hooked on Phonics" program. I had shared some concerns that I had with such a sub-skills based program and indicated that I would rather see children engaging in whole, authentic language experiences, such as reading good books. I know she had gone ahead and purchased the program. On this day she was quick to share that her child was swiftly advancing through the ranks of the leveled book program.

December 6, 2005

Madeline has brought home *Fruit Salad* again. This is a book from the basket from which she is required to choose. I have now seen and heard this book at least five times. The book consists of about eight pages and on each page is a bright, colourful picture of a piece of fruit. The whole text of the book consists of one sentence per page, naming the fruit in the picture: "I like bananas, I like oranges, etc." The book ends with the sentence, "I like fruit salad." I am curious that this book keeps reappearing in Madeline's home reading bag and inquire.

"I have noticed that you have brought Fruit Salad home quite a few times lately."

"Why is that?"

"I always choose it when it is in the basket. It's so quick and easy to read."

"Do you like reading it?"

"Yes, because I know every page and can just get through it. Then I can read the other books."

What I had originally thought was going to be a bi-cultural (equal parts home and school) literacy experience for Madeline has not unfolded that way. She has bought into the leveled book practice much more than I anticipated she would. It is actually me who is living in a bi-cultural world. I am caught between wanting to totally dismiss the whole leveled book practice by telling Madeline that leveled books have nothing to do with reading, and wanting to support her school experiences and help her successfully navigate the system. I am dismayed over the fact that a child who has been exposed to rich literacy experiences her whole life would let this reading program become most significant to her identity as a reader.

December 12, 2005

Tonight we took our Christmas decorations and other Christmas treasures out of storage. One of the many exciting discoveries was the container full of Christmas and winter books. After setting up and decorating the tree, Madeline suggested we read some books while we sat under the tree. It was lovely and peaceful. The books in that container are some of my favourite books, and they seemed extra special this year because Madeline was so excited to look though and read them with me. We spent a lot of time just looking through the extensive collection, browsing through the pictures in many of the books. After a while I suggested Madeline select three books that she would like us to read. The first book she selected was *Santa's New Suit*.

"Mrs. Jackson read this at school last year and it was really funny."

"Do you want to read it or should I?" I asked.

*"I'd like you to read it. But when you get to the part where the characters talk,
I'll read the talking bubbles."*

We had fun reading the book together. It was entertaining and we shared lots of giggles about Santa's new suit. Madeline's idea to read the "speech bubbles" was a good one. The text of the book would have been challenging for her but she was able to master the speech bubbles with a little help, still finding a role for herself in the reading of the book. She knew the comments the characters made were funny and she read them with exactly the right inflection. The illustrations in the book also helped make the speech of the characters more obvious and she relied heavily on pictures as clues to help her in her reading. The next book Madeline selected was *The Small One* by Alex Walsh.

"Mom, you read this one. I'd like to just listen to the story."

The last book Madeline selected was *Country Angel Christmas* by Tomie dePaola. This choice surprised me because I knew there were other much loved books in the box and I didn't remember this book being one of the favourites.

"How come you chose that book?"

"Because the pictures are so nice. They are making me curious what those little angels are doing."

"Am I reading again?" I ask.

"Let's take turns. You read a page and I'll read the next page."

Shared reading was her idea and ended up being a super strategy to support her developing reading strategies. The first page I started reading had the names of the three main angels: Ari, Pip and Kira. We spent some time trying to determine who was who from the illustration. This was helpful in subsequent pages when these names reappeared. Madeline was able to take the first letter cue and, in conjunction with the corresponding picture, figure out the tricky names. The text was challenging for Madeline, in large part because of so many unusual names,

including: Harim, Petra, Adasa, Nebo and Ziph. During our reading, Madeline got to the point where she recognized when the word was a name and just looked at me and let me read the name. At other times, when she had read a particularly difficult passage, she asked me to read. This helped us to keep the story flowing and the meaning intact.

Tonight I gained some valuable insights into Madeline and some of her reading strategies. I liked how she offered to read the speech bubbles in *Santa's New Suit*. She was able to suggest a way for her to be actively involved in the reading of our story. I wonder if the success from this reading made her more willing to take risks with *Country Angel Christmas*? Some of her reading in this more difficult text was slow and laborious. I kept wondering if she would say she wanted to stop reading the book, or just ask me to finish reading. She persevered, with interest in the story holding her attention. I noticed that she was using the pictures for clues and was utilizing the strategy of predicting. When we got to the end of the story, she commented,

"I knew it was going to end like that. I thought those little angels were going to save Christmas."

December 18, 2005

"Come on Emma Kate. Let's go and read some books."

I was in the kitchen when I heard Madeline offer this proposition to her little sister. Both girls disappeared into Madeline's room and I heard them digging through the overflowing book basket. They came back to the living room with arms loaded with books and snuggled on the sofa to read. From my position in the kitchen, I heard Madeline busily "woofing" and "ruffing" with such expression that she quickly had her twenty-three month old sister giggling. Maddie

reveled in her role as reader and entertainer as I heard her changing her voice for each different dog. She accomplished a great feat, getting her busy little sister to actually sit still long enough to be read a story, and by securing and maintaining her attention in such an engaging way. The giggles continue throughout the rest of *Doggies* by Sandra Boynton. The engagement did not last as Maddie tried to read other Boynton books to Emma Kate. Neither *Snuggle Puppy* nor *Dinosaurs* were able to sustain her attention as she tried to scramble down off the sofa and leave. However, Maddie swiftly brought back *Doggies* and Emma Kate was back at her side in a matter of seconds.

Madeline has also tapped into the social practice that surrounds reading. Madeline would not have enjoyed reading that board book nearly so much if she hadn't been motivated by her little sister's enthusiasm over it. Giggles motivated her and pushed her to make the reading extra dramatic and exciting. She was able to create a special moment for her sister through the reading of a book.

December 22, 2005

I just got off the phone with my good friend, Laura. Due to a scheduling conflict yesterday, she did me a favour and drove Maddie to the school Christmas concert. She was chuckling because she told me one of the first things Maddie asked Kathy, upon getting into their van, was what reading level was Kathy at? Kathy is a friend in her grade one class, the same girl for whom I had previously been given a reading level report. Laura, also a teacher, and I have had many discussions about the leveled book program and she knows my feelings and concerns about the program. She also knows that I am trying to help Madeline to not put too much

importance on the levels that she and her classmates are working on. I think Laura was politely pointing out that Madeline is not buying into what I am attempting “to sell” her.

January 23, 2006

Today was pancake day at Madeline’s school. The children were given the opportunity to pre-order pancakes and eat them for breakfast. I was the parent volunteer this morning. Madeline’s teacher planned some fun activities for the children incorporating the pancake theme. While the children were sitting at their tables enjoying the pancakes, Mrs. Manness pulled out the Eric Carle book *Pancakes, Pancakes!* to read aloud to them. Maddie unexpectedly piped up:

“Can my mom read it to us? She’s a really exciting reader!”

Mrs. Manness was agreeable. So, feeling a bit nervous with the expectations that were now on me to be exciting, I attempted to give a valiant effort to the reading *Pancakes, Pancakes!* As Maddie and her classmates were getting ready to go outside for recess, I slipped over to Maddie for a hug. I thanked her for the compliment about being an exciting reader. She told me:

“Your voice makes the story exciting while you are reading.”

It is becoming clear to me that one of the things Madeline values about reading is the enjoyment/entertainment factor. I wonder if one of the reasons she is struggling through the levels is that there is not much enjoyment or entertainment to be found within those books?

January 24, 2006

“Yesterday while I was in your classroom I noticed that Mrs. Manness has many books you like on her shelves.”

I noticed George and Martha books, Little Critter, Dr. Seuss, and many other similar types of books. Madeline often selected some of these books from the library.

"Which books do you usually choose to read during reading time?"

"Mom, those are wish books! Only the kids who are done the levels can choose those books." Maddie states emphatically.

"So, you never get to read those books?"

"Well, I get to see them because Mrs. Manness reads them to us sometimes. But I'm not allowed to take them to my desk."

January 31, 2006

I'm feeling uncertain how to broach the conversation around leveled books with Madeline. She hasn't said anything about it for a while now. I had been assuming that this silence translated into a diminished importance of the levels for her. However, yesterday I overheard a conversation she was having with her friend Jack, a current Kindergarten student. She was telling him about grade one and what to expect when he got there. The first thing she said was:

"In grade one you'll get called out to read with Mrs. Ballany. You have to read books right to go on to the next level."

She went on to explain the mechanics of the leveled book program. It was interesting to me that the first thing she would chose to talk about regarding grade one was the leveled book program. Interesting, but not surprising.

Many questions flood over me after hearing this conversation. Are other kids placing such importance on the level they have been assigned, or is it just because Madeline knows there is such a gap between her and the other students? How can I help her realize that there are other

indicators of strong reading and that she doesn't need to concern herself so much about this one area? Should I just stop "talking" and just keep "doing" in terms of reading practices at home? Sometimes I feel like I am a broken record Madeline is tuning out when it comes to leveled books. Is her perception of being one of the weakest readers in her class (because of her level) going to cause long term literacy identity issues for her? Will this contribute to lessened enthusiasm for reading in the future? Will Madeline join the ranks of people who are considered "illiterate literates" (Huck, 1996), or people who can read, but choose not to?

February 6, 2006

This morning I volunteered in Maddie's classroom. I observed lots of fun, interactive activities and routines. Later in the morning, Mrs. Manness gathered the children on the floor. She randomly sorted the children into groups. The children were then asked to read a piece together, much like a Reader's Theater: each group was assigned to read the part of one character from the piece. No child was singled out. Many of the children were enthusiastic about the reading. In contrast, I noticed Madeline was pretty much silent when it was her group's turn to read. She seemed to be following along with the text and yet she was barely audible most of the time. I don't think anyone else even noticed, but I was disturbed that she was not participating vocally in the group reading. Later that afternoon I tried to talk with her about my observation.

"I had lots of fun in your classroom today. During the reading time on your floor, I noticed something that surprised me. It seemed like you weren't reading with your group."

"I don't like reading out loud like that."

"Oh, it seemed like a fun story to read. Didn't you like it?"

"It was okay. I liked the animals."

Madeline's group had been assigned the role of the narrator. Of the five different parts there were in this story, it was the most challenging part.

"I'm not as good a reader as the other kids in my group and I didn't want to make a mistake. The other kids would have laughed."

"Why do you think you are not as good of a reader as the other kids in your group?"

"Mom! You know."

I am having a hard time discerning whether Madeline is "hiding" behind the levels. I remember as a kid myself hating to read aloud in activities such as the one I observed. Madeline's disengagement from this reading activity could be for a number of reasons. Perhaps she is not enjoying it, maybe she prefers to let others lead, or, as she has suggested, it could be a lack of self confidence. I do think the piece her group was asked to read would have been challenging for her, so perhaps she was intimidated by it. I also wonder if my presence in her classroom might have made her feel more inhibited.

February 22, 2006

It is our routine to go to the library every Wednesday after school. Usually we go to the library closest to our house, but we also enjoy making special trips to other libraries around the city. Today we went to "our" library. We were just entering the children's section when Madeline took special notice of an area we pass nearly every week.

"Hey! They have leveled books here."

She stopped at some shelves that were labeled “beginning readers.” Indeed, the books that lined these shelves did have the characteristic look of the “little readers.” However, as we started browsing through some of the books, I noticed some familiar titles. Madeline was also noticing this. She was excitedly exclaiming over some of the titles she was finding.

“Look! Henry and Mudge. Mr. Putter and Tabby.”

She also found a whole section of Clifford and Berenstain Bear books. I noticed that each cover had a type set logo that indicated it was a “Beginning Reader.” Many of them actually had a number or letter included on the cover of the book. This was not something the library had added, but rather a publisher’s mark. As I started leafing through some of the familiar titles, I realized that some of these versions had been re-worked. The text was shorter than it was in the original books. Each page contained just one or two sentences. These books were visually different from the originals. They were smaller, thinner versions of the “real books.”

“These are better than the leveled books at school. These are real stories.”

Madeline noted.

Seeing these books made me realize how cunning publishers are in climbing on the leveled book bandwagon. With so many children and schools talking the language of levels, it is probably a great business move to tap into this market. I am curious to know how much some of these stories have been changed to accommodate the leveling systems. For some reason I am reminded of an exercise in an undergraduate education class in which the professor read a Lio Lionni original story to us. It was a great story full of many opportunities for discussion and connection. He then read the same story, as it appeared in a prominent basal reader that was being used in school classrooms. The difference between the two stories was shocking. The original story was essentially gone, leaving a watered-down version consisting of high frequency

words and predictable sentence structures. Even the illustrations were dramatically different. Today at the library, when I first noticed this section of books, I felt happy for Madeline to have found some leveled books that she thought were interesting and was excited to read. After thinking about it further, I found myself concerned about leveled books becoming so readily available in a public library.

March 1, 2006

We were back at the library and back to the Beginning Reader section. Madeline selected a few books she wanted to check out from these shelves.

“Mom, what level are these?”

The books are identified by either numbers or letters. It is clearly a different system than Madeline’s school uses.

“I’m not sure how it works here. Why don’t you just choose some books that look interesting to you?”

“Okay. And I can do a trick I learned at school. If there is a word I don’t know I will hold up my finger. If I get to the end of the page and have five fingers up, I’ll know the book is too hard and put it back.”

A question I have struggled with for awhile is how to accurately match children up to appropriately challenging books. I know it is beneficial for children to read books with which they can be successful at certain times. One of the questions I am most often asked by other parents and teachers when I express my concern over the widespread use of leveled texts is:

“How do I match children to the right books?”

The “five-finger” method that Madeline referred to is a widely taught book selection strategy in schools. However, using a word recognition strategy such as this is fraught with problems. Some of the books Madeline considered checking out didn’t have any words on some pages and less than five words on other pages. This method also negates the whole idea that student interest and motivation can overcome their being “blocked” by not recognizing a few words. I’m sure many children who have successfully read the Harry Potter series would not have passed the five-finger rule with these books.

“I like how you are trying to find strategies to help you choose books to read, but don’t worry if there is a book that looks interesting to you and you have more than five fingers up. I will help you with those books. And I bet if you really like the story, some of the words that seemed too hard for you will be easier to read when you are reading the story.”

March 10, 2006

Tonight at supper I was sharing with Mike and Madeline what a rough morning it had been at play group. Emma Kate was going through a biting and scratching stage. Today she bit a young child and left teeth marks. Madeline’s response to my stress was:

“I should try to find a book about a kid who bites other kids. I can use it to teach Emma Kate not to bite.”

March 24, 2006

We are all adjusting well to Sadie, the newest addition to our family born on March 17, 2006. Today while Emma Kate napped and Mike and I did some household chores, Maddie was

in her room quietly occupying herself. About the time I was thinking I should check on her, she came bursting up the stairs.

“Mom! Dad! I’m ready. You need to come take a book out of the library.”

She shepherded us back to her room. When she opened her bedroom door, I stared in bewilderment. Her whole room was filled with little piles of books. What at first seemed like random chaos, soon gave way to the realization that a brilliant organization scheme was at the heart of the piles.

“What kind of books are you looking for today?” Madeline asked us.

I played along.

“I’d love to find some books about spring. My children and I enjoy going to Fort Whyte and we have enjoyed observing all the signs of spring there. I think they would like to read about spring too.”

Maddie ushered me to a pile of books.

“Right over here are the books about seasons. Oh, and maybe you would like to look at the animal section. There is a book there that shows all the different kinds of birds. Maybe you could take it to Fort Whyte to help figure out the types of birds you see.”

“That is a smart thinking by you! You know your library books well!” I enthused.

After Mike and I had checked out our books, and were no longer in the role of library patrons, I asked Madeline to show me around her library and tell me how she had sorted the books. I was so impressed by the thought and care she had put into designing her library. She had sorted books into clever categories that made finding books efficient. There were author piles including

Robert Munsch, Marc Browne, Phoebe Gilman and Eric Carle. Other categories included: ABC books, books that teach a lesson, board books, animal books, Franklin, seasons, Easter and so on. As she gave me a tour of her library, she also showed me a pile of two books she made for Emma Kate. The pile consisted of the two potty books we owned.

"These are to help train Emma Kate."

Madeline then made another interesting comment:

"The next time I make a library it will probably look different."

"Oh?" I wondered.

"I noticed that some books could actually be in two different piles. I was going to make a 'neat art' book pile but ended up putting those books in different spots."

Madeline explained.

"What would have been in the 'neat art' pile?" I asked.

"Gifts for sure. It's Mine! And all of the Eric Carle books we have. Lots of books could actually be in different spots. Look, we also have books that have won awards" she said, pointing to *The Treasure*. *"Don't you think that would be a good pile? Books that have won awards?"*

"That would make a great pile. You're right, I bet you can find many different ways to sort your books over and over again. Maybe it would be fun to make signs to identify the piles?" I invited.

June, 2006

Home reading books have stopped coming home completely now. Madeline has not said anything about reading with Mrs. Ballany or the leveled books for a while. School is busy with

many extra activities so maybe the program is finished. As I reflect over the year, I notice it seems like the leveled book component of the grade one program has always been separate from the classroom reports and conferences. The few times I mentioned my concern about the leveled books to Mrs. Manness, she has always concurred that she does not necessarily agree with them, but it is school policy and something they do at the school with all grade one children. She has been sympathetic to Maddie's struggles with this program. On all of Maddie's report cards she has indicated that Maddie is reading at grade level. In fact, if Maddie had not been so verbal about the levels and where she was in relation to other students, there would have been no other official communication that she was not reading where the majority of the children were reading.

July, 2006

We just spent a wonderful week relaxing at a cabin at the lake. One of my favorite parts of the holiday were the special times Madeline and I shared reading each evening. Every evening after Sadie had gone to bed and Emma Kate was playing with Grandma, Maddie and I went out and sat in a cozy swing and read books together. Prior to going to the cottage we had gone to the library. Madeline had checked out all the Patricia Polacco books she could find. We had wonderful conversations about these books. One evening we read the book *Thunder Cake*. Madeline identified with the little girl in the book because she too was nervous about thunderstorms. After reading and discussing the book, she wanted to copy out the recipe for the "thunder cake" located at the back.

"Mom, we should make that cake the next time we are expecting a storm!"

We also shared many giggles over the 'red-headed rotten brother,' a prominent character in a few of Patricia Polacco's books. Madeline particularly enjoyed reading the author's biography,

noting that the red-headed rotten brother was based on Patricia's own brother. For a girl adjusting to being a big sister to two younger girls, it was fun for Maddie to look at the sibling dynamics in another family.

August, 2006

During the school year the girls in Maddie's grade one class went through a phase where the Junie B. Jones series by Barbara Park were highly sought after reading materials. As a result, we purchased some. Maddie also received some as presents and we often checked out Junie B's from the library each week. They were challenging for Madeline and although she enjoyed the stories and found them humorous, they were not books she was able to read independently. As a result, she often started the book but grew frustrated and did not finish it. However, over the summer something changed. Maddie began reading them independently. I notice that her reading seems to have "clicked" in other areas as well. Often when we read together, I am doing much less of the reading and she is taking over more and more. She is becoming more confident and willing to take more risks.

In addition to voraciously reading through the entire Junie B. Series, Madeline has also grown interested in the Geronimo Stilton series. The books seem to be slightly more complex than what she has been reading. I am pleased to see that on her own Maddie is naturally progressing toward more challenging and difficult texts.

August 12, 2006

Today is Maddie's seventh birthday. At her request, she has received a few gift cards to a local book store. She is filled with joy and excitement and has already asked several times when I might take her to the store for her to select some books to buy.

August 26, 2006

The pieces seem to be falling into place for Madeline and reading. She has noticed this herself. Yesterday while we were driving home from the beach she said, "*I can read anything now. Reading is so easy.*" I know she is referring to the fact that she is no longer dependent on me or anyone to help her decode words. I am happy that she has noticed this herself and that this is translating into an increased confidence in her abilities. Yet, I also know that reading is about so much more than simply deciphering words.

September 20, 2006

Madeline has been in grade two for almost one month now. She has made a smooth transition and seems happy.

"Guess what the best part of grade two is mom? I can choose any book I want for silent reading. No books are wish books in Mrs. Bate's class."

I felt relieved we had put the leveled reading program behind us. Madeline had regained her confidence in reading.

September 28, 2006

Unfortunately, my relief over leaving leveled books and the issues that surround them was short-lived. Today Madeline brought home a note from the resource teacher. The note indicated that Madeline had been identified as a student who needed reading intervention. The note went on to explain that the "help" would consist of Madeline being pulled out of class a couple of times per week by a resource assistant and given help to finish getting through the

levels she had not completed the preceding year. I was puzzled by this. My early years teaching experience convinced me that Maddie had grown enough in her reading proficiency over the summer that she was functioning very independently. Had a recent assessment caused concern for her teacher, I wondered. And if yes, what did this assessment entail?

A follow-up call to Madeline's teacher revealed that students were tracked from Kindergarten onwards on their reading assessments. This intervention was based on these continual trackings and specifically the "low level" Madeline had completed at the end of grade one. I could not believe what I was hearing. Firstly, the intervention decision seemed to have been made without considering the progress that occurred over the summer.

Secondly, I felt concerned that the "red-flagging" started in Kindergarten, yet never had one of Maddie's teachers approached us about a concern that she was falling behind in reading. There seemed to be a huge disconnect between the resource program and classroom teachers. Shouldn't extra help given to a student be informed by classroom teachers' observations? Both parties, classroom teacher and resource teacher, should be working as a team to best help the student, shouldn't they? I believe parents should also be invited into the conversation and kept apprised of what is going on. This did not seem to be the case in Madeline's situation.

During the follow-up phone call, I explained to Madeline's that Maddie's reading had flourished over the summer, and I felt that with her growing reading independence, sophistication and confidence, that such a reading intervention was not necessary. My concern as a parent was the impact that being pulled out of class might have on Madeline's new, but fragile reading identity. However, much to my surprise, when I talked to Madeline about the extra reading help that was being offered, she said she would like to read with Mrs. Rainer, the educational assistant who would be assigned to work with her and the three other classmates identified as needing

reading intervention. This young woman was an attractive, gentle person and I am quite sure working specifically with her was part of the appeal to Maddie. With great trepidation I agreed to the extra reading help for Maddie. I made the request that some of the reading materials would be "real" books. I was assured that this would be the case by Madeline's classroom teacher. However, the verbal accounts I heard from Maddie always centered around the levels she was reading. As I suspected, this time Madeline quickly read and advanced through the levels.

"I got through another level today! I'm the only one who has finished two levels already. Mrs. Rainer says I'll be done the levels soon. Martin still hasn't finished a level yet."

This time Madeline was the one successfully navigating the levels. She seemed pleased to be doing so well in comparison to her group mates. I'm still surprised that she wanted the reading intervention and wonder if she felt as if she had something to prove to herself or the other children in her class.

January 14, 2007

"I'm all done grade one reading now. I can start grade two reading!"

The fact that Maddie is halfway through grade two and believes she is just starting grade two reading because she has finally completed reading through the levels makes me very sad.

June, 2007

Madeline is continuing to read voraciously. The Magic Tree House and Rainbow Fairy book series are her favorite reading materials. She has also developed a keen interest in non-

fiction reading. She loves reading about how and why things work. Everywhere she goes she carries a back pack stuffed with books “just in case” she is bored.

As I reflect on the almost two years that have passed since I started documenting Maddie’s literacy journey, I believe Maddie has “survived” the leveled book experience. I can’t help but wonder, though, how much richer her learning might have been had she not had to endure this program in the first place. If all her literacy experiences had centered on rich children’s literature and fascinating non-fiction on topics of interest to her and her classmates, what difference might this have made? How many children in the school system, who lack the support Madeline has had at home, come through such programs with more damaging impairments? How many children become frustrated and disillusioned and choose not to pick up a book during their free time -- joining the ranks of those who know how to read but choose not to do so?

Data Analysis

I have read through my journal entries, charted relevant incidents and reflections, woven these vignettes into a story, studied the story, and color-coded and clustered the main themes and patterns supported by my data: identity and affinity groups, purpose, reading models, belief systems, public labeling and external reinforcements, and power.

Identity/Discourse and Affinity groups

Identity is a complex concept to explore. Sfard and Prusak (2005) have noted that identity has become an increasingly popular construct in educational research. They are concerned that the term identity is widely used in this literature, yet is often not defined carefully (as cited in Juzwik, 2006). Juzwik (2006) suggests this is problematic because “the term identity has been commandeered by educational researchers drawing from and situating themselves within a wide range of disciplinary and methodological traditions” (p. 13). For the purpose of this study, I will situate my use of the terms identity and affinity groups within the field of sociocultural research on identity and education. “Sociocultural” refers to “how people creatively appropriate language, both as individual performers and as competent members of a cultural group” (Juzwik, 2006, p.14).

Returning to the concept of discourse is necessary to unpack identity issues. As explored earlier in the literature review, Gee (1999, 2001b) has divided the concept of discourse into two separate ideas, Discourse/discourse. As previously explained, for Gee (1999) Discourse (with an uppercase D) refers to a way of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, and acting that

identifies one as a member of a particular group. Gee (2001) explains that discourse (with a lowercase d) refers to the language used by the members of the group to signal their membership within a particular group.

As I attempted to make sense of all of these intertwined ideas around identity/discourse and affinity groups I found Gee's (2001a) explanation of "identity kits" to be helpful. Gee (2001a) writes that Discourses can be thought of as identity kits. Each identity kit comes complete with the appropriate costume, devices and instructions on how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize.

When thinking of Discourses in the manner of identity kits I was able to find different identities and Discourses apparent within my data. For example, Madeline's reading identity kit at school was different from the reading identity kit she used at home. At school much of her book language (discourse) centered around levels, both hers and her classmates. Gee (2001a) writes, "Discourses can be related to each other in relationships of alignment or tension" (p. 47). When Madeline started to bring her school identity kit language home with her, this created a tension for her and me. I did not like this identity kit and challenged her to not wear this particular identity "costume" at home:

"We already know this by all the wonderful books you read" (Nov. 23, 2005).

"Let's just read our own books" (Nov. 28, 2005).

Gee (2001b) further explains the notion of Discourse as it applies specifically to learning to read in this statement:

Learning to read a text of a given type in a given way, then, requires scaffolded socialization into the groups and social practices that make a text of this type to be read in

this way. Being able to read a text of a given type a given way requires that one is a member of such social groups and is able to engage in their practices. (p.17)

This quote helps me to understand why Madeline worked so hard to succeed with the leveled books. She wanted to be a “member” of the social group of her peers at school. She was living a life at school in which acceptance into this social group meant being successful at reading the levels.

To further elaborate upon and unpack what is meant by the above two concepts, Gee (1999, 2001a) writes about the construction of identity and how it relates to learning. He explains that identities are both multiple and situated and that people present various “ways of being” that correspond to particular social situations. McCarthy and Moje (2002) further explain that: “Identities are always situated in relationships...power plays a role in how identities get enacted and how people get positioned” (p. 231). Compton-Lily (2006) extends the idea around identities by writing:

Children’s personal histories as readers, their past successes, the official criteria for determining reading competence, and their current struggles all contribute to ways in which children identify themselves as readers. These struggles did not occur within neutral and political contexts, nor are they played out upon level social and political planes. (p. 59)

The complexities around identity are further heightened in this narrative because multiple identities are interwoven. In addition to Madeline’s identity, my own identity figures prominently in this research story. Then there are the identities of many of the others mentioned in the story: Madeline’s friends, Madeline’s friends’ parents, various teachers at her school, Madeline’s sisters and so on.

Notions of identity impacted me when I was able to step outside of Madeline's story and reflect on it as a researcher, rather than as her mom (and as a central character in the story). It became clear that Madeline was moving in and out of many different identities, depending upon whom she was talking with and what social situation she was in. McCarthy and Moje (2002) write about power relationships having significant importance in how identity is enacted. Clearly Madeline was dealing with two contrasting "power figures" in her life. Her mother looked at literacy as being a distinctly social practice, whereas at school, literacy was about individual mastery and comprised of learning a set of skills. Madeline was positioned between two opposing understandings of literacy, and she needed to "fit in" with me at home and with her peers and teachers at school. She needed to be able to shift between two conflicting identities.

Gee (2001c) defines affinity groups as "a group wherein people form affiliations with each other...primarily through shared practices or a common endeavor (which entails shared practices...)" (p. 9). He goes on to clarify the concept of affinity groups by sharing some examples. "Greens, Saturn owners, members of an elite guarded-gate community, users of Amazon.com, skate boarders, or Pokemon fanatics constitute affinity groups that share practices, patterns or consumption, and ongoing relationships to specific business organizations" (p. 9).

For children, particularly children learning to read, identities and membership in the "literacy club" (Smith, 1988) are even more complex because becoming literate often entails reading and writing texts that are considered appropriate for different contexts (Compton-Lily, 2006).

Reading through the highlighted portions of my data that were coded for the theme of identity, it became clear to me that I could not simply code in terms of a single theme of identity. I returned to my data and "sub-coded" it for all the different identities that were found in the

research. So beside every cluster that was color coded for identity, I went back and added the initial of whose identity the cluster was referring to. As well, I needed to describe these identities based in the social situations in which they occurred.

That bright, sunny morning when Madeline shared that she was “the worst reader in the class” (Fall, 2005) I truly thought that the situation that would unfold would be a scenario where Madeline and I, as a team, took on leveled books. Looking back at the role I played, I drew on a number of “identity kits” myself in the construction of identities. As an elementary teacher passionate about the reading process and about helping children become successful literate beings, hearing my own daughter doubting her abilities worried me. I also immediately made a connection back to some of my own classroom practices--where my practice and my beliefs had not meshed together. I knew I had not served some of my former students well in terms of the way I had approached reading instruction. My identities as educator, researcher and parent became intertwined and created tension and conflict.

One of the biggest sources of my inner conflict was that in order to support Madeline, at times I felt as if I was giving credibility and acceptance to literacy learning that linked her reading identity to book levels. This conflict comes through clearly in the instance where Madeline had received her first certificate. She was excited and thrilled about it. My preference was to want to completely discount it as an unnecessary artifact to illustrate reading development. I did congratulate her on receiving it but continued to remind her that she didn’t really need it to measure her development as a reader. She countered this sentiment by placing it front and centre on the fridge, as a visual reminder that she had moved up a level, and wanted to celebrate it because it was important to her (November 23, 2005).

I was also conflicted in my roles as mother/educator because Madeline's school was advocating a different model of reading from the model I believed in. When Maddie was telling her dad and me that in order for someone to be "passed" to the next level the child needed to read every word perfectly in five books this upset me deeply.

"When you have read five books from your level perfectly, you are ready to go onto the next level. I was close a few times before but I kept messing up a word."
(Nov. 5, 2005)

I tried to question Maddie about this:

"Sometimes people read a word that isn't quite what is written on the page, but the story still makes sense. Would that be okay?" (Nov. 5, 2005)

Because of my understandings of the reading process, I believed this kind of reading "miscue" could be highly sophisticated (i.e. when meaningful and grammatically acceptable substitutions are made). I also knew that Madeline herself tended to make these kinds of miscues. From Madeline's answer: "No, no! You have to read the word exactly as is written in the book. That's what she is looking for" (Nov. 5, 2005), I realized she was essentially being penalized for such miscues. She was being taught from a "reading as accuracy model." I felt a model such as that was reductionist, focusing much more on basic skills than reading for meaning. Furthermore, in this model any approximating a child might do, was immediately considered wrong. In this context, how could I help her understand that she needn't concern herself over reading every word correctly?

Another instance when I found my identities of teacher/mother in conflict was when Madeline brought home the information about the Home Reading Program and the description of

the materials to be used. I knew right away I did not like it. I also felt that Madeline would benefit much more by just reading the books we had at home.

I am feeling caught in a precarious position. I want to be supportive and respectful of Madeline's ideas, and yet I strongly believe that she would benefit more from reading authentic books that would allow her to utilize a host of reading strategies that would help build her confidence (Nov. 28, 2005).

However, she wanted to participate in the program and was adamant about it. Again I found myself wanting to listen to her and her desire, while not believing that this program would be of benefit to her.

Another “identity kit” I drew from was that of “expert.” Other parents knew my background as an early years teacher and would sometimes ask me education-related questions or ask for advice. That day at play group when the other moms were talking about their children and the level their children were at, I felt very uncomfortable. I know one mother was clearly identifying the Hooked on Phonics program she has used as the positive factor in her child’s reading and the reason why he was doing so well in terms of advancing through the reading levels. My identity as expert was being called into question because my own child was not navigating through the levels as quickly (December 2, 2005).

Another identity that I believe is supported by the data is the identity of “reader for pleasure.” There are specific times during this study period when Madeline and I were able to read together for the sole purpose of enjoying books. Each of us drew from a different identity kit in these moments than we did when we were involved with other reading times. For example, my identity as a reader here was different from the one I utilized for reading as a graduate student, or reading an instruction manual. This reading identity was different from

Madeline's reader identity when she read the Home Reading books, read leveled books at school or read to her sister. The day we brought our Christmas books out, Madeline and I sat under the Christmas tree and enjoyed reading books together (December 12, 2005). Madeline and I also had special reading times together at the lake during the summer (July, 2006). We were reading for no other reason but to enjoy good stories. Madeline and I were the members of our own affinity group, one in which enjoyment was the primary purpose of our reading. Through our social practice of reading together we engaged in many wonderful conversations that extended our book talks in wonderful ways. When we read *Thunder Cake*, Madeline found an activity she could do to comfort herself during a thunderstorm-- make a thunder cake. She also found delight in how other siblings interacted in some of Patricia Polacco's books. In addition to the affinity group Madeline and I formed while we were reading together, our family unit was also an affinity group that both Madeline and I were members of. In this group both Maddie and I shared power.

The parents of the children in grade one were also members of an affinity group. Conversations circled around the levels their children had achieved and where they were in comparison to other children. Those with power in this group were the parents whose children were "top level" readers.

Madeline's reading identity is a central feature of my data. McCarthy and Moje's (2001) assertion that identities are always situated in relationships is supported in my research story. Madeline's identity as a reader was strong and confident from an early age. I included evidence of this based on interviews I conducted with her at the age of four. She clearly identified herself as a reader. She was able to confidently answer a host of questions about books and reading. I

expected this early confidence would translate into confidence and success in school when it came to reading.

Therefore, when Madeline entered school and her identity as a reader changed so dramatically, I was taken aback. She started to identify herself as a weak reader, even the “worst reader” in her class, based on the level she was at (Fall, 2005). She allowed her reading identity to be determined by the level she was at. I now see, through this research data, that this was because Madeline wanted to belong to the affinity group that was in place in her school life. As Gee (1999) has written, people present various “ways of being” in order to correspond to social situations. Thus, at school, Madeline was quick to adopt the “language” and corresponding behaviors dictated by leveled reading. She started to talk about the levels that various children in her class were at. She often informed me about who had moved ahead to a new level: “*Guess what level Kathy is on! Level E*” (November, 2005). She talked about her own progress in terms of levels. She knew the levels of most grade one children. Levels had become a pervasive factor in her grade one classroom. In order for children to fit into this social situation, they needed to talk the language and walk the talk of levels. Since Madeline’s status in the group may have been low because of her reading level, I wonder if she felt the need to over compensate for this by talking the “level talk” even more. The time Maddie jumped into our friend’s van and asked her, “*What level are you on, Kathy*” (December, 2005), she was attempting to identify herself as a member of the leveled book affinity group.

I believe the school perpetuated the notion of identities being linked to levels, with the awarding of certificates upon the completion of each level. Children always knew what level they were at, as did their classmates. Therefore, children always knew where they stood in relation to the other children. Madeline went through a long period where her identity was

stalled at “level A.” Then she identified with “level B” and so on. The certificates she earned help reinforce her identity at each level. At each level, she knew the other children who were also at that level. They were her peers. When a classmate moved up from a level that they had been working on together, Madeline immediately believed that person was a better reader. The reverse happened at the end of Maddie’s leveled book experiences, when she was reading with Martin. As she advanced ahead on the levels and he hadn’t changed levels, she considered herself the stronger reader:

I got through another level today! I’m the only one who has finished two levels already. Mrs. Rainer says I’ll be done the levels soon. Martin still hasn’t finished a level yet (November, 2006).

Maddie was also living with conflicted identities as a reader. At home she was a girl who checked out and read fifty library books per week. This was in stark contrast to the girl who at school was limited to choosing books based on the level she was currently at. At school, books that Madeline would have enjoyed choosing were considered “wish books” and were off limits to her.

Madeline’s home and school reading identities collided in the Home Reading program. Madeline wanted to follow the rules and do the reading outlined by the program. This meant reading books that Madeline herself deemed boring. I gave her the option of not reading those books. I said she could choose books she wanted to read and we would record them the same way. She was concerned that not reading the leveled books for practice would result in her falling further behind on the levels. Yet, she knew I wasn’t in favour of her reading these leveled books. At six years of age she was walking a tightrope between the power players in her life: her mother and the program to which she was assigned at school.

At home Madeline reveled in her reading identity as an entertainer. She took great delight in reading with her little sister, Emma Kate. I have described how she took it upon herself to give each doggie in the *Doggies* story a different type of voice (December 18, 2005). The more giggling she was able to elicit from her sister, the more her reading performance flourished.

Madeline was also willing to take risks and attempt reading that would have been considered beyond her level with our Christmas books (December 12, 2005). She took pride in herself as a reader and found enjoyment in this experience. In contrast to this reading, at school when I observed her faced with the opportunity to participate in a read aloud, she shut down and refused to do it. She explained her resistance to participating in this reading was because: "*I'm not as good a reader as the other kids in my group and I didn't want to make a mistake. The other kids might have laughed*" (February 6, 2006). Her self concept and confidence were clearly linked to her reading identity. When she felt confident and safe she was willing to take risks. When she felt marginalized by her status as a weak reader in the class, she was unwilling to take risks.

I believe my data supports my contention that Madeline was working hard to try to make sense of her identity. At school she was surrounded by books sorted into book baskets according to a system that assessed book difficulty. These were the books she selected from during quiet reading time and home reading. Yet at home, she organized and arranged a library according to sophisticated groupings (March 24, 2006).

For the whole year I had been concerned about what impact the school's reading program was having on Madeline and how much it was influencing her. I had not been thinking that the reverse might also be happening. Was it possible that Madeline was also bringing some

practices from her home reading experience and her home reading identity to school? She clearly brought our special reading relationship into the classroom the day I was volunteering when she requested I read the story Pancakes, Pancakes! to the children because I was an “exciting reader” (January 23, 2006).

Purpose

In my theoretical model, literacy must always have a purpose; there is always a reason for reading or writing something. This belief is deeply ingrained in me, so much so that I no longer give it much thought. Madeline has been implicitly taught this belief from the day she was born. She has experienced the power of being transported to a place she has never been, but which she can picture because of wonderfully arranged words that create a story in which she is imaginatively “at home.” She has empathized with characters living out adventures she has never experienced herself. She has found humour in funny places as favourite characters have found themselves in zany predicaments. She has gasped and held her breath as characters she has grown to love found themselves in peril. She has shed tears over story situations that have caught her off guard and stunned her emotionally. And, of course, her horizons have been widened beyond what she knows. She has become aware that the life of privilege she is living, is not the experience of many children in the world. She has read about Ecuador and the living conditions our foster child experiences in his daily life. These lessons have become real through writing letters to him and receiving letters in return. Madeline experiences literacy daily in our home in many authentic ways: writing grocery lists, reading recipes, playing games, working on the computer, listening to music, making posters, playing barbies, writing journals and diaries, and reading conventional books.

Jacobs and Tunnell (1996) assert that “real reading” offers two rewards. “The first is immediate as the text creates personal satisfaction while we are living in the words. The second is long-term and delayed, as we reap the accumulated benefits of increased skills, knowledge, experience, and insight” (p. 5). As I look at the story depicting Madeline’s home and school literacy experiences, it is clear Madeline’s home literacy experiences have real purpose for her. As Jacobs and Tunnell (1996) allude to, Madeline is aware that reading is for satisfaction and enlightenment. My journal account of Madeline and I reading Christmas books under the Christmas tree is a clear demonstration of her purposefully enjoying books (December, 2005). At the cottage we created time to read together for the satisfaction it afforded both of us (July, 2006). Madeline enjoyed reading to her sister because of the enjoyment it brought to both of them (December, 2005). At school the day she requested that I read *Pancakes, Pancakes!* (January, 2006), she was showing that she knew enjoyment of books could come from dramatic reading. I had often entertained her in the past while reading to her and she wanted to share this enjoyment with her classmates.

The library Madeline created (March 24, 2006) serves as an example of her awareness of books and literacy having purpose for her life, and the lives of others. She sorted the books into piles that would help make finding books of interest easier for her “patrons.” In her sorting schema she demonstrated that while people read for pleasure, they also read to learn. She had included a pile of books that could “teach a lesson.” She also had a specific pile for Emma Kate about toilet training.

I also see evidence of Madeline’s awareness of the power of books to teach from the conversation we had when I had shared the problem I had encountered with Emma Kate biting another child. Madeline’s very first response was: “*I should try to find a book about a kid who*

bites other kids. I can use it to teach Emma Kate not to bite" (March 12, 2006). She clearly understands that books are meant to bring enjoyment and to teach.

So when Madeline was faced with a reading program at school for which the primary purpose was to progress to higher and higher levels, this must have caused her some initial confusion. Madeline had previously learned that books have intrinsic value. She enjoyed and learned something from books. Books were worth reading and rereading. But the books she was now being asked to read at school were not for these purposes. Szymusiak and Sibberson (2001) write:

When student's reading diet is exclusively a leveled one, their purpose for reading disappears. They read for us. They become eager to reach the next level, instead of being eager to learn more from what they are reading. (p. 15-16)

Although Madeline's reading diet was not exclusively leveled books, they did represent a significant part of her school reading. Some of her conversations during this study indicate that she grappled with defining the purpose of these leveled books in her life. The day (November, 2005) that Clara and Madeline were quizzing Andrea in the car, asking her what happened when she got to the end of the leveled book collection, suggests Madeline's attempt to situate the purpose of this reading in her life. What had Andrea read after the leveled books? Were they a stepping stone to something bigger? What was the purpose of reading through the whole set of levels?

When Madeline realized that the progression from one level to another resulted in a certificate, she began to equate success at each level with attaining a certificate. Thus, the day she finally received her own certificate made her feel successful in terms of the purpose of reading these "little books." At home the purpose of reading was for enjoyment or to learn

something, or both. At school the purpose was to move up higher through the levels, as quickly as possible. This was a complex, contradictory message for her to try to work out. Perhaps the confusion around the purpose of reading these books contributed to the difficulties she had with them? The theme of purpose makes it clear that the values underlying our home literacy experiences did not match up with Madeline's school literacy expectations.

Reading Models

Another theme/pattern that is supported by the study's data is the presence of a diverse range of reading models to which Madeline was being exposed. Although I have already alluded to this theme in my analysis of the identity theme, I'd like to revisit and carefully explore this concept. Referring back to Street's (1993) concept of autonomous and ideological models of literacy, I see Madeline was exposed to both ends of this continuum.

At school, the leveled books were indicative of an autonomous model of reading. It was assumed that literacy could be presented in a package, such as a leveled book collection, and that these books could be used for all learners. Learning to read was a matter of mastering a neutral set of skills, and that these skills could then be applied equally across all contexts (Larson & Marsh, 2005).

"When you have read five books from your level perfectly, you are ready to go on to the next level..."

"No! You have to read the word exactly that is written in the book. That's what she is watching for" (November 24, 2005).

These quotes from Madeline are consistent with an autonomous model of literacy. Autonomous models assume that texts can be read independent of their use for some authentic purpose (Larson & Marsh, 2005).

Viewing literacy as an ideological model fascinates me because it links literacy practices to identity. It asserts that people read and write for various purposes. This is the model Madeline would have been versed in prior to entering school. As my data indicates, once Madeline arrived in grade one, the model she was expected to use was an accuracy model, synonymous with an autonomous model.

Moving from the broad idea of autonomous/ideological models of reading, I will examine a more specific model of reading developed by two Australian researchers, Allan Luke and Peter Freebody. This model is called the Four Resources Model. In their Four Resources Model, Luke and Freebody (1999) refer to four co-existing reader practices, each of which contributes to the development of a literate person. These four practices are: code breaker, text participant, text user and text analyst.

The code breaker is positioned outside the text and must use code breaking strategies such as the alphabet, patterns of sentences, conventions etc. to enter the text (Wilson, 2002). The text participant works to understand the text and “may shed tears at a sad part, smile at a humorous incident or may even recall a related life experience” (Wilson, 2002, p.10). The text user has a purpose for his reading: “The text user reads not only to understand and participate but also to make sense of the text” (Wilson, 2002, p.10). All texts have different structures and thus are read in different ways. For example, a novel, an instruction manual, a textbook and a recipe have different structures which result in their being used in different ways. Finally, the text analyst “steps back from the text to analyze the text itself from a social critical literacy,

perspective” (Wilson, 2002, p.10). Analysts interrogate the text by “stepping into the character’s shoes, figuring out the author’s motives for writing a particular text and examining multiple perspectives that may or may not match the reader’s views of the world” (McFarlane, 2006, p.30).

Luke and Freebody consider the above four roles as practices because they understand code breaking, text participation, text using, and text analyzing as a dynamic family of practices engaged in by humans in social contexts. This notion follows the idea that language develops as a part of social practices (Wilson, 2002).

Using the Four Resources Model is helpful in analyzing the reading models within which Madeline was operating. Wilson (2002) writes:

Beginning readers can engage in all four of these reading practices. However, it is important to note that some books written for early years readers make it almost impossible for the beginning reader to be a text participant, a text user, or a text analyst. Books written with controlled vocabularies or phonic texts make text participation very difficult, for meaning is not a priority in the construction of the text. (p. 10)

At school, the practice was to use leveled books to instruct and assess students. Given that leveled books are typically written with controlled vocabularies and phonic texts, Madeline was required to principally engage in the code breaking practice. Value was placed on progressing to higher and higher levels, rather than making meaning, using the text, or being a text analyst. Books for which Madeline could utilize the latter strategies were considered “wish books” in her classroom, and were off limits to her, because of her current level.

Madeline repeatedly brought home the same book, *Fruit Salad*, for home reading practice. When I asked her about this she stated,

"I know every page and can just get through it" (December 6, 2005).

She equated reading this book with code breaking. Wilson (2002) condemns such a purpose: "To be a code breaker and not enjoy reading or to see no purpose for reading is a waste of time" (p. 45). This notion of reading just for the sake of "code breaking" goes against everything I believe about the reading process. I agree with Wilson (2002) when she writes, "Code breaking is not learned first, in isolation from the other reading practices. Code breaking is learned as the reader engages with text participation, text using, and text analyzing" (p. 45).

Madeline was being taught at school to choose books on the basis of isolated word recognition.

"I can do the trick I learned at school. If there is a word I don't know I will hold up my finger. If I get to the end of the page and have five fingers up, I'll know the book is too hard" (March 1, 2006).

This strategy is all about code breaking again. It is about the correct identification of each individual word being considered of prime importance. Yet, if it is agreed that the purpose of reading is to construct meaning, by using all of the cueing systems available to a reader, this technique has limitations.

Madeline declared one day:

"I can read anything now. Reading is easy" (August 26, 2006).

This statement appeared to me to have been made in terms of her perceiving herself to be a proficient code breaker. This was concerning to me because I wanted her to understand that reading is so much more than merely code-breaking. At school she had been taught that strong code-breaking translated into moving ahead in the levels. Thus it was easy to understand why she might think that "reading was easy" if code breaking was all that mattered. I, however,

wanted Maddie to be involved in the complexity and messiness of reading. I wanted her to be actively involved in all four practices in Luke and Freebody's (1999) model. I believe this is why I was so resistant to bringing the leveled books into our home. When she wanted to use leveled books for her home reading component, I wanted her to reject them and agree with me that real books enabled us to have a better, richer literacy experience.

Belief Systems

Wilson (2002) writes, "What teachers believe about the reading process determines the reading materials in the room, the activities and the purposes for reading with which the children engage in the classroom, and importantly, the classroom attitudes towards errors and risk taking" (p. 3). Cambourne (1988) asserts, "What teachers actually *do* when engaged in the act of teaching is motivated by what they believe about learners and what they *believe* about the processes which underlie learning" (p. 17, emphasis in original).

Beliefs and belief systems are also prominent themes supported by the data. Madeline was exposed to contradicting literacy instruction belief systems. Madeline's teacher has an interesting role in this story. She and I connected immediately as fellow book lovers. We engaged in many discussions about books each of us were reading and we recommended books to each other. She facilitated many literacy activities with the students that I thought were wonderful and authentic. In the conversations I had with her about the leveled books and my concern about the use of this program she concurred and distanced herself from the program by stating it was something each grade one child was required to participate in from a school policy standpoint. I suspect that some of her own belief systems about reading and reading instruction were in conflict with the program. The data does not make her particular beliefs about reading

instruction clear as she is not the key person with whom Madeline identified her school literacy engagements. Madeline repeatedly spoke about going out of the room to read leveled books with Mrs. Ballany.

"Well, you get to read with Mrs. Ballany a few times a week. She comes and calls you out to read with her" (Nov. 24, 2005).

"In grade one you'll get called out to read with Mrs. Ballany" (January 31, 2006).

Mrs. Ballany was an educational assistant; not a certified teacher. It is hard to know what beliefs Madeline's teacher held about literacy instruction.

Certainly my beliefs about reading and reading practices were not aligned with the school beliefs. In the data generated, I can see evidence of trying to win Madeline over to my belief system about reading. The day Maddie received her first certificate, and wanted to celebrate it, I was quick to remind her that she didn't need that piece of paper to affirm her identity as a reader (Nov. 23, 2005).. In my journal, I noted that I was aware Maddie and I were not thinking the same way. I wrote about her,

"... having bought into the leveled book practice" (Dec. 6, 2005).

I was concerned that Madeline seemed to be buying into a belief system about reading that was misaligned with my own beliefs around reading. This led me to question whether I had sufficiently prepared her and caused me to wonder how,

"a child who has been exposed to rich literacy experiences her whole life would let this reading program become so significant to her identity as a reader" (Dec. 6, 2005).

Public Labeling and External Reinforcements

In Madeline's class, leveled books were one component of the literacy program. For this component she was pulled out of the classroom with a few classmates, to read with an Educational Assistant. In addition, she was required to choose books to read during Independent reading time, from the basket deemed appropriate for her. These books also came home with her to read, constituting the home reading program. However, Madeline did have other positive literacy experiences at school. Her teacher was a literature lover. Her teacher read aloud from excellent books daily, Madeline had journals she read from at school and brought home filled with poetry, songs, charts and journal writing. She was able to select books of her choosing from the school library each week and we often purchased books for the monthly book order.

In addition, we visited a city library weekly. Madeline was exposed to a variety of different literacies in the forms of music, video games, television, games, magazines and drama.

Yet, despite all of the wonderful home and school literacy experiences she was exposed to, the level Maddie was assigned from the leveled text set was how she identified herself in terms of her literary life. Kathryn Mitchell Pierce (1999) shares my concern about students defining themselves as readers in terms of a level:

This experience forced me to reconsider the messages my students were receiving about themselves as readers. I had a difficult time reconciling the fact that reading levels had such a prominent role in our classroom, given the nature of the classroom context I had worked so hard to create (p. 372).

Pierce had worked hard to create a classroom environment in which her students were "engaged in rich literacy experiences, had a wide range of books available and employed the extensive use of flexible groupings based on interest" (p. 372). In spite of that, even in this classroom

environment, she still heard her students engaging in conversations that defined themselves as readers based on the “level” of books they could read. This situation, which reminded me of Madeline’s, is important because I think it could be easy for an educator to think, if leveled books only comprise one part of the literacy program, there is no harm in that. Yet, as Pierce (1999) wondered, “to what extent ‘struggling’ readers are more susceptible to the pressures of society to define themselves as readers in term of levels” (p. 374)? Reflecting on Cambourne’s suggestion (1988) that one of the conditions required for success in literacy is the involvement of significant adults who communicate to the child their unshakeable conviction that the child will be successful in learning to read, one wonders if a child stuck in A or B levels for a period of time is actually receiving that unconditionally supportive message.

In Madeline’s classroom, each child received a certificate for passing through each level. In the early days of grade one, a common supper time conversation for our family was the discussion of who had received a certificate that day, and who hadn’t. The assignment of levels to children was a very public affair, with everyone knowing the rank of everyone else. The message to those who weren’t receiving certificates was undeniable. They were not good readers. So and so was a better reader. They shouldn’t try to read the harder books; they were still at too low a level. These are hard messages for beginning readers to hear.

In addition, the practice of rewarding passing through levels is a questionable practice. Alfie Kohn (1999a, 1999b) has written extensively about the dangers of motivating children with extrinsic rewards. When children receive a certificate for “passing” through a level, the focus is taken away from valuing intrinsic motivation, or enjoying what one does for its own sake (Kohn, 1999a). Some children might approach getting through the levels as a way of “earning” something, as well as proving to their peers, teacher, and parents that they are “good enough” to

read books from the next level. I believe that there is wide spread educational support for the idea that reading is about so much more than passing through a level and that the value of reading is intrinsic -- reading is about learning, doing, enjoying and critiquing. As concerned as I am for the students who are stuck at a level and not progressing, I can't help but wonder what happens to the children who move quickly through the levels, each time earning another "reward." At some point the levels do end, and do these children then think they have mastered reading? Do they know how to find books to keep challenging themselves? What happens when the rewards stop? Is the motivation for some of the readers to continue reading gone? Although these children might have learned to read, it is questionable whether they have learned how to be a reader (Mere, 2005). Lucy Calkins (2001) writes, "there is a fine line between leveling books and leveling children" (p. 120).

Power

Finally, I'd like to address the theme/pattern of power. Originally, I intended to only address this idea in my identity analysis section. And while it does figure prominently in that section, the notion of power relationships having significant importance to how identity is enacted (McCarthy & Moje, 2002) is such a significant notion that I wanted to explore the power theme more closely.

My data supports the idea that power was closely linked to specific book levels. The grade one children who held the power, in terms of the leveling book community, were the students at the higher book levels. Madeline was very aware of her own "low" status in the classroom.

"I'm the worst reader in the class. I'm the only one on Level A"

She was aware she was not powerfully positioned in the group, and felt embarrassed enough about this to not want to return to school. This power status even extended itself to the parent community, with the parents of the high level readers being positioned as more powerful in the group. During a conversation with other mothers (December 2, 2005), in which I became aware that mothers were aware of the level rankings of other children, I even felt like a less important and powerful member of the group.

Although I was aware of the role of power throughout this research, it was while I was reading through my data in my “researcher stance” that I grew most uncomfortable. The incident in which Madeline is talking about Martin and how she has already moved up two levels, while he has remained the same, was unsettling. At the time, I had not given much consideration to Madeline’s words, other than to notice that her self confidence seemed to be rising as she moved through the levels. However, realizing that Madeline was assuming the “power role” between her and another child, because of her higher level, and seeing that she seemed to enjoy this new found power, even though it was coming from a program that in the past had caused her pain and made her feel marginalized, was a very uncomfortable realization for me as her mother.

I do want Madeline to enjoy a sense of power relative to her literacy, but not power that comes from a system of being superior to a classmate. I want her literacy power to come from using her literacy for good, to make a change in the world. Lewison, Leland and Harste (2008) write:

Critical literacy practices encourage students to use language to question the everyday world, to interrogate the relationship between language and power, to analyze popular culture and media, to understand how power relationships are socially constructed, and to consider actions that can be taken to promote social justice. (p. 3)

Unfortunately, when children are in a program that does not value critical literacy, but rather is based on competition and external rewards, the power comes from superficial categories that pit one child against another.

Personal Implications

One of the biggest concerns Clandinin and Connelly (2007) identify about self study methodology is the possibility of the student to "...stop with the self and think that self-knowledge in and of itself is enough" (p. 597). Clandinin and Connelly further note with concern that there is some temptation of self-study researchers to "...merely satisfy the self" (p. 598). Personally, one of the biggest attractions to this methodology was the notion that self-study must ultimately be grounded in teacher practice (Clandinin & Connelly, 2007). As I reflect on this research journey I have undertaken, I am at a place where I must now challenge myself with the question of what I am going to do with this new knowledge I have gained. How will my new understandings be reflected in my own teaching practice? How will my future students benefit? I am much more cognizant of asking these questions because I am more aware that my own "...personal belief systems about living, about learning, about language and about reading" (Wilson, 2002, p.188), will be implicitly linked to the way I approach literacy learning and teaching within the classroom.

In the future, I see myself being much more intentional about the questions I ask in terms of the needs of my students. I will then use those answers to form the basis of my literacy instruction. I will consciously ask myself: what sort of literate lives do I wish for my students? How can I best prepare my students to lead successful literate lives? How can I value the diverse literacies each student brings to the classroom? How can I continue to help each of my students build upon these literacies? What are the literacy needs of my students?

Central to these questions will be the notion of identity, specifically reading identities. As a direct result of this study I will give more consideration to what I can do to help my students develop strong reading “identity kits” (Gee, 2001a), as well strong reading communities within the classroom. Wilson (2006) writes: “A classroom where the literacy program aims to have reading as social practice, to build identities and understanding of communities and cultures, is dynamic and alive” (p. 11). This will be my future classroom.

At the onset of this journey, I had concerns and uneasiness about reading instruction being delivered through a leveled book program. Around that time, I read Calkins (2001) *The Art of Teaching Reading*. I had been surprised and disheartened to read that Lucy Calkins and her colleagues had returned to using leveled books in their classrooms at times. I had wondered if I too would come to the end of this journey with a view that leveled books do have a justified place in the classroom. However, I have not arrived at that understanding. Closely comparing two distinct models of reading instruction has shown me the severe limitations of a model built upon the use leveled books. Leveled books generally have students focusing on word identification (Goodman, 1965, 1967, 1996) and generally have students operating simply as code breakers (Luke & Freebody, 1999). The Four Resources model (Luke & Freebody, 1999) consists of four co-existing reading practices in which readers utilize a host of cueing systems, while they simultaneously code break, text participate, text use and text analyze. This close comparative examination has positioned me to clearly understand that the former model is severely limited. Reading must be viewed as “an orchestrated use of various skills, strategies, and knowledge that converge to make meaning with text” (Braunger & Lewis, 2001, p.11). The former type of reading model has students learning to read while the latter has children reading to learn with meaning making at the core. A model such as the Four Resources Model (Luke &

Free body, 1999) has the potential to help students develop into lifelong, critical readers who are socially responsible people (Wilson, 2006, p. 12).

Teachers have cited the availability of leveled books and the ease of matching students to the “right level” as reasons for using leveled texts in the classroom. While I do understand that there is an inherent convenience linked with the use of leveled texts, I remain more convinced than ever that teachers must be active agents in helping match their students to just “right” real books. When children are given choice and presented with books that they can engage with, assuming the roles of code-breaker, text participant, text user and text analyst; they will be reading with purpose. Matching books to children could have been the focus of a thesis on its own, it is such a complex issue. I believe that integral to this concept is a teacher truly knowing his/her students and being committed to building relationships within the classroom community. For me, this might start in the summer prior to the school year commencing. A welcoming letter to each student, along with a questionnaire for the student or student’s family to fill out, specifically asking about each child’s interests would be a great way to glean some insights into potential topics of interest to each child and some potential books to support these interests in the classroom.

I remain concerned about parents and the lack of education many parents seem to have about what their children need in terms of literacy instruction in order to become successful literate beings, prepared for their futures. Educators must initiate conversations with parents about the process of reading. Parents want to help their children become readers but might genuinely not know how to do this. I believe there is a huge misconception in society that learning “phonics” is foundational to learning to read. I clearly see that I need to be more vigilant in educating the parents of my students that “...students do best when the skills they need

are explicitly taught in meaningful contexts" (Routman, 2003, p. 50). Children need to be given opportunities to read in contexts where they can make use of all the cuing systems available to them. I'd like to find ways of helping parents understand that literacy is about much more than letter-sound relationships. It would be wonderful to help parents envision the bigger picture: "Literacy education is ultimately about the kind of society and the kinds of citizens/subjects that could and should be constructed" (Luke & Freebody, 1999, p.5). Literacy is about so much more than the level their child might at in a particular reading program at school.

My current passions and interests have shifted to parent education. Many questions have arisen for me related to this idea. What is the best way to start initiating conversations with parents? Will parents be open to such conversations? How can I best paint a picture of the future literacy needs of our children and the fact that skills based programs are not meeting these needs? I believe that if educators are ever going to be able to shift away from regimented programs driven by standardized assessments, parents are going to be the link to supporting and facilitating that change.

Final Thoughts

I have answered many of the questions with which I began this inquiry. I have deepened my understandings of the theory and the practices I envision in my future classroom. I can articulate why leveled books will never be utilized in my classroom. I have a heightened awareness of the importance of helping children create strong reading identities and supportive classroom communities. I have a specific literacy model in mind for ensuring a literacy program in my classroom meets the needs of all students.

New questions have naturally also arisen through the course of this study. I remain concerned that parents are not being educated adequately about the reading process and how we can best help our children become literate beings who use their literacy for good. I need to find ways that I can contribute to this education. The issue of power in the classroom has intrigued me and motivated me to further explore the creation of democratic classrooms. Personally, as I explored the work of other parent literacy researchers, I found writings (Lenhart & Roskos, 2003; Gregory, 2001) about the issue of siblings and literacy. Given the age of my daughters and my interest in documenting their literacy development, this seems like a natural area for me to consider and explore. This research story already contains evidence of Madeline's influence on Emma Kate and the potential impact she might have on her in her literacy development. I plan to continue exploring all of these literacy relationships.

Conclusion

June, 2007

At the end of the school year in Madeline's school, each grade has its own special awards ceremony where each child is recognized for three special traits. The teacher calls each student up individually, and announces to the entire audience the three special attributes of each child. The audience applauds and the child receives a handshake and his or her certificate. As I sat in the audience listening to what was said about each child, I noticed that many children were being rewarded for qualities such as proficiency in reading, confidence in reading and even expressive reading. Finally it was Madeline's turn. The first quality read was "enjoyment and love of reading." I was thrilled. Of all the qualities that could have been attributed to Madeline's reading, this would be my top wish for her. Enjoyment and love of reading will inevitably lead to proficiency in reading. Enjoyment of reading will lead her to want to read, and this continued engagement with reading will help her to grow stronger as a reader. Children learn to read by reading. I suspect that many children are deemed proficient readers simply because they have reached the sixteenth level quickly, yet may never come to develop a true love and enjoyment of reading. Madeline's love and enjoyment of reading will take her far on her continued literacy journey.

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