A Complex Literacy Journey:
What The Grade Ones Are Teaching Their Teacher

By

Claire E. Sutton

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

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Abstract

Using the methodology of Teacher Action Research, I researched the world of literacy learning in my own Grade One classroom. For the space of one year I recorded, in narrative form, the actions and words of many of the children in my classroom regarding their views of literacy. These stories were shared with several colleagues over the year, and I learned to look at them through a variety of lenses. At the beginning of the research I had a variety of beliefs, supported by many other researchers, about how children learn. These beliefs included the ideas that: children's learning is ongoing and personal, children have to believe in themselves as learners, children's learning is social, children are in control of their own learning, children's literacy involves more than reading, and children's learning is diverse.

At the end of the year, the stories were reviewed and categorized according to these same basic beliefs about how children learn. The stories in the thesis show how my ideas about these beliefs were greatly expanded as the children taught me to really listen to them.

As I continued to reflect on the stories, it became increasingly clear to me that I was not only studying the children. What I saw in the children's learning was also reflected in my own learning. I realized that my learning also was ongoing and personal. I too came to believe in myself as a learner, particularly as a writer. My learning was very social, and literacy for me was more than reading and writing. As I allowed for the children's diversity, I became more diverse. As I debated the issue of the children's control of their learning, I reflected on the control I had gained over my own learning.

This research not only gave me a greater understanding of the issues of literacy; it showed me the complexity of teaching and learning, both for my students, and for myself.

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Acknowledgements

First of all I have to thank my husband Lyall and my family for supporting me throughout the writing of this thesis. They made it possible.

I am grateful to the Seven Oaks Teachers Cohort, a group of teachers and administrators who accepted me, an "outsider", into their group to learn about Teacher Action Research.

Without my friend and colleague, Tannis Nishibata-Chan, I could never have survived four years of teaching full time and working as a part time student as well. We spent many hours sharing our classroom stories and questions.

I have to thank my wonderful committee. It has been a privilege to work with Dr. Judith Newman, Prof. Joan Irvine, and Dr. Wayne Serebrin. Judith Newman helped me to understand Teacher Action Research and this knowledge has enriched my own teaching. Judith believes in the power of writing and she always encouraged me to "get writing."

Joan Irvine, with her amazing ability to always see the "big picture", walked me through my own thinking at several critical points in the writing. She helped me to see through the maze of the stories to what it was I really wanted to say.

Wayne Serebrin has been my mentor and friend since I entered the teaching profession. His keen understanding of the deep issues of Early Childhood Education has been a constant source for my own thinking. He has given me the gift of learning to value my own questions, and to reflect on my own learning.

Lastly I thank the children I have taught and their parents, who have enriched my life and taught me many lessons about teaching.

Introduction: Steve Raises the Questions

Journal, May 22/98 "Can I use the yellow squares? I just want to do it my way. " For a split second I hesitate, but then I say "Sure Steve, go ahead. Do it your way."

Today is one crazy day, with eight extra Grade Twos in my room this morning, including my friend Steve. I am exhilarated actually by the chance to see and talk to some "old" students of mine, but I am also well aware that these children don't remember all the underlying structures of the room and the Grade Twos that have never been in my room do not understand them at all. In an effort to introduce a math lesson that will be both interesting and applicable to my visitors, I have read a book about quilts and invited the children to think about making a patchwork piece, with 9 - 3 by 3 inch squares. As we talk about it, the job begins to look more and more difficult, so I decide that we will all make the same piece with only two colours, cutting some of the squares into smaller triangles and fitting them together in an identical construction. There is still lots of thinking that has to go into this project. Once the pieces are joined together, the pattern will emerge for all to see. My Grade Ones are being coached along by some of the Grade Twos when Steve, seeing the extra yellow squares, makes his request.

I realize that the project I planned for this "mixed class" morning is perfect for Steve and in the general chaos I watch him cutting and fitting the pieces of his quilt patch. And then he presents the patch to me; he has used three colours and he has cut the squares into triangles that when fit together have the look of a star. "Steve," I say, " if you can get five other children to make a square like yours, we could join them together for a different quilt." In no time at all, Steve has T.J., Adam, Dylan, and his own brother Brendan at work. The boys are discussing how the patch looks like something from one of their superhero shows, but I can't make out exactly what they are saying. Steve is totally in control of this, my "wild guy" group. He instructs them about the making of their patches, and suggests some changes to some of them so that the "big quilt" will look the way he wants it to look. He arranges all the finished pieces,

turning and twisting them to the perfect fit. My Grade Ones are full of praise. "Awesome," says Dylan.

Steve, now in another room for Grade Two, came into my Grade One class a year ago last fall, described to me by some others as "somewhat immature" and "kind of strange." I experienced that immaturity, or so I thought , on the first day of school, when Steve burst into tears at the end of the morning because he didn't get to make a "castle" before choice time was over. During those first few days with Steve I wondered if he would be one of those children I might have to refer to Resource, because I could tell that he had very little interest in reading and writing and as it was suggested, he was a little different. His speech appeared to be delayed and his mother confirmed that he did not talk until he was two and a half. He would often leave off the endings to words, or he would not use the correct pronoun in a sentence. When he saw another student crying one day early in the year, he said "What the matter her? Scared?" This was typical of his speech pattern.

However my opinion of Steve soon began to change. I watched Steve playing with the building toys - Lego, Big Builder, and the blocks. He seemed to have a sense of spatial relationships that I had not seen before.

Everything he made had attachments, removable and rotating parts and what he made in three dimensional construction, he could draw in two dimensions on a page. He intrigued me and I wanted to know more about him. I began to watch and record.

Steve was fascinated with action figures. A few months into the year he brought in a "guy" in a hang glider - the first of many such figures to invade our classroom that year. Made out of any available paper, Steve's "guys" often sported helmets, or armor, or guns (secretly, because guns aren't allowed in the class!) That first "guy" came back and forth from Steve's home for at least 2 weeks, becoming a mass of tape and reinforcements towards the end. "He was my favorite," Steve told me much later. When Steve showed that "guy" and the hang glider to the class, he was deluged with requests to "make one for me." We observed that although Steve cut the holes for the guy to fit into the hang glider, he never actually measured anything. He would draw the "guy" and then cut him out, usually cutting the head of the man smaller than he had drawn it and incredibly, the riders ALWAYS fit into the hang-glider cuts rather perfectly. He seemed to be able to visualize size as he was cutting.

When the original hang-glider got ripped, Steve outfitted the "guy" with a parachute, then with a space ship made from an egg carton and still later a laser space ship. The egg carton space ship had an "arm" which reminded me of the Canada Arm on the Space Shuttle. The laser space ship , made from a cracker box, had arms, and a net. When I asked where the lasers were, Steve said "Oh, they're invisible." The paper arm that Steve constructed for the spaceships fueled more fun as Steve went on to make a much larger arm, which he attached to himself and tried to use.

I was impressed by Steve's self confidence about his creations. It did not seem to matter to Steve that other children brought all manner of toys to the weekly "show and tell" which they demanded we have. Steve continued to bring his paper guys. Often he would show the same guys, pulling the 2 dimensional plain paper toy carefully out of his backpack. In the early part of the year, some of the children would say "We already saw that" or "Not another GUY, Steve." He would always want to pass the guys around; the original guy went around that circle at least 3 times. As the year wore on, the children would more often admire what Steve had brought and would try to copy his creations. I think my obvious enthusiasm for what he brought

helped to interest the other children, but mostly it was Steve himself and his excitement for his projects that was the draw for the others. He began to be revered as an artist.

Although Steve took great delight in his abilities, there was no doubt that his focus was quite narrow. He seemed at times to scorn other art approaches. One day in December when the rest of the class were all doing a tear and paste picture, I asked him if he would "just try tear and paste." He said to me "I'm not a tear and paste guy. I'm a making guy." I couldn't argue with that! Still, I tried to help him extend his abilities in some ways. In December he started drawing an action figure in choice time. I took out some brass fasteners and asked him if he might be able to use them. He took 6, and told the boy next to him that the guy he was making would have "six things." First he put on an "aim" piece, as he called it. This piece swung up from the action figure's arm, and allowed the "guy" to look through a little hole, in order to see the enemy. I watched him make it. The first time the hole didn't reach to the guy's eye, so Steve actually measured the piece of paper to the "guy's" arm and the second one fit beautifully. He also added a fan, a wing on both arms, a gun and a claw on one hand - "six things" all

attached using the brass fasteners.

Cutting and folding was truly one of Steve's most accomplished art forms. In fact I began to think of him as my "scissor boy." Armed with a pair of scissors, this boy could make many imaginative play materials that fascinated and perplexed me. In December he began to make very tiny planes. He would make them, as he made many of his creations - by folding a piece of paper in half and simply cutting. Sometimes he would draw out his creation first, but most often he would simply begin to cut, following a pattern he obviously had stored in his head. Later in the year, when he presented me with yet another plane, I questioned him about his methods. "Did you draw this first with a pencil?" I asked. When he answered in the affirmative, I asked "Where are the pencil marks?" He claimed that he cut around them, so we went looking for the piece of paper that he had used. When we found the cut out piece, with amazement, I pointed out to him that there were *no pencil marks*. He shrugged. He had cut out an intricate plane, seemingly designing as he cut. Then he had taken the plane and had made 5 folds - symmetrically on both sides of the plane, which gave the plane a three dimensional look. It was a very beautiful thing - something my scissor

boy had created in less than 5 minutes.

Steve seemed to have a good sense of perspective. One day in February he showed me a picture he had drawn. It was full of action and the guys he so loved. He was also in the picture he told me - a small person towards the upper right hand corner of the paper. "Look" he said, " I'm far away."

Every day after choice time the children were required to record their activities in their project book. Steve's recordings were a combination of words, drawings, and arrows. When he played at the water table one day, using funnels and plastic pipe to direct the water, he drew the pipes in the middle of his sentence (fig. 1) , with arrows showing where the reader should go. The visual effect is striking,

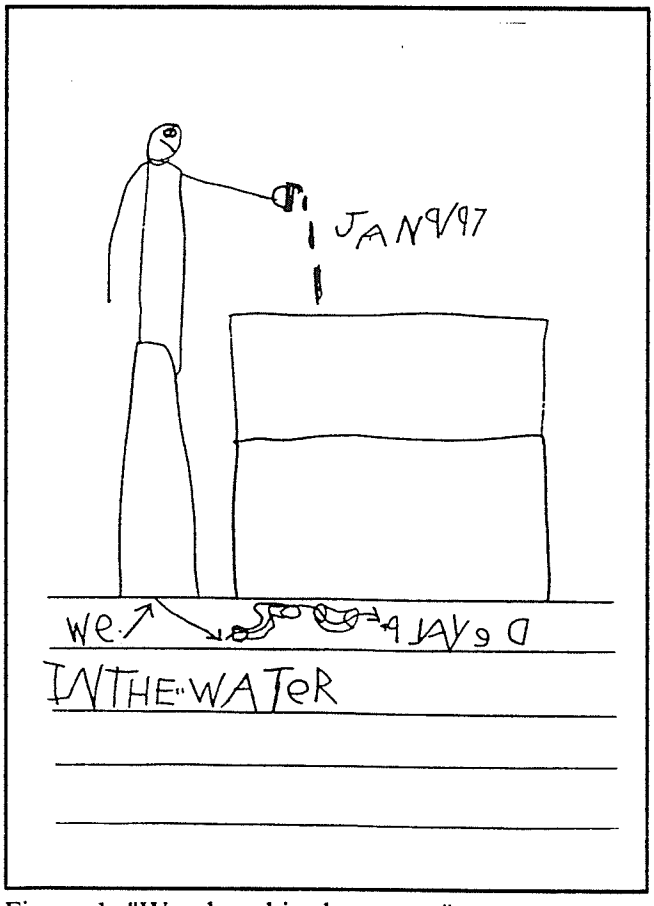


Figure 1 "We played in the water."

and a very good example of the way that drawing enabled Steve's literacy. Steve's project book was almost always full of complicated pictures with lots of little stick figures and dancing people. He could explain each one's activities, if I took the time to listen to him. (fig.2)

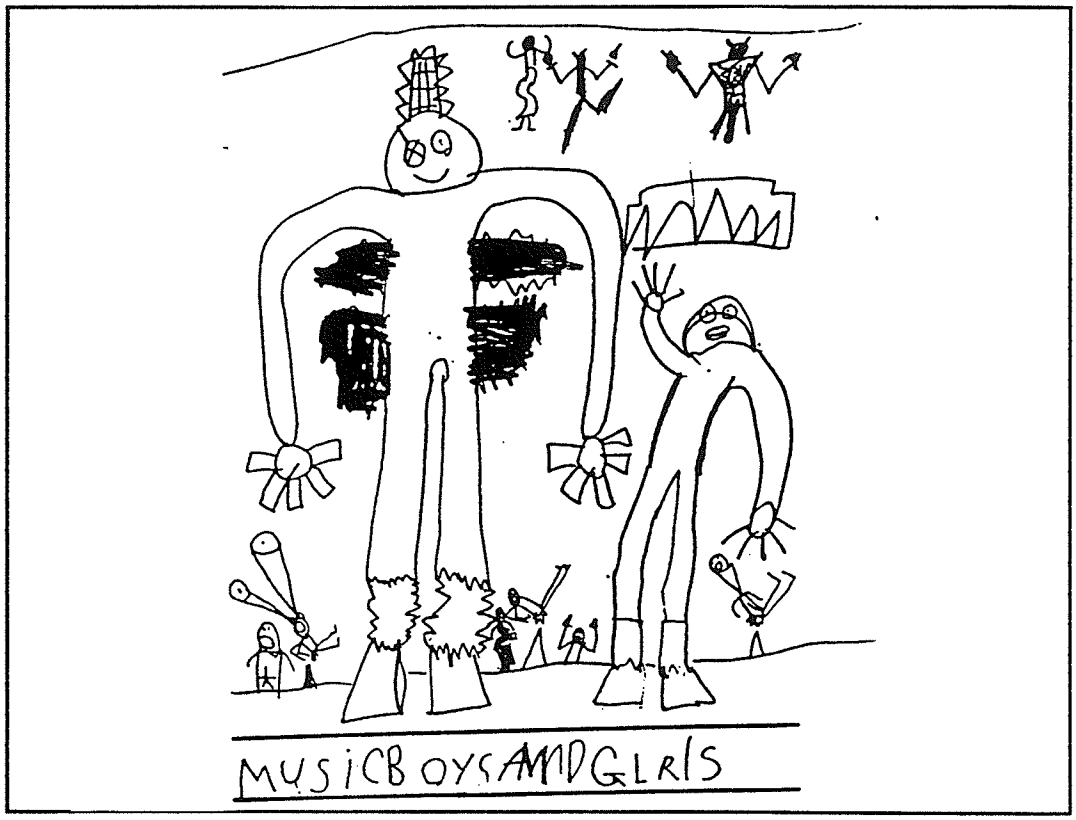


Figure 2 "Music boys and girls" from Steve's journal

At times I wondered about Steve's social connections with the class, because he often seemed to be in his own little world. Once again, Steve

showed me more through his art, than through his words, what was going on in that world. One day I picked a drawing off the floor which had the unmistakable stamp of Steve's work. (fig. 3)

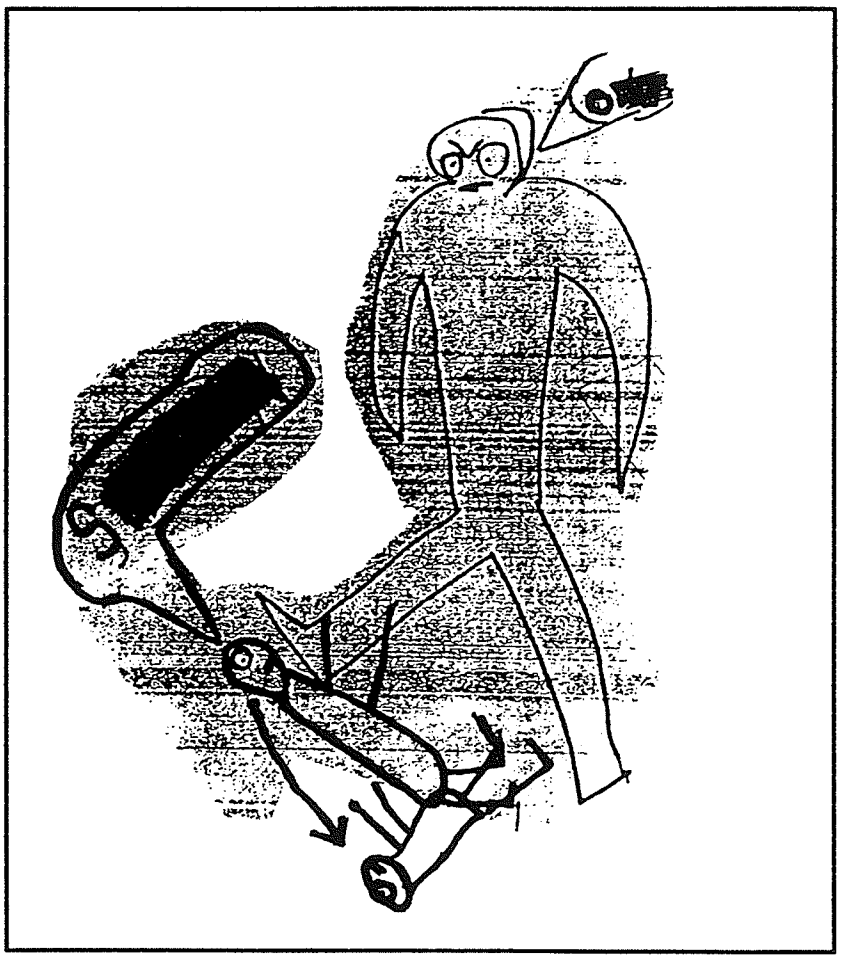


Figure 3 Steve's picture of his interactions with Orval

It was a picture of a large person kicking a smaller person in the head, and the smaller person is shown in falling to the ground. The bigger person is shown to be mad, with a use of a straight line for the mouth, and a V between his eyes. In bubbles above each person, are names - Steve is the one being kicked, while Orval is the bigger, mad person. Steve and Orval have been together in class since nursery school,

and for the most part, they stay apart. Orval is a very powerful boy in the class, very competitive and often controlling. He has often been the catalyst for class discussions of what is fair treatment, and how everyone has equal rights in the room. It was not until I saw this picture that I realized the hold Orval had over Steve as well. Not long after I found that picture, Steve showed his view of Orval once more through his art, his chosen form of literacy. Steve picked up a large paper plate from the art center and cut pie shaped wedges from the middle of the plate to the sides of the plate. He then pushed the spikes all into the air, making a perfect crown and promptly placed the crown on Orval's head.

Steve's ability to visualize things was used by the other children. In the middle of the year, the children seemed to "rediscover " the blocks, and started using them every day to build with. While most of the children simply piled the blocks in a row - one of top of the other, Steve had figured out early in the year that the blocks didn't fall over if they were stacked like the bricks on a building, in a staggered pattern. When the other children picked up on this tactic, their buildings became much more interesting and stable. One day I noticed that a particular block structure

had all sorts of windows, and overhangs. I said to the boys who were building "I don't know how you did that," and Chris answered quite confidently "It's easy. We just ask Steve." Steve was himself building a house with many windows, and so as I watched him, he asked me why I was staring. I said "I just wonder how you do these things." Without hesitation, he gave me his standard reply "I just think about it in my 'magination." (figure 4)

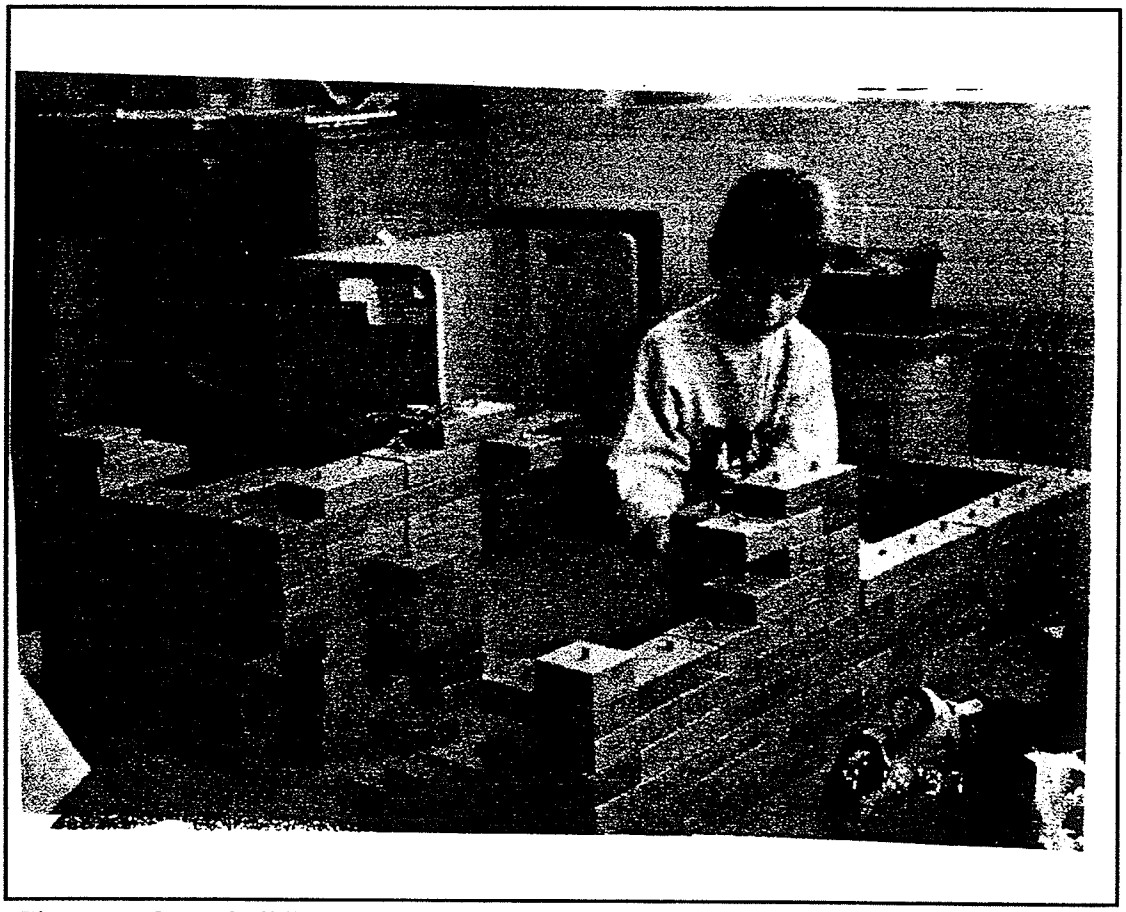


Figure 4 Steve building from his 'magination.

While I grew to expect the unusual from Steve, it was obvious that other adults that occasionally came into contact with Steve had some problems understanding him. One day a math consultant from my school division came to my class to do a lesson with the children. The consultant placed three pictures of different bears on the board and the children were supposed to write their name under the picture of their favorite type of bear. The consultant's object was to have the children count the number of names under each picture and then draw some inferences from that information. However when Orval added his name to one of the lists, he wrote it in very large letters, so that it took up as much room as two names in the list beside it. Steve remarked loudly that Orval had cheated. Steve, so aware of spatial relationships, was thinking about Orval's name taking up too much room on the board. Because I know Steve and the strength he shows in this area, I understood his thinking, but the consultant was somewhat baffled and quickly said "No, he hasn't cheated."

As the year went by, it became apparent that Steve not only enjoyed drawing, but he HAD to draw. In March he was given a picture of himself, which I had taken at a visit our class had made to the museum. In the

picture he was dressed in a costume and his job was to record what was going on. When I walked by him, I noticed that he was not writing, but instead he was drawing. I asked him about the writing and he said simply "I'm going to write about it. I have to draw thirst [first] silly!" His drawing showed the motion which the picture lacked, and which he wanted to put into his writing. His impatient comment to me was to remind me that he trusted me and expected me to understand his need to draw.

Later that same month the student teacher in my classroom introduced the class to "dream catchers." She suggested to the class that they might like to draw a dream they had had. At the table where Steve was working, I sat down and began to talk to Steve about his dream. He couldn't explain it in words, so he began to draw. Deliberately, I asked him "Steve, why are you drawing?" "I have to" he said, his head down, his pencil moving. He told me that he couldn't remember what his dream looked like, but he COULD draw it. Later he began to draw a smaller part of the picture. He covered his eyes with his hands and scrunched up his face, thinking for a minute, obviously visualizing the scene in his head. Then he continued to draw.

At the beginning of the year when the children were asked to draw a self

portrait, Steve created quite an unusual looking profile picture. (figure 5) One of my colleagues asked me if we had a "Picasso" in the Grade One class.

The other childrens' perception of Steve was often interesting to hear. One day Britney and Susan were discussing what was "appropriate" for making at school. Susan was wondering out loud what Steve was making at the art center, and Britney answered" Probably what he makes every single project time." She didn't have to say "a guy" because we all knew what she was thinking, but she added "a beetle guy." We had just started a study of lady bugs, and Steve found one outside and gently brought it in. After we looked at it with the magnifying glass, we were able to identify it on a chart that hangs in the room. Steve, at project time, began to make a guy, but turned it into a lady beetle. After Britney's statement, Susan began to question why Steve was allowed to make guys all the time, because sometimes they have guns and guns aren't allowed. She summed up with a lovely description of Steve and, I thought, somewhat of a tribute to him. " If he gets an idea in his head he goes straight to the art center. He always has an idea in his head that he has just got to do."

Journal, May/97 Writing workshop time. Many of the children are busily engaged in getting their thoughts down on paper. Some are chatting to their friends. Steve, as always, is drawing an action figure. I watch him as he completes the drawing and reaches into the scissor bin. "I have to free him," he explains to the boy beside him. Incredulous, I move towards him and ask "Steve, what did you say?" "I have to free him from the paper, so he can move around," he replies, and quickly and deftly applies his scissors to the task. He surveys his latest creation - yet another "guy" to add to the collection, and runs off to show it to a friend.

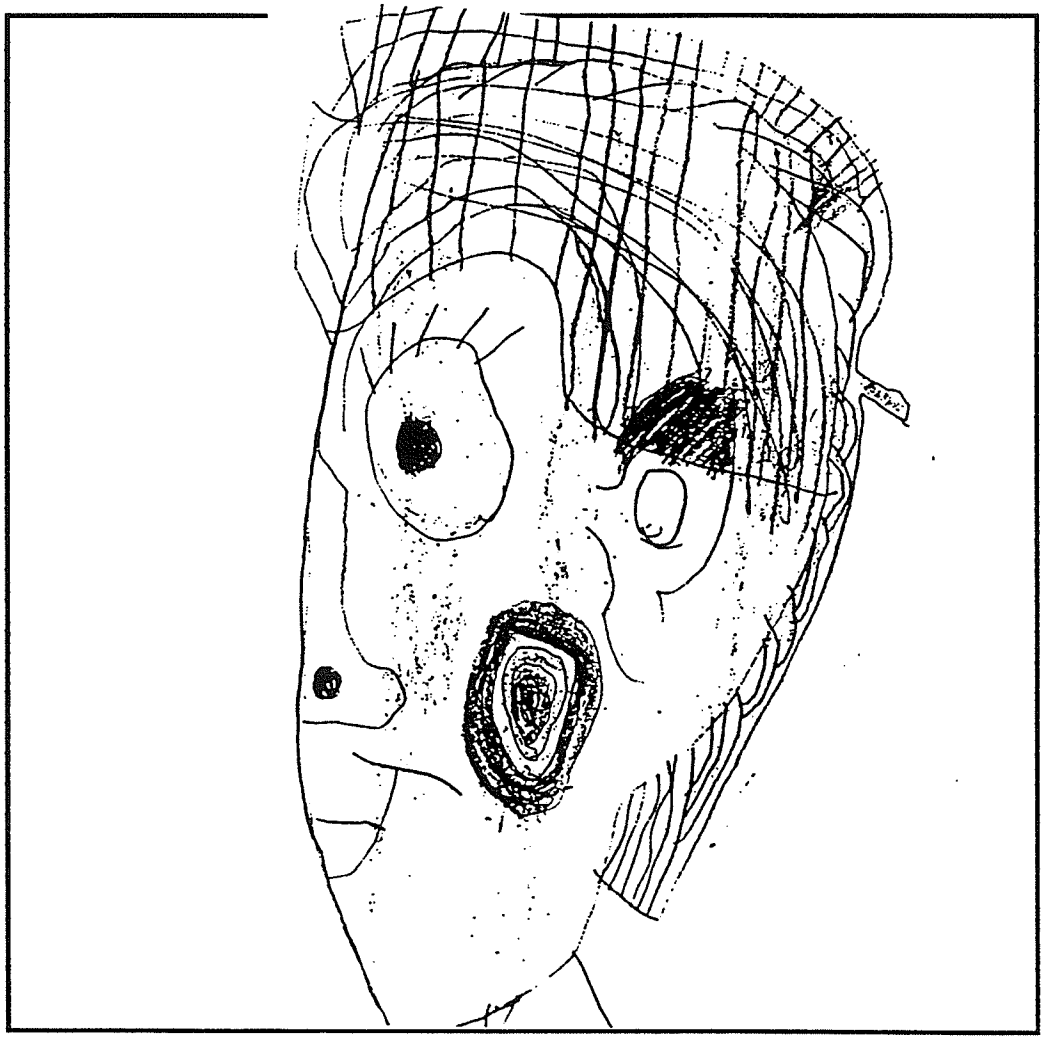


Figure 5 Steve's Self Portrait

Chapter One Freeing the Guy

Steve was the catalyst for much of my thinking in the year that he spent in my Grade One classroom. He had wonderful abilities and strengths in art and construction. Steve made many precise and interesting drawings that year. He could visualize ideas in his head and although he struggled with spoken and certainly written language, he was often able to show his thinking in his own way, through his art. As I thought about him I returned many times to the unforgettable story of Steve telling his friend that he had to "free the guy from the paper." "Freeing the guy" became in my mind a metaphor for this lovely boy. I pondered the freeing of Steve.

During the preceding summer I had been a part of the "Summer Institute In The Arts," at the University of Manitoba. This course was designed to invite teachers to integrate their own learning within the arts and to suggest ways to make this kind of learning a part of their classroom. As part of that course I had considered the many ways that children come to know about their world and I had been particularly impressed with the visual arts. I had studied the theory of children's use of " sign systems" in order to make sense of their world. Reading Jerome Harste's (1994)

explanation of sign systems or "ways of knowing," I found a perfect example in Steve of what Harste was explaining:

> What are these other ways of knowing? According to semiotic theory, they are sign systems which we have created to express meaning and to mediate our world. These sign systems include art, music, mathematics, drama, and language; they offer different perspectives. (339)

There was no doubt that Steve used the sign system of drawing as his main form of literacy. His drawings were his way of making sense of the world and they were his commentary on his life. Steve did much of his thinking through his art. I wondered how I could more effectively grant Steve that freedom to express himself through his drawings and make my classroom the kind that supported the curriculum described by Harste:

> A multiple-ways-of-knowing curriculum builds on these insights by supporting the learner in taking a new perspective on knowing. Such a curriculum is more democratic because it allows children whose dominant ways of knowing are something other than language a way to gain voice and to write their own identities. (343)

This was another reason that I longed to free the guy. While for most of my life I held the belief that I could not draw, during the Summer Institute I discovered that not only did I like drawing, I developed a need to draw. As time has passed I have realized within myself the capacity to view the world through the rather different lens of an artist and this

knowledge has impacted greatly the way I view the arts in my own classroom. Because I understand in some small way how a drawing could speak for me, I began to realize just how important it was for Steve to be valued for his ways of knowing. I wanted to prize what he did and create the kind of classroom that Karen Gallas (1994) describes:

> There is an aura of excitement in the classroom engaged in the arts, and also one of serious intent. Children who know that their artistic expressions are valued take their work as artists seriously. They know what I, as a student, never did, and that is that the arts are transformative; what you know and what you create from that knowledge changes you and changes everyone around you. It makes you powerful and gives you authority within that community. It enables you to feel some control over your history as a learner. (111)

I longed for Steve to experience that control and yet Steve remained somewhat of an enigma for me. I worried about Steve wondering if he would continue to be valued for who he was during the rest of his school life. I questioned my role in his education and by the end of the year I felt in many ways that I had not been able to help him make the connections between what he did know and what he needed to know. I wanted to be able to accept and value the kinds of things that he contributed to our classroom and most times this was not difficult for me, but at other times I struggled with his unorthodox approach. I wondered how I could justify the amount of time that Steve spent with his creations. I struggled too with my

responsibility to guide Steve into the use of more "acceptable" sign systems, the ones that really seem to count in school - the systems of spoken and written language. And how could I do that without devaluing what was most important to Steve?

This year as I have watched Steve continuing on in school, it seems that my worst fears have been realized. Steve has a dedicated teacher but it is obvious that he does not fit the norm. As he is not a good reader or writer and he has to do things "his way," he is seen as somewhat of a problem. He is getting extra help that does not connect with anything that he knows about. He is teamed up with another child who is not verbal at all, and is ushered out of the classroom for special help. His art work is seen as "interesting" or "cute," but it is not being considered as a form of literacy. It appears that he is starting to become somewhat of a "management" problem as well, as he is often acting out some of his action hero movements in class.

Because I know Steve I do not think that he will ever entirely lose his "voice" as far as he or his family are concerned. But because I care about him I long to "free the guy" from the constraints of a traditional schooling

system where he will never be seen as anything more than a problem, a remedial case and a buzzard. (Apple, 1988, 342) I do think that Steve exhibits a kind of artistic genius and I believe that Steve's individuality demands that he be respected as the learner that he is. Ultimately as a teacher I am concerned about the other "Steves" in my classroom and this is part of the reason for this inquiry.

Steve is one of a growing number of children who have influenced me as a teacher. When I first entered the teaching profession in 1992, I had a lot of respect for children. I had just spent a most remarkable year in my own education. At the University of Manitoba I had been working primarily with Dr. Wayne Serebrin and Prof. Joan Irvine, considering Early Years instruction. During a most awakening year I rediscovered myself as a learner and began to cultivate my "voice" in educational issues. I was eager to teach. I wanted to know if what I had thought about in my Early Years classes, what I knew about theory and what I knew about children would be reflected in my classroom.

Teacher Action Research

In 1995, I decided to return to the University of Manitoba in order to work on a Master of Education degree. I was eager to take some coursework, while remaining in the classroom. I had many questions that I wanted to research and was excited about the sharing I knew would happen with the others in my group. With the help of Dr. Wayne Serebrin, now my faculty advisor, Prof. Joan Irvine and Dr. Judith Newman, I began to investigate what it means to be a Teacher Action Researcher in my own class.

This year as a Teacher Action Researcher I have recorded the narratives of my classroom and I have seen the power that resides within a story. I have recorded the words and actions of children and of myself during and right after the story unfolds. I have to agree with Karen Gallas (1994):

> Useful stories for teachers, are those that ring true, stories that are evocative of their own lives in the classroom. Each story we hear forces us to situate ourselves in relation to the personal truths that the storyteller is relating; each story although not a fiction, presents many perspectives and many meanings rather than one focused and conclusive meaning. Teacher stories, although not cloaked in an attitude of knowing, are about what teachers know about children, learning, and teaching. They are often characterized by elements of surprise, conflict, and mediation, ... (2)

By choosing stories I am making the point that I respect the variables that are at play in each child's life and I am rejecting the path of the simple

answer to the problems those children might be struggling with. The use of narrative in educational research makes sense to me. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) put this:

> The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore is the study of the ways humans experience the world. (2)

As well, I am saying that there is a part to teaching that is not a technical enterprise. To be a teacher is to be constantly replaying the stories in my mind, reflecting on the parts of the various players and wondering how I might plan the next steps to best assist the children's learning. Vivian Paley (1997) writes also of the strong influence of narrative when she says "It is amazing the way even one story can give someone place and purpose."(58) The stories make this research real. This is not research in a sterile laboratory or in some prearranged test situation. This is research in a live classroom and the stories are filled with information from real life teaching.

The research that I have done has resulted in a collection of stories - stories which are in fact my data. By the end of the year of course, there were MANY stories. In class I would write down the most important part of

the story, usually the words spoken by children, the "meat" of the story that I did not want to forget. Sometimes these words would be recorded on a tape recorder. When I got home from school I would scurry to my computer to transcribe those words, describing the events around which they arose usually in a two page narrative. Because I have written the stories very soon after they occurred the stories are as close to reality as one person's perceptions are able to capture. Of course the stories are a part of MY reality and as such they are greatly influenced by my values and my standards. Most days I would then send the story I had collected off to my faculty advisors and some others and in this way the story would grow. Often I would receive feedback from one or more of my readers and this would sometimes cause me to reconsider my response to the particular situation. Often too, the response of my readers would cause me to reread my story, perhaps more from their perspective and I would gain new insight into my writing. As I have included many of the stories in this thesis they are still open to interpretation. In most cases I have included the story in its entirety and even as I reread them, they have at times taken on other meanings and I have considered alternative views of them.

I began this year with many questions in my head about literacy, especially as it relates to emerging readers and writers in a Grade One classroom. Because Steve had helped to open my eyes to other ways of knowing, I regretted that I had not always recorded the stories that he told me and only collected a small sampling of his volumes of paper craft. I determined at the start of the year to listen to the children, to record what I saw and heard and to wonder about the issues of literacy as the children's voices explained. I wanted to know more about the many ways that children made themselves known and I wanted to see how my philosophical beliefs about reading and writing were playing themselves out in my classroom.

Chapter 2 The Journey Begins: What I know about learning

When I began this research, I had some strong opinions about how children learn. I belonged to a teacher study group that met and talked about issues of the classroom. I was in the middle of my Master of Education program at the University of Manitoba. I had been teaching in my own classroom for five years and I had many ideas in my head concerning the way children construct their own meanings of text. While I was concerned at times that what I had in my head was not always reflected in my practice, I knew that my theory, at least, had been thoroughly considered. Of course I still had many questions about my theory and I was adding to this thinking by reading and by talking with other teachers. At the beginning of my research I felt confident that I could enunciate the factors which I felt were most important to children's learning. At the start, I decided to explore issues connected with reading. As the research unfolded, I realized that in fact what I was studying was the much larger idea of literacy and what that term could mean.

My own journey into literacy research began in my undergraduate years. At the University of Winnipeg I took two reading courses; one followed an obvious "skills" method of teaching reading. In that class we learned how the child would study letters and sounds, and then words, and then sentences and punctuation. The instructor for this course only once asked us if we all "knew what whole language was about." I was the only one in a class of about seventy students who put up my hand and asked for an explanation. The later course that I took in reading was given by a teacher who claimed to espouse a theory of whole language: a "top down" processing model, as she kept calling it. However it seemed odd to me that the assignments we received were all directed at publishers' series of basal readers. I did know enough about whole language to understand that in practice, real books were supposed to be involved.

I did not begin to really grasp the theory of whole language, until I took another course entitled "Language and Literacy." I enjoyed this class immensely. Here I was introduced to Gordon Wells' (1986) The Meaning Makers, a book that looked at the literacy habits of real children. Wells' book confirmed something I knew as a parent: the importance of reading

real texts to children. We also studied Shirley Brice Heath's work Ways with Words (1989). Heath's work fascinated me. I began to think about other views of literacy and about the diverse backgrounds that children bring with them into the classroom. Because I could closely relate to one of the communities in Heath's book and in part understood their approach to written text, I particularly connected with the book's message. It was in this course that I was also introduced to the ideas of Ken Goodman and miscue analysis.

At this same time I was student teaching at an inner city school, in a classroom where students were reading in "round robin" fashion to each other in large groups. While one person read, the other students were supposed to count the "mistakes" the reader made. When I queried the teacher about this method, and tentatively suggested the work of Goodman, she answered me sharply that "she didn't believe in that stuff." While I knew that I didn't like what was being done to those students, I didn't really know how I would go about teaching reading myself.

In my last year of teacher education, an "awakening" year of working with Prof. Joan Irvine and Dr. Wayne Serebrin, I did some hard and deliberate

thinking about literacy. I wanted to know more about language and so I took a course in language acquisition. I began to read more of Goodman's work, and I was influenced as well by the writings of Jerome Harste and Margaret Meek. It was obvious to me that there was far more to reading than just decoding letters and words on a page. I had to agree with Ken Goodman(1996):

> Reading isn't simply recognizing words in succession. Something propels you forward as you read, helps you to anticipate so well what's coming that you simply use cues from the print to move constantly toward meaning. Your brain is not a prisoner of the senses; it's in charge of the process! It sets up expectations and instructs your eyes to glide over the surface of the print, using that input to make sense of the text. (40)

I also began to realize that there was far more to "literacy" than just reading. Pushed and prodded by both of my professors that year, I asked many questions of myself, and began to search for the answers.

While there were many questions that followed me through that final year of teacher education, none was so compelling as the question that was posed to me on the very first day of classes: "How do children learn?" By the time I began my research, five years later as an M.Ed. student, I had a theory in place in my head regarding that question. The thinking I have done about how children learn, or what conditions best assist a child in becoming

a literate person, have been influenced by the reading I have done, the colleagues I work with, and the children I teach.

1. Children's Learning is Ongoing

It seems that children are always learning something. Their natural curiosity and wondering nature demands that they touch, feel, smell, taste and experience their world. Frank Smith (1995), asserting that the brain is always working and learning, describes his view of learning:

> This view is that learning is continuous , spontaneous, and effortless, requiring no particular attention, conscious motivation, or specific reinforcement. It occurs in all kinds of situations, and is not subject to forgetting. (40)

This view that the brain is always working is at times a frightening thought for a teacher; it implies that what children are learning may not be what the teacher is intending. At the same time I find it encouraging that young children are such thinkers, and that their enthusiasm for learning is so easy to stir. As I began this study I believed that there would be constant learning going on in my classroom. I wanted to be able to use children's questions, and my own questions in the most advantageous ways. I wanted to guide the children's learning and facilitate their risk taking, so that this

year of continuous, spontaneous learning would be directed towards meaningful discussions and thinking.

2. Children's Learning is Personal

I believe that each child comes to school with many different background experiences, lots of abilities, and many of the rudimentaries of literacy already in place. In the first few years of his or her life, each child has learned an incredible amount of information, has progressed in language learning, and has made many physical accomplishments. As a teacher I view my students as rich resources for each other's and for my learning. Learning in this paradigm is a very personal process. For me, it is imperative that children make connections between what is new to them, and what they already understand so that as much as possible they are always making sense of their world.

I agree with Judy Logan (1997) that "children of all ages need to feel connected to what they are doing, either by being allowed to discuss their own experiences and feelings, or by being allowed to express what they have learned in a way that is meaningful to them, as in art or drama." (76) As

children connect to the curriculum of the classroom, they take ownership for their learning, and this is what causes real learning to take place.

In her book Jevon Doesn't Sit at the Back Anymore, Connie White (1990) records the story of a boy in her class who struggled with literacy learning. It was not until he began to make personal connections with books about farms that his interest in reading grew. White asserts:

> Jevon needed to live his literacy. There had to be personal meaning in the symbols he saw on paper; he had to bring his personal experiences to the stories he heard, and to articulate them. He had to have freedom to search out the children who most supported his learning... He needed to listen to others tell of their experiences so he could take on new images. (32)

At the start of this research, I too sought to make my classroom a place where children could make connections to the life they knew at home and search out other children who would support their learning. I especially worked to provide a wide variety of books for children to read that might personally connect to the children's lives.

3. Children Have to Believe in Themselves as Learners

The idea that a child's affective domain substantially contributes to his learning has been articulated often by Ken and Yetta Goodman. In a written conversation in a current journal, Jerome Harste (1996) is interviewing

Yetta;

> JCH: I've heard you say that you have never met a reader who didn't at first believe he or she was a reader. That seems to be a theory-to-practice statement. The insight that theoretically kids need to see themselves as readers before practically they become readers seems extremely profound.
> Yetta: This is what retrospective miscue analysis is all about: articulating your theory. It invites kids to articulate their theory of reading as well as articulate who they are as literate human beings. Are you a good reader? How do you know you're a good reader? (516)

Encouraging children to believe in themselves as readers is something that I work on throughout the year. At the beginning of the year I deliberately engage children in the act of reading. We share poetry, nursery rhymes and songs that they know. When I put the words to these chants on paper, and point to them as the children read, I always praise the children for their reading ability. We take the time to look around the neighborhood for all the signs we can read, and we spend some time looking through junk mail and flyers, reading the familiar ads. Invariably there will be some children who will say to me, at some point in the first month of school, that they "can't read." When they do that, I take them by the hand and show them some environmental print from the pile of junk mail that we have been working with. "What does this say?" I ask, as I dangle a Safeway bag in front of them. As the child answers, I get a questioning look on my face and I say

"but, I thought you said you couldn't read?" This, of course, leads to lots of hilarity. At the very beginning of the year then, I begin this job of assuring the children that they are indeed readers. I do this because I am convinced that without this confidence in themselves these children won't go very far.

4. Children's Learning is Social

I have to agree with Frank Smith(1995) that "we learn from the company we keep."(40) In a Grade One class this is highly evident as children begin to emulate their friends, their teacher, and their favorite T.V. characters. As children collaborate with each other in studies of topics of interest, they create understandings together, and add to each other's perceptions. Anne Haas Dyson (1989) writes of this social networking in the classroom, and of the place that writing plays in it:

> Margaret had established a classroom structure that centered on the children and their own activity. Within this supportive structure, the children's social energy became the major fuel for writing growth. Through their interactions with each other, the children established a social network that both bound them all together as a group and also allowed each to seek recognition as competent but unique individuals. ... Written language was a part of the knowledge and skill valued by the children, as well as a social tool that helped them to connect with and distinguish themselves among their peers. (66-7)

As I began this study I already believed in the social nature of learning and I set up my classroom to model this belief. Children sat at circular

tables, chose who they wished to work with, and were encouraged to consult each other with problems or questions. At the same time I worked to encourage the children to include in their group some of the children who were not as popular or socially advantaged. We had many discussions about how to honor the gifts of all our peers and I expected the students to be inclusive in their sharing. We spent many hours together sharing what we had done in writing or art and we recorded each other's thoughts about how to accomplish a certain task.

5. Children are in Control of Their Own Learning

This was an area that I claimed to believe in at the start of this research, but which in reality I questioned as a teacher. I had read much of Vivian Paley's work and was very impressed by her assertions again and again that young children could launch into their own inquiries and remain committed to studying and thinking about a topic they had chosen. I read with great interest the literature study and response that occurred in Paley's class as the children read the books of Leo Lionni:

> In the course of a morning, the children have taken up such matters as the artist's role in society, the conditions necessary for thinking, and the influence of music and art on the emotions. From Reeny's simple assertion "That brown mouse seem to be just like

> me" has come a preview of the introspective life. And I, thought by some to be *too* introspective, though never by Nisha or the children, have met a little girl with a brown crayon and an author with a magic paintbrush who will outshine me in their search for the mirror of self-revelation. (Paley, 1997,8)

In Paley's classroom the children are definitely in control of their own learning, largely, it seems to me, because of Paley's own gift for giving the children freedom to explore their own thoughts and lots of encouragement to speak those thoughts publicly. I wondered, however, how much children were in control of their own learning in my class and how I would recognize if this were so.

I wondered how I could support and encourage the children to embrace their own learning. It seemed to me that if children were to be in control of their own learning, then they ought to be making lots of choices in the classroom: choices about topics of inquiry, which books to read, how to respond to those books, writing topics, and who to work with etc. While working on this research however, I began to see just how much the children did control their own learning, whether I was encouraging it, or aware of it, or not.

6. Children's Literacy Involves More Than Reading

When I first began this study, I thought I would be looking at how

children learned to read. I had enjoyed the description of learning to read provided by Karen Gallas(1994):

> I speak of a child learning to read in magical terms. My colleagues do the same. While our methods, structure, and intent as teachers of reading imply a systematic approach, we know in our hearts that the event of reading is magical. When a child learns to read, we are awestruck- not knowing absolutely that any one thing we did so systematically caused that outcome. (3)

While reading is a primary consideration of a Grade One teacher, I knew that there was far more to developing literate learners than just reading. I knew that in my definition of literacy that writing, drawing, and perhaps even dancing and music had to be considered. As I read Margaret Meek (1991), I realized that reading and writing were NOT the only forms of literacy that young children exhibit:

> We have looked at some of the ways in which modern artists make storytelling in picture books as intriguing as the seductive narratives of television. We are bound, as a result to acknowledge the power of images - that is, non-verbal representations of ideas ... to be, in the early stages of reading, as important as words. ... Evidence from research emphasizes the importance of images. It is schooling and the teaching of reading as a concern with words alone that put into our heads the notion that books with pictures are a preliterate form of storytelling, while all the time the very force of television shows us this is not the case. (95)

Meek's assertion that television watching was a form of literacy had been introduced to me several years before in a university course. As I worked to understand the many varied abilities of my students during my research

year, my definition of literacy began to expand.

7. Children's Learning is Diverse

Children are diverse learners. Each one has his or her own strengths and approaches to the task of becoming educated. As a teacher I feel the responsible for addressing the various needs that these diverse learning approaches require. At the same time, I want to celebrate what this diversity means for enriching the community of learners in our classroom. I want my class to accept and value the differences among the children who inhabit this space. It was not until I really looked at my research data, however, that I began to realize how very diverse these children could be. In her book about adolescents, Judy Logan(1997) describes the difference between a curriculum that encourages diversity and one that expects uniformity.

> In each class, I have students with a diversity of interests, abilities, talents learning styles, and something that I think in kindergarten they call "emotional readiness." What works for one student doesn't necessarily work for another. When I think of curriculum, I picture a journey. In traditional curriculum everyone is supposed to be on the same journey at the same time, and the teacher's role is like that of a sheep dog, trying to keep everyone together. It is like being on a field trip, always looking ahead to one group of students and saying, "Wait for us, don't get on that streetcar, we're not all there yet, " and then looking behind, saying, "Hurry up, walk faster, we'll never get there at this pace."
>
> But I think of feminist curriculum as a journey that acknowledges that, while

> everyone needs to be moving forward, most of us are in different places at different times. Some people are filling out passport applications; some people are touring beautiful cathedrals and famous monuments; some are sitting in cafes having bread and cheese and intense conversations; some are learning Japanese; some are homesick, writing letters home; some are putting together their photo albums. The teacher's role in this vision becomes one of keen observer. After all, it is inappropriate to speak Japanese to someone who is filling out a passport application, and it is inappropriate to hand a photo album to someone eating and visiting in a cafe. This metaphor seems to capture my impression of the difference between traditional teach-and-test curriculum and student-centered curriculum that acknowledges the individual interests, talents, and learning styles in the class. (68-9)

It is this kind of "keen observer" I want to become. Early in the year of 1997, I recorded a long story, which in many ways framed the understandings that I had about literacy learning at that time. As I recorded this event of children reading to each other, I began to realize the many different approaches that the children were taking. As I reflect on this story, I find many examples of the complexities that are involved as children proceed on their literate journeys. This is indeed a story of diversity.

> Journal, Sept. 20/97 They all want to read. The "sign up" list, taped to the wall is full of names. Some names are written in pencil, so we can hardly see them, others are boldly scribed in blue marker. All the children who have placed their names on the list fully expect that TODAY they will get to read to the whole class.
>
> Fairly late in the afternoon, I call them to the carpet and give them that opportunity. I don't know how long this will last. I hate asking children to sit for long periods of time, but they are all so eager, and they seem willing to listen to their peers so long as they get their turn. I sit at the side of the group, my pen in my hand, and the show begins.

> David is first up. He has a 6 page book about "Donkey Kong" and he tells a most engaging and flowing story about his intricately drawn pictures. The children are entranced. They love his jokes. They clap.

I believe that children need to use pictures and drawing in order to show their understandings of the world. David uses this strategy of drawing and of reading his drawings, and I encourage this plan. At the beginning of the year, David knew that drawing his ideas was a form of literacy, and that there could be a story within a drawing.

As well, I believe that children come to school with an understanding that there is meaning to be made of text. Meagan showed that she had this understanding.

> Journal, Sept. 20/97 Next is Meagan. She chooses to read a little book by Brian Wildsmith entitled <u>If I were You</u>. I have read it to her once, a few days ago. I wonder at the confidence Meagan has, reading this book to the entire class. Since the first day of class, Meagan has had a "tummy ache" most days, seemingly a case of "nerves". And any unusual twist to the day sends her to the bathroom. But today she sits in front of the group, reading confidently through her book. When she gets to a page she is unsure of she says "just wait" and then she scours the pictures and text for the words to the story.

Meagan shows me that she knows that there is meaning to be made of the

text and pictures of the story. She knows this story quite well, but when she gets stuck she looks intently at the writing and the pictures, as if searching for clues to help her along. She obviously knows that the potential for meaning is there if she can only figure out how to interpret what's on the page.

Public reading is a favorite activity of this group. Sometimes they read the book from their "book pot" - a name we give to the file folder that holds the book they are currently working on. Some days we choose to read from our own writing. Before I allow anyone to read to the class, I go over the "rules." We always honour whoever is in the reader's chair, and unkind remarks are not tolerated. Although this episode from my September 20 journal is very early in the school year, the children are quite relaxed with each other, and we work together to create an accepting attitude. I would not accept anyone saying "Oh THAT'S easy!" in the way that children often do. At the end of a reading, the reader asks for "hands", and then he or she picks two children who are supposed to offer some compliment on the reading. Once they understand the idea of a compliment, the children are always very generous and very genuine in their praise.

Throughout the year we talked often about the fact that we each had our own gifts, and that some things were easy for some and more difficult for others, but so long as everyone was trying their hardest that was the most important. Meagan reminds me that children need to feel valued, and safe, in order to learn to read. When Cora gets up to read to the class, she shows me this need for feeling safe in a slightly different way.

> Journal, Sept.20/97 Cora is surely the quietest child in this class. I still haven't really made many connections with her. She apparently was a late starter in language, and her pronunciation is hard to catch at times. Because she can't find the book she wants to read, she takes Matt's book from the book shelf for her reading today. Cora says nothing, but simply turns the pages to the little book that Matt has made about "Signs", while the children around her shout out the words. She is very pleased with herself, and with her ingenuity. I try to get her to talk, but to no avail. She has "read" the book, hasn't she?

When Cora reads, I am struck by her need to be accepted by the other children. While Cora still does not see herself as a reader, she so wants to fit in that she is willing to take quite a big risk. She also shows me that she knows this crowd - they LIKE to read along and shout out what they know about books and she uses them well. The social connections that she has with this group of children speak well for her inclusion into the "reading

club." (Smith,1995,45) Cora needs the group, the social connections, in order to become a reader because reading is a very social activity.

The next child to read to the class is Sean. I believe that children need to make their own connections to literacy, and Sean is a perfect example of this fact.

> Journal, Sept. 20/97 Sean is next to take the reader's chair. He has told me in advance that he is going to read the "I spy" book that has been devoured by the boys over the last week. I wonder how that is going to work, as the book is hardly one that I would choose to read to a group. Sean, the youngest in the class, seems quite confident as he begins. He says "I spy with my little eye..." and then he points out all the things in the book that he has found. Wow. This boy has made a connection I surely never thought about. The book IS called "I spy", but the hookup to the children's game is entirely Sean's. In a teacherish voice he is now allowing other children to find objects in this book: "Who never had a turn?" I have to ask him to come down off the reader's chair as other children are getting a little anxious.

In this simple demonstration, Sean takes what he knows about a childhood game, and applies it to a book by the same name. It is obvious as he reads that the association has given him lots of confidence in front of his peers, and he expects that they, too, understand the game. Sean would have stayed on the reader's chair for the rest of the afternoon if we had let him, playing

his game with the book he has commandeered. The choice of book has made a lot of difference. Sean confirms for me that he needs to make personal connections with a book. The book he has chosen is very important to his development as a reader.

Finally it is April's turn to read.

> Journal, Sept. 20/97 I am amazed that the class is still on the carpet, listening, and waiting. Some are lying down, but their eyes are still on the reader's chair. April announces with her Philipino accent that she will be reading LOOKING ZOO. Karla immediately corrects her: "It's ZOO LOOKING." April has some of the language, but she is improvising somewhat. She gets the rhythm of the book, that's for sure. Several times she gets stuck for what to say, and at these moments she LOOKS AT THE PRINT very closely, squinting her eyes and furrowing her brow, showing us all that she knows that there is meaning to be made with those letters on the page, even though she is not about to interpret the print exactly as it is written. I love to watch her do this. I wonder if she actually does not understand some of the language of the book - she substitutes "The monkey was having a snack" in place of the book's words "the monkey got a smack;" and later she says "She looked at the zebra when her tail was a knot" instead of "when her tail went whack". It is quite possible that she has not heard these expressions in English, as this is not her first language. Is it not rather amazing? She has figured out how to make sense with the words that she does know in English. The children clap when she is finished.

For April it is important to make the book sound right and make sense. She is working on both the syntactic cue system of reading and the semantics. While her understanding of English is very good, at times she has a hard time

totally expressing herself, and this is very evident when she first reads to us. She obviously knows that this book should make sense, and she works very hard, even with her limitations in English, to proceed in that direction. When she is uncertain of how to continue, she peers so intently at the print, her nose an inch from the page, that I nearly start to giggle. She almost seems to believe that magically the words she needs will jump out at her. It is important that April be accepted by her peers, and for her that involves reading a story that makes sense.

When Karla gets up to read, some children complain that she is reading the same book as April. The popular Mem Fox book ZOO LOOKING. I intervene for Karla, telling the children that Karla might read the book quite differently, so that would be interesting.

> Journal, Sept. 20/97 Karla, as usual, runs the audience. She makes sure everyone sees the pictures, and takes her time over each page. She reads the story sticking much more closely to the text than April did. An argument erupts over the monkey page. Is it "smack" or "snack" or "nap?" Most children have an opinion. When she reads "She looked at the camel and the camel looked back," someone, Frances I think, interrupts. "NO it's "with a lump on its back." Karla looks taken aback for a moment and then she announces with finality in her voice "I can do it any way I want." It's true, I think to myself. She is making sense of the book. Isn't that what counts the most for these early readers? I am so proud. Not only of their

> reading, but of the interactions among them, and the patience they have shown each other. At the end of Karla's reading, April puts up her hand. "I like your reading" she says, and then adds graciously "It's a better reading."

As I was to learn, Karla did most things in our Grade One class "any way she wanted." She is a small sized girl, but she has lots of self confidence and drive. She seems to understand that in her reading SHE is in control, and that suits her just fine. Both Karla and April display an understanding that there is not always only one way to read a book. They appreciate that the interpretation lies within themselves. While they will accept the criticism of their peers up to a point, they are independent enough to know that it is their own sense making that will carry them through. Reading involves complex thinking, and children are able to act on their own theories of reading. When Trevor comes up to the front, he has two books in his hands. He asks the children to vote on the book they want read; Yo!Yes! or Zoo Looking?

> Journal, Sept. 20/97 Trevor is happy that they choose YO!YES! and he reads it with lots of expression. He is a leader in this classroom and the children are all very respectful as he reads. He apologizes that he doesn't know all the words, but he makes his way through quite beautifully.

At this point in the year, Trevor is using his memory to make his way through

this book. We had shared the book together several times in September, and Trevor was a devoted fan. He loves the way the punctuation in the book causes me to change the intonation, or the volume of my voice as I read. Being a very dramatic boy himself, he immediately attaches himself to this book. He loves to share it with others. When he asks the other students to vote on the book he will read, he is pretty sure that they will pick the one he really wants to read. But because he also wants to continue to be a leader, he needs to be sure that he is pleasing his peers. He shows that he understands that words on a page can be rendered orally in quite a powerful way. Like Sean, he is another good example of a child who needs a certain kind of book; one which he has chosen, in order to be a successful reader.

When Travis gets up to read, he confirms the importance of a child's interests.

> Journal, Sept. 20/97 Finally Travis gets up with a copy of FREIGHT TRAIN in his hands. The last time this unusual boy got up to read, he told a wild and somewhat incomprehensible tale based on his own drawing - a very immature picture of himself - and his writing - lines of scribbles. Today he opens his book, a book about his beloved trains, and he reads the whole thing, word for word. The audience seems quite surprised at the change that has come about in this reader. He asks me about one word "gondola". The children comment on the beauty of the pictures, and how the author shows the train's

> movement. It is a solemn ending to a half hour of wonder.
>
> I feel like a very fortunate guest allowed into a world of my own with these students. I believe firmly that each one has shown that he or she is a reader.

Travis exemplifies what can happen when a child is reading about something that really interests him. Travis had grown up with the "Thomas" train books in his home, and his attention is riveted on any train book that enters our classroom. He knows far more about trains than anyone in our class and so it is fitting that the first book he ever shares with us is about his favorite subject. He reminds me that I need to find out what other interests in the minds and hearts of the children are pervasive in our class this year.

At the beginning of the year, I was fairly convinced that reading was an interactive, complex procedure. I knew that children needed to feel competent and to believe in themselves as readers before they could proceed as readers and writers. I wanted them to be able to write down their own thoughts, independently, and I believed that the writing would support their reading and vice versa. I filled my room with books and other forms of print, and invited my students to explore.

My Questions

I had questions. Many questions. I had just been through the year with Steve, and I was troubled by what was happening to him. I wondered if I really knew how individual students tackle the huge job of becoming literate people. I wondered if my classroom only suited some of the children, while others' needs were not being met. I also knew that there were many pressures on me and the program that I wanted to explore, because not everyone shared my beliefs about learning or their application to literacy.

In fact, as I worked on my research into literacy, I began to realize how difficult it might be for other adults to grasp what it was that I was trying to do. The school in which I teach is known as being a fairly "traditional" school - traditional in the sense that many of the practices that are accepted here do not align themselves with the current research in education. For instance, the first time I walked into the school for my interview, I was greeted by a huge pile of workbooks at the door to the office. At the time I didn't think that teachers even used workbooks any more. During one of the years that I taught at this school, one of the school trustees actually introduced a motion to create a school modelled on "the

traditional classroom", which included desks in rows, the use of workbooks and readers, competition, and lots of testing. While this project was considered by most of my educator friends to be a step backwards in terms of educational philosophy, one of the teachers in my school couldn't figure out what all the fuss was about because that model described her class perfectly.

While I have done a lot of talking and writing to parents over the years that I have taught Grade One, I was often frustrated by my lack of really communicating what it was that I believed about education. All the parents of children in my classroom had their own views of what education was about and their perceptions - often influenced by their own schooling - were very difficult to change.

It was not only the parents who were struggling with what I was trying to do, some of the school staff members that I had to deal with were also committed to different understandings of how children learned. As I proceeded with the research, I realized that often my stories were about this very problem; how my views clashed with the ingrained views of others.

As well, it is obvious that the government is currently attempting to

return to a more conservative approach to education. Standards tests, and new curriculum documents have been introduced into all schools in Manitoba at a feverish pace in the last five years. There is much talk about "excellence" and "being accountable". While I do believe in being accountable to my parents, I began to discover as I proceeded with my research just how much a parent's understandings could affect my teaching, even in ways that I did not agree with. In some ways my research became a microcosm of the struggle that was also occurring politically, almost worldwide. While I wanted to garner the support of parents, and others in my school, I had to risk being misunderstood, because my expanded view of literacy and how children learn was new or different for my community.

Chapter 3 My Teaching and Learning is Affected by Others

It has become increasingly obvious to me as I teach that the parents of the children in my classroom can affect not only the children's learning, but they can substantially influence the type of teaching that I do. This subject of parents and parental influence has been an issue that has at times encouraged and at times totally discouraged me. The fact that I, too, am a parent of children within the public school system has added to my struggles and my fascination with the difference a parent can make. My concern with parents comes through in many of my journal writings this year.

> Journal, Sept. 11/97 She is holding a rather large cut out picture of a bucket of chicken and looking at me with nervous eyes. "It says" and then she stops. "I forget what it says" she mumbles and her voice fades. "Kentucky fried chicken?" I offer, somewhat hesitantly. "YES" she replies and runs off to stick on her contribution to the "I CAN READ" poster in our classroom. I immediately wonder about the wisdom of my actions. The poster is supposed to be a collection of words that the children recognize. Today many of the children are accepting my invitation to find two words that they know to cut out of the junk mail pile that sits on one table. Meagan certainly recognizes the chicken bucket, but as I look at it later, I realize that there are NO WORDS on the bucket, rather it just sports a picture of Colonel Saunders on the side. Meagan certainly is reading according to my definitions, but I wonder for a few moments what her parents will think when they visit next week. If she shows them the bucket and says "That says Kentucky Fried Chicken", will they

understand? Will they encourage her tiny literacy step?

It seems to me as if parents are expecting more and more of their children in Grade One. As they become anxious about their children's success, they invariably transmit this apprehension to me. In my journal I often question myself about parents' views of what they will see in this classroom.

> Journal, Sept. 15/97 More than my concern for these children lately has been my concern about their parents. How WILL they handle this view of literacy and this teacher, who openly encourages children to draw their thoughts? Will they be looking for the lists of "important words to know" on the classroom wall, because they won't find them, at least not this early in the year. Rather there is a list of "what good writers do" on the flip chart. And what will they think when I tell them at the "meet the teacher" night in only two days that I believe their child IS a reader right now. Will they understand what I'm talking about or will they think I am merely pretending to know?

As soon as I got my class list this year, I realized that I would have a lot of talking to do with my students' parents; almost all of my students are first born children. That means that almost all of my parent population would be new to the school system, full of questions and full of preconceived notions of what schools are about. Sometimes some of those notions are handed

down by teachers that precede me. Sometimes those ideas are triggered by media articles or programs that assure parents that education isn't what it used to be.

I determined to try and stay as in touch with my parent community as I could this year by inviting them for an after school visit, one family at a time at the beginning of the year; sending home monthly newsletters; running student led parent teacher interviews; and sending home a parent comment booklet with the children's home reading books. While I felt as if some of these projects produced a greater collegiality with my parent group, it was still difficult at times to know for sure. David's family was a good example of this dichotomy.

I knew David's parents because Sarah, David's sister, had been in my classroom two years before. How well I remember that first parent teacher interview with them when Sarah was in Grade One. We talked for over an hour about how children learn and what a Grade One program should look like. Sarah's Mom was very aggressive and worried that I wasn't teaching children the "right way." However, when Sarah began to read her concerns melted away and this year, when David entered my classroom, she let me

know that "so long as it worked" she trusted "my" way of teaching. My discussion with David's mother did continue over the year. She was an active and outspoken member of our parent council, and was an eager participant on all of our field trips. She worried over David for much of the year and although she kept saying that she wouldn't, it seemed to me that she did compare David with his sister. At the beginning of the year, I felt that she really needed a lot of reassurance. She seemed to have fallen into that trap of expecting so much, and not believing in her son's ability to learn. I knew that she wanted the best for David; I feared that she was exerting too much pressure on him. I tried early in the year to assure her of my belief in David's literacy.

> Journal, Sept.15/97 At the end of the day I look out the door as the bell rings. There is a sea of faces, parents and grandparents who are becoming more and more familiar to me. I watch as the children parade out of my classroom into waiting arms. There are smiles and laughter. The cry of a baby. Excited squeals. To my surprise I am addressed by David's mom: "I want the negatives!" she says. "The negatives?" I question. "To these fabulous pictures you took of the neighborhood! I want them all. You did such a great job." David's Mom answers. I look at the pictures, thumbtacked to the wall. They are pictures of signs. Pictures of the local grocery store. A picture of her house with the "For Sale" sign visible on the house beside it. I don't really know why she would want them, but the opportunity is too good to miss, so I walk over and say quietly: "You

> know, David could read ALL of these signs. This is one literate boy you have." Her eyes widen in amazement and her voice actually has a catch to it as she tells me how happy I have made her. I tell her that in fact I am doing some writing about her child and his literacy abilities, and would she give me permission to share his story with others? She tells me how proud she would be. In a simple moment, I have made a great connection with this parent. For now, all she needs to hear is someone who believes in her child.

As the year wore on however David's mother began to question "my way" of teaching reading and why David was still using picture cues in order to read. Starting at about the middle of the year the children were invited to take home a book from their "book pot" - the folder that held the books that they were currently working on - in order to read to their parents. Along with the book I included a little response journal for the parents, inviting them to write to me about what they observed their children doing. In March David's mom writes "David still continues to remember rather than read. I hope he continues to try other methods too." And in April I heard some disappointing gossip.

> Journal, April 6/97 Today a teacher assistant took me aside to pass on some gossip she heard. Christine, David's mom, was complaining about the number of "field trips" we have taken this year. Reportedly she said "I just wish they'd stay at school and teach David to read." Apparently one of my other parents was there, and

she defended the trip.

The fact that David and his sister are very different children is very evident to me. They are both active inquirers, but Sarah is much more content to sit and read and write than her brother is. He is loud and moving all the time and very talkative. He picks up ideas very quickly and he offers lots of insightful thoughts. But so far, at least in Christine's terms, "my way of teaching" hasn't "worked" as far as reading goes.

I play back the movie in my mind of a workshop I was at in Fargo, at the Reading and Writing Conference. Jerry Harste was being questioned about Reading Recovery. He rebuked the crowd by saying "We wouldn't need Reading Recovery if we could only get past this one idea - that a child HAS to be reading by the time they leave Grade One." But the fact is, most people do expect their child to read in Grade One.

The struggle has been mine this year, as I have thought more than ever before about what reading really IS. Christine and I would not agree. I believe that David IS reading, and has been for quite some time. He did not come to school empty handed, when it comes to literacy learning. He was, in fact, rich with many literacy experiences. In Grade One he has picked up more abilities and experiences. The fact that he remembers books in holistic ways says more about the type of learner he is, than it does about the way he has been "taught" to read. But when is it all going to come together for David? I have no doubt that he WILL read, in his mother's terms, and I think it may be soon. I vow to continue meeting with him as often as I can and I make sure that he is continuing daily to experience literature.

It was obvious that Christine's pressure hit me where it hurt and changed my teaching. I was a bit surprised with myself when shortly after this incident I began to write out words on cards for David - the kind of "sight word" teaching that many of my colleagues relied upon, but which I had

previously regarded as a mostly confusing and not very helpful type of teaching. I wrote about this in my journal, searching for answers.

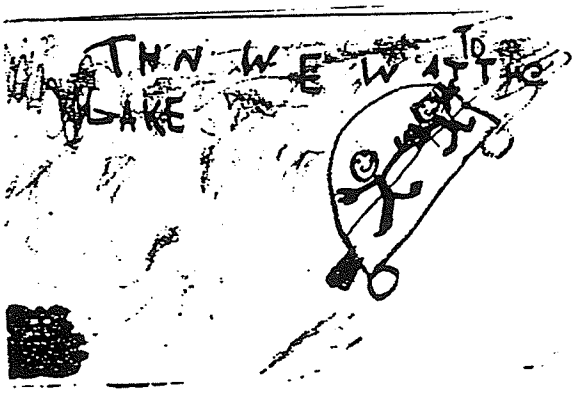
> Journal, April 6, 1998 Not believing it will help in the least, I make up some "word cards" for David today. I take them out of the book he is currently working on; most of them are names of animals. He is playing on the carpet as I copy them out, and I am impressed with his ability to read them to me, as I show him each new card. I'm impressed until I realize that he is looking over my shoulder to the book I am taking the words from. Each animal is well represented on each page, and I know that he NEEDS that picture cue to help him. Nevertheless I continue making up the cards, and I run through them with him, talking about phonics cues, and size of word clues. Poor David. While I don't think this little exercise will really hurt him, I don't think it will help him in the least. I try to make it as game-like as I can. In reality I know that I am only trying to placate his mother. Maybe I'll just get him to memorize these cards, and then I'll send them home. I guess it's worth a try.

Late in the year one of the Resource teachers in my school met with David's mother and talked with her about her concerns. And very soon after that meeting, it seemed that David's reading did become more acceptable to her. She wrote in his response journal on April 21: "He's really trying hard and is catching himself when he hasn't read something correctly. Good job!!" I wrote back to her "Yes - officially this is called 'self-correcting' and it is a good sign of a person who is reading for meaning." One of the ways that David was supported in his literacy learning during the later part of the year

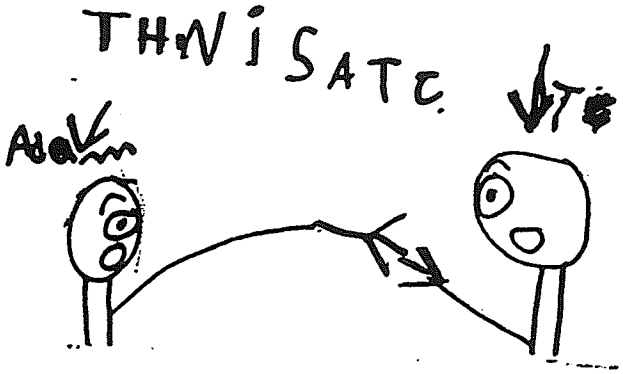
involved writing stories. David discovered story telling in a big way. While I had always encouraged him to draw his stories and let the writing flow afterwards, it was not until mid April that he began to write about experiences that he knew. He drew the complete story about a trip he made to his cottage one evening. Apparently when they got there he met his dear friend Trevor and they had a sleepover. After he drew this story he worked very hard to get his own words down on the pages. He read this story to all of us with much pride.

I went to the Lake

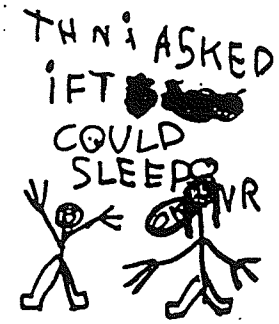
T. was already at the Lake



Then we went to the Lake.



Then I saw T.

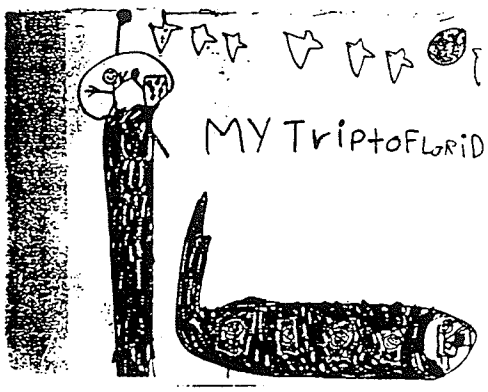


Then I asked if T. could sleep over.

Figure 6

In May another boy, Matt, went on a trip to Vancouver returning with a journal in which he recorded much of what he had done on the trip. This really interested David and he asked me if he could write about a trip he had

made the year previously to Disney World. In the same fashion as before David first drew and then wrote the story down. (Figure 7)

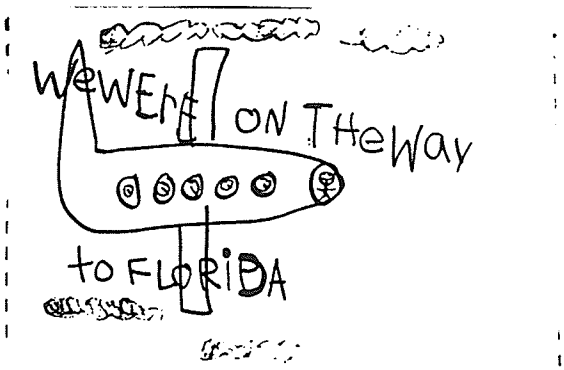


My trip to Florida

My Opa took me to the airport.

Finally we were at the airport.

Figure 1



We were on the way to Florida.

We were at the airport.

We went on the ride called Star Wars.

My Mom went on the tower of terror.

It seemed that this use of drawing and writing allowed for David's full inclusion into our Grade One literacy club. His confidence grew over the last few months of school, and he began to read more texts within the classroom. While he was not as proficient as many of the other readers in the classroom, it was evident to me and finally accepted by his mother that he was definitely on his way to becoming a reader.

On the last day of school, David's mom totally surprised me by throwing her arms around me, and with tears in her eyes, saying that she wished she had more children to send to me. I hardly knew what to say to her, but I think I understood the emotion she felt as a mother. She wanted her son to be successful and she wasn't always sure of what was the best way for him. She wanted to trust me but sometimes what I did ran contrary to her vision of schooling and her background in a more traditional setting. I think that she valued me as his teacher, but because our philosophy clashed, she would have waves of uncertainty. While I expected her to support her child, I could not expect her to always accept my teaching agenda.

What I expect of parents of course ties in heavily with my own set of values. I expect that parents will treat their child with encouragement and

respect. I don't think I should have to tell parents that they need to be the cheerleaders for their child's efforts at school, but I DO tell them this because many of these parents have bad memories of school themselves and so they think that what happened to them, will also happen to their child. And I have learned that I cannot expect parents to have the same view that I have about what constitutes reading. This was made very evident to me after an open house we had in the middle of September, when I talked to the parents about what I believed reading was all about.

> Journal, Sept. 20/97 The day after the open house I am talking to my student teacher, Colleen. She was a wonderful encourager the night before, nodding and smiling at me as I gave the parents my little talk about what reading looks like. Then she saddens me with a story. "I'm so glad you told those parents to expect their child to memorize some books and use the pictures to help them tell the story." Apparently she had watched, helplessly, as Karla had read ZOO LOOKING to her mother just before my presentation. Every time Karla said something different from the text, her mother corrected her. "Not slippery black, slinky black..." And then at the end of the story, Karla's mother had wiped the smile off Karla's face by saying "Karla you didn't read that book, you only have it memorized".
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> Indeed, I think to myself, I must be in my own little world. I have watched Karla's mom pick her up from school every day with a big grin on her face and a welcome hug when she runs out of our classroom. Somehow I assumed that she, as any parent, would want to encourage her child as a reader. Does she think that reading is only "getting it right?" Does she really believe that by telling Karla

> that she "hadn't really read it" that she would press Karla towards more risk taking the next time? And what about Karla? Is she confused by the messages that have been coming from her teacher and her mother? Does she still think of herself as a reader, even when her mother does not? And what about tomorrow? Will Karla be signing up for "reading to the class"? I can only hope so.

I really don't believe that Karla's mother was trying to discourage her, however her view of what reading *was* and the pressure of expectation that she had, robbed her of enjoying Karla's journey into literacy. Karla soon became a very adept reader and writer and so I did not have very many discussions with this mother. However, her remarks about Karla not really reading, caused me to become more explicit in my remarks to other parents, and also raised some questions for me about how to impact parent's thinking in a more positive way.

Meagan's parents also wondered about reading and memory and their questions haunted me throughout the year as I tried to figure out exactly what WAS happening with their child.

> Journal, Nov.17/97 Meagan's Dad has been in the classroom for the afternoon. Ron is a very easy going man, gentle with the children and so lovely to have with us. At the end of the day, as arranged, his wife Caroline joins us and we get Meagan to lead them around the room showing them her work in an early parent teacher conference. When we sit down to talk, Ron is very enthusiastic about what he has

> seen but he has a concern. Meagan seems to be memorizing all that she reads. Caroline laughs and says that Meagan can read some books while looking at the wall. "Is it anything to be worried about?" I agree with them that Meagan has a great memory and she really enjoys books. She can retell a long story that has only been read to her once, using much of the book's own language. I talk to them about the need for children to store books in their heads and that I now think that Meagan is ready for us to begin pointing to the print and helping her make the connections to what is in her head. It is what I have been doing with her for the past several weeks. They seem relieved. These parents are obviously so supportive of their child that I have few worries about her.

It seemed that whenever Ron was in our room as a volunteer that he and I ended up having a discussion about education and about reading. I know that when I was expecting Ron, I would usually plan a reading lesson or small group work that would involve him and at the same time show him a little bit about my ideas about reading. I believed that as long as he was in the classroom he would SEE these things, but in retrospect I think I deliberately planned some aspects of teaching reading for when he was going to show up. He was always very encouraging towards me, saying often that I did "a heck of a job" but at the same time I knew that his experiences at school had not been pleasant and my classroom was a bit of an enigma for him.

> Journal, Feb.18/97 Since he lost his job, Meagan's Dad, Ron, comes every Monday afternoon to volunteer in my classroom. Last week I

gave him my very best group of readers along with multiple copies of Mem Fox's Time for Bed. It's not such a tough book for those kids - Ben, Trevor , Karla, and Matt - but it was new to them, and as well, I thought it would be a good introduction for Ron to a reading circle. I gave him some instructions, and ended with "Just don't tell them to sound out a word, if they are having trouble". "Oh?" he said, looking a bit taken aback. "Nope. Ask them what strategies they can use, but don't suggest sounding out." Then the children came barging through the door.

I worked through the next hour with one ear listening to MY reading group, and one ear listening to Ron. He did talk to his group about the animals in the pictures and really stretched out the opening of the book. I could tell that he was surprised when these kids finally had a turn to read. Of course they zipped right through, reading with expression and animation. Then they went off to writing workshop.

At recess Ron had a lot of questions. "You really threw me for a loop when you said NO sounding out. How do you teach these kids to read then?" We had a long conversation and I ended up showing him our list of "what a good reader does" that the children and I have compiled over the year. He admitted that he has been telling Meagan to sound out her words whenever she brings a book home. "Actually, " he says" Caroline tends to do the reading with Meagan. I just get frustrated because it seems like such an easy word and she doesn't get it. I guess I've been kind of hard on her." So I talked to him about reading WITH Meagan. " When you start a book, both of you read together and then as she gains confidence let your voice drop down and just behind hers, so that she takes the lead. When she stumbles on a word your voice catches up and supplies the word and then on you go again." I know that Ron is somewhat dubious about this, but he is always boisterously supportive of me and my classroom skills so I know that he is thinking.

Later, during writing workshop, he is shocked when I suggest to him that it is difficult for these kids to copy sentences from the board. Meagan is trying to copy something, and I just write it out on a piece of paper and place it right in front of her. Ron is again

amazed.

It seems that all the strategies for teaching that he is so used to, I won't use. "Gee," he says," I told my neighbor after the last time I was in here that I thought I could handle the job of being a Grade One teacher all right. Now I'm not so sure."

Slowly over the year, as Ron continued to come into the classroom, it occurred to me just how difficult it would be for parents OUTSIDE my classroom to figure out what I was doing. While I thought I was sending home loads of paper in the form of newsletters, instructions and articles, it became apparent that for Ron at least, the best form of knowing for him occurred when he experienced the classroom for himself. As Wayne Serebrin remarked when he read one of my pieces of writing about Ron, it was necessary for Ron to "take the journey" before he had any real understanding. Why had it taken so long for me to consider that not only the CHILDREN, but their parents also needed to construct their understandings of what real reading and writing were about? I did write about this struggle in my journal.

Journal, March 17/98 Ron was in the classroom again this afternoon leading a group of children in a discussion organized by my student teacher. Neither he nor I were exactly sure what we were supposed to be doing and I was feeling awkward. Ron did his usual enthusiastic job with his group nonetheless, although I winced a few times when I

heard him say "Now there's good work, Don is really doing a good job", and when he was a bit harder on his own child Meagan, saying "Meagan, doing a drawing is not just copying someone else's work." Meagan is the last person who would copy someone else's drawing, but because her Dad was there, she was looking at his drawing.

Later we got into our usual educational discussion. Ron is open, that's for sure and he often helps me to realize how hard it is for parents to appreciate what is going on with their children. Ron first points out to me that "I might like to deal with a couple of monkeys over there because they are not doing any writing," during writing workshop. I don't even have to look behind me to know that the "monkeys" will be boys. And the "fooling around" will be drawing. Kris and Andy have hit it off today and they are drawing their usual action packed stories. Ron mentions that he has noticed that there are some children who ALWAYS seem to draw and "they are never practicing their printing." I question him about what he means - does he think this is time to practice making letters? Because that is pretty low on my agenda. We talk around the word "writing" to make sure that we both are using the word the same way.

Ron wants to know just what a child should be able to do at the end of Grade One. It's a hard question to answer. I can quote the L.A. curriculum guide, I guess. "Writing a sentence with punctuation." But as I point out to him, that could be "I like apples." Is that all you want? Ron also mentions that the first time I talked to him about reading, he went away thinking "Ya , right", about my explanation of reading as sense making. Now, he says, he understands more of what I was talking about. But he is obviously worried about some of the kids in the class - and in particular he is worried about Meagan.

While I enjoyed having Ron in my classroom and I felt as if he would at least consider the ideas I was feeding him, his presence in the room was a sort of double-edged sword. It was apparent that he was open to my

explanations but there were two problems. Towards the end of the year it appeared as if the philosophical lessons I kept giving him about reading were not seeming to have much effect on his own daughter. And when he was around, she changed rather dramatically.

> Journal, March 17/98 Meagan is the most nervous and sensitive child I have ever known. She practically apologizes for her very existence at school. One day she asked me if I could see without my glasses and then she swiftly added: "I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings by asking such a thing." It is a typical comment from her. At home, her parents assure me, she is much more outspoken and downright bossy with her younger sister. She has only just started to write her own stories at school, and when Ron is there, she wants him to spell for her. Today she wanted to write "Sometimes I like to pull my brother in the sled," and it took her over a half hour to get that down. She wanted Ron to spell "sometimes" for her, but I wouldn't let him. I kept telling her to write down what she was hearing. She wrote <s> <m> (it sounds like 2 <m>'s she said, so I said "Write it down) and then a <t>. She got most of the way through "I like to" when she saw the Anthony Browne book entitled I like books so she erased all of the "I like" part and redid it. On a day like this I do begin to wonder if I should just supply all of her spellings so that she can get on with the job.
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> I talk to Ron about the need for kids to draw and how I believe that their story can be told in pictures (that's their way of thinking), and that of course I want them to hook up with reading and writing, but I also want to value their way of thinking. He has that "I don't get it " look on his face. And I HAVE to point out to him that not all the teachers in the world would agree with me. I have to admit to myself that I am also puzzled by Meagan and I would love to be able to keep her in my class for another year, just to see what "might be".

When Ron was in the room Meagan was inseparable from him. While I tried often to assign him a job that did not involve her, she would be very unhappy with this arrangement and would hang around him anyway. She was a skillful artist and so I was especially surprised when I heard Ron scolding her about "copying" his drawing. She would hardly do any writing when he was in the room and was very lacking in self-direction. By the end of the year Meagan was still really struggling to make sense of print and I had to tell her parents that she was a bit "behind" the others in the class, and would probably be receiving Resource help the next year. This was always a disappointing thing for me to tell parents. I felt as if somehow I had failed. Although philosophically I agree with Jerry Harste - that a child does not have to be "reading" by the end of Grade One - I found that I too have fallen victim to the political pressure that expects uniformity.

Of course I had many happy incidents with parents. I do believe that all parents simply want the best for their children. The issue is how to go about that job. As I have many questions myself about the way schools work, the "system" that ranks some abilities as more important than others, I anticipate that the parents I work with will also have many questions.

However I do expect parents to be very supportive of their child and I am always thrilled when I see evidence of this support.

> Journal, March 15/98 A happy thing from today. I looked through April's home reading booklet, where her mother has written a lovely note. She is so proud of Ashley's reading and she writes about April bringing home Eric Carle's book The Birthday Surprise. "She read this book to me and it is very special, because she picked it out for me. Today is my birthday." Her Mom overflows in praise for her child, and it really warms my heart.
>
> I am also proud of April, who shows every day that she understands and exhibits the social nature of reading. I know that April rarely reads exactly what is printed in her books. None of us do. But her mom doesn't believe that decoding each word on the page is reading at its best. Her mom looks at the sense making and the thinking April is doing. Her mom is enjoying April's continuing journey into this complex world of literacy.

The Actions of Others

While the process of learning to read is complex, I do believe that my theory must guide the decisions I make. Many of the parents of the children in my classroom were taught using the "sound it out" approach and it seems that lately this phonics system of teaching reading is becoming more pervasive. As I consider myself to be a whole language teacher, I reject the simplicity of the "phonics versus whole language" debate. I acknowledge that understanding the sound symbol relationship of letters

and sounds is obviously necessary to reading and that attending to this cue system is one of our reading strategies. However I have found that the place to teach this relationship is in writing. I observed this system of "sounding out" very difficult words one day when a teacher assistant came into my room to give some help in reading. The "help" she gave has been given to many children over the years I'm sure, but with this child it only hindered. This story is symptomatic of the struggle I can have with my colleagues, when our theories clash.

> Journal, Feb. 8/98 At the end of the day, a group of Grade Threes come into the room to read to my Grade Ones. As the children sort out their book buddies Sally, a teacher assistant, also walks in. She has just recently been assigned to my room for a half hour every other day. Sally has rarely been in my room before. Assuming that I am giving her an easy job, I ask her to read with Trevor, because his book buddy is away today. I circulate among the children and make sure that everyone has a book and a buddy. Then I sit down at the table where Trevor and Sally are sitting and settle in to record some information in my journal. As I write, my attention is drawn across the table to the conversation that is transpiring between Sally and Trevor. Trevor is reading a book to Sally, a book he has just chosen off the shelf. It is not a book he knows well, in fact I imagine that this is the first time he is reading it. Sally is "helping" him. "There's a <t> <h>." She says "what sound does that make? "TH" That's right. "TH" We call that a blend. A consonant blend. "TH" Trevor makes the "TH" sound. "And then there's an <R>... What's the <R> sound?" Trevor makes the <R> sound. This painful lesson goes on through the entire word until I can stand it no longer. "Just tell him

> the word, Sally. We don't do that sounding out thing here," I say. "Oh, O.K., thanks for telling me" Sally looks a bit taken aback, but somewhat relieved to just tell Trevor the word "throat" and then they proceed. At each little "mistake" that Trevor makes she corrects him. He says "The " she says "No, that's "a." And on it goes. What is amazing to me is that Trevor, the KING of the class, is faltering and hesitating as he reads. He is Mr. Confidence. But today with Sally's "help" he is becoming very unsure of himself and is headed for certain failure. I realize that I will have to talk to Sally about what I see as being supportive of beginning readers.

I know that Sally honestly wanted to help Trevor but I also know that Sally has had very little involvement with current reading theories. She is using the same strategies that no doubt were used in her own Grade One classroom. In this model, mistakes are viewed as needing to be corrected so that the child will not fall into the habit of making that mistake over and over again. Reading is viewed as decoding letter sounds, in order to make words, which in turn, join together to make sentences. This view of reading dismisses the interaction of the reader entirely, and as well, ignores the impact of the type of book that is being read.

As Sally is an older teaching assistant in our school, I understand her reliance on older theories. And because I am in a rather conservative school, the philosophies about how children learn are sometimes different. At times I feel like some of the work I go to, in an effort to convince students

of their abilities, are lost when the children move on to higher grades. This issue presented itself especially poignantly one day in October.

> Journal, Oct.16/97 At morning recess, Jim is holding a little board book, with a cut out center, in his hands. Jim is a special needs boy who has visited me on other occasions. His book is a brand new Hallowe'en book which belongs to Jim, and he has taken it out for recess. He shows it to me proudly, and I ask him to ask his teacher if he can bring it down to me to read. I tell his teacher that I've told him that and she can send him anytime. He doesn't come. At afternoon recess she is standing right over Jim's head, as I ask her once again if Jim can come to my room "Oh, that book,...well, he can't read any of it, you know" she says. I am stunned, and say "well, he could share it with me whenever you like." She never sends him. I go into my room feeling furious. Why would she say that right in front of him?

For me the question becomes a philosophical one. What is reading? What is writing? And even more basic what IS the teacher's job? Is my job to encourage children, accept them where they are, and help them to move on? OR do I need to "tell it like it is", comparing children with each other and encouraging them in a competition for first spot. Of course I know that my own education was like that. I can remember even in elementary school being placed in a queue of first to last on my report card. As I was usually about third, it never occurred to me what it might be like to be twenty-fifth in class. But obviously someone must have had that written on their report

card. As a teacher I think that there is no excuse for that kind of feedback, which is highly damaging to children whether the child is first or last. And of course I have to ask myself on what basis children were judged. I know that in my educational background marks on academic tests were the only consideration. As a teacher I know that all of my students do not always show high academic skills, but they do have abilities in other areas. These things of course were never considered when I went to school. And because I am a parent myself, I have been made to consider these questions even more personally.

> Journal, Sally 6/97 I am in a meeting with my own child's teacher. She is in Grade 6 and it is June. We are trying to decide what will be the best placement for her for next year. Around a rather old table, in a dingy room, sit the resource teacher, my child's teacher for the past 3 years, a reading clinician, a psychologist, my husband, and I. The reading clinician is doing most of the talking, as she has just completed administering a major test to my daughter. She goes over all the information, showing us finally a graph of the test results. My daughter, according to the test, is in the normal range. I suppose I should be pleased but as the meeting wears on I begin to lose my patience. Then the reading clinician looks at the psychologist and points out all the times that Sharon has used an eraser during the test. "You know," she says pensively" I used the 'ABC' test. The 'ABC' test allows the use of an eraser. If I had used the 'XYZ' test you can't allow an eraser to be used. Sharon's test score would have been much lower." My heart sinks. I know that these people are trying their best to understand why this child, MY child, is having such a difficult time in school, but the discussion of the eraser is

> more than I can bear. I sit back in my chair and say "You know I really don't put much stock in these tests of yours. We KNOW Sharon. As a whole child. Surely Jane [her teacher] knows her. She is struggling so much and I really wonder if these tests are showing us the whole child."

And so as a parent I fight for my own children to be accepted on a scale that includes many considerations for abilities that are not only academic. And because I am a parent of a child who struggles, I have experienced the pain that can be inflicted by a teacher's offhand remarks. I will never forget that after meeting with Sharon's Grade Two teacher, I cried all the way home, because that teacher talked for our entire interview about the things that Sharon could not do. He actually said to me "Oh, I need to start with something positive. Sharon is very quiet." Then he went into his negative list. I was a brand new teacher at the time and I vowed that I would never be so blind in my assessment of a child in my own classroom. While I have lived up to that vow, at times I have really struggled with this issue.

This year my principal is new to the school. He has requested that we give parents as much information as we possibly can about how their children are performing in school. He often tells us that we should "tell the truth to

parents." While I understand his desire to give parents lots of feedback, this phrase does not sit well with me. It seems to be sometimes at war with my own belief in each child's unique makeup and gifts. I do not want to lead parents astray concerning their children's academic performance, but I do value the children in a bigger way than our report card "assessments" sometimes demand.

Pressures Outside the School

Besides dealing with other teachers and the influences of parents, I am also affected by the news media, government decisions, and the general political pressure of living in the late 1990's. I hardly open a newspaper or magazine without being assaulted by someone's idea of what schools should be doing and especially, it seems, how reading should be taught. Everyone has an opinion. Often I feel as if I must respond to what I see as media attacks on teachers, as words like "child-centered" and "whole language" are strewn thoughtlessly throughout news reports. Many times I have found myself unable to sleep at night unless I pound out a rebuttal to these public articles.

This past year, after responding to an editorial in the local newspaper,

I was asked by the newspaper's "education" writer if I would allow him into my class in order to show him "how I taught reading." Although I talked at length to this man it was quite obvious that he already had his own ideas about how to teach reading. He never did write the article that he claimed he would write and in fact he hooked my comments up with a group that I don't belong or ascribe to, in a later article in his newspaper. On another occasion this year I attended an inservice at which the speaker was supposed to be dealing with the issue of how to handle very violent children. I was incensed when this speaker began to make sweeping statements about how to teach reading. At one point she said "We know how to teach reading. We know how to teach writing. It has to be by direct instruction. We have all the research on our side. Whole language has no support." In a room full of over fifty Grade One teachers from my own school division, I was the only one who stood up, and with steam pouring from my ears, walked out. Although I complained bitterly about this speaker, I noticed at the end of the year that she has been booked again to make presentations for next year by our Early Childhood Consultant.

It seems to me that the conservative political views which have swept

over many countries in the last decade have greatly affected the public's perception of schools. Within the academic realm as well there seems to be a strong resurgence of very conservative views about education. Lately among reading "specialists" I hear about "balanced" literacy instruction, using "levelled" books. No where in this model do I hear about children.

I know that the views and pressures of parents, principals, and politicians outside my classroom had an effect on me. The word cards I gave to David were typical of the kinds of changes I was willing to make in my teaching practice, if it meant that some of the parent's expectations were being met. I never felt that they distrusted what I did, but I knew that my Grade One classroom did not resemble much of what they remembered from school. I wanted them to be able to relate to the class. However, I was not willing to make large changes to what I was doing, unless I could justify the change philosophically.

And so I began to record the stories within my classroom, stories about a very real, very energetic, very vocal, and very thoughtful group of six-year-olds and what they were discovering about reading and writing. I wanted to think about their journey into literacy; the process that was involved and

the real life acting out of the theory. I wanted to ask the big questions about other ways of knowing, and how those children who did not fit the norm were being helped or hindered by my teaching. I wondered if all the pressures from outside my classroom really made a difference to the kind of teacher I was, and I wanted to discover the theories that the children were developing in their heads about how literacy worked. Finally, I wondered how all of this research would affect me.

Chapter 4 You don't have to make the teacher happy, do you?

This year of collecting data in the form of stories has been a very interesting and valuable experience for me, both as a teacher and as a person. I have to agree with Yetta Goodman in her evaluation of how teachers and students learn:

> We believe all people learn in the same way - adults as well as children. In order for teachers to become knowledgeable, they must go through similar kinds of experiences. They have to examine their own thinking. They have to begin by observing kids. (in Harste, 96, 517)

As a teacher, I have "observed kids" for a number of years. However this year while doing my research, the "observing" was quite a bit different. I recorded many stories in writing which other years I might have left only to the care of my memory. I shared those stories with others and began to look at some facets of my classroom through the eyes of others. When the year was over, I had the rare chance to re-observe those students and to think again of the implications of some of the decisions I had made in my classroom. I had an opportunity to revisit those aspects of teaching and learning that I had thought I understood so well at the beginning of this

research and I have continued to learn from what I recorded.

This research has confirmed in my mind many of the original thoughts I had discussed in earlier chapters about "how children learn" and "what a good classroom looks like." However this research has done far more than merely confirm my thoughts. My ideas about teaching and learning have been greatly expanded, challenged, and changed through this experience. I have had to rethink some of my classroom practices. I have realized that I do not always act in ways that support my theories. Happily I have also realized that I DO have a philosophical basis on which I plan my teaching and I do often cling to those convictions even in difficult times. In Chapter Two I outlined the basic beliefs I held about children's learning at the start of this research. In this chapter I revisit those issues and show, through the stories, how my thinking has changed.

1. Learning is Ongoing

> Journal Sept. 6/97 "McCain" he shouts, shoving a tiny piece of paper in my face. "Yes David, It's McCain all right," I answer, squinting to see the stub of paper in his little hands. David has accepted my invitation to "find everything you can read" in the tub of junk mail, cereal boxes and flyers I have placed on one of the tables in my Grade One classroom. He and Matt are the only two investigators today, combing through the box and then cutting and pasting their findings on the large sheet of paper marked "I can

read..." on the bulletin board. David works at this job for at least a half hour confidently reading out "Safeway" and "Superstore" to no one in particular. When he comes upon a toy store flyer however, his interest peaks. He carefully cuts out two square pictures of Nintendo games he owns and proudly presents them to his friends. "I have this one = Warrior two" he announces and then he reads another title, too obscure for most of us to see. He glues them in place.

I am impressed with his determination and his literacy skills. Just yesterday he tackled the job of recording his activities at project time with real "David" forcefulness. "I want to write 'I cut fruit' but I don't know how to spell" he said. We had made fruit salad together and he had brought the "prize " fruit - a huge honeydew melon. He had spent most of project time cutting and chopping. "Well, just say those words slowly to yourself and write down what you hear," I say cautiously. I have only had David in my class for 3 days and I want to see what he does with that kind of help. He looks surprised when I tell him that I won't spell for him. "O.K." he bellows " I... hmm, " and he writes an <i> , "cut... ohh, that's a <K>," and then "fruit" and he writes an <F>. <I K F> is written above his picture of a huge green melon that has a knife with a very serrated edge sitting over it. The point is made. David knows how to write. (figure 8)

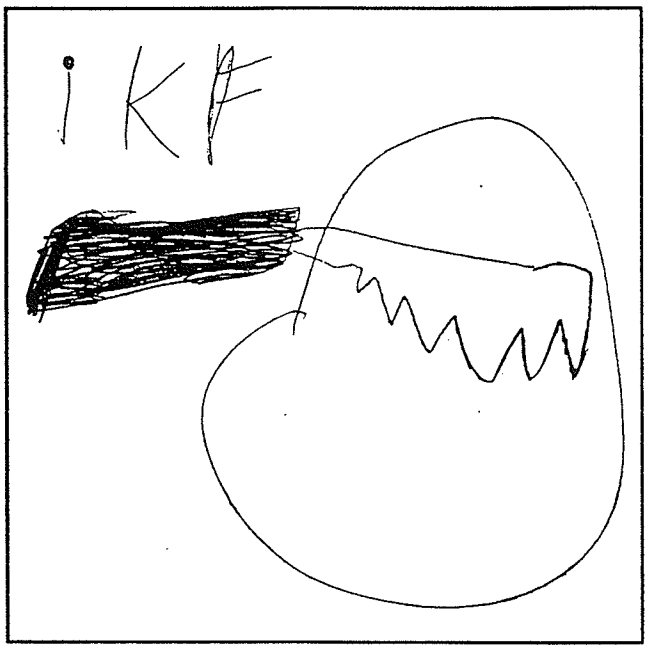

Figure 8 i K F "I cut fruit."

Two days later our class goes out for a walk in our community. We don't go all that far before I realize anew that this area is PACKED with literacy moments for my grade ones. They all know the

street sign says STOP and the words on top of the school say the name of the school. But when we turn the corner of the block and stand in front of the local grocery store, we have a literacy bonanza. I look at my student teacher and comment that we should have brought a tape recorder. I ask the children to read what they can and the words pour out. PEPSI, CHIPS, OPEN, and there are lots more. Trevor says he knows what's on the back of the door - it says "pull". David points to a picture of a Dove bar (it's a new one I don't know) and he says "That says chocolate bar." And then he points to a sign and says "That one says no smoking" - it's the red X over an "under 18" sign - the store won't sell cigarettes to anyone under 18, but David certainly has the understanding of this kind of sign.

We continue our walk, and my young charges have picked up on the game now - every time they see something that looks like a sign, they point and shout. "FOR SALE." " DON'T GO ON THE GRASS." "BEWARE OF DOG." It goes on and on. David knows what the striped pole means. "That's a barber shop," he says. I wonder to myself when I last saw one of these old poles, but David knows about it because it is right down the street from where he lives. It is indeed a literate walk through our school's neighborhood.

Later that same day I am reading a letter from David's mother. I have invited the parents to write me about their children, so that I might understand them better. She has written a lovely letter, but she mentions the fact that "David doesn't seem interested in learning his 'ABC's." And then I am shocked to read "His final report from Kindergarten stated that he could only identify eleven letters of the alphabet. I was stunned and have been trying to help him over the summer months, but he was always more interested in catching frogs..."

I ask myself how this can be. And then I remember glancing at the files that have come up from Kindergarten - containing stark white sheets with alphabet letters marching across them. Some are circled, some are not. Apparently David's sheet only had 11 circles. I shake my head in disbelief. David has shown, every day that I have been with him, that he understands and reads the print in his world. He also proves the point that he NEEDS the context of the print, in

> order to make sense. He cannot, or perhaps WILL not identify single letters, stripped of meaning. But within a context of meaning, and his own life, he is a reader and a writer and a sense maker. My job for the next few weeks will be to convince him of his abilities and I think I will have to convince his parents as well.

Of course I didn't believe for a minute that David only knew 11 letters of the alphabet. This issue of what David "knew" was linked with the whole idea of testing. While I do not know exactly how David's knowledge of letters was checked, I doubt that it was done in a holistic fashion. Likely David was tested by a teacher pointing at a sheet of isolated alphabet letters. I do not blame the Kindergarten teachers for this type of "testing", because I know that many of the current language arts experts suggest using out of context words and letters for testing.

The whole journey with David, recorded in part in Chapter Three, helped to confirm for me that the learning that Frank Smith talks about - that effortless, constant learning that children especially are engaged in, was surely at work in my classroom. While I do believe that the classroom teacher's job is very important in directing and challenging the thinking of her students, it became obvious that the children often had their own agenda, and I had to either acknowledge it, or miss out on a wonderful

opportunity to learn with them.

In February there was an issue that required mediation between the children and myself that showed me something about the ongoing nature of the children's learning, as well as impressing upon me the fact that the children were in charge of their learning. Many of the children began to carry little stapled booklets around with them, bringing them to our carpet time and writing or drawing in them while we were having class discussions. While at first this activity bothered me and I tried to discourage it, through my writing I discovered that the children may have been inventing writer's notebooks for themselves. This was a thought which pleased and excited me.

> Journal, Feb. 24/98 This month I began by battling a bit with students who insisted on carrying pencils and paper around. When it suddenly struck me that my students might actually be using "notebooks" to record important information, I have a talk with them. I start out by apologizing and by asking the girls what they were doing with their little scraps of paper. I tell them that I too carry a journal around with me, because I might hear or see something that I might want to record. Meagan talks about drawing and writing. "Sometimes I draw something, and then I write about it. When I'm drawing I'm always listening," she says. "Sometimes I even write before I draw, and sometimes I have to draw first." She IS always drawing, and I know that helps her think through her ideas for a story.
>
> When I ask the other girls what they are using their little notebooks for, April is the most outspoken. "When I'm doing some

writing, I'm doing some stories, or I'm pretending." She talks about taking her notebook to French and Music, although she is quick to point out that she does not take a pencil. Obviously she has picked up my concern with the lost pencils. She says that when she takes her notebook out at recess she does take a pencil, so she can "just write about what we're doing outside". A day later, April refers to her "journal" and says "I'm thinking what I'm going to write and then I'm writing it in my journal. I write some titles of books." When I ask her what she is going to do with these titles, she answers "I'm going to show it to my mom and she'll be impressed that I know how to write". Karla also has a fair bit to say about the notebooks, as she has recorded an entire short story in her notebook. She points out that the reason SHE takes her notebook everywhere is so that it won't get lost in the classroom. When she goes out at recess she is going to watch and "if we see some kids we can just write down what they're doing." Frances understands this and suggests that they might be like the conflict managers, who carry clipboards at recess and write down the conflicts that arise.

It does seem as if these children have been using notebooks for their own purposes. After the discussion, many of the boys begin to carry pieces of paper around, but as they don't seem to be as organized about it as the girls they tend to leave their pieces of paper here and there around the room. Many of them are openly drawing on the carpet when we are having meetings about one thing or another and I am surprised to be feeling kind of good about that. These children really do like to draw and I have supported that need more than ever this year. I have found that while it may take several writing workshops for a child to draw his/her story, once the drawing is complete it may only take one more class to write all the words to the story. It seems as if the drawing can be the creative element of the storying and the act of getting the words down is then much easier.

After several discussions of what we will "do" about notebooks, we have still not come to any conclusions. The children are sure that the individual notebooks they are creating are sufficient despite my suggestion that we legislate some sort of common looking device. So

I resign myself to one more week of using their own notebooks, asking that they please keep them in their "keeper boxes" when they are not in use.

We have had to talk about how other teachers might view the notebooks; already one child has gotten into trouble with another teacher when a notebook was taken into that class.

And then I have a little talk with Sean. I ask him why he isn't copying books anymore, not because I'm worried about his change, but because I want to understand what he is thinking about. He says "I am copying titles." And then he shows me his notepaper, where he has a list of book titles. "I'm just writing about titles so I know the words," he says. Several days later he expands on this when he talks to the class about what he does when he is reading. And then he names his notepaper. He says "I put them in my keeper notes." I suppose that he is combining the "notebook" idea with the place where I have suggested they keep them - their "keeper box." But I like the sound of the label he has invented. Keeper notes. I think I shall have to share this with the rest of the class.

2. Learning is Personal.

The issue of using "testing" in the case of David reminded me that the year Steve was in my class, I had consulted a book by Bonnie Campbell-Hill (1994) and I had myself used her "primary screen" for identifying reading behaviors. Tim, a boy in my class that year, taught me a good lesson about the personal nature of learning.

Journal, Sept./96 Tim and I have been sharing a book which he has chosen from the classroom to read to me. We have had a discussion about the amount of reading that is done in his home, and I now produce the "primary screen" test from Bonnie Campbell-Hill's book.

"Now Tim", I say "don't get nervous about this, just look and see if you know any of these words. Do you know what that word is?"

Tim does look nervous. "No," he says.

"Well, what about that one?" He shakes his head. "No? Well, O.K., that's fine. That's the word 'cat' and that's the word 'me'."

Tim suddenly looks interested. "I think I know one of the words here. Time. Like Taco Time," he offers.

"Oh, good for you," I say "great and lots of times that's how you learn to read because you know something like from something else, from a name like Taco Time or somebody else's name.

Tim continues: "Sometimes when it's a time word, I usually say, take off the 'e' and it's Tim."

Totally surprised by the connection this boy is making I say "Of course, and that's another great way to learn how to read, because you recognize something that you know. Yea. Tim and Time.

The importance of his name plays a big part in Tim's literacy, as it does for many children. When I backed off my agenda of testing, and let Tim do some of the talking, he was able to show me what he really knew. What intrigues me about many of the stories I have collected this year is the fact that when I have listened to the children in my class, they have shown me rather extraordinary abilities in their sense making. The stories tell me lots about what children already know about literacy and they confirm for me what is important in teaching reading. My stories are full of examples of the theorizing children are doing while they read and the strategies they are using in order to make sense of their books.

During this research I was again reminded of how important it is for children to make connections with their everyday lives in order for learning to take place. Often their connections totally surprise me and at times their connections confound and disappoint me. But as they do make these associations, they illustrate how they are guiding their own learning and how they are forming their own theories about reading and writing.

> Journal, Sept. 25/97: I sit at the front of a row of eager children, clasping the big book "Growing Vegetable Soup" by Lois Elhert. Don's Grampa has a huge garden and last week he sent in an enormous potato and a strange, double-pronged carrot that we played with. Don has talked about his Grampa's garden so often that it seems like a good idea to read the book. We are still looking at the front cover - a bright red colour, when Jason speaks up. He is usually a quiet boy, still suffering occasionally from separation anxiety. He has told me several times that he cannot read. He points his finger to the corner of the book and says "That almost says gulp." It makes no sense to me. He is pointing to the publisher's 'BIG BOOK' sign on the corner of the book. Then he continues with an explanation that opens my eyes. "When my Dad goes to Seven Eleven he buys a big drink and it says GULP on it". "Oh," I say, "like a Big Gulp?" "Yes, that's it" he says, quite pleased with himself.
>
> Connections. Don's connections to gardens are easy for me to understand. I love gardens. But Jason's connection is to a drink at 7-eleven. In his mind the word "Big" was ALMOST gulp. Jason knows that the sign on the cup of his Dad's drink surely means something, and that something must have to do with the drink. He's heard his Dad call it , not a Pepsi, or a Coke, but a Big Gulp. And so for Jason, the connections that will guide his literacy growth come

from his environment, as it will for many others in this class.

It was obvious that the children were making connections with what they knew in the books that they chose and the writing that they shared. Jason was using the environmental print of the classroom and relating it to what he knew outside, while Don's connections were to real life occurrences. The connections they were making were assisting their growth in reading as they tested their hypothesis about "how reading works."

As their teacher, I wondered how I could better facilitate the making of connections. Of course I realized, as I recorded in my journal, that often my own values came into play. If I did not approve of hunting, or comic books, how could I accept and encourage the thinking of a child who brought that kind of knowledge with him to school?

> Journal, Sept. 25/97 But what do I value about what these children know about? David knows a lot about nature - he spends his summers at the cottage. When he brings in a deer skull, complete with teeth and horns, we have a great time examining it. Apparently he found it in the bushes, dragged it home, and his mother soaked it in bleach for 4 days to rid it of maggots. And now it is his prize show and tell. And then there's Andy. He also knows lots about animals. He brought in a beaver tooth and several feet from geese. It was great to get to actually feel a goose foot - smooth and kind of slippery. But I had to admit that I wasn't so pleased with Andy's stories of how the geese feet were obtained. "My poppa shot them,"

> he says confidently. Later that same day we are outside and Andy points up to the sky. "Look, Mrs. Sutton, geese." Sure enough, there they are. The book Goodbye Geese flows through my mind, and I lift my hand to wave to them. My musings about the coming of autumn however, are broken by the sound of half my class forming their arms into shotguns and aiming at the geese. BANG BANG!! Their shots ring out. It seems that many of these children have fathers, or uncles who are hunters. I'm not at ease with hunting. I order them all to lower their guns.

On the one hand, these children had to make their own connections with literacy. Whether that involved a drink at a Seven - Eleven, or a hunting expedition with their Grampa, I needed to accept their particular association and learn how to build upon those relationships. But, on the other hand, as the year progressed I realized that sometimes I did struggle with the associations they were making. I did not realize until after the year was over that rather than approach those situations head on, I often avoided topics in the classroom which clashed with my own ethically or culturally formed opinions.

This did create some conflict for me in the classroom and in my research. I truly believe that in order to honor the personal nature of learning, that I must listen to the children in my class. While this is an activity that most teachers would claim to be engrossed in, I have discovered for myself at

least, that I do not and I have not always listened to them. I have found this year, through the writing I have done, that the children have been my teachers, as they have shown me how to teach them. They have been leading me, showing me where they should be going. It is the children's voices that have been the best curricular guides for me this year in their literacy pursuits. Because I have been especially tuned in to their voices and I have recorded them immediately, I am learning to respect the individuality with which each child approaches the huge task of becoming a literate person in our society. I have discovered that I need to be listening to all of their voices in order to tailor my plans for each one. And when I do listen to them I have more than enough information with which to plan.

The problem with listening to the children is that sometimes they tell me things that I don't want to hear, like Andy telling me that his Poppa had shot a Canada Goose. Perhaps I could have raised the issue of hunting for sport with this group, but that could have been a dangerous stand to take in this community. The parents of many of these children DID hunt for sport and I was not sure that I wanted to get into a controversy with parents over an issue that I didn't think would make any difference in the classroom anyway.

I felt as if I was already taking a number of risks pedagogically with the neighborhood. To take on some other social or cultural issue was not something I wanted to do. In retrospect I wonder if I robbed some of those children of their chance to see and discuss some of those issues from another perspective.

3. Children Have to Believe in Themselves as Learners

In the teaching of reading there were some social factors that became particularly clear to me over this year. While I have always believed that children need to have a lot of self confidence in order to read, I discovered just how very crucial it was for them to believe in themselves, and to see themselves as readers. With some children the job of convincing them that they are readers is easy, but with others it is particularly difficult.

> Journal, Feb. 8/98 The next day most of my class are off in their "Ukrainian"class. I am left with a small group and we are reading together. I decide that I will simply read a selection of books to the children and offer them as possibilities for the children to work on. I am sharing some of the beginning books I have in the classroom because this group have some of the strugglers in it, including Anna and Kris. Kris came to this class late in the year and he speaks a mixture of Polish and English at home, so for him it is a matter of mastering the language a bit more. But what about Anna? I know that she isn't getting a lot of support at home. Her mom works

strange hours and Anna and her sister are often alone. Anna doesn't want to take any books home to read and I suspect it is because her older sister will make fun of her attempts. So, at school, I have tried to make reading an easy going experience. We read through one of the books that Anna "knows" by heart and she is quite delighted to read with me. Then I read through One Grey Mouse. It's a counting book that uses colour and numbers to help children read successfully. It also contains some rhyming patterns. After I read through it once, Anna and Tamara claim that they both want to read it. I suggest that they take turns reading the pages. Tamara zips through her pages; but Anna stumbles a bit here and there. However as the book unfolds, Anna gets an excited and confident look on her face. "This is easy," she says to the group. While I suspect that this is not easy for her, I am thrilled to see that she is correcting herself from time to time, and when she stumbles on a word she doesn't know the other children encourage her with various strategies. Not once does she hear, "No, that's not right." When they finish the book, I send the two girls off to the carpet to read the book through once again.

Tamara, shy and soft spoken, is making a number of break-throughs in reading this month. She has broken her right arm, and as it is tied tightly to her body, she cannot write. So she has spent more time with books and with the tape recorder. She has finally begun to believe in herself and she is reading at home to her mom. Anna has struggled with reading this year and she has used a lot of avoidance techniques in order to stay away from writing. In many ways, she is the artist - my "this year's Stephen" - of the class. Today I think I have seen a spark of understanding in her face, and for her, that spark has created great confidence and joy. She has added another book to her list of "books she knows" and in this one it is obvious that she is using the print to help her make meaning.

If a family is not supportive of their child's literacy attempts, or if there is an older sibling in the family who enjoys deriding his/her younger siblings

attempts at reading, I find my job much harder. Within the confines of our own classroom I always work very hard to convince children of their own abilities. However as the year wears on the children who struggle can become quite mired in their own inabilities, especially if they begin to compare themselves with others in the class. I often wonder how to shield these children from their frustrations, while still giving them more time with books. I don't want to just give them more of what they cannot do and so the choosing of the right kind of book is very important.

In fact a book could become a good friend as in the case of Frances, a very young girl who affiliated herself with certain books in the classroom. She showed us one day how powerful that attachment could be, and how necessary it was for her own self esteem that she find a book that she loved.

> Journal, Oct. 31/98 Frances is a very sensitive little girl who seems to change often from one moment to the next. She has some problems fitting in with the other girls, even though in terms of personality the other girls are quite an easy going group this year. I am shocked when her mom tells me, in mid October, that some days Frances comes home from school and hides under the bed. "Kids are mean," her mom says, "they were like that to me at school too." I assure her that I won't condone children being mean in my class and I have some talks with Frances to see how I can help her. I wonder if she is feeling a bit inadequate because she seems to have few literacy skills. Frances often asks how to make a certain letter of

the alphabet. In writing workshop she makes random strings of letters, or letters from her name and then asks me what they say. When her mom, expecting her fourth child, tells me that she has no books at home, we begin to load up Frances's home reading bag with many extras.

Frances may not have many books at home but she really enjoys books at school; she especially loves to listen to the books on tape. Her absolute favorite is Big Pumpkin, a repetitious story about a witch trying to get a huge pumpkin out of the garden and into her kitchen in order to make pumpkin pie. Frances will listen to this story over and over again. In late October, when she gets the chicken pox, Frances stays away for more than a week and returns to class just in time for Halloween.

I have told the children that they can bring a costume to put on after recess in the afternoon, for our Halloween Party. Frances, however, comes back from lunch in full "witch" attire. Her face has been painted a bright green colour and red "blood" drips from her mouth. She takes one look at everyone else and refuses to enter the room. She is crying. "My Dad put on this makeup," is all she will say. Most of the children leave the room to go to their Ukrainian class, so we manage to entice Frances in, with the promise of the Big Pumpkin book. I talk to the remaining children in the room about making Frances feel welcome and they all rally around her. "You look so nice," April murmurs.

And then we play the tape. When the words of the witch are said my student teacher, Colleen, looks at me and gasps. Frances's tears are gone. She has assumed the persona and she is saying the witch's lines to perfection, cackly voice and all. In no time at all we have turned the reading into a little drama while Frances leads everyone with the witch's words. When the rest of the class come back the drama is performed once again. Frances is beside herself with joy and confidence. It has been a number of days since she has heard this book, but it is so ingrained in her mind that she anticipates each time the witch speaks and she does it perfectly.

A few days later we have book buddies with the Grade Threes. I have put Frances with Sarah, a very capable reader from my class

> two years ago. During this book buddy time Frances is reading to Sarah - the Big Pumpkin book. Sarah is politely listening and Frances is nearly bursting with pride. The book is hers, in so many ways.

I love this story about Frances because it tells me some of the happy potentials school can have for a child who has learning difficulties. I know that Frances is going to have many struggles in her life in school, but I like to think that, at least in this classroom, she sometimes saw herself as an able child, with gifts to offer other children. Although she could not "decode" every single word in Big Pumpkin, there was no doubt that Frances's connection to that book helped to transport a nervous, unhappy child into a world of wonder. She DID understand what that book was about. For a time in Grade One Frances BECAME the witch who longed to make pumpkin pie to share with her friends. She assumed the role of the friendly witch, even though her facial makeup portrayed a mean and nasty identity. Frances, the friendly, giving witch was the leader of the classroom; quite a contrast to her everyday life as a little girl who hid under the bed. As a reader of Big Pumpkin, Frances believed in her own abilities and it certainly made a difference for her.

4. Learning is social

It has been made quite clear to me this year that learning is a very social activity. Learning to read in my classroom has been an especially social phenomenon, as I have watched many children share, question and teach others what they know. Although the children showed a vast variety of abilities and understandings about reading, they were all quite willing to help each other out when they could. During a reading circle, where children would bring the book they were currently working on, I would find that I had a very hard time keeping the other children quiet while the one who's "turn" it was, was reading. In fact it became obvious to me that while one child was reading, I SHOULD be watching the other children, because in the security of being out of the spotlight many of the children did a much better job than when they were required to read out loud. The reading circle was not a stressful event, however, invariably the child who was supposed to be reading would be getting help from the another child. When it was the "helper's" turn to read, SHE would need help. By the middle of the year, I secretly began to take notes on the child BESIDE the child who was reading and that turned out to be a much more positive note taking experience. And because

in fact I couldn't STOP the other children from helping the one who was reading, this assessment strategy was much more pleasant all around.

Tamara was one of those children who had a hard time in reading circle. When she discovered April as a reading partner, her reading changed rather dramatically.

> Journal, Nov. 10/97 Tamara is a very quiet child; her family discovered this past summer that she has some hearing loss. As a result she does not always put the endings onto words, and she does not pronounce the "r" sound very well. When she speaks, she sounds more like a New Englander, than a Winnipeger. And she's shy. The first few days of school I had to make sure that I took her hand out of her mother's, in order to help her come into the school. Now, more than two months into the year, I still feel her clutching my hand as we walk down the hall from the front door, and if she is late, there is usually a bit of a stall at the classroom door with her mother. "She's a mamma's girl all right" her mother fusses to me.
>
> Tamara never talks in the large group and even in small groups it is often hard to see any enthusiasm emanating from her. She seems a bit sad to me and sometimes totally lacking in self motivation. Tamara is not a risk taker in any area of her life, and most noticeably, in the area of reading. Since the beginning of the year, she has stuck with the one book she is sure to know and able to read: Brown Bear. It's not my favorite book, that's for sure, but I put it out at the beginning of the year because it is one I know the children will recognize from Kindergarten. It gives some of them confidence as it's a sure fire "successful" read. But after the first few weeks most of the children turn away from its rank predictability and find something else. But not Tamara. At the start of October, it is still the book of preference for her. She stores it in her book pot and brings it faithfully to reading circle. In the middle of October I try to suggest some other books to Tamara.

With reluctance, she picks up John Burningham's Colour Book. It's not much better, as the colour words are represented in their own colour, except for the last page where the list of colour words are in black. With surprise, I realize that Tamara can read them all in black. But she has been exposed to these colour words quite a lot, hasn't she? I am beginning to feel somewhat incompetent when in November I realize that Tamara is still only carrying Brown Bear and the Colour Book in her book pot.

I don't know what happened, but yesterday things changed. I take the majority of the children for the walk down the hall to the Ukrainian teacher, and when I return to the four children left behind, my student teacher says to me "You should hear April and Tamara reading!" Both wearing big smiles, they approach me with another book I'm not that fond of - Where's Spot! When the children showed a liking for my lift-the-flap alphabet books, I brought out the "Spot" books in my collection. The Spot books became an instant hit and now apparently April and Tamara have discovered them. April has never before bothered much with Tamara, but because her "main friend" Anna is away sick this week, she has been attaching herself to whomever is around. They read the book to me. While April is usually flying through a book, telling the story with an outrageous disregard for the print, today Tamara is forcing her to slow down and look. And while Tamara is usually too shy and nervous to read anything except what she is sure she knows, today April is giving her the confidence to assert her abilities.

They are indeed an odd couple. One outgoing and talkative. The other shy, nervous, retiring. But, here, today, they are combining their strengths to encourage each other in the reading process. When they finish the first book, which they know pretty well because they have read it a number of times, April looks at Tamara and says "Let's get another one." Together with me they read through three "Spot" and two "Nicky" lift the flap books. I recognize the difficulties the girls are having, because the story line does not follow much of a plot and the language is a bit stilted. But we carry on for a half an hour, looking at the pictures, watching the print, and sometimes, guessing. I read along with them at times, and

let my voice fade when they pick up the text.

When I listen to the tape of the girls reading one of the Nicky books, April's voice stands out, as it is always much louder. It appears that when April makes a miscue Tamara follows her, so I know that I will have to draw them back. At times April is the first one to recognize a word in the reading, but sometimes it is Tamara. April knows that the story is called Nicky's Noisy Night, when I ask them to look at the title. At first they both thought it was called "Nicky's Bad Night". And as they continue to read through this book, April helps Tamara with words like noisy (again), running, and quiet. She also gives directions to Tamara about which flap she can raise, and which flaps are April's responsibility; instructions that Tamara takes willingly. However, Tamara also helps April with a few words: mouse, and behind. It seems that Tamara's very presence is a help to April, as she is aware of Tamara monitoring the print, and she wants to make meaning with that print as well.

The sheer volume of reading that these two girls do together is staggering. After two months of Brown Bear, Tamara has read through five books, and she feels success she has never felt before. April has finally realized that she can indeed slow down and work with the print as well. It is a happy time for both of them.

And what about me, their teacher? Once again these children have demonstrated to me that they are in control of their own learning. I don't think I would have thought to put these two readers together. But in finding each other themselves, they have discovered a very rich resource.

Later April again showed me, in a totally different way just what a social connector a book could be. During the school year her best friend in class was Anna. The two of them had secret clubs and an entire world to themselves, which no one else in the class was ever invited into. One day in the early spring, Anna moved away rather suddenly. We did not have a

chance as a group to say goodbye to her and April was especially crestfallen to hear that her friend was gone. During our next reading circle, I was surprised to hear April reading the book entitled One Grey Mouse. It was not a book that she had been reading and by this time in the year, April's reading abilities put her far beyond such a book. I listened to her read the story, however, and then I asked her why she had chosen the book. "It was Anna's book. She was working on it," she answered simply. I didn't need any more explanation, as the look on her face told of her sorrow in losing her friend, and the choice of the book showed the connection she was trying to establish.

5. The Learner is in Control

That the children were in control of their own learning was becoming increasingly obvious as the year progressed. This was one area that in the beginning of the research I had questioned. However, I discovered that in the story of David, the story of the notebooks, the story of April and Tamara reading together, the story of Sean which is in Chapter Five, and many others, there was always this aspect to the story: the children were

in charge. Over the course of the year I came upon many examples of the children guiding their own learning. However, it was not until I compiled all the data and began to reflect on my classroom that I came face to face with what was something of a struggle for me. There was no doubt that I wanted the children to have the freedom to guide their own learning. The struggle occurred when the children's choice of learning material, or story line did not seem acceptable to me.

One of the ways that I came to understand and support the concept of the children controlling their own learning was around the issue of choosing books. It became obvious that not only did children make incidental connections with the books they read, they also were much more interested in reading and it really took hold of them, if the books they were allowed to read were on topics that interested them. Among adults, of course, this is an obvious point: no one reads books, at least for pleasure, that don't interest them. However in some of the literature about teaching children to read there is very little regard for *what* the child is reading. In my research it has become critical to consider *what* the child is reading, before I can consider *how* the child reads. If I believe that children are in control of

their own learning, then the choice of books has to be in their hands.

I became concerned this year that the children's interests had to be considered when books were put out on display for reading. While I often felt that I did not have a wide enough variety of books in my classroom, I did try to bring in extra books from the library on a number of different topics, hoping to grab someone's attention with an interesting one. If the children brought in books from home, I would honor that action by sharing the book with them, and sometimes with the class. Sometimes the books they brought were not those that I would have thought to bring in myself.

> Journal, Sept. 25/97 David, Trevor, and Andy pour over the books Trevor has brought in - a first volume in an animal series set. "There's stuff in here about Africa" I hear Trevor saying, as he opens up the "A" volume. Sure enough there is a map of Africa, with small black pictures of the animals that are indigenous to the various areas. Under each animal , in tiny script, are the names of the animals. The boys seem to know several of them. I muse about the context. Aren't these bald words, sitting in the middle of a map somewhat out of context? But here are my students, looking at a map and reading words that identify animals. Is this a context that is helping them? Yes, there are pictures of the animals, but how DOES David know that it says "vampire bat" and Trevor reads out some other strange animal name?
>
> Trevor asks me to read the part about the two-headed snake to them. All three boys hang on my every word, as I tell them about the "freak" snake. One head tried to eat the other head. In retaliation the second head bit the first head. The snake died. The

> boys are thrilled. I'm sick. Trevor is a bit disappointed because I haven't read the part about the snake having 2 sets of lungs, 2 mouths, and 4 nostrils. That is in the caption right under the picture. Obviously Trevor's mom has read this to him before and he relishes the reading.

While the book these boys were reading would have been considered way beyond their Grade One abilities, they showed me that their interest in the topic superseded their perceived reading competence. The Encyclopedia was not something that I would have chosen to have in the room, either. It was an "information book", with small print, and was clearly not a Grade One book. I was shocked that they took so much information out of this book and that they did so in such an excited yet effortless fashion. I know that I saw this type of connection to a book happen again and again during the year as children guided their own learning. I wondered if I would have ever brought in a book about a two-headed snake? In retrospect, I think the children's choices might have been much broader than my own.

> Journal, Sept.16/97 And finally I get to Meagan. She tells me that she can read another book, so I ask her to bring it over. Zoo-Looking by Mem Fox has a lot of repetitions and lots of picture clues. I have read it to the class once, and apparently Meagan's book buddy read it to her as well yesterday. She reads through it all, making sense as she goes, telling me "I have to skip over some words," looking at the pictures and occasionally correcting herself when what she says

doesn't sound like English. She is not relying purely on the pictures, that is for sure. So then I remind her that she had told me a few days ago that she could read some of that other book, The Lion and the Little Red Bird. I had read it to the class twice last week. She brings it over and starts to read. While I know she is not looking directly at the words, I am struck by how closely she sticks to the story she is telling me. She in fact uses some of the words directly from the book on each page, phrases such as: "The bird had never seen anything so unusual," "the next day the lion's tail was as orange as the flowers he rolled in," " the bird splashed by," "the lion soaked his paws." They are not statements she would be making up herself.

She makes her way successfully through the whole book and then she smiles and dances off to play with her friends. I am left to reexamine my thoughts. Initially I thought she was reading the pictures. Then I began to think what a great memory she had. But when I remember that she has only heard this story twice, I marvel at how much information she would have had to absorb in order to be able to retell it to me. I am thinking how easily I brushed off her assertion four days ago that she could read parts of this book already and what a different respect I have now for her sense-making abilities because I took the time to really listen to her.

She IS reading this book. She has a connection to it, for whatever reason, and she has sat and looked through it a number of times during our quiet reading time. She knows the story and has captured some of the language. The pictures give her some obvious clues and she knows how a story should sound. Supporting all of this are the years of story telling that Meagan has already been exposed to.

And, I add to myself, this year her teacher will take the time to listen to her and support her in her view that she is indeed, a reader.

Meagan did seem to attach herself to certain books, usually those about animals. When she shared these books she would use much of the book

language and the story would flow very nicely. Although some might say that Meagan only had the book "memorized," this did not seem to be the case, as the readings would not be exactly the same at any one time that she reread the book.

I have come to agree with Frank Smith (1995) that, indeed, books do teach children:

> There is massive evidence... that two groups of people - two kinds of company - together ensure that children learn to read. The first group is the people who read to children- the parents, the siblings and friends, and above all the teachers - who do so much to determine whether a child makes the crucial step of "joining the literacy club." The second group is the authors of the books that children love to read. (Smith,44)

Because we spent a lot of time with books, it seemed to me that many occasions just arose spontaneously for me to teach the children lessons of grammar or phonics. I did plan some of these lessons, of course, but the most meaningful ones were the ones which the children directed themselves. Obviously when something caught someone's interest, it was an issue that had to be dealt with right then and there. Teaching these children was often like walking through a maze. I never really knew what might come up next and it was very exciting whenever an unplanned lesson was arranged by the children's needs and observations. One of these lessons was on phonics.

My journal writing begins with the story of the children, but includes some reflection on my own learning and teaching.

> Journal, Oct.20/97 The book is called The Baby Zoo and I am sharing it with the entire class, as they sit before me on the carpet. There are lovely pictures of baby animals on one side of the page and on the other, in large letters, somewhat sign like, is the name of that particular type of baby. A baby kangaroo is a joey, a baby seal is a pup and so on. Underneath the large word is a description of the animal in question, and as well, there is a small map of the world with a tiny arrow pointing to the spot on the globe where that animal comes from. We are looking through the book and just reading the one word descriptor for each animal.
>
> Several of the children are reading along, or guessing at what the name might be. When we get to the word "lamb," however, Travis gets quite agitated. "It's lamB, he says, pronouncing the <B> at the end of the word. He hops up and points out to everyone that there IS a <B> at the end of the word. "Yes, isn't that crazy," I say "we don't say that letter, do we?" On the next page is the word "calf" and again Travis points out that there is a stray <L> there that no one pronounces. It turns into a major game, with various children pointing out letters that are not pronounced. As well, it becomes a lesson on vowel and consonant sounds that I could never have planned.
>
> When the word "cub" comes up, Trevor points out that IF the <U> was an <A>, the word would be cab. He is saying the two words, putting lots of emphasis on the vowel sounds. But Ben isn't happy with this. "If the <U> was making a <U> sound, " he argues "the word would be CUBE". Wow, I wonder, should I explain this one or not? The talk on the carpet is taking many turns and twists, and the children are showing, in rapid fire examples, that they DO understand many of the nuances of the English language. With each new "baby" word that is read, they come up with a possible change of vowel, or last letter, that would change the word into another word. I am taken aback, not because I don't think these children know

about letters and sounds, but because they are confirming what I have been mulling over in my head for the last two days.

When my principal announced that there was some money in the textbook budget that needed to be spent, I picked up a copy of the Manitoba Text Book Bureau Catalogue to scan over the weekend. To my surprise, I discovered that most of the books in the language arts section are starred - they won't be offered by 1999. That's no problem as far as I'm concerned, but I am wondering just what will be the replacements. Then I turn to the back of the book , where there is a new section entitled "Phonics." Apparently the publishing companies are now churning out readers that are called "long A" and "Digraphs" for small children. Not only are they being churned out, but the Text Book Bureau is putting their stamp of approval on them, with the coveted "R"(recommended) beside them. I cannot believe that anyone would actually purchase these books; however, I am fearful that they may become "required" reading in no time.

I put out a hasty note to my teacher friends on email and I call the language arts consultant. She hasn't seen the "phonics" section, but my discussion with her calms me somewhat. She claims that the new language arts curriculum is based on a "balanced" approach to reading. Balanced I can deal with, I told her, just don't make me use those readers. Because I won't. I KNOW that kids do not need the kind of directed grammar lessons those so called books would give. I know that those books will only make reading HARDER for young children. They will not be natural language and there will be no sense making to them. I debate the issue with myself for most of the weekend. Why don't we just go back to Dick and Jane, I scowl to myself.

Then, today I encounter, without any planning, this lovely lesson with my students - about vowels, and consonants, and sounds. Later that same day Trevor comes up to me, and with total disgust in his voice he says "look at this word. WHALE. You don't even hear that <H> OR that <E>." I agree with him. And I don't have to pull out the reader labelled "silent E" to teach him about it, either.

Many times this year we had similar discussions, learning ABOUT language. I had to ask myself many questions, of course, about this kind of teaching. It DID make such a difference if the children were pursuing the questions of phonetics or pronunciation on their own. I knew that I did not engineer any of these discussions, but I do know that I have to choose books very carefully to share with children, so that these discussions are at least possible. I wondered if I should be keeping some sort of checklist of what we had discussed so that I could match the list with the provincial curricular requirements. I felt that most probably the results of our discussions would show themselves in the children's own writing and I was recording the stories each day. Most significant, I felt, was the necessity for me to be willing to slow down to consider the requests and comments that came from the children. This often meant throwing aside the plans that I had for that time and concentrating on an important need. It was this sensitivity to children's comments that I most wanted to develop.

6. Literacy is far more than reading

It soon became obvious at the beginning of this research, that I could not look at reading alone. I was made very aware of the necessity for children

to work on reading and writing at the same time, as these forms of literacy informed each other in the children's work. The reading - writing connection was ever present.

From the very beginning of the year when David wrote his "I K F" message (I cut fruit), the children showed that they understood that writing was for real purposes and that they themselves could write. In their early attempts, I marvelled at what they showed they knew about language already.

> Journal, Sept 11/97 Today we have our first writing workshop. The children are all wriggly on the carpet, so I don't spend all that much time talking about what they are supposed to DO. We share a few ideas and then I just turn them loose, with their brand new portfolios and whatever paper they want. Meagan asks, rather surprisingly, "How many pages do we have to write?" and I am stuck for an answer. She decides to write everyone's name on a list. Frances makes a string of letters. "I don't know what it says," she offers, not seeming the least bit upset. David and Tyler are making a Nintendo poster with all sorts of action. Many of them have drawn pictures and are asking me what to do next. It seems fitting to say to them "Well, just say the words you want, and then in Grade One spelling, write down what you hear. Remember, it's Grade One spelling, not big people spelling." I give that encouragement over and over. Karla writes a little story about being in a tent. She writes freely and is amazed at her own ability. Andy, our nature enthusiast, writes EG EC MOC - "eagles eats mouse" under his picture of an eagle. Matt has drawn a picture of a school bus and written a collection of letters that somewhat resemble the words he reads to

me: "Me and Don are going on the school bus. We are going to school." Don has drawn a very expressive picture of a shark chasing a boy who is on a blood soaked raft.

When I look at the little story that Karla has written, I can see that she is already spelling some words conventionally, she knows about making spaces between her words and she knows about using "speech bubbles." Her brother is inside the tent calling to her, "Karla" "Play" he is saying and his words are circled. (figure 9)

Figure 9 Karla's writing. It reads: One day I went in my tent
and my brother was waiting for me. Karla. Play.

While Karla never wrote long stories, her writing was a great help to her reading. They both developed significantly over the year.

Along with using good literature and lots of books in the classroom, I discovered this year that if I was sensitive to the questions of children, I could use our group writing and individual writing times to teach children about language use. One morning we learned the importance of using punctuation.

> Journal, Jan.6/98 We start into the morning message. "Good morning! Today you have gym. In the afternoon, we are going to paint our portraits." We read it together, Karla and Travis supplying the helps for the other children. No one knows the word "portraits," but Trevor guesses "pictures." We talk a bit about the language, and then we review our day on the agenda. Karla asks why we are having gym in the afternoon. We have never had gym in the afternoon before. I am puzzled, and point over to the agenda once again, reading through the day's activities. French, math, gym, recess, project, lunch, reading, recess, writing. "See here? Gym is in the morning." Karla remains adamant. Gym is in the afternoon. She says: "See on the morning message? Good morning! Today you have gym in the afternoon..." Oohh, that's the problem. Karla has missed the small dot between "gym" and "In". We talk about what that dot is called. And what a difference it makes. I find it kind of hard to explain to the children what a sentence is about, but the example is right there. Some of the children are catching what I'm saying. Then we talk a bit about the book Yo! Yes!, a book that has shown many of these children what punctuation can do. Trevor says that he knows what an exclamation point is because of the Yo! YES! book; it makes his voice "go up." I encourage them all to try putting some

punctuation in their own writing, because it would make it all so much easier to read.

I think it would have been quite possible to simply pass over Karla's misunderstanding, by quickly correcting her, without letting her explain her dilemma. I think this is one example where I showed myself just how much these children meant to me, and how I valued their questions. I was learning how to really listen to them and when Karla got stumped on this issue of when we had gym, I gave her some time. While this may not seem like a very big matter, in fact, I think it is very crucial to my research this year. When I am in the classroom there are many demands on my attention. There always seems to be someone calling my name and often children, in their need for immediacy, interrupt each other and talk to me in groups of two or three. It is very easy for teachers to develop a kind of "group mentality" about their class and forget that the group is made up of individuals. Listening to Karla was one of those proud moments for me, when I gave one child the attention she needed and deserved.

Talk about punctuation was only one of the issues we discussed when we were writing. On another occasion, we talked about plurals, as we made books about Halloween.

> Journal, Oct. 27/97 Today we had a lesson on plurals. We had been reading number books lately. I have a whole bucket full of them and we have looked at several. On Friday, because some children were writing Halloween poetry and they wanted some spellings, we made a number of Halloween word cards and illustrated them for general use. David used them to make a Halloween number book. On page one he drew a pumpkin "One pumpkin," page two he has "2 ghost" and so on. So when David reads his book to us today, he reads "one pumpkin, two ghosts," But he has not written the words in the plural, as they are not written that way on the word cards. This becomes my opening to talk to the children about adding the letter "S" to the ends of words when they are talking about more than one. Later in the day I look through the Halloween number books that other children have decided to make and I can't help but notice that four of them have added an "S" to the end of the words they want to be plural. Ben, Trevor , Karla, and David (his second book) have at least for today been listening to the ending of the words they are writing.

Because I do believe that writing must be for real purposes, I celebrate those moments when the children use writing, totally on their own, for a purpose of their own. Later in the year, April got a new set of markers and immediately lost the green one. She was quite upset about this loss, but as I always told the children that their belongings were their responsibility, I did not offer to help her look for it. During project time that day there was a lot of activity in the art center and then I noticed a number of the girls rushing in and out of the classroom. When I went over to investigate, I

discovered that April had produced quite a number of posters about her lost marker and she was directing her friends to place these ads in the hallway. When project time was over, there was a mass of signs lining the walls near our class. The marker, unfortunately, was never found. (figure 10)

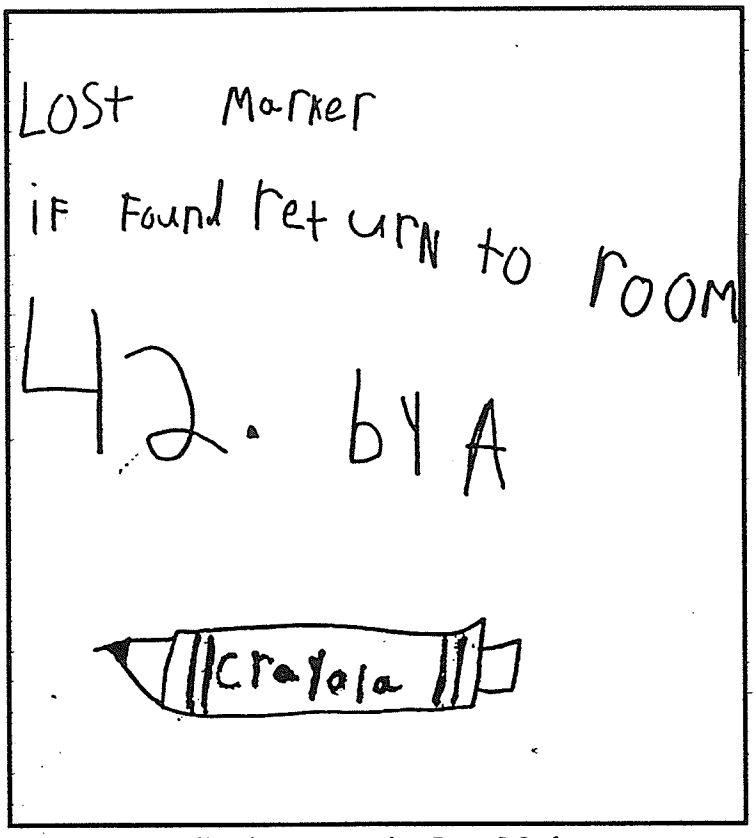

Figure 10 April's sign. It reads: Lost Marker if found return to room 42. by A (child's name)

Later in the year, Frances lost a little bracelet, and she sought out April's help to create signs for her. I was involved with some other children at the time and so when Matt alerted me to the fact that Frances was out of the classroom, she had already placed a number of ads in the hallway that

read "LOST: BRLSLT Frances'S 42" with the picture of a bracelet drawn beside the words. (figure 6)

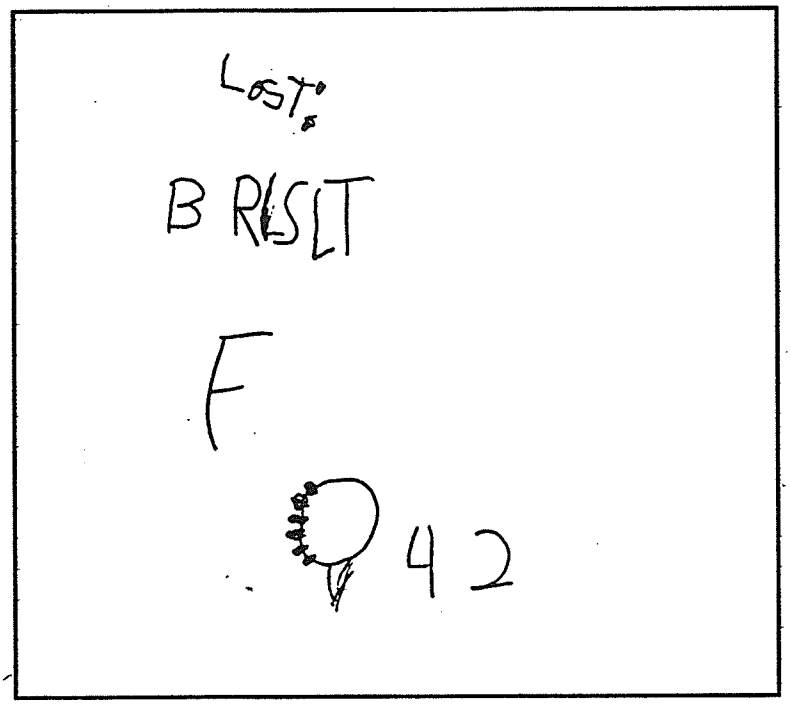

Figure 11 Frances's sign. It reads: Lost:
Bracelet
F (child's name)'s
42

When Frances's mom came by later that morning I was so pleased when she looked into our room and said to me "Oh, tell Frances not to worry about her bracelet. It was just from Safeway." She obviously had gotten the message of the poster.

One of the ways that I sought to encourage the children's writing was in the area of poetry. Reading and writing poetry was something that I really wanted to do with this class. From time to time I would share a poem with the children, but it was somewhat sporadic. While we were studying the

signs in our neighborhood I was given a poem about traffic lights by a colleague which I shared with the children. I tried, with my student teacher's help, to get some talk about poetry started. However, as in the case of the lessons on grammar, I learned that when the children led us into the discussion, it was a much more meaningful occasion.

> Journal, Oct. 1/97 We've been enjoying a short little poem about traffic lights; I wrote it out on chart paper with as many colour cues as I could manage (the word RED is written in red, etc.), and today we cut it all up into a puzzle. Half of the class goes with my student teacher, and half are with me; my class is so small (and 2 are away today) that we each have 7 children - seemingly a manageable number. We take the poem apart, word by word, and each child gets to hold a number of the words. Then we try to put it back together. This job seems to be harder than I had imagined, although the children seem to be enjoying themselves, and in my group, at least, there is a lot of cooperation. Thinking I was doing her a favour, I have given what I think will be the more able children to my student teacher. Unfortunately, I have forgotten how competitive some of those students are; she is having to referee quite a lot. The poem does get put back together and the students, I think, have done a bit of thinking about what a word is.
>
> After the children have left the room, I am glad to have Colleen, my student teacher, to talk with. "Tell me honestly, do you think the poem puzzle was a worthwhile thing to do?" She talks more about management issues, and thinks that the group should have been only 2 or 3 children. I have to agree, especially with such children as Trevor and Matt. I am unsure myself. I am eager to see if anyone takes up the challenge next week to use the new "puzzle" - the cut up poem - and put it back together again. I wonder if I am asking too much of these children. I resolve to meet individually with more of

them next week, in order to find out what they are thinking and how I can better help them. Big group instruction, even with only 7 children, rarely seems to have an impact.

After this rather dismal little poetry lesson, I had a very exciting day with poetry. On this day, the interest was generated by the children, and sustained by them.

Journal, Oct. 9/97 David marched into class yesterday and announced that he had written a poem last night. My ears perked up immediately. "Did you bring it in?" I asked him. "Nope, it's at home somewhere" he answered. "Well, make sure you bring it in, because I REALLY want to see it," I told him. We've been looking at a few poems over the last few weeks, but David's proclamation is a bit of a wake up call for me. I haven't really gotten into poetry this year the way I would have liked to. And here it is, the middle of October already. At the end of the day, David's mom comes in for a visit, and I ask her about the poem. "Yes," she says, "there I was writing Dixie Kong for him." She seems surprised. "Would you get him to bring it in, please?" I ask.

Sure enough today, David brings in his poem. He presents it to the class:

"Dixie Kong
In the water." (figure 12)

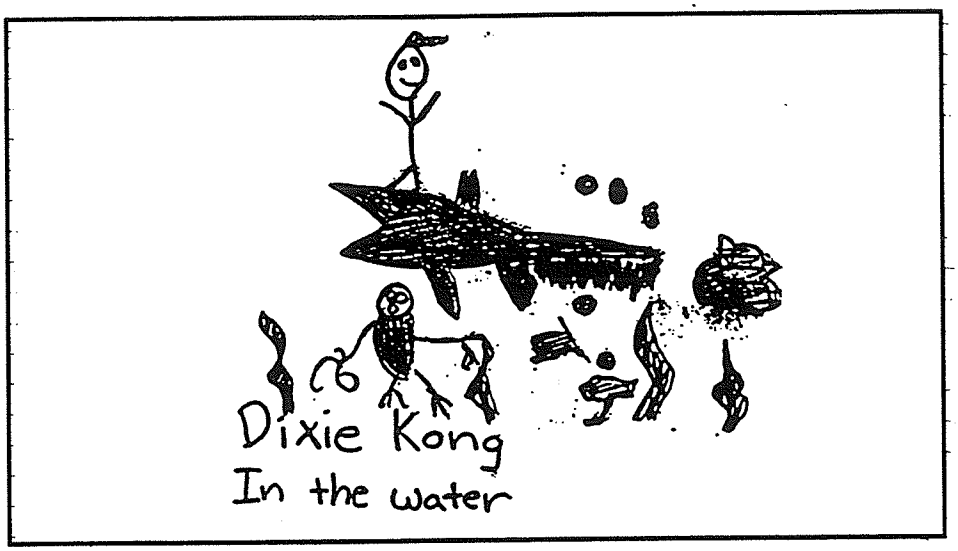

Figure 12 David's poem.

The words have been written by his mother, and, of course, there is a picture with lots of action. He explains that the two figures are monkeys (the one on the bottom is Dixie), there's a shark and some fish. Sprawled across the top of the piece is his name. It's a nice little picture, but even I can't get all that excited about it; except for the fact that David called it "a poem." I don't know if his mother has given him this label for it or not, but today it brings a certain excitement to the classroom.

Poetry. Georgia Heard (1995) says that there is poetry inside us all. I have to say that I don't think there's much inside David's poetry except maybe more Nintendo games. But, still, he called it a poem. I ask the children what they think the difference is between a poem and a story. David says, "A poem is only one page." Trevor thinks a poem should rhyme. So we sit together in the afternoon, and I read the children poetry. None of it rhymes. Mostly it's just for fun. When I read a poem about the sea, David says, "I've been to the ocean," and I think about my own recent visit. Some of the poems are in a section subtitled "LISTS"; one of those poems is called "The Nine best things in my Pocket." The children seem to be enjoying the newness of this kind of poetry.

While some are lying on the carpet, they are all listening.

Then it is writing workshop time. I suggest that they might want to try to write a poem. I am somewhat skeptical because we really have not spent much time in this new genre. However, many of the children do try. Frances runs up with her usual paper filled with odd letters. She starts to read it to me but gets bogged down. As I look a little closer at her writing, I realize that many of the letters are from her name and "uff" , the last three letters of her last name are a very prominent combination. She runs off to make another "poem" to read to her parents, when I tell her that this one has to go into her writing folder.

Anna has drawn a series of hearts, all different colours and she says a little poem to go with them; it sounds much like the "roses are red" ditty we read in a book yesterday. I write the words down for her and she goes off to read it to her friend.

Karla writes quickly and is soon back at my side, her poem in her hand:

SAN DAY. MONDAY
DO I NO ANLR.
YES I DO NX
COMS TOSDAY
I AM COR
AV THT.

(Sunday. Monday. Do I know another? Yes I do. Next comes Tuesday. I am sure of that.)

I ask her if she will continue, but she says "I don't know any other days." She is making one of those "list" type poems we talked about, but it strikes me how very poetic it all sounds. She seems to have caught the idea rather well. (figure 13)

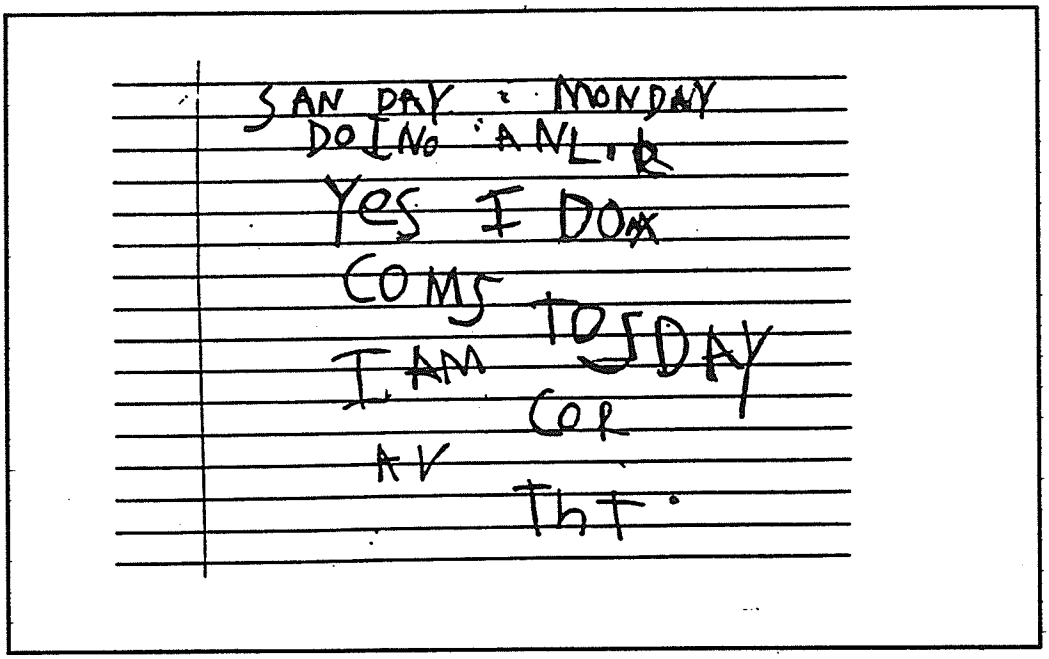

Figure 13 Karla's poem. It reads: Sunday Monday
Do I know another?
Yes I do next
comes Tuesday
I am sure of that.

Ben is labouring away on a rather small piece of paper.

i Het Beeg A Doc
i wus beeg a doc
wn i stop
(I hate being a dork. I was being a dork. when I stop)

and then he ran out of paper. As it is, he is using arrows to show where to go for the last line, which is starting to "back up" the side of the page. I tell him that he needs a bigger paper. When he comes back with the bigger paper, he has written the ending to his poem:

But wen i STOP
i HeD FreNS i Wes
HUPE i LOVE HUPE
(But when I stopped
I had friends
I was happy
I love happy) (Figure 14)

He gets out the stapler to join the two pieces together. I hardly know what to say to Ben. He is a six-year-old spilling his soul on paper. I give him a little hug. "You're not a dork," I stumble. His face is very serious as he responds: "Someone outside yesterday said I was." ' The sting is still very fresh in his mind. No doubt it has been a black mark on his thinking, which he has carried around with him since it happened. And here, in this simple little lesson on poetry, he has been able to name it, and write about it. It's poetry that has come from his "inside."

I think tomorrow, we'll read more poetry.

This writing for Ben changed the way he was able to view himself. He had long since discovered that writing had great meaning for him. One day in the fall, we had been writing and then the children had gone out for recess. When Ben came back into class he said he was "full of writing". When I asked him what that meant, he said "I just can't get enough of writing. Even at that time, he was writing poems about bats. When he worked through this piece about being a "dork", he showed us all the incredible release there was in getting emotions down into print. It seemed that Ben knew, as I was learning myself, that the writing was not only a way of recording history, it was in itself, a source of understanding, a way of thinking through problems and a means of self-discovery. By writing about his thinking Ben was able to reposition himself - he was no longer a dork.

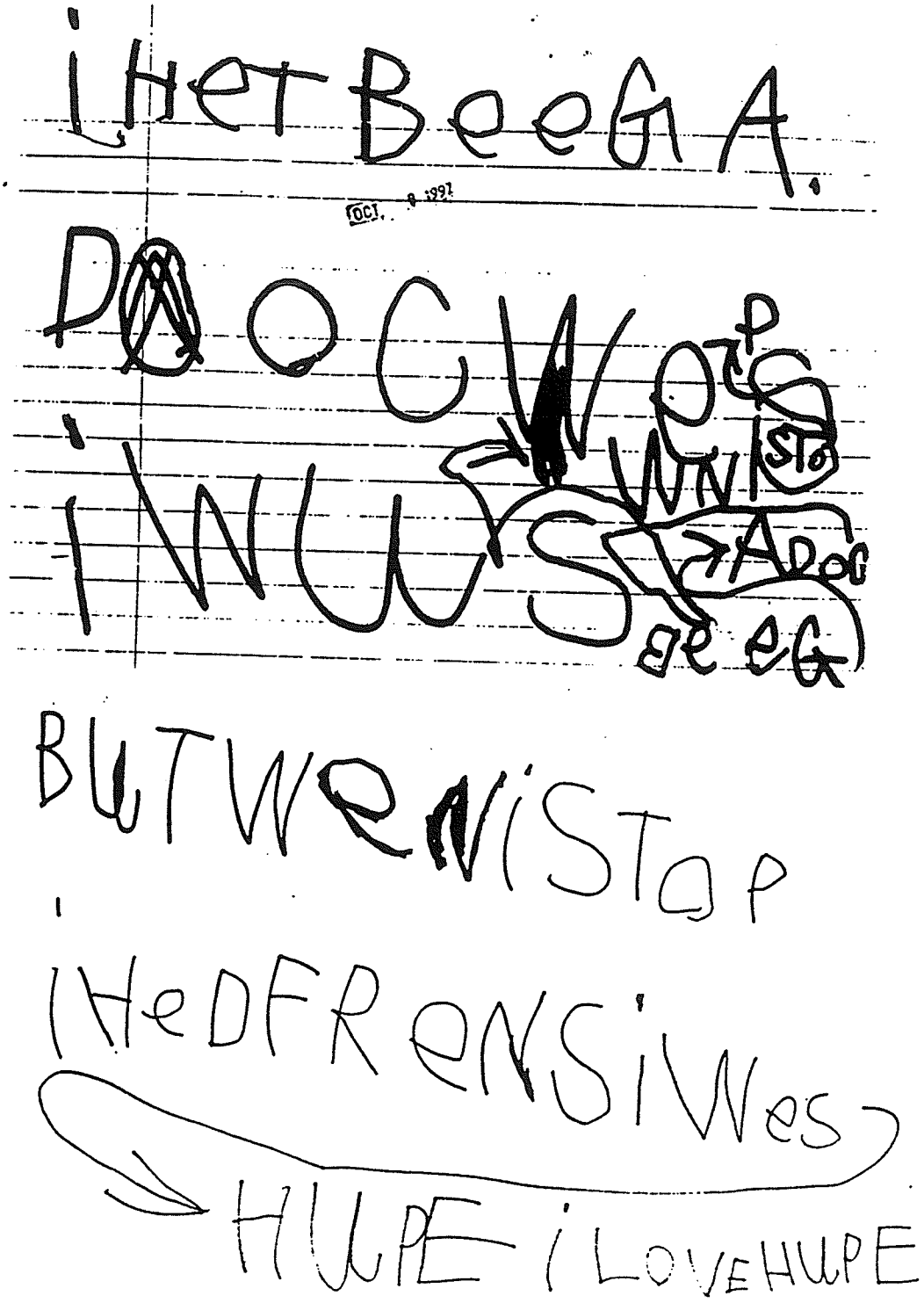

Figure 14 Ben's poem. It reads: I hate being a dork
I was being a dork.
When I stopped
I had friends.
I was happy. I love happy.

As the research progressed, I watched for instances of literacy that were embedded neither in reading nor writing. I found that there were many instances in my classroom this year, of children using their art as an expression of literacy. Writing workshop might have looked more like an art class at times to a visitor, as children made many stories in picture form. The children also showed through their songs and drama, their understandings of their world.

I had one very poignant instance of children showing their knowledge through forms other than print when my student teacher led us through an "in role" drama. She played the part of a deer, trying to save the forest. I was given the role of "the Forest Queen." As the drama unfolded, it was not only the children who experienced the thrill and new understandings from this way of "knowing." At the end of the day, I wrote a story about my own experiences and the way the drama affected me.

> Journal, Nov. 26/97 Today, I was the QUEEN. Really. A queen with a crown, a royal scepter, and a cape. The power of the kingdom was in the palm of my hand. The children got on their knees in my presence and no one spoke unless I bade them speak. It was a heady day, to say the least.
>
> My student teacher Colleen planned and carried out an "in role" drama with my grade one class. At the beginning of the drama, I was

basically into crowd control, making sure that some of the children didn't make Colleen's job too difficult. I knew Travis might cause her all sorts of problems, so I kept him by my side. Of course it helped that Liz Coffman[1] was there too, offering the children some choices, and helping the drama to develop. Our mission was to go through the forest, trying to find the magic box, that contained something that would save the forest. We donned our animals masks and faced the fearsome trials that lay ahead. A river to cross, a mountain to climb, and then , we found the wise woman who held the riddle that had to be solved. While the children searched for the gold box, I slipped out of the room, and donned my Queen costume.

Standing out in the hallway, wearing a star studded cape, a gold crown and carrying a large beaded scepter, I suddenly began to feel a bit strange. Children from the room across the hall started to tag team to the bathroom it seemed, and to each I had to share my secret and ask them "not to tell". And then, just down the hallway, I spied a teacher of the special needs children, trying to convince James, her student, to come to his room. She has obviously been working with him for a while, because he is stubbornly lying on the floor, and the teacher is trying to physically lift him. Then another teacher comes along and the two of them talk to James about how he'll have to miss recess and a host of other consequences. Suddenly, from behind the fire door, they all spot "the Queen." At the same time, James jumps up and runs past me towards the exit door. He stops between the two doors to the outside. I look at him. Hmmm.

When I first approach James I am still feeling a bit silly, but suddenly the crown and the scepter take over. "Do you know that you ran right past THE QUEEN?" I ask him, using my most royal voice. He looks at me and as I continue to talk his whole demeanor changes. He smiles. "The Queen is quite upset that you would ignore her. Would you now please allow the Queen to walk you back to your room?" He shakes his head no. I start to cry. "No one ever listens

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[1] Liz Coffman was my student teacher's faculty advisor. Professor Coffman teaches art and drama at the University of Manitoba in the Faculty of Education.

to the Queen, you know. It makes me so discouraged." I cry, as I leave him, to go back to stand at the door to my classroom. (Please let them need me soon!) I just glance back at James and motion with my hand for him to come. He marches right past me and back to his classroom, with his teacher.

And then it's time for my own class. Filled with confidence from this last venture, the Queen marches in and thoroughly enjoys her role for the next ten minutes. When the children all start talking she barks "Who dares to speak in the presence of the Queen?" "Oh, I'm sorry your majesty" murmur little lips, as bodies sink to the floor. The gold box, containing the secret to the kingdom is opened, and the magic seeds are passed ceremoniously into little hands. At that point the bell rings for recess.

Not too eager to take off the coveted crown, I march into the hallway. Usually I have to stand here, police style, telling children to "WALK in the hallway, please," mostly so my own Grade One's won't get run over. Today, the Queen has only to give a "look" and the usual law breakers are reigned in. Even as I go out on the school playground, I am being addressed as "your majesty" and "Queen Claire"; teacher on duty never was so much fun!

If this day was fun for me, how much more so for my students. I noticed that David and Anna especially jumped into role right away, trying to solve the mystery of the forest. Anna figured out that the magic feathers would help us fly over the river and Meagan questioned how we would climb over the mountain with only the yellow rope to help us. All the children, loud as usual, were a part of the drama. When the head deer (Colleen) found the key to unlock the castle door, Andy, quiet, retiring Andy, pulled an almost identical key out of his pocket and his face registered pure delight. And wouldn't you know it? Colleen's key didn't work, but Andy's DID! We opened the door to the castle, found the wise woman, and listened to her riddle to solve. It was at this point, of course, that I had to leave to get into my costume, and the aforementioned interlude with the special needs student happened.

After recess the children retold the story to Trevor. He'd been at the dentist and had only arrived in time to see the Queen entering

the story. Then they were invited to use paper to tell the story in some fashion as a drawing, or a story, or a map. Several of the children take up the map invitation; Ben, Matt, and Jordan. Matt's map shows each step of the journey. Jordan's has the word "start" on it and then "to be continued" in Grade One script that is easily discernable. Meagan makes a four page wordless book which she later shares with the class:

"We are going for a puppet show."
We climbed on the mountain."
We are going on a river today.
We are going to an old lady's house
Oh NO. We don't got the key
Here it is.
This is a map."

Don, writing for the first time this year, has written letters all across the top of his page: "Once upon a time there was a bat and a cat." It is quite discernable and he accompanies his short story with a picture. Colleen tells me later that many of the children at his table were encouraging him on as he wrote.

Anna is another child that has done no writing yet this year. She is very creative, but balks at any attempt I have made to get her to write. Today she draws a storyboard of the drama. It has at least 9 frames and the story is told in picture in minute detail.

There was no doubt that the students had expressed themselves in new ways in the classroom during this drama. Some of the children who were not as able in reading and writing, such as Anna and David, were the leaders in this adventure. I had worried that the excitement might be too much for Travis, but his knowledge of fantasy and adventure became an obvious asset, as he added so much to the drama. Because we took the risk to explore

another avenue of knowing, we seemed to open up the children's store of imagination and it was soon obvious that they all had much to share. Their excitement spilled over into other "ways of knowing", as some of the children who had never done any writing picked up a pencil and let the words flow. It was an inspiring afternoon to say the least. While the benefits from the drama were many, none was as spectacular as the nine frame storyboard that Anna made. (figure 10) Anna had no assistance and went almost unnoticed. The next day as I interviewed her, she told me the complete story and her picture frames matched precisely. Her ability to record a story had not been seen in this class before and surely would have never emerged if it were not for the encouragement of the drama.

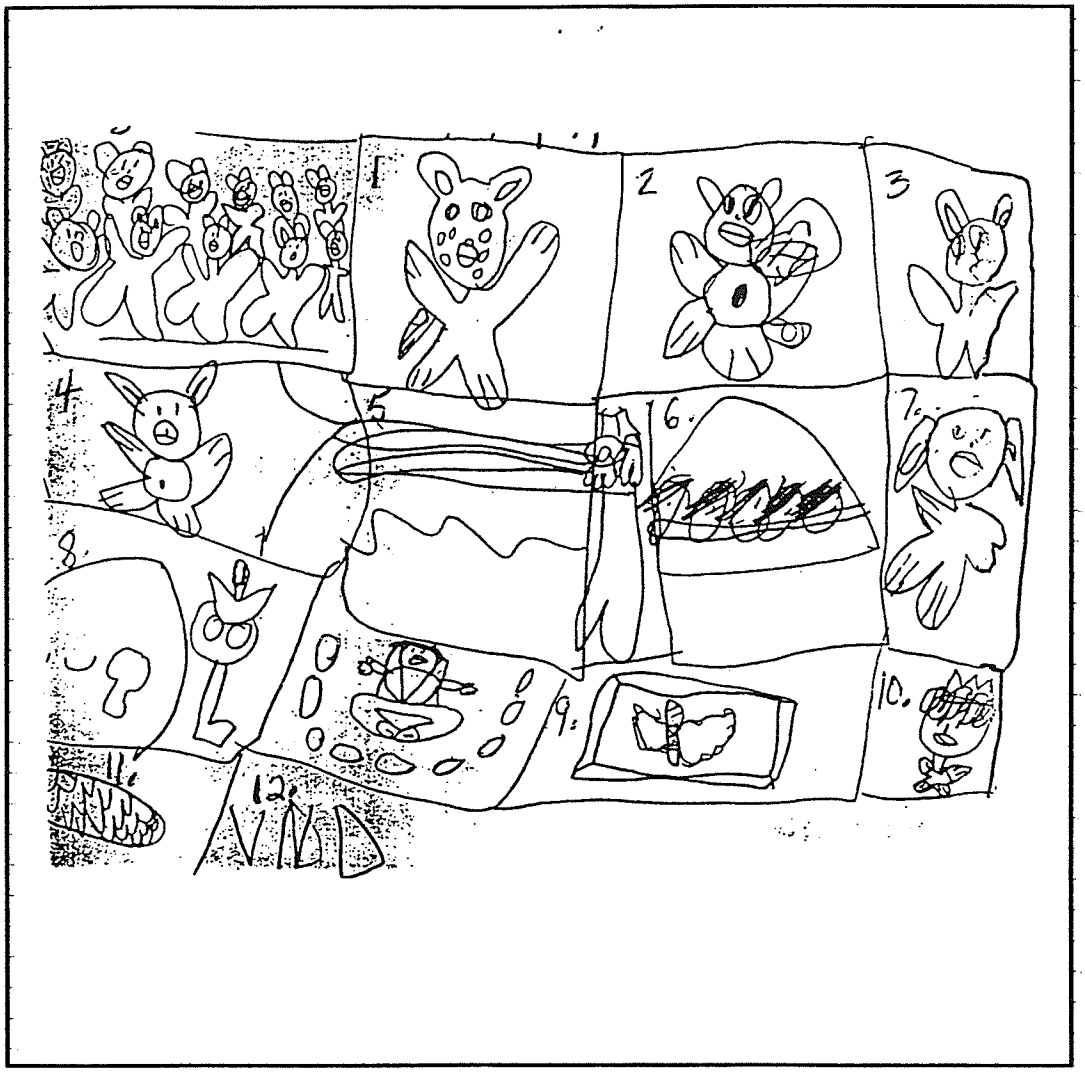

Figure 10 Anna's Story Board

1. Miss deer, Miss deer, Why are you crying?
2. I have an idea.
3. I have an idea to save the forest.
4. We could all do something.
5. We have to cross the river.
6. We were pulling around the hill.
7. We walked along.
8. We had to find the key. And we found the wise woman.
9. This is the magic box.
10. And then we came to the queen.
11. And the magic seeds.
12. The end.

7. Learning is Diverse

All of the stories taken together, show a very diverse style of learning. There are many ways for children to learn and many ways in which children become literate and show literate behavior. As a class we worked together to understand one another's chosen forms of literacy and we tried to make our thinking explicit. By holding discussions about "what good writers do" or "what good readers do," I encouraged the children to try to describe what was in their heads about literacy learning. I recorded their answers on chart paper and we went back to the list to revise it often. In the middle of the year, the list for reading looked like this:

Good Readers:
-look at the words carefully
-look at the pictures
-read books they know by heart
-read some books over again
-sound the words out
-sometimes make their own books, and only put down the letters they know
-can make mistakes and get messy
-listen to the words
-read slowly
-say the words in their head
-get someone to help them
-read with someone else
-use a dictionary
-copy a book

I think it was this unpacking of the student's own thinking that enabled others to take an idea and make it their own. I wondered at times if I really did accept all the children's ways of learning, and I questioned how my own prejudices and background might make it difficult for me to even recognize another "way of knowing", if it did not connect with mine. Because I did encourage the diversity of my students, at times I found myself in a dilemma. If what the students were offering involved their making choices, which I had promoted, how could I still maintain some control of what was happening in the classroom? Did accepting the students' diversity mean that I accepted everything that they suggested or did? I knew that was not true, because we did have rules in the classroom that limited some activities. No one, for instance, could play with or make a gun. If you made a gun or even something that simply resembled a gun, it was immediately taken apart. If students brought colouring book sheets into class, they were not allowed to be a part of a display. I didn't allow colouring books in the classroom. These areas were "absolutes" it seemed to me. However there were a lot of "grey areas" in the classroom, and some days I really struggled with what the children wanted to do versus what I thought was more important to be doing.

One of the students who caused some puzzlement for me was Sean; his needs in literacy, while mirroring many of the philosophical needs that I believed in, were met in some fairly unorthodox ways through the choices that he made. His story is the next chapter.

This whole issue of diversity and the struggles that it raised in this classroom came through very powerfully one day, as we sat and discussed what a good writer would do.

> Journal, April 22/98 We are gathered on the carpet, trying to calm down after a recess spent outdoors in near perfect summer weather. The children are not that eager to discuss their writing strategies, but I haven't talked to them all for so long, and I am eager to see what they will say. I start out by telling them that I have been studying them this year - something I thought they knew, but some seem surprised by this statement. "I am just so interested in what you Grade Ones have to say about how you are learning to read and write. I would like to talk to you once again about what a good writer does. We haven't talked about that for a long time." I pick up my marker in anticipation, although it seems that the children are not really in tune to the subject. Karla is waving her hand in the air and she says the usual: "A good writer, if they don't know a word, just sounds it out." I ask her to explain what she means by "sounding out" and she gives a pretty good explanation. Karla seems to be committing conventional spellings to memory at quite a pace these days, so she has a hard time thinking of a word that she can't just reel off. Another child suggests that one might look for a word around the room. David is sitting at the back, not really paying a lot of attention, so I ask him about the current book he is working on. "You really enjoyed writing that book, didn't you?" I ask him. "Yah!

> Because it was so fun!" He continues to talk about the EVENT around which the book is written until finally I suggest that he has written about something that he knows about. A real story that happened to him. He likes that explanation and so we write down "a good writer writes about stuff he knows."
>
> By now most of the children are paying attention and thinking is starting to happen. When Ben raises his hand, I am ready for something profound. "A good writer writes on paper," he says proudly. I don't get his point. "Not on the desk!" he explains. It seems a bit odd. Cora suggests that you could copy a book, or use another book for information. Tyler adds his own piece, that a good writer writes neatly. It seems like a strange point from him. [...]
>
> Then Ben puts up his hand again, and totally blows me away. "A good writer doesn't have to make his teacher happy all the time." His look is very serious, and I begin to probe him with questions. "What do you mean by that?" He repeats his initial statement with a smile on his face. I tell him that I really like his idea and I try to keep my voice calm as my brain is translating the implications of what he has just shared. I ask him who he thinks his writing is for, and he says "Well, it's for everyone to read," and then he adds "and it's for me to read even."

I thought long and hard about what Ben shared that day. "You don't have to make the teacher happy all the time." I wondered how true his statement really is. Wouldn't a lot of people, children and adults, think just the opposite? It seems obvious that in many classrooms, from Kindergarten to University, it IS important to do what the teacher says and to make her happy. I thought about my own education and the classrooms that I had been in as a student, where the key to "doing well" had been to "make the

teacher happy." In many of my university courses, I had known that in order to get a good mark, I had to "play the game," and figure out exactly what it was that the professor wanted me to say. I especially remember being in a Shakespeare course where I received the public praise of the professor, as well as the much coveted "A", on a paper about Hamlet. All I had done for that praise was quote from a number of the standard critical works about Hamlet and without any reflection or consideration of my own, I was quite well able to please the teacher. As a student, pleasing the teacher was neither thought provoking nor particularly exciting for me.

Ben's statement encourages me as a teacher. Somehow over this year, I have conveyed to this child at least, that he does not always have to satisfy me. For me, that assertion means that I have attempted to accept this child for who he is. In treating him as an individual, I have given him some room to make his own decisions. And I have obviously worked to learn over this year just what that sharing of power in the classroom could lead to. I wonder what this statement means for Ben? Even early in the year, Ben was determined to follow his own ideas about writing.

> Journal, Sept. 11/98 Ben has been labouring over a collection of pictures all day. His older brother, Steve, was in my class last year, and I can tell that he has been greatly influenced by that wonderful boy. Ben is drawing streetfighters and sharks. I try to encourage him to put some words to his pictures. He is adamant that "they don't need the words 'cause they know what's happening." Other children are crowding around and I am not paying much attention to Ben. "Well, perhaps you could just try," I reply absently. Ben looks at me with determination and declares, "Remember you told the children that the words don't tell the whole story?" I hug him in disbelief. He is quoting my words from the reading of several books earlier in the week - Bunnycakes and Rosie's Walk.

At the beginning of the year I always read a number of books to the children that confirm the fact that "the words don't always tell the whole story." In many children's books the reader has to observe the pictures in order to grasp the underlying tale of the story, and in many other books the pictures tell a completely different story of their own. I read these books to the children, because I want them to feel confident about *drawing* their stories. I want them to know that I believe that they can do a lot of thinking in the drawing process and that if that is their way of thinking, that it will be valued in this class. This desire to help children understand that their perspective is important to me, that I value their individuality and that they don't always have to make the teacher happy is balanced, of course, by

my desire to lead these children on to become better drawers and writers and readers. It seems to me that, in fact, this is the primary source of struggle and reflection for me as a teacher: I want to value each child's individuality and I want to encourage his/her choices, but on the other hand, I am their teacher. I want to guide them into some higher forms of thinking and reasoning and I want them to grow as learners. And so, teaching is this balancing act; allowing children choice and valuing their individuality, balanced with my responsibility to provide guidance and some challenge to move beyond what they already know.

However in some instances, I wonder if I, too, have been guilty of wanting my students to please me. In that discussion with the class about reading strategies, there was another contribution to the list, but I didn't add it. It didn't please me.

> Journal, April 22/98 Travis adds his own piece, that a good writer writes neatly. It seems like a strange point from him. He adds that a good writer doesn't make mistakes. We talk that one over for a while with some children agreeing and others, including me, disagreeing. When I ask them who is a writer in this group, they all raise their hand. When I ask "Who has ever made a mistake?" all hands except Travis's are raised. I write down "Good writers make mistakes."

I thought at the time that I did the best thing in that discussion. I really didn't want the children to think that good writers didn't ever make mistakes. Actually I saw it as a really good opportunity to discuss the point with them and I wanted them to understand that making mistakes was crucial for them as writers. But I wonder if this was really the truth? Was I really only thinking of Travis, trying to protect him from his peers? It wasn't until I wrote about the entire incident and reread my writing, that I began to feel uneasy with what I had done to Travis. Was I, in fact, demanding that Travis make me happy? Later that week I received an email from Wayne Serebrin, that confirmed my uneasiness.

> Email, April 23/98 I like the discussion about the self-direction your children have developed; this speaks to issues of voice and power. Literacy is about developing voice and about contributing your voice to the conversation (even when it differs from what YOUR TEACHER has to say). So why then didn't you write down "Writers don't make mistakes?" Couldn't it have sat on the list as something to be further discussed. Yes, I would have challenged it too, but it didn't even make it to the list. Travis never even got a chance to change his mind and realize he had made a mistake.

It didn't take much reflection to realize that as a teacher, I too, could be guilty of requiring a child to "make the teacher happy." I had robbed Travis of his chance to learn from his own mistake. I did not realize this

immediately, however and I am grateful for the writing and the questioning of others that forced me to re-search what I had done with that child. This is one of those issues that remains a big question for me at the end of the research. While I wanted the children to have the freedom to make their own decisions, and I *didn't* want them to think that they only had to be pleasing me all the time, when there was a disagreement about what was appropriate for study in the class I had to be able to decide the outcome. While this does not sound very democratic to me, it is the struggle that I live with as I attempt to mesh my thinking about children's choice with adult responsibility.

What I know now about literacy learning

The struggle to understand how I can balance my philosophical understandings with the reality of my classroom has been, and will continue to be, a complex journey. While there are some basic premises that undergird my thinking, I know that with each new child I will have to learn to address the particular strengths and needs that that child possesses. This is the job of teaching.

I do know that I must take a philosophical and theoretical stand. I do believe that language learning, whether spoken or written, must be considered in its wholeness, before it is taken apart. I saw how David learned to read and write, not by being drilled on his recognition of individual letters and numbers, but rather by his fascination with animals and drawing stories about his own life and then adding the whole story in words to his pictures. I know that many of the children, including Frances and Meagan, needed the wholeness of a story to connect with and they took great joy in telling those stories as their form of reading. I also know that the children needed to feel success and to believe in themselves as readers, before they would succeed. Just before she left our classroom, Anna finally began to believe in herself and she so enjoyed sharing her stories with us.

I learned in many ways about the social nature of learning. Each day I had only to look around my noise-filled room, to SEE this fact. The children were always using each other as resources to test out their hypothesis, whether that hypothesis concerned correct social behavior or appropriate reading strategies. I tried to draw on this wonderful ability which the children already had, by making their thinking more visible. By posting the

charts about "what good readers do" or "how good writers write," I tried to draw the children into even richer discussions of what they were doing and how they could help each other. I think the children were surprised at times to find an adult who consciously encouraged them to seek help from their peers. Tamara and April were such obvious examples of friends who assisted each other with reading. It is impossible , of course, to determine all the instances of social learning; who influenced whom in the drawing of stories, the writing of notes, the encouragement to read publicly, the decision to participate in a drama. That it was happening was obvious. How to encourage and build on that social network continues to raise many questions for me.

I don't think I had really thought about the importance of the "right" book quite so much previous to this research. I had read Frank Smith's article about belonging to the "reader's club" several years before I began my research. However as I saw the impact that certain books could have on my group, I reread his article. I was thrilled when the children took ownership of a book, or an author, as Frances did with Big Pumpkin, and as the whole group did with James Marshall's George and Martha stories. However, I do know that each year the group has to be won over once again

to an author and never does each group choose the same ones. At the beginning of a new year I will enthusiastically share a book that was much loved by the previous year's students, and be saddened by the seeming lack of response from the new group. My research has shown me just how important is it that children do attach themselves to their books of choice, because this alliance can be a powerful learning tool.

For the first few years that I taught Grade One, I did not invite the children to do any writing until nearly December or January in the school year. I felt that in many ways the children would resist writing, because they might associate it with the printing of rows of disconnected letters. However, I think now that my actions were a mistake; children need to develop in writing and reading at the same time. The writing that the children did during my research year certainly supported their reading, as the stories of David, Karla, and Sean testify. These children needed to use the actions of writing and the thinking involved in drawing their stories, in order to focus on their reading. The development of literacy abilities in many different areas and with different sign systems did give the children a larger pool from which to draw in their attempts at meaning making. This

effect was beautifully illustrated when we were involved in the drama with my student teacher.

Children do express themselves in a variety of ways, and some of these ways are not always valued by the school community and the prescriptive curriculum guides. I feel in many ways that I have only had a small peek into this world of children as I have conducted this research. In my school I am known as the teacher that does "lots of art" with children, but in reality I think I have only just touched the surface of a very necessary part of who children are. I am still not very comfortable with many of the sign systems that children do use, and while my research certainly showed me some of the exciting possibilities, I long to be able to do more in the areas of drama, song, and dance.

Finally, this research has shown me to a greater extent just what strong learners young children are and what depths their thinking can explore. I know that the poetry experience with Ben made me think about the power of writing; how freeing it was for him to express his thoughts and what deep thoughts they were! As the children talked through their reading and writing strategies, it became apparent that they were working through their

understandings and that they did have theories of how reading worked. While some could not express what they were thinking, others were able to tell, in childlike ways, what they were trying to do. Most impressive and most difficult to research, was the exampling again and again, that these children were in charge of their learning.

Taken together, these stories show me that literacy learning is neither linear, nor simple. Even as I am writing this thesis, I continue to teach in a Grade One classroom. With a new group of children, there are some new stories, some new questions and problems. I know that I have to keep rethinking my teaching plans and actions, in order to meet the needs of each new group and each individual child. I have to be willing to shift my focus and question my bias always, in order to accommodate the children I meet.

Taken as a whole, the stories show the complex nature of literacy learning. While I do believe that there are many ways that a teacher can prepare for and encourage the literacy growth of her students, I do not believe that this preparation comes in the form of a package. As I have watched my students this past year, I have consistently concluded that any preset curriculum guide, one that tells me exactly what to do and when to do

it, would probably not work in my class. The reason for this is simple: these curriculum guides don't include children, they certainly don't know MY children. While at times I have felt some discouragement at the amount of work and organization it takes to keep children engaged in learning at their own ability and interest level, in fact this is the only type of classroom that I want.

Chapter 5 A Journey of Diversity: Sean

When Sean entered my Grade One classroom in the fall of 1997, I did not ever expect that in six short months he would be explaining his reading strategies to the entire class. Even more, I never suspected that he would be teaching me so much about his journey into literacy. As I listen to the tape of Sean explaining what he is doing as he reads, I have to shake my head in amazement.

> Journal, Feb. 28/98 Sean is reading to the class. Because he has chosen The Very Grouchy Ladybug , a very difficult book to share, he is really struggling, and his voice has become quite quiet. Most of his peers are busily drawing in their notebooks. Sean, however, perseveres. After reading his favorite page about the boa constrictor, he asks for the customary "two hands". After Jason offers a compliment ("good reading"), Trevor asks a question: "How did you find the right word?" Sean begins to explain: "Well by looking at the picture, by looking at the words. I look at the picture first and then I look at the words so when I know what I'm looking about, then I will know what to say, about a boa constrictor. So I looked at the boa constrictor and I say "Hmm, this is a boa constrictor so I gotta try to find boa constrictor, the word. So I look for it now I'd say.... a boa constrictor." .... "When I'm looking for the word boa, so I know it would go <B> <O> I know what "do" starts with, so then a <b> goes this way and a <d> goes that way. So then that would be a <b>. Bowl starts with bo - like when you eat breakfast, and trictor, sort of like tractor, so I know what that tractor looks like."

I had wondered about this boy right from the start of the year. On several occasions I wrote in my journal about this little boy, questioning how he would ever become interested in literacy issues.

> Journal, Nov. 8/97 At the beginning of the year, Sean is one of the children that worries me the most. He seems very young, and somewhat immature, when compared to the other children. Sean seems to be in such a world of his own that he often doesn't hear me talking to him, and when I make a special effort to draw him into a conversation, he will look at me with a crease in his forehead and a "HUH?" on his lips. In a large group, Sean is usually playing with nearby blocks, or talking out some imaginary car race quietly to himself. After explicit directions, he will wander up to me and say "What are we doing??", the fog seeming to literally hang over his little head. And after any cleanup project, it is Sean's markers that most likely will still be lying on a table. His jacket is usually on the floor too. His Mom told me this week that she intends to send a second pair of ski pants "just for school", because he'll never remember to bring them home.
>
> I do notice that he loves cars and monster trucks. Most days he will draw one, cut it out, and turn it into a three dimensional toy that he drives around the room. And when he prints, he is very determined to make each letter with precision. His drawings have to be perfect too, or else he throws them away. "A perfectionist", I said to myself, "and worst still, a perfectionist who is in a fog." I was sure that Sean might be the last child in the room to get into reading.

When Sean started to make three dimensional cars out of paper, I was reminded of Steve, my "scissor boy" from last year, and so I took a step back from my hasty initial diagnosis and I gave Sean some room to show me what

he knew about his own learning. It took a while, but eventually I saw that Sean was on his own timetable and that he had a plan for teaching himself to read and write. His plan was not one that I would have picked for him and surely not one that I would ever have imposed on my class, but for Sean, it worked. I discovered over the year that when Sean set himself to a task which he chose for himself, he stayed at the job until it was finished, as this boy was always in control of his own learning. While it was evident that as a reader Sean had many of the same needs as the other children, he definitely had a style all his own. Sean's style required that I be flexible in my teaching.

Sean often seemed to be breaking the unwritten rules of our classroom; during project time he would be writing furiously while most of the other children would be engaged in play in a variety of forms. Yet when it was "writing workshop," Sean might be doing something entirely different. One day he worked the entire writing workshop making a little basketball game, and another day he made a computer game, complete with score card. He then went around the room, inviting other children to "play the game" while he recorded their imaginary score. Some days I was afraid that the other

children might try to copy Sean during writing workshop, but this never seemed to be a problem. Like their teacher, Sean's peers seemed to recognize that Sean was on his own timetable and that he definitely worked better with his own plan. In Judy Logan's (1997) book, a story is recorded of a similar incident, when one child was allowed to paint while the others were reading. I love the explanation that Logan gives:

> I want to say a word here about saying yes to the passions of individual students. I can hear someone saying, "But all the children are supposed to be reading, why should *one* be allowed to paint? Shouldn't they *all* be allowed to paint if Rosie gets to?" Perhaps this critical voice that I hear is my own and maybe that's why I need to pause a moment to answer it. My response is that students seem to understand that by saying yes to one student's needs, I am in a way saying yes to all their possibilities too. Unlike some adults, they seem to recognize that everyone has different interests, needs, talents, abilities and gifts. (76)

Sean needed to make his own connections to what he was working on. Early in the year he made his connection to the I Spy book by reading it to the class, using the children's game "I spy with my little eye" to interpret the book. Sean has a love of monster trucks and that also is a connection for him. When the class was making individual number booklets at the start of the year, Sean named his " 1 2 3 Polar Bear." On each successive page he wrote the number (1 or 2, and so on) and then the word polar bear. All the drawings, however, are of monster trucks. His learning is indeed very

personal.

There were other areas of our classroom life in which Sean showed he had to form his own connections with what we were doing. In December, we were beginning to work on the concept of addition and I handed the children what in math circles is called a "story board." In actual fact, it is a coloring sheet picture, which gives the background for a little problem for the students to talk about. While I didn't like using the story board, I thought at the time that it might help the children in their understanding of the concept of addition and so I handed them out. Sean transformed the colouring sheet into something he could understand and enjoy.

> Journal, Dec. 10/97 Today we are beginning to work on a math lesson on addition. The children are using storyboards to tell some addition stories with cats and dogs. Then it's their turn to represent the cats and dogs in pictures. They all draw in the animals, adding the number of animals that are at the storyboard pool. They all want to color in the pool and diving board, but I won't let them. These storyboards are all right for math, but they are coloring sheets for any other use. Sean , as usual, is the last one to finish the job. In fact he carries his story on into project time. Why? Because Sean is not satisfied to draw and write a simple math "story". He is compelled to write the words to the story that he is reminded about - a story about himself and his friend going to the pool. On the back of his math sheet are several sentences, in perfect Sean script, describing the event. "Ones a pond a time Sean and Ryan went to the pool. Wy went swim Wy layed until there Mom cal for them." ("Once

upon a time Sean and Ryan went to the pool. We went swimming. We layed until their Mom called for them.")

Later, I ask Sean why he had to write about the picture, and he says, "Well, I just wanted it to be a story."

Sean did appear to be a confident boy in his own way. He was not easily swayed by the actions or words of the other children or of his teacher. However, as a reader it appeared that, as with many other students, Sean wanted to be totally sure of himself. He had to first see himself as a reader and he used repetitious actions to reinforce what he knew, which gave him the confidence to continue.

Journal, Nov. 8/97 In October, Sean discovered the book Down by the Bay, a song put into book form. We have sung the song a number of times, and the children enjoy it a lot, but in October most of them have turned to other books. Sean sticks to Down by the Bay. He carries it with him and stashes it in his book pot. He brings it to reading circle on Oct. 1. After he sings the song for us, he points out that the words are repeated at the back. "Why don't I read it from the back?" he asks. He ends up taking the book home sometime in the middle of October. His mom tells me that he has been singing the song at home, teaching it to all of them. They read lots to him they tell me. On Oct. 22, Sean again brings Down by the Bay to reading circle. He points to each word as he sings and says them, turning the pages appropriately. When his finger races ahead of the words on one page, he stops and self corrects. Then he picks up the little book that the child next to him is about to read and he reads that too, the first time through. It's one of those Karen Gallas (1994) "miracle" moments. The song, and his own tenacity, his years of language use and countless other pieces of the puzzle have come

together for him today. I am amazed.

Initially I thought that Sean was not a risk taker because he wouldn't try other books and he stuck with a book that he could sing, which helped him to remember the words. In retrospect, it seems that Sean, like all the other children in my class, had a great need to see himself as a reader, to really believe in himself, before he could in fact *become* that great reader. The repetitive reading and singing of the Down by the Bay book was the way that Sean achieved a measure of that self confidence that he needed. As his teacher I had to learn to accept the process that Sean had chosen for himself.

Even at the beginning of the year, Sean exhibited the importance of writing in his life. It was helpful for him to be able to record some of his thoughts, as best as he could, in writing. As I recorded the following story in my journal I think I was not really considering the great gains that Sean was making in literacy. I was surprised that such a young, unorganized boy could actually think his way through his writing:

> Journal, Sept. 29/97 Sean is surprising me again today. I had seen him as a "young" Grade 1 boy, not one who would be reading very soon. He seems to be in his own little world most of the time. One of

those boys I have to pick up after. Very young. But today he made yet another monster truck out of paper, cut it out, and then recorded in his project journal:

I M A M K K (I Made A reMote Control Car) And so today, at writing workshop, he is labouring over a little booklet he has stapled together. He has drawn a robot, and written a collection of letters. He reads to me "once there was a robot that wanted to do an experiment. But his Dad said no." The beginning of the writing is not that exact, but the words "Dad" and "No " are easily discernable.

Sean is showing me, with his writing, that he understands quite a lot about print. He knows how to write some words conventionally and he knows that if he puts some marks on the paper, he can use those as place holders for the words that he does not know how to spell. I also have a hunch that Sean's interest in "doing experiments" is showing up in his story about the robot and the Dad that said "NO." His project journal entry certainly shows that he has a good grasp of beginning letters and sounds and that he is willing to try to get his thoughts down.

The importance of writing for Sean became very clear a little later in the year, when Sean attached himself to another book. For several months, Sean copied the same book, Zoo Looking, by Mem Fox and this book virtually took over as Sean's teacher.

Journal, Nov. 17/97 After over a month with the same book (Down by the bay), Sean has latched on to a different one. Last week he picked up Zoo Looking. What an amazing book. It has been the catalyst for a number of children's journeys into literacy. He must know a lot of it because it has been read to the class by several children at different times over the last 2 months. When I first find him with it, it is during choice time, and he is copying the book out onto the pages of a little newsprint booklet he has stapled together. He works on this activity for 3/4 hour, and insists that he should be able to take it home. Because I want to look at it, I tell him that if he will leave it at school, he can read it to the class. So early in the afternoon, he sits in front of the big group and reads. The children are a little upset that there are no pictures in his book, but Sean shows them his printing. He has copied about 1/2 of the book, and he reads it to the children, using now only the print, and his memory, along with his ability to make sense, to complete the reading. The next day Sean makes another book: it's Zoo Looking again, but this time he has placed himself in the book. It begins " One day, my Dad and I went to the zoo. I looked at the giraffe, and the giraffe looked back."

Today, during choice time, he is once again copying the book. "One day Flora went to the Zoo. She looked at the giraffe and the giraffe looked back". I sit down beside him and tell him that I want to talk to him about his reading. When I ask him what book he is working on, he says, "Well, right now it's Zoo Looking. I'm going to work on it all day." I ask him why he is copying the book. "Well, I'm saving them for Cody, you know, so that when he grows up he'll have something to read." Cody is his 3-year-old brother.

We are on the carpet talking about our plans for when the parents come to visit, later this week. There are three adults in the room today, so I am dividing the children into three groups to read in a smaller reading circle. Before we go, I read out to the children the list of ideas they have given me about "what good readers do." I wonder if anyone has anything to add. Sean, not usually one to participate in such an endeavor, raises his hand. "Well, it's good to copy the book you're reading." He can't explain why. We add it to

the list.

With some slight variations, Sean copied and recopied Zoo Looking many times. It is almost impossible to overemphasize the huge difference that this book made in Sean's literacy acquisition. As he copied, he learned the sound/symbol system that helped him turn all those squiggles on the page into words. His work filled his need to print, carefully and correctly and he felt very satisfied when the books were finished. The copying of that book was a very safe activity for Sean and it gave him direction. In fact, Sean internalized the script of that book to such a point that he could write it in nearly any situation.

> Journal, Dec. 10/97 Sean continues to copy books. Most days during writing workshop and during project time, he can be seen sitting at a table totally absorbed in his very important work of book copying. He started with Zoo Looking, then branched out to several other books. His copy of Where's Spot is currently hanging on the bulletin board. He copied each page, complete with little flap door, working laboriously over the week last week.
>
> Today we are watching a video. When it's all over, we gather on the carpet. Sean insists that he has a book to read to the class. I am surprised when he sits in the author's chair that he once again is reading a copied version of Zoo Looking: "One day I went to the zoo. I looked at the giraffe and the giraffe looked back." Still the children offer some compliments to him on his writing and reading abilities. I ask him, "When did you write that book?" He admits that he was writing while we were watching the movie. It seems that the

book is such a part of him, that he can practically write it in the dark! Konrad, a boy new to the class, asks him in a very puzzled voice "How did you do that?" Sean answers "Well, I wrote "one" I know that word, and then I wrote "day" - well, we say that in the morning message when we have one... and then I just wrote the rest."

When I look at the book later, I realize that all the words are spelled conventionally, except for "went" - he has the word "with" and he has missed out the "a" in "giraffe". It occurs to me that Sean is not only learning to read and write using his own time honored method, he is also learning to spell.

As children seem quite impressed with Sean's abilities, I ask who else would like to write a Zoo Looking story. I really don't think there will be much interest. Surely this book has been read to death by most of these children. To my amazement six children go off with Sean to a table to learn from their peer, the "master " of book copying.

Sean is obviously revered by the other children as the Zoo Looking specialist, and their enthusiasm for the book was maintained by Sean's very presence. In this very social situation, Sean shone. He helped all the children at that table, giving them ideas about how to copy the book, showing them his copies and helping anyone who couldn't see the book. This scene reminds me that learning is social, that reading is a social activity and that children need each other to encourage them and help them make sense of their world.

In January, when many of the other boys were very busy writing Nintendo stories, Sean finally stopped copying Zoo Looking and began to read and

write other stories.

> Journal, Jan.20/98 Sean continues to show his independence, spending today writing three different little stories. The first is modeled on the story On Friday Something Funny Happened. Several of the children had read that story and then written their own group version last week, and I suggested that some might like to try their own story. In typical fashion Sean did it HIS way. Instead of using the book or the handout I supplied with the days of the week, he went to the daily agenda and copied the days of the week from that source. Then he wrote about his week: "On Monday I played on my computer. On Tuesday I played on my Nintendo. On Wednesday I watched T.V. On Thursday I played outside. On Friday I played with Cody. " Each day is on a different page, illustrated with self explanatory pictures. I wonder to myself why Sean NEVER uses paper the way it is, but rather always takes a wad of 8x11 sheets, and then cuts a "book" out of the middle. When I got after him about this waste of paper a few weeks ago, he gave me a very vague look. Today he defends himself by explaining that he always puts the leftover paper in the art center's paper box (it's full). His second writing for today is all on one large sheet of paper. He tells me that he thought really hard about the spelling. It's true - he did not ask for any spellings today when he was working on this one. He has written about four sentences about the "Back Street Boys"; they are his favorite group and models for his latest hair style. Then during writing workshop he told me he would write a poem - a poem about Mario. The finished product looks more like a book, and like the other boys, he has told a story of Mario and Yoshi going to fight Bowser at his castle. He didn't cut the book out of the middle this time. He has used the paper sideways - his words go across the lines of the paper at 90 degree angles. He has been prolific today.

It did become quite obvious that all the copying that Sean had done had tuned him in to an inner voice about writing. He became quite adept at

getting his thoughts down and was a very eager and patient teacher of others.

In February, I set a tape recorder in front of Sean, as he assisted his friend Jason in the making of a birthday card for Jason's mother. In my journal notes I record the story and later that evening I transcribe much of the tape of the conversation between these two boys. It is obvious to me that Sean has become a great risk taker. He certainly understands the idea of writing in "Grade One" spelling and he sticks to the job, no matter what. Jason, on the other hand, is more like a large number of the children in this class: he hates to take risks. While I know he has much of the sound-symbol system down in his own head, Jason does not have the confidence to use his understandings. As well, he is often even too afraid to take the lead of one of his peers.

> Journal, Feb. 2/98 Sean is trying to help Jason to write on a birthday card that Jason is making for his mother. I am there when Jason starts the card, set up the tape recorder, and then come back several times during project time to check on Jason's progress. Over the space of the tape there is a lot of extraneous talk, as the two boys try out the tape recorder, making every strange noise they can. Both the boys talk into the microphone from time to time as if they are radio announcers.

I turn on the tape when they are already into spelling Happy Birthday:
Sean: "Birthday ...the day, <a> <y> yup <a> <y>
Jason: <a> <y>
Sean: "birthday HAPPY BIRTHDAY Happy birthday"
Claire: "Explain how you did this to me. How did you help him to do that happy part"
Sean: "Well I was like, doing it like, inside my body. I was like trying to say the words. I was saying the words like, as I was going. I was going like, happy <e> B <b> birth - th- th -day. Happy birthday."
Jason: " OK Now happy birthday -TO- How do you spell to"
Sean: "to <t>-<o> <t> <o>"

The tape goes on and on in this fashion. I have transcribed three pages of Sean trying to help Jason make a birthday card. Whenever I "the teacher" wander away from them, they begin to use the tape recorder as if they were radio announcers and Sean is particularly adept at making all sorts of annoying sounds. In the midst of all this they do get on with the job of making the birthday card. It is very obvious that Sean is thinking his way through the spellings and is bothered by Jason's technique of making the letters. Jason, for his part, is quite unsure of Sean's methods and only accepts what Sean says if I back him up or he is totally sure of the spellings from before. At one point in the tape, Sean has just spent a huge amount of time trying to help Jason spell the word "have." When I come along, apparently Jason has not written any of this down and I say

"O.k. the next word is have. Sean do you have any ideas about how to spell the word have?" When I listen to the tape, I think if I were Sean I would run off screaming and tearing my hair out by this point. But Sean graciously continues to help his friend.

Then in late February, as recorded at the start of this chapter, Sean delights me with his ingenious reading of The Very Grouchy Ladybug to the class. He takes a huge amount of time to explain how he has been reading the book. While he talks it is immediately evident to me that he is showing a very profound understanding of his own reading strategies, but it is not until I listen to the tape later that day that I get the entire picture. He tells us first that he looks at the pictures, so he knows that he has to find the words that match the picture of a boa constrictor. Then he breaks down the words "boa constrictor" into the two words and tells us how he looks for the word that looks like "bowl", which word he knows. He has to describe the word "bowl" to us all, because we all think he is saying the word "boa." The boa constrictor is right there on the page, but he is thinking about another word that starts the same way and so he says "bowl - like when you're eating breakfast." Finally the light bulb goes on for his listeners. He

also breaks down the words into letters, talking about the difference between a <d> and a <b>. The complexity of his thinking is highly evident as he breaks down his reading strategies from using picture cues to making word associations, and then doing some letter recognition.

Sean's connection with the word "constrictor" is also very enlightening. He breaks the word down into parts, and says that the word part "trictor" is quite like the word "tractor," which he knows. In this reading Sean confirms for me that he does have his own system of reading, he is in charge of his own learning and he has his own theory of how reading works.

Although not all children could have explained their thinking in the way that Sean does, we have spent a large amount of time as a class talking about our thinking as readers. Our discussions about "What Good Readers Do" and "What Good Writers Do" did draw a lot of this kind of information from the children. I would record this information on chart paper, and we would refer to it often, adding new ideas as the year progressed. By making the children's thinking more public, I believe the children were allowed to think more socially with their peers.

Sean is only one child in my classroom this year and yet he exemplifies many of the issues in early years education that deserve my attention. Sean showed me that if I was willing to honour what a student brought to class and was able to restrain myself from always trying to impose my plan on a student, real learning could take place. Using his own plan, he taught himself to read, to write and to spell. The plan that Sean choose for himself was a very boring plan, as far as I was concerned. Copying the same book over and over was not something I would have asked a child to do. However, there was something about that activity that was very meaningful to this boy and so I had to relinquish my opinions about the activity and allow him to move at his own pace.

In the end, it was apparent that the book copying was both something Sean needed and something that helped him as a learner. As a result of his work, he became a mentor for other children and was always full of self-confidence and drive to learn. Sean was an unusual learner in many ways and yet I have to ask myself how many other "unusual learners" I have had in my classroom over the years whom I have not recognized. While I know I have SAID many times that I trusted children as learners, with Sean, the point

was proven. He demanded that I trust him as a learner.

In essence, Sean helped to confirm for me that each unique child does come to school with a background in literacy learning and that I cannot prejudge where each one is on this complex literacy journey, nor can I prescribe immediately what each child will need in order to continue to move along. While Sean might have looked like a candidate for a remedial, interventionist program in late Kindergarten and early Grade One, it is obvious to me now that such a program might have damaged him to some degree. Any lock step, preplanned program for Sean would have been met with frustration and, possibly, failure. Sean may well have stubbornly resisted any imposed plan for him and been labelled a problem. And what an opportunity his teacher would have missed to witness this boy's approach! While it was somewhat risky for me to allow Sean some room and some time to show me what he could accomplish on his own, I am so glad that I did. Sean, like all other children, deserves to be valued as the active learner that he is.

Late in April, when Sean had stopped coping books, I asked him why. "You don't seem to be doing much writing anymore," I said to him. With that

notorious crease in his forehead he answered me: "Well, at the end of the month I choose something and then I just go on and on and on. In April I've been making costumes. In June, it'll be the book thing again."

Sean was a wonderful example of many of the facets of literacy learning that I was exploring, except his approach was so different that it has taken me some time to realize that he was on the same journey, but in a very "different vehicle" from the rest of us. Sean's learning was ongoing and very personal. He figured out his own plan for believing in himself as a literate person. He shared his methods of learning with his peers, and he was greatly revered in his role as the Zoo Looking specialist. He needed to be writing in order to learn how to read. Lastly and most importantly, Sean's learning, in some ways diverse from his peers, was being controlled and directed by himself. Sean taught me that I have to be willing to change my plans, even when what a child has chosen to do does not always sit well with me. If I am willing to remain open to new ideas and differences in children, then I must remain vulnerable in some ways within my own framework. Increasingly I am realizing that although I am the "teacher", there is little doubt that the children have taught me far more.

Chapter Six: The Journey Within

Before I began my research, I read these words of Connelly and Clandinin's (1988):

> If you understand what makes up the curriculum of the person most important to you, namely, yourself, you will better understand the difficulties, whys, and wherefores of the curriculum of your students. There is no better way to study curriculum than to study ourselves. When we have a grasp of the difficulties, for example, of figuring out something simple such as how we think and feel as a component of the personal, we will understand the really serious difficulties of trying to figure out how some one else , our students, think and feel. (31)

During the research and now as I write about the writing, I am beginning to understand those words, because in many ways the research was not just about "literacy learning." The research has been about me. It has been about me as a teacher and it has also been about me as a learner. This has not, in many instances been such an easy or pleasant job, especially as I have tried to take the stories and put them into some sort of named order. I would really have liked the research to have looked more orderly, more structured. But because learning is not orderly and certainly not linear, this research was not to be forced into this mold. As well, the studying about how I was thinking and feeling about the stories was so immersed in the writing that it has taken some time to sort it all out.

The naming of what I have learned has also been difficult. As Connelly and Clandinin state:

> The process of coming to know ourselves as practicing teachers is difficult. So much of our personal practical knowledge is tacit, unnamed, and, because it is embodied in our practice, difficult for us to make explicit.(33)

Every time I wrote a story, I had to sit back and ask myself: "So, what is this about?" Looking through different lenses, I began to see the stories from my perspectives as parent, teacher, and learner. As I have continued to read my stories and write about my own writing, it is slowly dawning on me that many of the discoveries I have made about the children in my class are also discoveries I have been making about myself. Taking the long look backward, I have begun to realize that as I was learning about the children, I was also learning about myself. I was indeed beginning to research the "curriculum of myself."

1. My Learning is Ongoing

I have realized, with joy, that my own learning is ongoing. In the area of the research, this is quite obvious. The stories that I have written continue to speak for themselves and continue to teach me. Each time I read them and as I write and think about them, the meaning of them can change or

cause me to consider some other aspect of children's and my own learning.

As a teacher one of the biggest lessons I am learning is that teaching, at its best, is an act of inquiry. Over this past year, I have seen the benefits to my own thinking and my teaching as I have written about my students, and as I have reflected on those students' learning. I have continued to pursue my own questions about literacy with this group and I have not been satisfied with some of my answers. I go into my classroom every day expecting new surprises and looking for new questions to pose for myself. This inquiry stance has been at the center of this research. Sometimes this inquiry caused me to struggle with what was happening in the classroom, because while I welcomed the "happy" surprises of building curriculum with the children, I was not so sure about some of the other experiences.

In January, I had a particularly hard time getting the class to focus on what I thought was an important time for reading and writing. As I reflected in my journal, the children were extremely restless and I was feeling very incompetent. I wrote three pages about the different struggles each child seemed to be going through. Even the children who normally would

be following school rules were getting into trouble with the itinerant teachers. I began to wonder if perhaps because of the research, I had given the children too much responsibility, which they were not handling very well. Over a two week period I finally figured out that a large part of the problem lay in the fact that I was trying to impose my plans on the children and they wanted nothing of that! I believe that this story shows how *my* learning was and is ongoing.

> Journal, Jan. 11/98 I know that I have tried this week to impose my agenda on these children in a way that just hasn't worked. I cannot get Sean's words out of my head. When I interviewed him on Thursday because of his difficult behavior he mumbled "Well, I got used to being at home, and I just don't want to be here." It has taken a while, but his words finally made an impact. These children are always difficult on Mondays. It seems that they fall out of the routine of the school day easily. They sleep in on the weekends and have a very tough time staying awake all day on Mondays. It has occurred to me that the same thing has been happening this week. The children slept in over the holidays and spent most of their time in front of the T.V. or Nintendo screen. It is still dark when most of them have to pulled out of bed. And, then, when they do get to school, they want to visit with their friends and get back into the routine gradually. Meanwhile, there I was, trying to move them to new heights of reading instantly.
>
> I wonder why I was so insensitive? For one thing, I knew that the reporter from the Free Press was coming on Wednesday and I wanted to make sure that I would have some semblance of order in the classroom. [Because I had written a "Letter to the Editor" in November concerning the teaching of reading, the educational writer

> for our city's newspaper had requested a visit to my classroom to see how I taught reading.] That certainly was a pressure that I allowed myself to fall under. Then too there is this research I'm doing. I never realized before that the RESEARCH could drive ME. Apparently this week it has. Then, of course, there is all this writing and planning I did over the holidays. Good plans, really, but they were MY plans. And my plans almost caused me to miss some of the beauty of the week.

When I realized that many of the children had spent their Christmas holidays playing with new Nintendo games, I knew that this was what was filling their heads. When I wrote again in my journal a week later, I was appalled at what I was doing in the classroom, but I was intrigued with what would truly interest the children and Nintendo seemed to be high on the list. This activity of writing Nintendo stories, which stretched out over several months, certainly was not pleasing to me, but it was my attempt to balance the children's choices with my desire to see them write:

> Journal, Jan. 15/98 We just don't speak the same language. The chart paper today lists these words: Mario Luigi Bowser Geno Mushroom Princess Toadstool Prince Malo Donkey Kong Diddy Funky The mean old Yetti Game over. After 2 weeks of trying to figure out what these kids are about, I have adopted the "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" mentality. The boys talk endlessly in a language I don't know. Sean has been writing a story about Yoshi and Mario and Bowser. "Is this a Nintendo game, or is it on T.V.?" I ask him. Sean says it's a Nintendo game. But T.J., sitting across the table offers "It's Nintendo, but in real life it's on T.V." Matt has

been drawing pictures for the last week. He has a pile of 10 of them and I have been trying to understand what he has been telling me about them. Where do they come from? Are these out of his imagination and why is he churning them out at such a rate? Today as I sit with him, he asks me to write on the pictures. I write the sentence he dictates and again, the story is filled with the Mario and Princess Toadstool words. Jason has also been excitedly writing out stories, mostly pictures with lots of action but with some words. His stories are titled "Adventure No. 1", "Adventure No. 2". So far he has completed 5 such books. They too are all about "Bowser." It's certainly lovely to see all these children jumping into writing, but WHAT I ask myself, are they writing about?

Ben is writing in his project journal, recording what he did during choice time today. He reads it back to me "Today I made a glitch." "What's a glitch?" I ask. He takes me by the hand and leads me to his mailbox, where he has stashed an armband with a strange insignia on it. "It's a glitch. It's from Reboot." OH NO! Not Ben too!! When I ask him if HE has a Nintendo, he answers in the negative, "But I know about that stuff," he says, somewhat defensively.

Sean brings me his latest book. "MODKBAT 64" is the bold title. "Can you read this?" he asks me. The story about Mortal Kombat is written in very interesting Grade One spelling. He confirms that he thought and thought about the writing, saying the words and writing down the letters: "He CIKT" "He PaNTe" "Game over" "The end" I praise him for his use of wonderful functional spelling. But I have to tell him that my concern is over the content of his piece. "He kicked, he punched, game over, the end". Sean is looking at me with a grin on his face the whole time I read.

Nintendo and T.V. seem to be their life. I am truly appalled. Today has been a real awakening for me as I casually ask the boys if they have a Nintendo at home. Everyone does, except for Ben. Most have the very latest model, Nintendo 64. One boy in my class has both Nintendo 64 AND Sony Playstation. I am not sure if the "high" of playing these games has robbed these children of their usual enthusiasm for school, but they have been so unmanageable for the past 2 weeks. I have questioned everything about my teaching

> practice and have not been able to resolve much. I am wondering now if their Christmas "gifts" are the culprits.
>
> Today my chart paper is filled with the words they want. The words from their world. And I understand very little of it.

This series of entries in my journal marks what was a very confusing time for me in the classroom, but it now exhibits to me my own ongoing learning. I had already shared many of my "literacy stories" with colleagues and I was being praised for the "great stories" and "wonderful things that were happening in my classroom." Meanwhile, in January, the children were so unmanageable and it didn't seem as if we were moving along at all. Because I was researching this group of children, I really wondered how I would report this month of time. I felt very insecure in my teaching. I was questioning everything I was doing and I even thought to myself at times that I would either have to stop the research, or I would have to lie. Surely I couldn't report a whole month of mass confusion and unhappiness.

In retrospect, I think it was during that very time that I learned some very valuable lessons. When I had first been introduced to the idea of "teacher action research," I had really questioned if this research in my own classroom, this "navel gazing," was in fact true research. I was cognizant of the criticism of action research from among the faculty at the very

university where I studied. I had read a number of articles from traditional researchers who themselves questioned this type of research. As part of my course work, I had been required to take a course from three different professors who were obviously totally opposed to teacher action research. I had to ask myself: "Is what I am doing REALLY research?" During January I found my answer.

Sticking with the children and continuing to write, even though I was embarrassed about what I was doing, caused me to understand some things about my class that I would otherwise never have seen. While it was easy to say that the children and I were co-creating the curriculum and that they were teaching me how to teach them when the circumstances were ones with which I felt comfortable, this became much harder when the children were not pursuing something that I valued. If I had been conducting some other type of research, I think it would have been easy to see this month as a "blip" in the screen or perhaps it might have shown up in some calculations as error because it didn't fall into the "norm." But because I was writing the stories and recording my reactions to real life happenings in my classroom, I could not just write these days off as "accidents." Slowly I

have begun to realize that *because* I was researching the children and researching my own teaching, I had to face what I did not like and what I could not explain. I had to admit that I was, in fact, into control in ways that I did not think possible. I had to acknowledge that I was *not* so willing to collaborate with the children, unless it was on my terms. When I finally allowed the children to address the writing issues that they so wanted to investigate, writing became a much happier time for all of us. On our list of "What Good Writers do" was listed "good writers write about things they know about." The children in January forced this issue into the open and I had to acknowledge that either I did trust their learning or I was not what I was claiming to be.

Was this real research? When writing reaches into the core of my understandings and forces me to face up to a major clash between my philosophy and my practice, it has to be research. The confusion itself seemed to be confirming for me that indeed this was research.

> Classrooms are supposed to be orderly and structured, and teachers are expected to have control and to direct the process of learning. However, my stance as a teacher-researcher often begins by situating itself in an attitude of not knowing and loss of control, not in a physical sense, but in the existential sense of losing control of the meaning of the habitual practices. (Gallas,1994,9)

Throughout this year I have confirmed again and again that what I was doing was research. This research, for a teacher at least, was the very best form of research possible. Not only was the research teaching me some things about literacy and teaching me something about myself. The research was in fact changing me as a teacher; causing me to become more responsive to my students, helping me to accept their ways of knowing and showing me where my practice was falling short of my philosophy. My learning, ongoing with and like the children's learning, drove the research for much of the year.

2. My Learning is Personal.

My learning is also very personal. When I first returned to university, after about ten years of being a homemaker, I was quite unsure of myself and of my abilities. My first few classes were painful experiences as I tried to connect what I knew as a parent to what I was hearing about in the university setting. I made some personal connections to some of the books I was reading; Gordon Wells' and Shirley Brice Heath's works on literacy. However it was not until I was in my last year of teacher education that I truly felt valued for my past experiences. This year I was encouraged to

view my parenting experiences as a valuable resource; something that I had thought was important, but which had not even been suggested to me previously.

As I came into education later in life, I have also had to struggle with some other areas of "integration" of theories of education with my personal belief system. This is another example of how personal my learning is. When I was a child, my family belonged to a very conservative Christian church. Of course I was heavily influenced by the thinking of that church, and while now I belong to a more moderate group, I still cherish many of the same basic beliefs. These beliefs were quite foreign to many of the people that I have worked with and so in this area of my life, this very personal area, I was not always able to talk or share. I have never wanted my life to be segmented, or compartmentalized. Being a Christian is simply a part of who I am, being a teacher is also a part of who I am. It has been very interesting to me that as I have worked on this research, I have been confirmed in my thinking that the two "parts" are not at war with each other, in fact, they complement and support each other. This realization has not come without a lot of soul searching in each part. Sometimes I feel as if I simply don't have the

language that joins the two together, but I know that when I talk about valuing children and wanting to connect with each child, that basic desire is fueled not by educational theory but by my spiritual belief system. As I have researched my work as a teacher, I have realized that teaching has for me become somewhat of a ministry.

3. I Have to Believe in Myself as a Learner

I have realized through this research, as well, that I have had to believe in myself as a learner, in order to accomplish my goals. When I was a child I thought I was a fairly "smart" - usually second or third in the class but never first. When I was in my last year in high school I was part of a "team teaching" experiment in Mathematics. All the Grade 12 students were grouped according to ability - and the teachers actually named the classes "A, B, C, and D." I was mortified when I was placed in the "C" group and was quite sure that they had made a mistake. After each chapter of study, a test was given and the groups were redistributed, according to marks. Occasionally I would rise to the "B" group, but I usually would then nose dive back to the "C" group after the next test. After this happened a few times, I remember thinking that I really didn't care much what they called me,

because I was sure I was a "B" student even if I was sitting in the "C" or "D" class. I am not sure where that confidence came from, except that my Mother had always told me that I had "my Dad's brains." She claimed that she had always prayed that her children would be so blessed because she was "so dumb." My Mother was, I have to say, the wisest person I have ever known, but because she dropped out of school in Grade Seven she never had that view of herself.

My Dad, likewise, viewed me as his academic legacy. He was a man who loved language and gained great enjoyment from using an unusual word in a conversation while searching his listener's face for a hint of confusion. During my years back in university my father died, but not before he left me with a kind of "blessing." Searching my face with those steely blue eyes he said "Claire I not only love you, I admire you." It was the legacy of what I had lived with all my life. Because I have experienced the confidence that great parental support can give, I likewise want and expect that support for the students in my class.

When I entered university as a young woman of eighteen, I continued to think of myself as a capable student, a "B" student and that is generally what

I received in marks. However when I returned to university for my Education degree, nearly twenty years later, some things had changed. I took several English courses where I was encouraged to respond to the literature with my own voice. This activity was called "reader response" and seemed to capture the imagination of a number of the professors I worked with. I really enjoyed those "reader response" assignments and I started to garner some "A's." However it seemed that reader response was something that the professors believed could be turned on or off and at times I was "allowed" to respond in my own voice, while at other times I was not to do so. I found that if I could not respond with my own opinions or voice, I wasn't very interested in the question.

Then, in my last year as a preservice teacher, I met Wayne Serebrin and Joan Irvine who not only encouraged me to use my own voice, they also invited and welcomed my questions! Throughout this paper I have recorded how these two educators toiled to compel me to work on my own queries and to develop my thinking in education. It is indeed fitting that these two now are working with me through this research as well, prodding me to look and think more reflectively than I have ever done before. Because of this I have

gained confidence and I do believe in myself as a learner.

One of the areas in which I have gained confidence has been in the area of writing. I know that I have always enjoyed writing. Even as a "mom" at home I loved to write letters to friends and I often would record stories or write about problems I was having. Writing has been important to me most of my life, but during my research years I have come to understand how very precious writing could be. Of course, the encouragement of my peers has also helped me to view myself in a more favorable light. I will never forget the first time that Wayne Serebrin said to me "Claire, you are becoming such a writer." It was like music to my ears. No one had ever told me before that I was a writer. I know that often a problem will present itself to me and I feel a great need to write about the problem. At school this year, when I have been faced with decisions to make and difficulties to overcome, I have immediately turned to my computer to put my thoughts down. As my confidence in my own abilities to write have increased, I have turned more and more to writing to think. Writing is no longer simply a way of conversing, or a mode of record keeping. Writing for me is thinking. Like the children, I had to first believe in myself as a writer before I began to progress.

4. My Learning is Social

There is no doubt in my mind that my learning is social. As a teen questioning my upbringing, as a young mother with small children, as a student and as a teacher, I have consciously sought the help and opinions of my peers. This has not always been easy for me because I also harbour some very independent feelings. But for most of my life I have known that I need the support of others.

Likewise, I need my peers in Education. I have been very privileged to be a part of a collection of students who have worked together towards a Master of Education degree. Many of these students were teachers and administrators from the Seven Oaks School Division in Winnipeg. Although I am not a member of that school division, I was welcomed into that group when I was working with Dr. Judith Newman and Dr. Wayne Serebrin on teacher action research. We shared our writing and our lives in the two years that I was involved with that group and I learned a lot from many of them.

Mostly I have worked closely with a very special colleague, Tannis Nishibata-Chan, throughout the entire process of my Master's program.

Tannis has been my sounding board and my advisor through four years of study, coursework, writing and teaching. Although we are very different in nature and are not close in age, we have formed a strong bond through all the social connectors that our thinking together has enabled. Thanks to Tannis, my learning has been greatly enriched.

As well, as I have shared my writing with Wayne Serebrin, Judith Newman and Joan Irvine I have learned much from these gifted educators. Sometimes I would write a story about my own classroom and I would be so close to the story that I honestly would not really know what I was writing about. I would send the story by email to Wayne or Judith, and when their response would return to me I was often quite surprised at first. "Is this what I'm writing about?" I would wonder. Their ability to view the story from a slightly different standpoint was a great advantage for my own learning.

5. My Learning is Diverse

My learning has become diverse. By becoming more diverse myself I believe that I am learning to be more accepting of the diversity of my students. This is an area that I am still really working on and thinking about.

When I grew up I knew I was different, thanks to that conservative church I attended. Because I have experienced the feelings of isolation that being different can create, I think I have realized that many people feel separate from others and I think I have begun to see the world through the eyes of others. I really don't want the children in my class who, for one reason or another, are different from the rest, to feel that isolation. Surprisingly, this has meant that at my school I am the voice that, for instance, opposes a heavy emphasis on the Christmas story at our winter concert. Two years ago I had a child in my class who had an Islamic background and I thought it was inappropriate that this child be forced to sing Christmas carols. Since that experience I have found myself being opposed to and not "fitting in" with the rest of the staff because I, of all people, don't want to have a "Christmas" concert. I wondered about this for a while, but I now realize that it all fits with who I am. While I hold strongly to my own religious belief system, I do not believe that schools should be imposing that system on children who are not a part of it.

Learning that I could draw, and that expression through art was meaningful for me, has also opened my mind to other "ways of knowing."

While once I thought I could not draw, now I realize that drawing can be a new way of understanding my world. I wonder to myself - if drawing could open up new thinking for me, what about drama? or music? or photography? or sculpture? Suddenly the possibilities seem endless. And yet what is valued at school remains so narrow, it seems. This kind of thinking has also caused me to be sidelined by some of my teaching peers. A teacher who questions the system is not always valued by that system. Nevertheless, I do believe that the system needs to become more diverse, and I am not afraid to make my thoughts known among my peers.

6. My View of Literacy is Expanded

I have learned that for my students and for me as well, the word literacy can have many interpretations. Recently I was asked to look over a questionnaire that a colleague had been given by her principal regarding "literacy." The fact that only the words "reading" and "writing" were contained in the many questions simply screamed out at me. It was obvious what *that* person's definition of literacy was - only reading and writing. I know that the research I have done and the authors I have read with have convinced me that in this new century the word "literacy" has to convey much

more. Margaret Meek (1991) says this so well as she gives a new definition to even the word "reading":

> There is also abundant evidence that from now on, the meaning of 'reading' will continue to expand, to describe what people do in contexts where what is read is not, evidently, writing, script or text. Television is the obvious example. Do viewers *read* what they see? If so, how? (207)

In my own learning I have accepted art as a form of literacy, and I know that there are many other forms or ways of knowing that, just because they may not be as easy for me, are nonetheless literate in their application. Dance, drama, T.V. watching, surfing the internet, these are all literacies. They are ways of communicating and ways of understanding and they too should be valued in children. In fact, it seems to me, that by ignoring these literacies that schools sideline themselves and disempower their students.

One of the powerful experiences I had during a Summer Institute in the Arts at the University of Manitoba, was to sit through an explanation of a musical that Ron Paley, a Winnipeg jazz musician, was planning. Knowing nothing about jazz, I felt as if I needed to be taken by the hand and given the simplest descriptions. I couldn't help but notice that Ron was not very good at explaining, in verbal terms, what he was doing. It seemed to me as if he kept looking longingly at his piano, hoping that he could just sit down

and tell his story as he pounded on the keys. When he was at the piano he simply shone. His music did tell a story. When he stood up to speak, he stumbled and looked very nervous. I couldn't help but wonder how Ron had managed to get through school. He is considered a very talented man, but his ways of communicating are not my ways. He had a fellow jazz player with him and they took turns playing feature parts. It was obvious that they were speaking to each other through their music. I certainly enjoyed Ron's form of communicating, but I did not understand it in the way that other jazz musicians would. It made an impression on me that I will not forget. Surely my definition of literacy has expanded in a great degree but I know that there are many areas I have not even touched.

7. I Believe the Learner is in Control

Finally, in theory, I do believe that ultimately the learner is in control. This has been one of the rather surprising issues in this research. While I did believe at the start of the research that a learner had to have some input into her own learning, I am not sure now that I really understood just what that might look like. In the classroom, I observed many children taking the leadership and making decisions about their own learning. However I did

not realize how many questions this issue could raise for me.

I wonder if I do have a strong grasp of what it means for the learner to be in control of their own learning? I certainly saw children who drove their own learning. Sean was an excellent example, but in many ways David, Frances, Meagan, Karla and all the others were children pursuing their own interests and managing their own time. I do know that I want children to be responsible and self-driven. The conflict for me occurs when I try to understand *my* role as teacher in this type of classroom. I saw how my own prejudices and desires sometimes got in the way of the children's learning, while at other times, I knew that I *had* to intervene. Obviously, I do think that the teacher has a role to play in the classroom.

I wonder if my struggle is not the struggle of many educators. I think back to my days as a student in Wayne Serebrin's and Joan Irvine's undergraduate courses in Social Studies and Early Years. I know that they tried to give me as much encouragement and freedom as possible to pursue my questions. They certainly encouraged me to think about the "big picture" in education. They were so careful about how they took part in our classes, so that I never thought of them as "controlling" the class. Rather, they

gently led us to form our own questions and find our own answers. They worked so hard to *show* us what an Early Years education might look like, rather than simply *tell* us. Theirs were the most unusual yet most meaningful university courses I have ever taken. In those classes I had to be myself and I couldn't play the "university game" of doing what I thought the professors wanted me to do. They gave me ownership of my learning in ways that I had never experienced before.

And yet, during that year, there were some classes where I felt their hands trying to direct the learning just a bit more than usual. Some days I wanted to ask "What are you expecting me to *do*?" At other times I got the faintest glimpse of them struggling themselves with how to guide us without burdening us with only their viewpoint.

There is certainly no doubt that I learned a vast amount from that year I spent with them. I certainly wonder what kind of teacher I might be, if it had not been for the wonderful year with Wayne and Joan. They always made me think.

I think this struggle will always be mine, as long as I continue to pursue my understanding of learning, and continue to reflect on my thinking.

Learners are in control of their own learning, yet teachers are needed to support and challenge that learning in ways that do not take ownership of the learning away from the learner. As a teacher of young children, I have responsibilities to guide their thinking along moral and educated lines of thought.

This research has certainly caused me to inspect my own moral code, my own cultural and religious prejudices and my own views of what is worth knowing. I believe that the best curricululm is that which is described by Short and Burke:

> There are several beliefs that are fundamental to our position that curriculum is inquiry. The first is that learning is inquiry and inquiry is learning. ... We define research as systematic inquiry which develops from being interested in the world, asking questions about aspects of the world that are puzzling, and investigating those questions and possible solutions. (55)

When children are pursuing their own questions of inquiry, they are in control of their learning, because they are driven by the intricacies of their own minds. Throughout this research I have been impressed immeasureably by the minds of the children in my care. As well I have been humbled and amazed to see how my *own* mind works.

During this research, I think I have begun to realize how important it is for me to have a large part in the decision making in my classroom. As I have gotten to know the children, I know that I need to be ready to make curricular decisions with them. I have no intention of relying on the prepared curriculums of publishing companies. By choosing to be a teacher who relies on inquiry myself, in order to understand my own acts of teaching, I have placed myself differently. I don't think I will ever be satisfied with publisher's editions of curricular guides. There is just too much at stake in the classroom.

This writing has been a very freeing experience. Like my dear student Steve, I have been shackled at times by many outside forces. There have been the pressures to conform to an "easier" way of teaching in a community that has not always valued the work I pursue. The news media and many of the educational leaders in our community have tried to convince me that children can all be "standardized" on a common curricular framework. Some days all the work of inquiry seems overwhelming.

I have also been shackled by inside forces. Doing this research has caused me to realize how restricted my own thinking can be. By writing and

thinking about these issues, I have gained a much greater insight into my thoughts and actions in the classroom. While I began this research to consider how I might "free Steve", in fact this has been an exercise of "freeing Claire."

* * * * *

Writing this thesis has been an effort of trying to unpack what is in my head about how children learn. I have seen how very complex the issues are. As I have struggled to make sense of my own stories, I have realized how difficult it is to take a multilayered story and explain what I am seeing portrayed. As I have reviewed my notes and examined my thinking, it has become very clear to me that teaching is not "just a job" for me. It is both a large part of who I am and a significant part of who I want to be. As I have thought about the way the children learn I have come to some rather surprising realizations about myself.

I can vividly remember my first day at my first job, trying to organize a group of Kindergarten students in the fall of 1992. After all the parents left the room, I looked at this group of wide eyed 4 and 5 year olds and I wondered at the incredible responsiblity that had been given to me. I knew that many of the parents who had just left the room were going home with

tears in their eyes, because as a mother I had done the same thing myself only a few years previously. I marvelled at the trust all these parents were placing in me, someone they had only just met.

While in many ways I have changed from that first year Kindergarten teacher I hope that I never lose those feelings of wonder about my responsibility as an early years teacher. As I have never forgotten MY Grade One teacher I know that my students likely will never forget theirs. I want to strive to make those memories gentle and positive ones. I know that one encouraging teacher can make a difference in the life of a child.

This year the children who were in my first Kindergarten class are currently in Grade Six, their last year at our school. I have set up a program in my classroom where nine of these Grade Six students come to read to nine of my Grade Ones every other day for a half hour. One day in December I took my class to our city's Art Gallery and those Grade Six students came along. Kristen, a Grade 6 student who accompanied us in my vehicle, told me as we rode along that she had never been to the Art Gallery and she wasn't sure what it would be like. As we walked through the doors of that impressive building, Kristen's eyes lit up as she gestured towards me. "Oh

Claire", she said " I *have* been here before. You brought me in Grade One."

I am not pleased that Kristen has not experienced the Art Gallery in the years since she left my Grade One classroom, but I find some comfort in the fact that Kristen did recognize the place, happily, as a memory from her early life as one of my students. As I look into the faces of some of those other Grade Six students I wonder how many of them I helped in some way. I wonder always about the struggling students I have had. Did I do the best for them? I want to always be sure that I do my utmost for my students.

I do not think that I need a lot of recognition from my students as they pass through my life, nor do I need much reward from anyone else. In many ways as I think about the meaning of stories such as Ben's "you don't have to make the teacher happy" I realize that teaching "fits" with my overall life view of what is important.

Teaching is such a overwhelming responsibility that I wish at times that I could do something else. I don't think I can. Because teaching is not a static profession, but rather involves change and questioning constantly, I want to continue to remain open to the challenge and continue to write and collect my impressions of this journey.

Journal, Dec. 1998 Bernice and I are talking about the Art Gallery. I have been telling her about the wonderful exhibits that are there, and what a fabulous time we have had. "Oh Claire," she says "I just have to show you what Steve did today." Steve has been in her classroom now for two years. He's in Grade Three, still struggling with reading and writing. Bernice has had a hard time understanding him.

Today she pulls out a Christmas card that he's made. He has followed her "sample" triangular shaped reindeer card but he's added just a few things. The reindeer has teeth, top and bottom, on a mouth that opens. There's a tongue that lifts up to expose some hidden message. The antlers are much more realistic looking than the "sample" and he's added ears. "You know Claire," she says "I'm just beginning to realize what incredible abilities this child has. He taught all the other kids how to do this card much better than I could ever do. He is such an artist. Would you help me to think about him more, in the new year? You always understood him so much better than me." Understand Steve?, I thought. There are some things about Steve I will never understand. But I do know that he started me on a whole new train of thought in my teaching. Talking to his new teacher about him will be pure joy.

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