

**Professional Growth Through Journaling:  
A Resource Teacher's Perspective On  
Literacy Learning**

**By**

**Carol L. Moar**

**A Thesis  
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for the Degree of**

**Master of Education**

**Faculty of Education  
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning  
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**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University  
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree  
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## **Abstract**

**In this thesis I have used the methodology of Teacher Action Research to help me better understand literacy learning for children. As a resource teacher I began to question the many programs and “quick fix” skills-based methods I used with children who required support in literacy learning. The questions driving my research included: “What does it mean for children to be involved in authentic literacy experiences?” “What role does the social nature of literacy play in my students’ learning?” “How might the concept of a ‘community of learners’ support children who are struggling as readers and writers?”**

**Over the past three years I have been writing a journal reflecting on the actions and words of many of my students. My self-reflective journal entries have been in the form of narratives and stories. I have also collected written work samples, drawings and photographs that I have taken of my students as they have been involved in various learning experiences. Some of these work samples, drawings and photographs are used in this thesis to illustrate my journal entries and my learning.**

**My journal entries (the primary data for this thesis) were reviewed and categorized according to a developing set of basic beliefs about literacy and learning. I discovered how important student choice, trust and respect are to making literacy experiences authentic and meaningful to individual learners. My findings include an understanding of literacy as a social event. A supportive**

environment where risk taking is encouraged, fosters the social nature of learning. I now truly appreciate how important building personal relationships is to developing a community of confident literacy learners.

Through the course of revisiting and reflecting further upon my journal entries and other data, I came to realise that I was not just studying my students' literacy and their learning, I was also learning a great deal about myself as a teacher and a learner.

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I am grateful to the Superintendents and the Board of Trustees of the Seven Oaks School Division for supporting my professional growth and research. Thank you for granting me educational leave time to work on this writing.

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I met Ralph Mason in the summer of 1998 while I was taking a math course. Ralph has helped me to see the overall picture of where my writing was taking me. Thanks for your guidance and helping me to see myself as a writer.

Wayne Serebrin has been a mentor to me throughout my Master's program. Wayne's understanding of literacy and literacy learning has been of great benefit to me. Thanks for asking me the tough questions that really got me thinking. I am grateful for the inspiration and confidence you have given me to reflect on my teaching and my own learning.

Lastly, I thank the children whom I have taught over the past few years and their parents. You have been my students and my teachers.



**Dedicated With Love In The Memory Of My Mother  
Helen Sawka  
Who Passed Away In April, 1985**

**In April of 1985, I applied for my first teaching job. The job was a term position for a kindergarten teacher. I remember the day I found out that I did not get the job. I cried to my mother, who was very ill in bed suffering with cancer. My mother put aside her own pain to comfort me in my disappointment. I will never forget my mother's encouraging words to me. She said that I was going to be a fine teacher and that some day I would get a teaching position. She also said that because I was well educated I would always have "choices" in my life. It was not until I lived a little and experienced life that I began to understand what she meant by "choices" in life. In essence, this thesis is about the "choices" I make as a teacher. Thanks for the wonderful memories, Mom.**

## **Introduction**

As a resource teacher for the past eleven years, I have often struggled with how to best help children who are struggling in the areas of reading and writing. Many of the children with whom I work do not see themselves as readers and writers and lack confidence in their abilities. To help my students become more literate, I have often resorted to “quick fix” teaching approaches and skills-based “packaged” programs. My students have taught me through their actions, words, (and sometimes with their disengagement) that these approaches and programs do not work for them. In fact, I now feel that these practices may themselves have contributed to making reading and writing merely a meaningless set of isolated skills. I do not believe that this is what literacy is all about. This study began therefore out of my awareness that my practices did not reflect my beliefs. Change was inevitable.

The change process began for me when I started my Master’s program through the University of Manitoba, in the spring of 1996. A cohort of teachers from the Seven Oaks School Division began to study together in a program based on “teacher action research”: which involved us in examining our beliefs as teachers in relation to our current practices (see Chapter Two). Prior to beginning this program, I had already begun to feel a need to make changes in my literacy teaching practices. I was ready to begin a critical, reflective journey as an educator. I considered change to be a natural process for me. It was not being

forced upon me from the outside. I was in charge of the process of choosing how I would critically examine my decisions as a teacher.

Systematic and critical reflection (hallmarks of teacher action research) on my practice gave me the courage to begin to ask questions I had never asked of myself previously. I was able to look at what I was doing as a teacher, and consider my practices in relation to what I believed about literacy teaching and learning. Through my studies in teacher action research I have come to realise that as a teacher I do not need to know all of the answers, but rather, that I need to be willing to reflect thoughtfully on the choices and decisions I make every moment in the classroom.

How have my experiences as a teacher action researcher changed what I do as a teacher? In the early part of the Master's program, Judith Newman was one of our instructors. Newman (1987) talks about "critical incidents as a way of exploring our assumptions about language, about learning and about teaching" (p.727). I began to write stories, conversations with students and questions that I had about my teaching in my journal. As Newman (1987) states: the incidents which help us change as teachers aren't big events - they're small, everyday, ongoing occurrences" (p.728). My daily journal writing began as a means for helping me to stop and think about my questions as a teacher. As a result of this experience, I have become a teacher action researcher who observes, questions and learns from her teaching. My journal entries are helping me along my journey

as a teacher action researcher. These entries are providing me with a means of uncovering my own beliefs about literacy, learning, and how I can become a supportive teacher of the children in my care.

My teaching is my research. As teacher, I am the principal subject of my own study. My students play a large role in helping me to understand myself as a learner and a teacher. My journaling has enabled me to become more systematic in thinking about my understandings of literacy and the implications for practice. I have taken actions to improve my practice in ways that I feel will benefit my students.

My knowledge and beliefs as a teacher action researcher are “practical, personal and relational” (Richardson, 1984, p.6). My data - mostly in the form of self-reflective journal entries - is structured as “ images, narratives and stories and cases and events” (Richardson, 1984, p.6).

I also collect written work samples, drawings and photographs that I have taken of my students as they have been involved in various learning experiences. I use this data as illustrative references for what I write in my journal. Since a large part of my action research involves listening closely to my students, I record their own words and parts of our discussions in my daily journal writing.

I regularly read and reflect upon my journal entries. I find that this data helps inform me of: what my students have said about their own literacy learning, what they have said about how they think they learn best, and what they have said

about their interests and the struggles they are encountering in reading and writing. By revisiting my journal regularly, I feel that I have learned much about my students' voices, the knowledge they bring to school, and our attempts to build a community of learners. In turn, what I have learned has helped me to make informed decisions about how I can best support and facilitate my students' learning.

As a teacher, it is easy to think that a child is not reading well or learning because he or she is unmotivated, lazy, or that he or she does not have the skills to do the task. Reflecting upon my practice, however, has forced me to uncover my beliefs about how students learn and the changes I need to make to better support their learning. As a journal writer, I have found that I have been listening more closely to my own thoughts and feelings and the thoughts and feeling of my students. To take you on this journey with me, I must start at the beginning in my first year as a resource teacher.

## **Chapter One My Start as a Resource Teacher**

I have been a resource teacher at Elwick Community School for the past eleven years. As a resource teacher, I work with children who are in some way “behind” their peers, usually in the areas of reading and writing. Much of my academic background and experience in special education and resource teaching has been focussed on: learning ways to assess students; providing alternative instructional strategies for students and teachers; and, developing the consultation skills necessary to meet the needs of students, parents and teachers.

### **Resource Programs**

Resource programs are defined in many ways. Harris and Schutz (1986) state that “the title resource program is broadly interpreted and perhaps impossible to define” (p.10). Depending on the needs of the school, divisional philosophies, and administrative leadership, resource programs look different in different schools and school divisions. In the broadest terms, Harris and Schutz (1986) define the resource program or resource room as “a classroom where children with special needs go for part of the school day to obtain help” (p.11). Another definition found in Harris and Schutz (1986) explains that a resource program is “any school operation in which a person (usually the resource teacher) has the responsibility of providing supportive educationally related services to children and/or their teachers” (p.11). A final definition by Harris and Schutz (1986) portrays the

resource program as “ a means of interrelating the special and regular curriculum using common skill, sequence, compatible learning activities, consistent methods of instruction and application of teaching technology, and consistent evaluation techniques” (p.11). Wood (1993) claims that a resource teacher has many roles to fill including diagnostician, remedial teacher, materials specialist and an advocate for services which children may require. From my own perspective, I perceive the role of a resource teacher as being someone who works with children who need small group support and a differentiated approach to instruction.

I was hired eleven years ago as a special needs teacher. Prior to this I was teaching grade 5 in a rural school. I remember moving from the country to Winnipeg. I loaded up my dad’s truck with all of the precious teaching supplies I had collected from my four years as a classroom teacher. I had many file folders with writing, reading, math, spelling, social studies, science and art ideas. I also had collected the usual array of school supplies and desk organizers, as most teachers do. I arrived at my new school about two weeks before classes started and unloaded the many boxes filled with my teaching tools. I carried box after box into my new classroom, on the upper level at Elwick Community School.

My classroom was a large open room with many cupboards, two sinks, two computers, children’s desks, a teacher’s desk and a large black filing cabinet. I looked around this magnificent room in awe. There was so much space. It took me a long time to determine how to arrange the room. After deciding where the

students' desks and my desk would go, I began unpacking my boxes. I did not have any trouble fitting all of my files and teaching supplies in the countless cupboards in my new classroom. After several days of unpacking and putting posters on the wall I thought I was ready for my new job as a special needs teacher.

A few days before school started I went back to my classroom. The administrators, secretaries, and several other teachers were also in the building. After meeting many staff members, I remember going to see the administrators to ask them how I would know who my students for the upcoming school year would be. They advised me that the previous year's special needs teacher had left a list for me. I remember reading the list. There were nine children's names from grades 1-4 and seven names from grades 5 and 6 on the list. It was suggested to me that I read these students' cumulative files, which I did.

I was also told that these students had many academic and behavioural concerns. They were especially delayed in their reading, writing and math skills. My job was to teach them language arts and mathematics. This would not be so bad I thought, after all I had taught language arts and math to grade 3, 4 and 5 students in the past.

I remember my first day of school as a special needs teacher. I was to help the new students find their classrooms. I did not even know my way around this large school with two levels yet I was trying to help these new children find their



classrooms. Somehow I managed. Later that day I met some of the children with whom I would be working. The children would come to my classroom for half a day and the other half a day they would be integrated into their regular classrooms. It was decided that the grades 1-4 children would be in my special needs classroom in the mornings and they would go to their regular classroom for the afternoon. The children from grades 5 and 6 would spend the mornings in their regular classrooms and would spend the afternoons with me in my classroom. All of my students would be integrated with their regular classrooms for gym and music classes.

I had many meetings and consultations with the resource and guidance teachers, the school administrators, regular classroom teachers, and Child Guidance personnel. Migrancy has always been high at Elwick School and it was expected that we would have many new children each school year and many of the previous children would move away. This was the case again this year. By the time I was ready to begin my special needs classes, I had ten children in my morning class and eight boys in my afternoon class.

### **Disengaged Learners**

The students were referred to my special needs program because they were not reading, writing or doing math at a level expected for their grade. I had considered it my responsibility to help these children with their academic skills so

that they could “fit” better into their regular classrooms. I resorted to what I might now call “quick fix” methods to try to help these children. I thought I could somehow deliver the pieces that these children were missing in their academic learning and somehow they would catch up to their peers. If only these children could read better they would somehow fit into the regular classroom and would not have to be part of the resource program. I relied on teaching sight words by flashcards and in stories. I opted for a phonetic means of teaching my children how to read. We moved in a very prescribed way in reading, first by learning beginning sounds and later learning vowel sounds and blends. I believed that practise and more practise with a very controlled vocabulary would “fix” my students’ reading delays.

I remember my afternoon boys very well. Not only did these children have language arts and math in the morning in their regular classrooms, but they were taught language arts and math in the afternoon by me as well. After all they were so “weak” in these subject areas, surely a double dose of language arts and math would “fix” them.

In retrospect, I can appreciate why I had so many behavioural concerns, especially in my afternoon class. Many of these students were missing social studies, science, and art in their regular classrooms. Instead, they were with me doing language arts and math again. When I think about this experience now, I realise all of the “real life” reading and writing that we could have been doing. We

had a large room with two sinks. I could have engaged these children with hands on experiments or we could have built objects. Prior to these activities we could have read about what we needed to know and later written about our experiences. I gave my students very little choice in their curriculum. Instead I chose the programs that would “fix” them. While I can’t go back in time, I can learn from the past. This I have done.

The following year our school division adopted a consultative-collaborative service delivery model for special education. In this consultative-collaborative model “the goal of special education is to provide classrooms where all children can be successfully educated” (Freeze, Bravi & Rampaul, 1989, p.48). Stainback, Stainback and Forest (1989) see the consultative-collaborative model of special education as “coordinated work of classroom teachers and specialized resource personnel. Professionals work together in and out of the classroom to plan and deliver instructional and related services under a coordinated, inclusive program” (p.190).

As a special needs teacher my role changed. Children would be integrated into regular classrooms and I would provide support in their classrooms. This support could be in the form of team teaching, differentiated instruction, developing instructional methods and materials, developing behaviour management strategies, providing short-term, part-time alternative placements and working with small groups of children. Providing support personnel such as paraprofessionals to

work with students and being a liason between other support services was also part of my role. On-going consultation between classroom teachers and resource teachers continues to be an important part of this model.

I began to work more closely with classroom teachers and with groups of students in their classrooms. Sometimes I would work with groups of students in their classrooms and other times we would go to my room to work. I also helped classroom teachers and students by providing resources and materials at the students' academic levels.

I was still, however, resorting to "quick fix" programs to help my students become better readers and writers. I figured that if they learned to read Dolch word lists they would become more successful readers in their classrooms. I remember having students read list upon list of words out of context. I even expected them to cut these words out and glue them in the proper spots on worksheets. Surely this would help their reading. Perhaps, I thought, if I could help them to develop stronger vocabulary skills, they would not have so many reading difficulties. Most of the time in my resource program, I chose what children would do. Mostly I made such decisions without the children's input. As a teacher I thought I knew what was best for them.

As a resource teacher I often felt that it was expected of me to have a "magic bag of tricks" I could use to transform a grade 4, 5 or 6 child - who was

reading and writing well below grade level expectations - into a dramatically improved literacy learner. Many teachers, myself included, hoped that I could somehow “fix” the children so they could function in the regular classroom without program adaptations. I remember having uneasy feelings about my new role and I was starting to question what I did with students.

**Journal Entry (April, 1996)**

*I have been working one-on one with “Benny”. Benny has been referred to me because he is not reading at grade level and needs support. Benny cannot seem to remember words and is struggling with even the simplest text. He still has trouble reading words like see, can, the, an, etc. from one day to the next. I have been practicing Dolch words flashcards with him and sometimes we study phonics patterns. Benny and I practise the sounds of letters and blends or groups of words. I am even having Benny highlight certain blends in words in an attempt to help him read better. Both Benny’s classroom teacher and I feel these instructional approaches will help Benny with his struggles as a reader. I am feeling bored, myself, when I am working with Benny in these ways. We seem to be doing the same things over and over again. I present the words, letters or blends and Benny tries to read them back to me. I also encourage him to write using the words he is learning with me. Much of the time Benny appears frustrated and not very engaged. There are no other children in the group with whom he can interact. I am feeling bored, I wonder how Benny feels? I know I need to make some changes. I am not “fixing” Benny. I think I am making him dislike reading even more and I think I am frustrating him. Benny does not always want to come and work with me. Can I blame him?*

**Journal Entry (April, 1996)**

*Wes is also struggling with reading. Even his mom has told me "he can't read, he just memorizes the book". I am using the same approaches in reading with Wes that I am using with Benny. Wes says that sometimes the words do not stay still on the page. He does not want to read the flashcards. He does not want to write sentences with the words. He says he hates reading. Most of the time he just sits there not wanting to do anything but play. Why is he refusing to work? Why is he breaking his pencil? He looks so bored and disengaged. What I am trying to do is not making any sense to him. He tells me he will never be able to read. I am confused.*

I was also spending a lot of time on phonics lessons with my struggling readers. We would start with alphabet recognition, then work through "short a" vowel sounds to "short u" vowel sounds and finally graduate to long vowels. I believed that my students would learn to read by going through this sequential order of learning sounds. I was also supplementing this reading with Dolch word flashcards and other sight word flashcards. I also purchased several sight word story books and specific "short a" and "short e" vowel sound books. All of these programs, I believed, would help my students to read better - perhaps even catch them up to their peers in their classrooms. This was not so! I found that my students and I were bored. There was not much interesting, quality literature written highlighting sight words with "short a" or "long u" vowel sounds. The following "short a" story illustrates this problem:

### My Cap

That is my cap.  
My cap has a flap.  
My cap is on my lap as I nap.  
Tap, tap, tap!  
Clap, clap, clap!  
Slap, slap, slap!  
A bat, a rat and a cat did that!  
No nap!  
Do not slap my cap from my lap!  
That mat!  
Splat!  
The bat, the rat and the cat sat on my hat.  
My hat is flat!

I realise now how bored my students must have been reading stories like this one over and over again. These students were aged nine through twelve. I am sure that most of them would not have chosen to read a book about a flat cap. However, since *I* was the teacher, *I* thought *I* knew what was best for them and these were the programs *I* chose to make them better readers.

### My Past Experiences As A Learner

When I think about Benny and Wes I cannot help but feel empathy for them. They were both telling me in their own ways that they were very frustrated with the reading they were doing with me.

This thought brings back frustrating memories of being a student myself in high school. Recently I wrote a journal entry from this time in my life, twenty years ago, when I was a student in a grade ten English class.

Journal Entry (September, 1996)

*My teacher had assigned a short story - The Sniper - for us to read. We were to read the entire story during class and answer the comprehension questions. She wanted us to complete all of this in our 85 minute period, so that we could correct the assignment before class dismissal. I remember the directions she gave us as if they happened yesterday: "Read The Sniper on page 46 and answer the questions from the board into your scribbler." That was it! We had no prior discussion, no talk about the language in the story or anything. We were expected to just read and answer the questions. I remember reading nervously thinking to myself: What is a sniper? Should I ask my friend? No, better not, it's so quiet in here, the teacher will hear me and I will get into trouble. Should I go up and ask my teacher? No, better not, she looks busy, besides everyone else is reading. I must be the only one who doesn't know what a sniper is. I must be stupid. While these thoughts were going through my mind, I was trying to read. At the end of my reading, I still did not know what a sniper was. I answered the questions as best I could, which was not very well. When we corrected the questions, I remember praying, please don't ask me a question, please let me fade into the woodwork. I don't know the answers. I must be so dumb. I do not want my classmates to know how dumb I am. Thank goodness we did not have to exchange scribbles and mark someone else's work. I managed to make it to the end of the class without being asked a question. To this day I will never forget this experience.*

*Most of the reading I did in high school I was expected to do alone. This included answering questions alone. I grew up in a small community where most of the students came to school and went home by bus. Since my friends and I lived miles apart, we could not easily get to each other's houses to work on our homework. Instead, my friends and I would have long evening conversations about the stories we read and we would discuss the answers that we planned to*



*write. While engaged in these conversations, I remember feeling like I was somehow cheating on my school work. After all, I was to do my homework by myself and not ask others for help. Surely, if my teacher wanted us to work as a group, she would have provided us with time to do so in class.*

I now understand that I was making reading and writing a social activity for myself and my friends by talking on the phone. It is too bad three way calling and conference calls were not readily available in those days. I'm sure our discussions would have been much richer. Imagine the value in talking with my three closest friends, sharing our thoughts about our reading! At the time, however, it just felt like I was "cheating" and getting help with my homework.

**Journal Entry (September, 1996)**

*My grade 5 students have been reading a great book called Real Live Monsters. Today I want them to do a page about long and short vowels. No one is engaged. This is boring. Why am I doing this? I keep hearing the voices of some of my colleagues saying, "if only they knew phonics, they would become better readers." I know I do not believe this so why am I expecting my students to do the worksheet? Benny and Wes are racing through my mind. Why am I thinking that I can help these children become better readers by pushing the phonics and flashcards?*

## **Engaging Learners**

Being a resource teacher working within a consultative-collaborative model, also gave me the opportunity to work in many different classrooms in my school. What a wonderful experience it can be to teach with another teacher in the same room. I remember one grade 5 teacher particularly well. Cora taught in a grade 5 classroom in my school. I worked in her classroom every day. One day during literature circles in her room, I got a chance to observe students working cooperatively in their reading and responding to real literature. They were reading to each other, predicting, and discussing ideas they were thinking about. Cora had, and still has, a wonderful way of interacting with children. I saw all of her children choosing books that they were interested in reading. In response to what they were reading some children were drawing to make sense for themselves, others were making dioramas, some were creating objects, some were writing and others were acting out what they read and what they thought was going to happen next. The one thing that amazed me most was the way these children were all doing what they needed to do and this did not look the same for all of them. They were certainly all engaged in their learning. What I witnessed happening with and to children in Cora's room was opposite to what had been happening for myself as a teacher and to Benny and Wes. Children were enjoying their reading and responding activities.

**Journal Entry (September, 1996)**

*My grade 5 students were reading a novel about animals. I remember one student, Jack, in particular enjoying reading aloud and contributing to our discussions. As a learner, Jack was engaged when he was talking about what was happening in the story and making connections for himself. But this did not continue once we moved into writing answers to the questions I had made up about the chapter (in an attempt on my part to assess reading comprehension). Inevitably Jack was no longer engaged. He would refuse to do the work and would loudly complain "this sucks!" Over and over again, he would sit and sit and mumble, "this sucks and I'm not doing it!" As a teacher it was very hard to listen to this. I felt he should be doing what I had told him to do! After all, I had spent a lot of time coming up with these questions and now he needed to work on the answers. After hearing this for several days, I could no longer ignore this student's voice.*

Oh my goodness, there it was, my sniper experience all over again! I knew I needed to make changes in my teaching practices.

## **Chapter Two Teacher Action Research - An Avenue of Change**

“Any teachers who are interested in hearing more about a Master’s of Education program being offered through the University of Manitoba, are asked to attend a meeting at Rivergrove School at 4:00 p.m. today.” This was the message I heard over the intercom system in my school in September, 1995. I did not pay much attention to the message nor did I attend the first meeting about this Master’s program. I remember thinking to myself: Who has the time to take more university courses? It’s the beginning of a new school year and I have too much to do here. I never gave it a second thought.

The next day my colleague and friend Nancy came to see me in my room. I could tell by the enthusiastic look on her face that she had some exciting news to share with me. I had often shared some of my uncomfortable feelings as a resource teacher with Nancy who taught grade 5 in my school. Nancy knew that I was struggling with my own beliefs about literacy and what I was expected to do as a resource teacher. Nancy had attended the meeting about the Master’s program and she rushed to tell me what a wonderful opportunity it would be. She explained to me that interested teachers and administrators from the Seven Oaks School Division would work together in a cohort. The focus would be on teacher action research in curriculum, and everyone would be involved in critically examining their teaching practices.

**Wells (1992) argues that:**

**the most effective learning takes place when the learner, faced with a question or problem arising from an inquiry to which he or she is committed, is helped to master the relevant cultural resources in order to construct a solution (p.2).**

**In teacher action research, the teacher is the learner and the inquiry usually starts with a general sense of wondering. Wells also states that in teacher action research, the teacher/learner enters willingly into the process.**

**After speaking with Nancy my curiosity was piqued. The following week, there was another meeting. I attended this next meeting and was impressed with what I heard. I remember thinking that this would be something that I could do and something which made a lot of sense for what I needed professionally at this moment in my teaching career.**

**Now, looking back to that time almost four years ago, I think I already knew what I would research before we actually started any courses together. That same school year I had developed a take home math kit project with another teacher in my school. We developed over one hundred math kits complete with instructions, activity cards and all the manipulatives children would need to do the math activities. I thought that I would evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of this math project. This was not, however, where my journey was to take me.**

**After several more meetings we finally had a committed cohort of eighteen teachers and administrators who would begin their first course together in teacher**

action research. We began our first course, Educating as Inquiry, in April of 1996. We met with our instructor Judith Newman before the start of the course and she asked us to read Tony Hillerman's Sacred Clowns prior to our course together. Sacred Clowns is about a police lieutenant, Joe Leaphorn, who has two murders to solve. Judith encouraged us to read the novel twice, the first time to enjoy the story and the second time through we were to highlight anything Leaphorn had to say about doing action research. According to Judith, Leaphorn's actions were a clearly articulated description of what we would be attempting to do ourselves as teacher action researchers. We were asked to write a reflective piece about the questions about research and about our professional practice which the book raised for us.

I remember reading Sacred Clowns and enjoying it as a mystery. However, I thought to myself, how is police work and solving a murder case anything like what I want to do as a teacher action researcher? Eventually, I was able to link what Leaphorn did to what I would have to do to research my own practice. As I embarked on a journey as a teacher action researcher, I would have to question my own beliefs and practices, gather data, make connections among the data, verify my data with my respondents, and debrief with teaching/researching colleagues. I was starting to see how my own teacher action research and Leaphorn's police worked were linked. I give credit to Judith with this very creative way of enabling us to discover what teacher action research could look like for us. Instead of

telling us what we would do, Judith had us discover this for ourselves in a very meaningful way. “Leading from behind” was a phrase Judith often used with us. She argued that as teachers we sometimes want to keep control. Instead she felt we needed to take our “cues” from our students, we needed to “lead from behind”. This was the start of my journey as a teacher action researcher and the start of my uncovering my own beliefs as a teacher and as a learner.

### **Writing Reflections**

As a cohort we were also expected to do a fair bit of professional reading in our courses. We were encouraged to “think with” the authors we were reading. We were encouraged to write reflections each week. We shared these weekly reflections with Judith and with other members of our cohort. Judith also wrote a weekly reflection which she shared with all of us. “Thinking with” authors did not mean memorizing and regurgitating what the authors had written in their pieces. Instead “thinking with” came to mean recording my personal questions, thoughts, and connections as they arose in response to what I was reading. This was not an easy process. Throughout my previous university courses for my Bachelor of Education degree and Special Education Certificate, I was used to memorizing a text and doing what I thought the professor wanted me to do. In retrospect, I see this as parallel to what many children see schooling to be: do what the teacher wants and you will do okay. Indeed this is what I wanted my students to do in the

past. During my journey into teacher action research, my expectations of myself as a learner began to change. My expectations were similar to what I now expect of children as learners. They will: activate prior knowledge, make connections, and follow their own need to know.

Writing personal reflections and sharing them with others can be a scary process. I remember some of my first reflections. Many were safe comments and questions that came from my readings. However, as I got more comfortable with the process and the people in the cohort, my reflections became more meaningful and more thought provoking. Looking back over my reflections from our first course in teacher action research, I can see how my dilemmas as a teacher were beginning to take shape.

**Reflection (April 24, 1996)**

*In doing research we will be asking participants to tell their lived stories. Asking participants to keep journals of thinking may be a good idea. Some of the information that I need to gather may become very personal for some participants. How will I get personally involved in my participant's lives without crossing the privacy border? I know that I personally do not mind sharing some things with people but there are things in my life that are very personal and I am not comfortable sharing. I know I would feel offended if my personal privacy was invaded. How will I overcome this in my own research?*

*I am slowly beginning to appreciate how risky and scary the whole idea of research will be. I will be opening up myself and my teaching beliefs to "self critical enquiry" (Stenhouse, 1985, p.8). I will be questioning what I do and possibly educational issues in general. Publication of my work will make it*



*subject to public scrutiny. As a researcher I will have to allow an intrusion into my values. I still get butterflies in my stomach when I think of this.*

When I look at this reflection from years ago, I realise how worried I was about the research I was going to do and the impact of this research on my participants: my students. Through further readings, additional courses, and a closer look at my evolving data, I came to realise that teacher action research is about me and that I am the subject of my studies. I am critically looking at what I do as a resource teacher. Critical, reflective practice had provided me with a means of uncovering: my beliefs about literacy education in a resource program, the gaps between my beliefs and what I was doing in practice in the classroom, and a curricular action plan for addressing such gaps. This realisation came only after many more reflections, much more reading, sharing with colleagues and time.

**Reflection (May 7, 1996)**

*Stock (1993) and Newman (1987) discuss various teaching strategies in the articles. Stock tried a variety of means to get her students, who were reluctant readers and writers, to become motivated to complete an assignment. She provided students with the task of collecting growing-up experiences from their lives and allowed them many ways to complete the task.*

*Newman discusses the teacher's role as leading from behind. Interpretive teaching is where the focus is on learning and on ways to create contexts which allow learners to make sense of the world collaboratively.*

I was excited about what Stock and Newman expressed about teaching and learning. I began to question what I did with my students. Would the Dolch word lists make them better readers? Would practising word after word on flashcards improve their reading? Why was I not allowing students to choose what they would like to read? Why did I expect everyone to do the same type of novel response - usually written answers to questions I had prepared? Did I really know what my students were interested in reading about? Had I ever taken the time to understand and appreciate their need to know?

In my final reflection in this first course, my questions and dilemmas about teaching were continuing to form. I had come to understand that my journey of inquiry had just begun.

**Reflection (June 19, 1996)**

*As a teacher I know that I do not always take the time to stand back and say: "What's going on here?" Lately, I have been listening to Wes say, "This sucks!" and Andy say, "This is so hard!" Instead of ignoring what they say, I am asking why. I know that I have a lot to learn about how children think they learn and how they feel about their own learning. I think that one of my emerging questions, and perhaps the basis of an inquiry, will be about how students think they learn.*

*I have made some changes in my teaching practices over the past few months. I am doing more group work and encouraging discussion amongst my students. I still find that they are saying, "I don't know what to write, how do you spell \_\_\_, etc." I will keep encouraging them to "just try": just as I have been encouraged to do in my professional studies.*

*I recently did a class activity with one of my grade 6 classes using the song "Ironic" by pop singer Alanis Morissette. In this song Alanis sings about ironic occurrences such as rain on your wedding day, meeting the man of your dreams then his beautiful wife, etc. Prior to this activity, I had noticed that many of my students seemed to know this song and would often hum or sing the tune. Then I began to wonder, do these students know what irony means? I decided to find out. I started my lesson by asking the students if they knew what irony was. Some immediately mentioned the song "Ironic" and we shared ideas of what irony meant to them. Then I read them some poems containing irony by Shel Silverstein. We talked again about what irony was. Then we listened to the song "Ironic". After listening the students worked in groups and wrote down the ironic things they heard in the song. After about 5 minutes the students wanted to hear the song again so we listened to it again. Some students wrote as they listened. Then we shared everyone's ideas in a large group format. We followed this up with students working in small groups to write ironic occurrences that could/did happen to them or someone they knew. Later we again shared all of these ideas in a large group. I was impressed at how much listening, discussing, sharing and learning was going on in this activity. And there were no worksheets! Our discussions led us to talk about capital punishment, as one line in the song says "a death row pardon two minutes too late", songwriting and writing techniques, and different ways to listen to music. The students were motivated and excited about learning and I am convinced they all now know what irony means.*

*My long term goals include looking critically at my teaching. I think I have overcome some of my fears about doing this. Looking critically at what one does is scary. However, I keep thinking of my students and the reasons I am doing what I am doing - to become a better teacher. How can I motivate my students and help each and every one of them learn? I want to set up a learning*

*environment where students are free to choose, share, discuss and participate without feeling threatened. I want to listen to my students and appreciate what they feel and think. I know my journey has just begun and that I have a long way to go to meet my long term goals. Small steps are important however. My students will be my teachers.*

Even though my inquiry was beginning to unfold, I knew that I had a long way to go. How would I gather evidence of children's learning, sharing, discussing and participating in a non-threatening environment? A closer look at critical incidents and journaling helped guide me.

### **Critical Incidents and Journaling**

Discussions about data collection became an important component in our teacher action research. We talked about the critical incidents in teaching, the "ah-ha's": those times when we had to stop and think about what we were doing. My critical incidents were times when I stopped and said to myself, "What's going on here?" Judith talked with us about "critical incidents as a way of exploring our assumptions about language, about learning and about teaching" (Newman, 1987, p.727). Judith encouraged us to jot down these critical incidents on index cards. I remember waiting for a critical incident to happen and I had a stack of index cards ready on my desk for when it happened. What was I waiting for? Would the mere

fact that I was waiting and ready, with index cards nearby, make these critical incidents happen?

The process did not occur in a neat, orderly fashion as in: (1) buy the index cards, (2) wait for a critical incident to occur, (3) jot it down, and (4) instantly I would have data. Instead, I found that I was listening more thoughtfully to what my students were saying. I was taking note of what they were telling me both verbally and non-verbally. I found that daily writing in my journal became a place where I could most comfortably reflect. In fact, the index cards never became a comfortable means of collecting data for me.

My journal became my place where I could write about my critical incidents. My writing became “a way of exploring [my] assumptions about language, about learning and about teaching” (Newman, 1987, p.727). Almost immediately after I began thinking in this way, critical incidents began to dance in my head, prompted by the uncomfortable feelings I was having as a teacher. Our discussions and readings in this and other Master’s program courses helped me to formulate ways of recording critical incidents on paper. In my journal I began to write narratives about the conversations I was having with students and the new questions I had about my teaching. As Newman (1987) states, “the incidents which help us change as teachers aren’t big events - they’re small, everyday, ongoing occurrences” (p. 728).

My journal became a place where I could write about these occurrences.

Newman (1987) writes:

our learning opportunities come from comments made in passing, from a statement overheard, from something a student might write in a journal, from something we might read or hear either because it confirms our experiences or because we disagree and have to consider what we believe instead, or because it opens possibilities we haven't thought about before (p. 736).

My daily journal writing became a way for me to take the time to stop and think about the constant stream of questions running through my mind as a teacher.

As educators we plan lessons and jot down notes about what we have done with students. But critically reflecting on my practice meant taking this planning and note-taking much further. I began to regularly ask myself questions such as: "Why did this activity work so well?" or, "Why did it not?" "Were my students engaged in their learning?" "Why did one child rip up all of his work?" "Why did another child deliberately break his pencil?" "Why did another child ask to read more books about a particular subject?", and, "As a teacher how should I respond to these observations?"

Critically reflecting on my practice gave me the courage to begin to ask these kinds of questions. Indeed, it can be very risky to look at what one does critically. I had to be willing to come face-to-face with the teaching decisions I made on a daily basis and admit that as a teacher I made mistakes. Through my

studies in teacher action research I came realise that as teacher I do not need to know all of the answers, but rather, that I need to be willing to reflect thoughtfully on the decisions and choices I make at every moment in the classroom.

Specifically, then, how has my foray into teacher action research changed what I do as a teacher? I have become a teacher action researcher who observes, who questions, and who learns from her teaching. My questions and dilemmas have become problems to investigate. Alternative ways of teaching have become opportunities from which I can learn. When the unexpected occurs and when things have not gone as I thought they might in my classroom, I embrace these events as opportunities to reflect and reconsider what is happening. My journal is a place for me to write about what I am seeing with my “new researcher eyes”.

Karen Hale Hankins (1998) describes her journal writing as:

her observations about her class, her teaching, and her memoirs of her own past as they are sparked by present events, feelings, and challenges in her classroom. When carefully reflected on, writing can help you to better understand, and thus reach and teach your students (p.80).

Looking in the reflective practice mirror can be unpleasant because I do not always like what I see. My journey as a critically reflective teacher is not a typical journey. There is no beginning and no end. Critical reflection has become a part of who I am as a teacher. As Karen Gallas (1994) states, “ultimately the process of inquiry begins with a question or with confusion. The journey I take to answer

that question or see that confusion often leads to places I never intended to go”  
(p.11).

### **Journal Entries (December, 1996)**

*During the past year I attended some language arts workshops offered by my school division. In the workshops, the teachers were active participants. On one occasion we read part of a story and discussed two questions we needed answers to. This was a much more valuable learning experience for me than reading a story and answering comprehension questions about the story. I remember vividly when the presenter commented on how useless and boring it can be for students to answer comprehension questions, in complete sentences after reading a selection. Were the students reading for enjoyment or just reading to remember so that they could correctly answer the comprehension questions? Was I really teaching or testing reading comprehension by doing this? As the presenter said this I think I sank in my chair. How many times had I read a chapter with my students and then expected them to answer comprehension questions? No wonder many of my grade 5 students last year were not very excited about our language arts classes. Many even said “This sucks!” over and over again. It’s boring to do the same thing over and over again. Is reading then answering the questions in complete sentences going to somehow magically make you a better reader? This was probably the same question that my students were asking. I know that by doing this, my students were not becoming better readers. In fact, I think they resented reading after a while. This year I will do things differently. I will base much of my teaching on students’ interests and take cues from my students about what they want to learn. I will lead from behind.*

*I believe that students who are not doing well in their regular classrooms already know they are not doing well. No wonder their confidence is down and*



*they are reluctant to attempt new tasks. Most of them have failed time and time again. I want my students to feel comfortable and to become part of a community in my classroom.*

*Frank's leg shakes as he is printing. He is covering his work and is reluctant to share. Frank must be scared. He obviously feels that he is not a good reader or writer. He is doing what he is asked to do but how can I make him feel more comfortable? I will give him some space and not go over to him right away. I will let him continue working.*

*While Frank is covering his work, I move beside him and ask him to read to me what he is writing. Reluctantly he reads to me. I can see that his printing is at a beginning stage. There are few spaces between his words and he is using both upper and lower case letters. He is reversing p's and q's and b's and d's. However he is able to read what he has written.*

*If Sharon is feeling more comfortable will she be more willing to take risks? I want my students to take risks but I know that they have to feel safe before they can take a chance.*

*I think about my own experiences in this graduate course. My first few reflections were very general - only a summary of what I read and perhaps some telling about my successful teaching moments. I was not going to write about my failures or the questions I ponder when I teach. How would my colleagues respond? Would I be seen as a terrible teacher? I did not know many of the people in this class. I did not take risks. It was not until I felt safe with these other teachers and comfortable with them as people that I was able to be more open and honest in my conversations and reflections. Now I feel safe writing about unsuccessful teaching experiences and talking about things that I am unsure of and need to work on in my teaching. This has taken time for me. Even now there are certain people in this course that I feel are safer for me to*

*approach. Feeling comfortable will take time for my students as well.*

*The side of me that emphasizes "the product" of learning is what I want to change. In my resource teacher training courses, I accepted that by knowing a grade level equivalent for students would somehow help me to help my students. I now question what a grade level score really means. What does it really mean to be at the grade 5 level anyway? I know that understanding my students' reading and writing processes are much more valuable. As Newman (1984) revealed in The Craft of Children's Writing, it is important to see what students can do in their writing and build on what they can do. The same applies to reading. I have to engage my students in reading and writing.*

*As we continue reading The Headless Horseman, Carolyn, Brenda, and Nicholas ask if they can read out loud every day. I notice that no one laughs when someone makes a mistake while reading. Children who were physically closest to the person reading sometimes even helped out. I have never encouraged or discouraged this helping.*

*When will Wes and Frank volunteer to read? The reading that these students are doing for me and what I hear from their classroom teachers makes me believe that Wes and Frank are at the beginning stages of reading and have much more difficulty reading than the other students in the group. A few days later Frank puts up his hand to read. He carefully looks at the pages that we will be reading at the start of the class. Before we read we try to make some predictions based on the pictures. I want the children to use the pictures to help them with the meaning of the story. We have also been previewing and reading words that will appear in the upcoming pages. Frank put up his hand to read page 34, a page with very few words. I wonder if he volunteers because he thinks he can be successful? He does a good job in his reading and I enthusiastically praise him.*

*Brenda, another student in the group, has a gentle way of helping people read if they are having difficulty. She will whisper the beginning sound of the word or say the word if the child is struggling. Today Wes is sitting beside her. Does this give him the courage and confidence to volunteer to read? We are reading the last few pages of the novel. Wes puts up his hand to read the page after the climax. The Headless Horseman has just chased Ichabod across the church bridge. The picture on the page is showing a black hat and a smashed pumpkin. Wes slowly reads the page stopping when he cannot read a word. Brenda helps him by whispering the word to him. She also points to the picture of the pumpkin on the page as Wes struggles to read the word "pumpkin" in the text. Pointing to the picture as a clue to help students when they read is a strategy that I have encouraged my students to use. I like the idea of verbalizing reading strategies that can be used. I don't know if I have done this formally with the group. Perhaps we will discuss these strategies one day soon. Why don't I discuss this with the group right now? Is it because I am worried about the time and about finishing the novel today?*

*I know that these students do not feel very good about their abilities as readers. My students completed reading surveys for me a few weeks ago. The survey was composed of twenty questions which I read to the students. According to their survey results most of my students felt that they did not read as well as their friends. Many expressed that they understood little or none of what they read when reading to themselves. Most replied that they worried about what others thought of their reading. Many said that reading was hard for them. I know that some of my students filled out the survey the way they thought I wanted them to, in a way that would not make them feel vulnerable ( i.e., "Reading is very easy for me," ; "I understand everything I read," etc.) However, in light of other private conversations I have had with each child, I feel that mostly I*

*received honest feedback from my students. I am so proud that each of them, many of whom are reluctant readers, have volunteered to read orally in our group. How do I keep building on the risks the children are starting to take?*

*What have my students been teaching me? I have learned that it takes time for students to feel comfortable with me as their teacher and with students from other classrooms in their group. It takes some students more time than others to reach this comfort level. I “read” my students’ comfort level by the amount of talking and sharing (both written and verbally) that they initiate with me and the group. I also look for non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and body language. Do they look nervous or are they smiling and looking comfortable? I know that this level of comfort must be in place before my students will take risks in their reading, writing and learning.*

*In order for my students to take risks, I too must be willing to look critically at the decisions I make in my teaching. I have to make changes in my teaching, try new approaches and take risks.*

*One way I have been doing this is by reading high interest novels with my students. We read about the Titanic, real live monsters and tornadoes. They are doing novel responses both orally and in writing and in picture responses. In all these modes they are relating personally to what they read. As we are engaged in this reading, the sight word stories and Dolch word flashcards are collecting dust in my room.*

*I have been encouraging my students to find books that interest them. They can practise reading their books and they are encouraged to read to me or the group if they want to. My students seem to enjoy doing book reports about self-selected stories. They proudly display their book reports in my room and share them with each other and with visitors to my room.*

*We have also been writing books. My grade 4 students wrote Hallowe'en books that they shared with younger students, peers and other adults in the school. They were proud of their "published-looking" books complete with fabric covers. My grade 4 and 5 students are currently writing Christmas books.*

*The book-making process has challenged a myth I held. I assumed that most students enjoyed drawing. In the past, most of my reluctant readers and writers were quite engaged when they were drawing. This year I discovered that some of my students are also very uncomfortable drawing. Cory almost ripped up his entire Hallowe'en book because he got so frustrated trying to draw a "good" picture. I have suggested that if my students want to they can find pictures from magazines, colouring books or other books to either trace or glue into their books. Some of my students chose to draw some of their own pictures but for those who want to use other pictures, they have a means. The frustration level has gone down. Cory has not attempted to rip a book that he wrote since.*

*I will continue to listen and learn from my students. By taking risks myself, I can feel how my students must feel and I can help them in their own risk taking attempts. The journey continues.....*

The journal writing continued for three years and to this date I have five duo-tangs of journal notes. My journal entries have initiated my journey as a teacher action researcher. Now, these entries are providing me with a means of further uncovering my own beliefs about literacy education. Further, they are helping me to reconsider how I can become an even more supportive teacher of the children in my care in the future.

### **My Research Questions**

My research is about me as a teacher. I am the subject of this study. My students are my teachers: it is my students who are helping me to understand myself as a learner and as a teacher. My journal writing is the tool I am using to track and to critically analyse my professional development as a literacy teacher working in a resource program. After careful examination and synthesis of my data three strong themes became evident. I have recognized that the most important questions driving my research are: “What does it mean for children to be involved in authentic literacy experiences?” “What role does the social nature of literacy play in my students’ learning?” “How do I, as teacher, help facilitate authentic and social literacy experiences for children?” “How might the concept of a ‘community of learners’ support children who are struggling as readers and writers?” These questions were dominant and consistent in my journal writing and became the basis of my research and further studies.

### **Meeting With Other Researchers**

Another important part of the teacher action research process has been the opportunity to meet with other educational researchers. Throughout our courses together, the cohort, has met with Gordon Wells, Virginia Richardson and Karen Gallas. Wells spoke about inquiry in the classroom. Inquiry usually starts with a sense of questioning or wondering argued Wells. In this way teacher action

research is personal and practical to the individual. Wells (1998) argued “the problems addressed by teacher researchers are rarely well-defined, nor does solving them bring an end to the inquiry” (p.5). At this point I could relate to what Wells was saying, I knew I had uneasy feeling about literacy instruction, but I did not exactly know where I was heading.

Listening to and “reading with” Virginia Richardson helped me to understand and to appreciate the differences between formal research and practical inquiry. According to Richardson (1994), “formal research is undertaken by researchers and practitioners to contribute to an established general knowledge base. Practical inquiry is undertaken by practitioners to improve their practice” (p.5). She also articulated that both forms of research are useful in practice, but in different ways. Her comments invited me to clarify my understanding of research and why my journey into teacher action research was meaningful to me.

Karen Gallas spoke to the cohort about her own research. She shared her view about how her research tended to have a strong autobiographical quality. Some of her classroom research involved a silent child in her classroom, whom she equated with herself as an elementary school student. Her research on “bad” boys in her classroom and their behaviours was not unlike the behaviours she was experiencing at home with her own son. Karen also talked about some of the many strategies she employed to collect data, synthesize data, and how she spoke to her students’ parents about her research. I remember her saying that she told

parents and children that she “studies children” to help her become a more effective teacher. Revisiting my notes from the session with Gallas, I found some good advice about my own research: She suggested colour coding data with post-it notes in the synthesizing stage. I have used a variation of this approach in that I have used different colours of highlighter marker along with post-it notes to organize my five duo-tangs of journal writing and data. The fact that Karen was a teacher in school doing research in her own classroom made what she said so real and practical for me as a teacher action researcher in my own classroom. Hearing other researchers and reading their works has been an important part of the change process for me from teacher to “teacher/research” in my classroom.

### **Sharing My Emerging Views About Teacher Action Research**

Another important and meaningful part of my journey as a teacher action researcher was having the opportunity to speak to other teacher researchers. In April, 1998, four members of our cohort attended the AERA (American Educational Research Association) Conference in San Diego. The session we presented was titled Supporting and Sustaining Teacher Action Research. To make this session authentic, the four of us presented our perspectives of teacher action research in very personal contexts. Nancy Campbell gave a brief overview of the process of developing the cohort of teacher action researchers. She stressed the importance of participant input in the planning and implementation of each



course in our Master's program. Nancy finished by sharing her first "critical incident" from her classroom observations. I spoke next about the process of critical reflection and the cohort's first steps into the world of writing as reflective practice. I shared from my journal entries with the audience. Ruth Shrofel spoke about the role of an educational leader in teacher action research. As a vice-principal, Ruth shared some of the realities of the personal and political coming together of teacher action research in a school. Edie Wilde ended our presentation with a poetry reading and a commentary. She brought theory and practice together by discussing the value of action research that is grounded in philosophy.

After the four of us presented, Gordon Wells acted as a discussant. Wells reconfirmed that teacher action research is a way of thinking about learning and that this learning needs to be shared with others. Audience participants shared their views and posed questions for our panel to ponder. Never before had I attended a National Conference let alone speak at one. This experience was fulfilling and scary at the same time. However, the opportunity helped strengthen my own understanding of teacher action research and helped me articulate my own struggles.

In October, 1998, Nancy Campbell and I were asked to share some of our views about teacher action research with a group of fourth year student teachers from the University of Manitoba. Nancy and I talked about the process of teacher action research and how we were both researchers in our own classrooms. We

shared some of our reflections, critical incidents, and journal writing with the group. We facilitated a free write and provided an opportunity for small groups to explore some articles that we had read about teacher action research and teachers as learners. We concluded by explaining that the journey as a critically reflective teacher is not a linear one. There is no beginning and there is no end. One is never finished. Ongoing reflection becomes a part of who you are as a teacher. We challenged the group to explore their questions and frustrations. Again the opportunity to share my own views about teacher action research with others was a rewarding and empowering experience that has become essential to my own growth as a learner.

### **Change. Change. Change**

Prior to starting in the Master's program I had some uncomfortable feelings about my teaching. I knew that I wanted to make changes in my teaching practices. Reading the professional literature about learning and engaging with my students alone would not have been an adequate way of solving my need for change. I had to examine what I was doing in practice, and reconsider my

practices in relation to my beliefs about literacy teaching and learning. Gordon Wells (1998) argues it used to be that “researchers found out the truth and then told teachers what they should do as a result” (p.4). Instead, I now realise that:

lasting improvements in students’ learning opportunities would not occur as a result of top-down recommendations from experts so much as from changes made by teachers working together in the light of continuing inquiry and reflection on their own practice (p.4).

Change became a natural process for me working within a cohort of others who were committed to the same goal. Teacher action research became the catalyst of this change.

It is also interesting to note how my research questions and dilemmas have changed throughout my journey as a reflective practitioner. My research questions are no longer about developing activities or products for the classroom. Now my research is about me: who I am as a learner. What have I learned from my students about literacy education? Many invaluable changes have occurred for me over these past three years. How will I facilitate authentic literacy experiences, social literacy experiences, and the concept of a community of learners in a classroom? I needed to start by understanding authenticity in literacy from my own experiences and from what my students were showing and telling me.

### **Chapter Three Understanding Authenticity**

My students have taught me that literacy needs to be authentic and meaningful for them. I believe that whether language use is authentic or not is a personal construct for each child. Authentic literacy makes sense to individual children. It is real, meaningful, and feels true for them. This understanding occurred after much listening to my students' voices, writing in my journal, and reading the professional literature. One critical incident I often reflect upon occurred before I started my Master's program in teacher action research. However, my involvement in teacher action research has allowed me to think about this incident as the starting point of my research. This was the point at which I knew I had to rethink and do something about my teaching practices. In Chapter One I wrote about Jack who enjoyed reading aloud and making connections in the stories we would read. However, as soon as we got to the assignment, the comprehension questions I had made up about the chapter (in an attempt to assess his reading comprehension), Jack was no longer engaged. He often refused to complete the questions and he would just utter: "This sucks!" This was my wake up call. I could no longer ignore Jack's voice. I had to critically look at what I was expecting my students to do.

Jo Worthy (1996) writes about her struggles when she was trying to teach struggling readers. She discusses how she was trying to teach her third grade students to read with books that contained about eight words per page. She could

see the look of resentment on their faces when they were expected to read these uninviting books. Worthy describes the “angry war with the books” that her students had every day. She knew that this upset could not be right and she describes wanting to take her students outside and burn those books. By reflecting on her students’ feelings, she decided to make changes in her teaching practices.

One of my literacy teaching beliefs was that my students needed to show me that they could comprehend what they read. I thought the best way to do this was for me to get them to answer questions about what they had read, much like what was expected of me when I was in high school. As a teacher, I remember purchasing some wonderful novels about topics my students said they were interested in exploring, such as the Headless Horseman, monsters, Alcatraz, and the Titanic. I faithfully took these novels home and read each of them. Then I spent hours and hours making up comprehension questions for each chapter. In retrospect I see that this might not have been a very productive way to spend my time.

I now understand that expecting children to write answers to teacher-made questions has to do with who controls the power in the classroom. Clearly I was in charge if everyone was on the same page, doing the same type of work. When everyone was working individually on written answers to my questions, they were all quiet. But is authentic literacy about working alone and keeping quiet?

I was forced to stop and think about my own beliefs. I had been encouraging my students to read orally and to discuss their thoughts and feelings about the reading selections. In relation to these selections, they told me about the topics they were interested in learning more about and I found other reading selections to meet these new needs. They were making connections between what they were reading and their own lives. In this way I was making reading an authentic learning event. However, when I expected my students to answer comprehension questions that I had made up on my own, I was telling them to stop making their own connections and to pay attention to what I had decided they should know. Perhaps the connections I was looking for were different from the ones they were making. Or, perhaps, by asking them to write answers to questions, I was putting them in the position of seeing writing as a chore. Were my students in "an angry war" with what I had expected them to do? I needed to rethink what I thought literacy was all about, how students learn, and what my role was as their teacher.

I also thought specifically about Benny and the activities I was choosing to do with him to help him become a better reader. I expected him to read piles and piles of isolated words on flashcards. We would also study "short a" vowel words, move on to "short e" vowel words and so on. Later he would graduate to long vowel sounds. Benny was bored with these activities; and to be quite honest so was I. He did not always want to come to work with me. I cannot blame him.

The reading I was expecting him to do made no sense to him: he was not expected to connect his reading with his experiences, nor did he have peers with whom he could construct new ideas. Benny also had no choice in reading materials. I was his teacher and I thought I knew best. I did not, however, continue to feel as if I knew best.

My professional reading, in relation to these incidents, played a significant role in helping me to identify and name what I was doing. I was following a “skills approach to literacy teaching”. I was isolating reading comprehension as a skill to be practised. I was treating reading as a set of skills that needed to be learned as parts, in linear fashion, before the child could move on to the next level. Yet, theoretically I knew that reading and writing were more than isolated skills. Edelsky, Altwerger and Flores (1991) have helped me to understand that reading and writing are learned through authentic reading and writing experiences. Such experiences must be meaningful and purposeful from the readers’ and writers’ perspectives: “Drills on isolated skills or language fragments are exercises, so they don’t qualify as reading and writing” (p.8). I had been hoping that my students would become better readers and writers by reading texts, words, and letters that I had selected for them to study and by answering questions I had devised. I now no longer believe that what I was expecting my students to do could be called “real” reading and writing. Was I making reading “hard on their eyes”? (fig. 1)

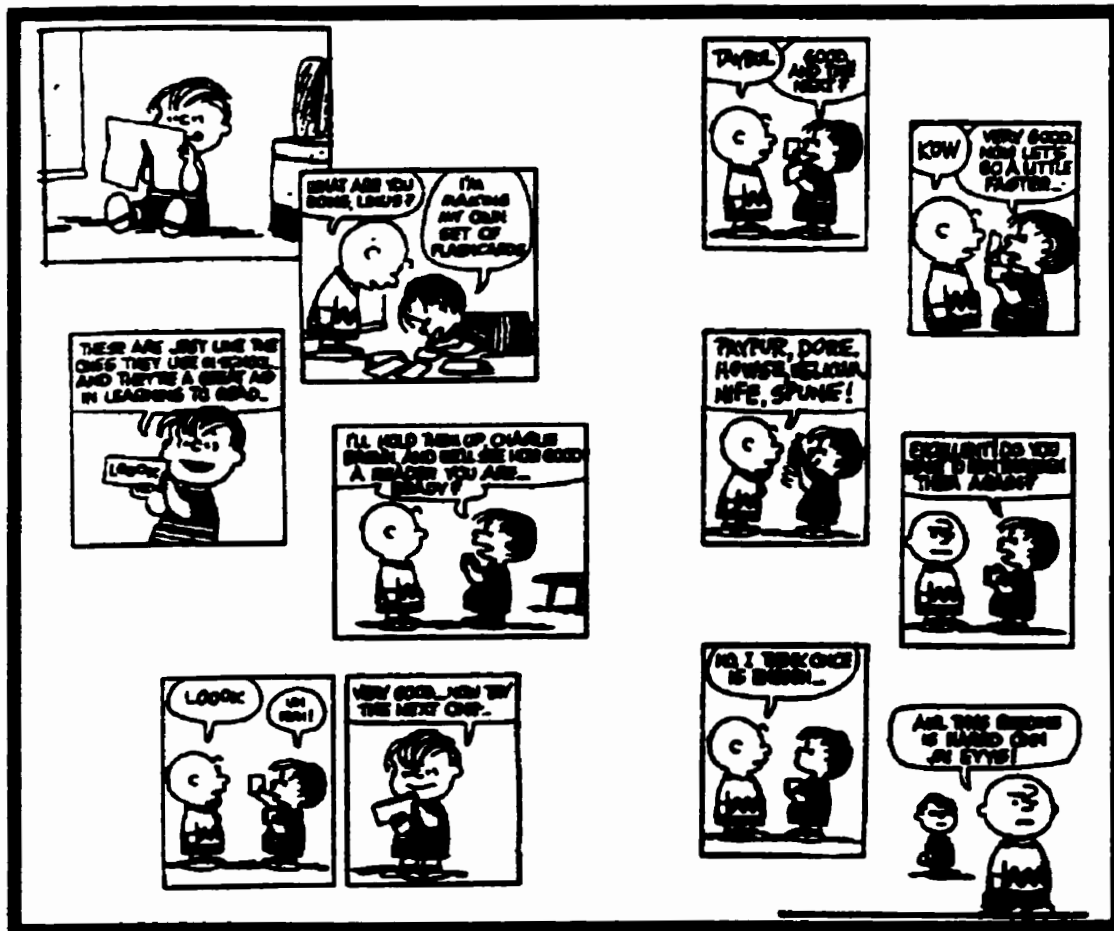


Figure 1 "Hard on my Eyes"

Much of the literature suggests that many struggling readers and writers are seen as lacking the basic skills and drills necessary for reading. Rhodes & Dudley-Marling (1988) argue that "instruction for students with learning disabilities often focusses on remediating underlying ability deficits through drill



and practise before academic learning can proceed” (p.68). I saw many of my struggling students lacking something in their reading and writing abilities. I had hoped and expected that learning specific skills, whether it be reading “short a” vowel words or answering questions that I made up, would make them better readers and writers. The literature along with my experience challenged me to shift my emphasis from a deficit approach to capitalizing on students’ strengths and abilities. In this view students are treated as competent rather than deficient, as real readers and writers, and not as children who have not yet learned prerequisite skills.

I had been relying on programs to help “fix” my struggling readers and writers. The Dolch words program includes five words at a time that are taught to students. Dolch words are high frequency words and each lesson introduces the child to about five words. The children practise printing the words, spelling them, cutting the letters out of the words and putting them back together and reading sentences with the words in them. Flashcards for practise of the words is another aspect of this program. There are countless other programs that teach isolated skills, whether it be letter and sound blends, books made up of “short a” vowel words, etc.

I now find myself moving away from feeling that “published programs” as Goodman (1989) refers to them, are providing real reading and writing experiences for my students. My students have shown me that they were not

engaged in their reading when they were expected to focus on isolated skills. Smith (1981) argues, “the decision to be made is whether responsibility for teaching children to write and read should rest with people or with programs” (p.49). The “people”, in this case my students, have spoken. They were telling me that they needed to read and write for authentic purposes - their purposes - not for the purposes of a program. I believe one of my primary roles as a teacher is to provide children with the opportunity to be involved in authentic reading and writing experiences.

I now believe that my previous teaching with flashcards, Dolch words, and many of my teacher-made activities resulted in my students feeling disengaged and bored in their learning. Smith (1981) summarizes my feelings when he states that:

programs may demonstrate reading is nonsense and ritual, that writing is boring, that learning is threatening, that children are stupid, that teachers are puppets, that schools cannot be trusted and that children’s own interests, cultures and insights into language can be ignored (p.56).

I think this is what Benny was telling me when he did not want to work with me.

This is what Jack was telling me when he kept repeating “this sucks”.

In a Reading Teacher article, Flippo (1998) discusses Frank Smith’s “Twelve easy ways to make learning to read difficult”. From this list I can see how I was probably making reading difficult for many students. Number one on the list states that aiming for early mastery of the rules of reading can make learning to read difficult. When teaching Benny I thought I knew the rules of

reading: learn blends, short vowel sounds, then finally long vowel sounds. Now I had to stop and think, were these really realistic rules of reading? Or was I just making reading more difficult for Benny? Number three on Frank Smith's list is that learning to read can be difficult if you teach letters and words one at a time, making sure that each new letter or word is learned before moving on. Again this is what I was expecting with Benny.

In early 1996, I saw one of my former students who was then in grade eight. I remembered this student as a child who really struggled with reading and writing. He also had many behavioural challenges and he would often give up when reading and writing. He was also convinced that he could not read and even his mother warned me not to be fooled by him. She said that he just memorized books. This child was another one of my students who received a heavy dose of flashcards and isolated word drills. By the time this child left our school in early grade 5, however, he was beginning to have more confidence in his abilities and starting to take some risks in reading and writing. He was very interested in cars and was choosing books on that topic. When I ran into him several years later I asked him how his reading was coming along. He replied by telling me that reading finally made sense to him and that he could read. I often wish that I would have had him explain what he meant by what he said. You know how there are times when we think of the right questions after the fact. I have not seen this student since. I wonder if he was telling me that perhaps now he saw a purpose

for reading and writing, hopefully this is what he meant.

Gail Heald-Taylor (1996) discusses three curriculum paradigms: curriculum as fact, curriculum as activity, and curriculum as inquiry. In the curriculum as fact paradigm, students read the same text, complete the same tasks and make few decisions about their learning. Student activities focus on factual and literal information and on right or wrong answers. In preparing comprehension questions for reading selections I was in a curriculum as fact place and time. Students were all expected to answer the same questions and most of the questions I prepared were very factual questions with distinct right or wrong answers. In a curriculum as activity paradigm, students can read the same text but they are encouraged to interpret the text in a variety of ways. Student activities are open-ended and promote high level thinking such as connecting what is read to the readers' own lives, inferring and making sense for themselves. I think that the many discussions I was encouraging with students were more along the lines of a curriculum as activity paradigm. Just as I am an inquirer into my own learning, so should the curriculum for my students engage them in an inquiry process. In the curriculum as inquiry paradigm, students choose their own books from many genres. Student activities are open-ended, promote high level thinking, reflection and inquiry. Problem solving, collaboration and exploring issues in literature is encouraged. I now see my expectations of my students moving into this paradigm.

Change does not come about easily. Hoffman (1998) discusses many aspects of change that I have already experienced, including: creating working structures and relationships that encourage risk taking and diverse thinking rather than pressure toward conformity; puzzling over the complexities of learning and teaching; reflecting on our experiences and refocussing; and, continually observing, assessing and evaluating what we do. Hoffman (1998) argues that “what looks like a healthy change environment for teachers looks in many ways like a healthy learning environment for kids” (p. 110). What I was expecting of myself as a learner and inquiring teacher I also needed to expect of my students as inquiring learners.

### **On To Some “Real” Literacy Experiences**

By listening to my students, writing in my journal and reflecting on my practices, I came to make some changes. My grade 5 group was excited about reading a novel: The Headless Horseman. We read this novel in October, close to Hallowe'en as the novel has a scary theme. By this time I was no longer using my teacher-made comprehension questions for novel study. Most days we would read a chapter or two together as a group. We always engaged in a discussion about what was happening in the novel. One day, we had just finished reading the first chapter of the novel and we were discussing the setting: the fact that Sleepy

Hollow was much different during the day than it was a night. I asked my students to describe Sleepy Hollow during the day and at night. My students had a better idea:

**Journal Entry (October 23, 1996)**

*Nicholas asks if they can draw the setting for Sleepy Hollow today. What a good idea. Some choose to separate their paper in two parts and draw the setting during the day on one side and the night setting on the other half of the page. Some choose to write words to accompany their illustrations. Everyone is engaged in their work. My students do what they choose to do and I can see that they all understand the setting of the novel. My principal walks into my room when my students are hard at work. She mentions how hard everyone is working and makes a point of looking at everyone's work. Nicholas is sure to make it known that this activity was his idea. Most everyone completes their task in our time together and my students proudly display their work on the window in our room. I rarely put up bulletin board displays anymore. My students are able to make choices in the work they want to display.*

So what did Nicholas' "setting response" show me? (fig. 2) I can see that Nicholas has a good understanding of the setting. He knows that setting refers to place and he has made a comparison of settings by separating his page. He knows that in the novel, Sleepy Hollow is peaceful and quiet during the day and scary and haunted at night. He is able to demonstrate his understandings without responding to my teacher-initiated activity. My thoughts and understandings were moving away from seeing the curriculum (in this case the novel the children were

reading) as fact, and towards curriculum as inquiry: where students are interpreting the curriculum in meaningful ways for themselves.



Figure 2 The setting of Sleepy Hollow

Ichabod Crane is the school teacher in the story and he is anxious to go to the party at the Van Tassel's house because he likes Katrina Van Tassel. He hopes to one day marry Katrina and possess her riches. Ichabod is also the character who gets chased by the Headless Horseman at the end of the story. Ichabod's

disappearance remains a mystery. My students and I were reading a chapter where Ichabod Crane gets invited to the party at the Van Tassel's house. We discussed the party and what might happen there. Students were making connections to their own birthday parties and other parties that they had attended. We discussed how we usually take cars to parties today, but that in those days people had to travel on horses to visit others. One student asked why Ichabod could not just walk to the party. Brenda, who had lived in a small community outside of Winnipeg, answered this question:

*Journal Entry (October 29, 1996)*

*Today Brenda answers many of the questions that were posed. One student asked why Ichabod could not just walk to the party, Brenda explains that when you live in a small town or on a farm your neighbours are sometimes far away so you can not easily walk to each other's houses. She uses her background knowledge of living in a small community to help her when the question comes up in our discussion about the chapter in The Headless Horseman. My students are beginning to ask questions that they want to answer, and most times the other members of the group can answer the questions for them. We are successful doing this orally. Why would I need them to write all of these answers on paper? They can tell me the answers. We agree that we will do some sort of response after each chapter. I give them freedom in what that response will be. Today Brenda thinks that they should make invitations for the party discussed in the chapter. This is a better idea than what I could have planned. They are excited about making the invitations.*



We talked about what invitations look like and I happened to have an invitation for my niece's birthday in my purse. I took this out to show as a sample. Brenda's party invitation (fig. 3) showed me that she understood the party was around Hallowe'en (as she drew a pumpkin on her card). In the novel it does not specifically state that the party is near Hallowe'en but it does mention that it was harvest-time, hence the picture of the wheat on Brenda's invitation. She also views parties as a time of celebration so she drew balloons on her creation. When I questioned Brenda about what the other picture on the invitation was, she said it was food for the party. I asked Brenda why she thought there would be food at the party. She replied by telling me that most parties have food and that she looked ahead to the pictures in the next chapter (something I have always encouraged my students to do) and saw that there was a picture showing a table full of food at the party. On the inside of the invitation Brenda wrote the date, time and place for the party, using information from the book. She chose 8:00 p.m. for the time, as she said that it looked like it was getting dark outside in the pictures of Ichabod riding his horse to the party. In the fall it gets dark at about 8:00 p.m. was her reasoning. She wrote October 30, 1935, for the date, because she said that she could tell from the clothes that they were wearing and the use of horses for their transportation that the story must have taken place a long time

ago. Brenda was showing me in a way that made sense for her that she was understanding what she read. She did not need me to hand her a worksheet to show me this.

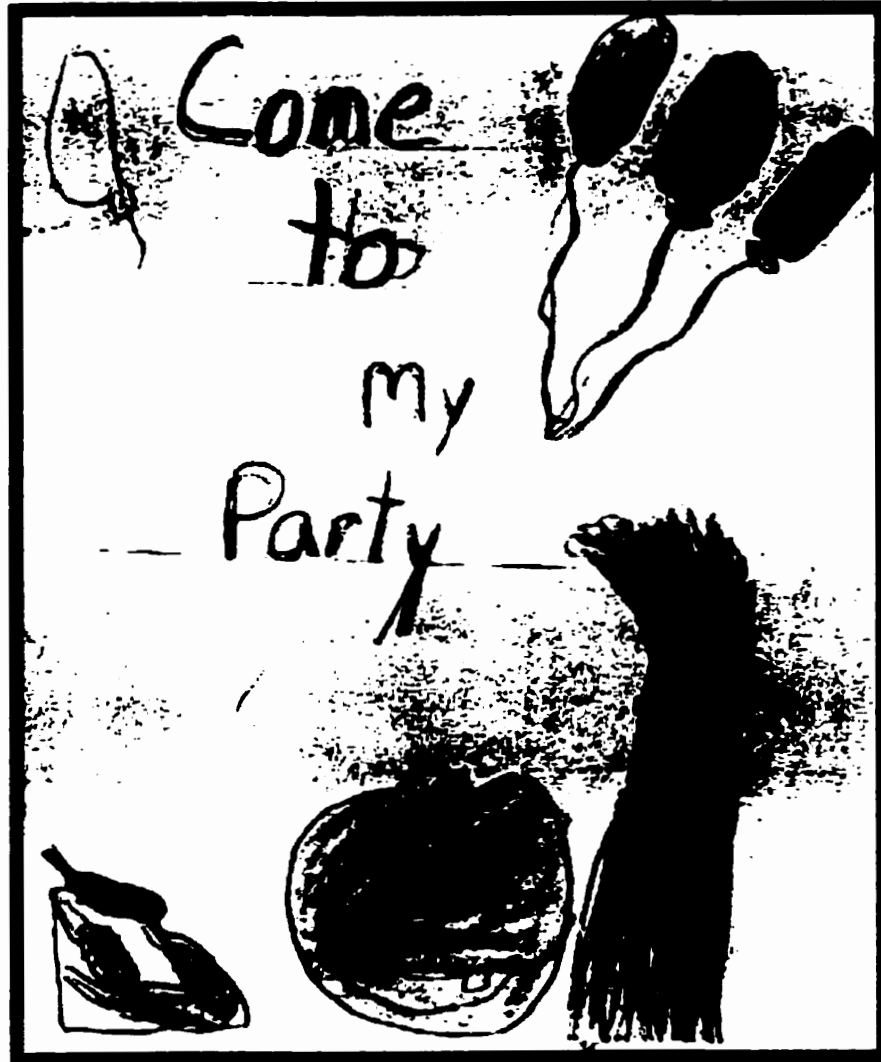


Figure 3 Brenda's Party Invitation

After we had finished reading this novel, Nicholas found a novel, The Legend of Sleepy Hollow, in our school library. This was a different version of the story than the one we had read together as a class. Nicholas brought the book to class and asked me to read it to the group. Throughout my reading of the story, the group made verbal distinctions and connections between this version of the story and the one we had previously read. Nicholas asked if we could draw Venn Diagrams to compare and contrast the two stories. (fig. 4) A Venn Diagram is a picture of two circles that overlap in the centre. On the sides of the circles that do not overlap you record information about the topic for that circle. In the middle, where the two circles overlap, you record information that is common to both sides of the circle. I was familiar with Venn Diagrams as I had used them in math class to compare and contrast. I had never thought of using a Venn Diagram for literature. Again my students were my teachers. Without a predetermined worksheet or set of teacher-made questions guiding my teaching practices, I was able to “follow my students’ lead” and do Venn Diagrams. Some chose to diagram individually. Another group of two students chose to do one together; one student wrote about one book, the other student wrote about the other story, and they decided on the similarities together. What a great learning experience for me and for my students. All of the students were successful in their attempts and there was no need for them to answer a bunch of personally meaningless

questions. They were comprehending what they had read and heard and were showing me so in a way that was meaningful for them.

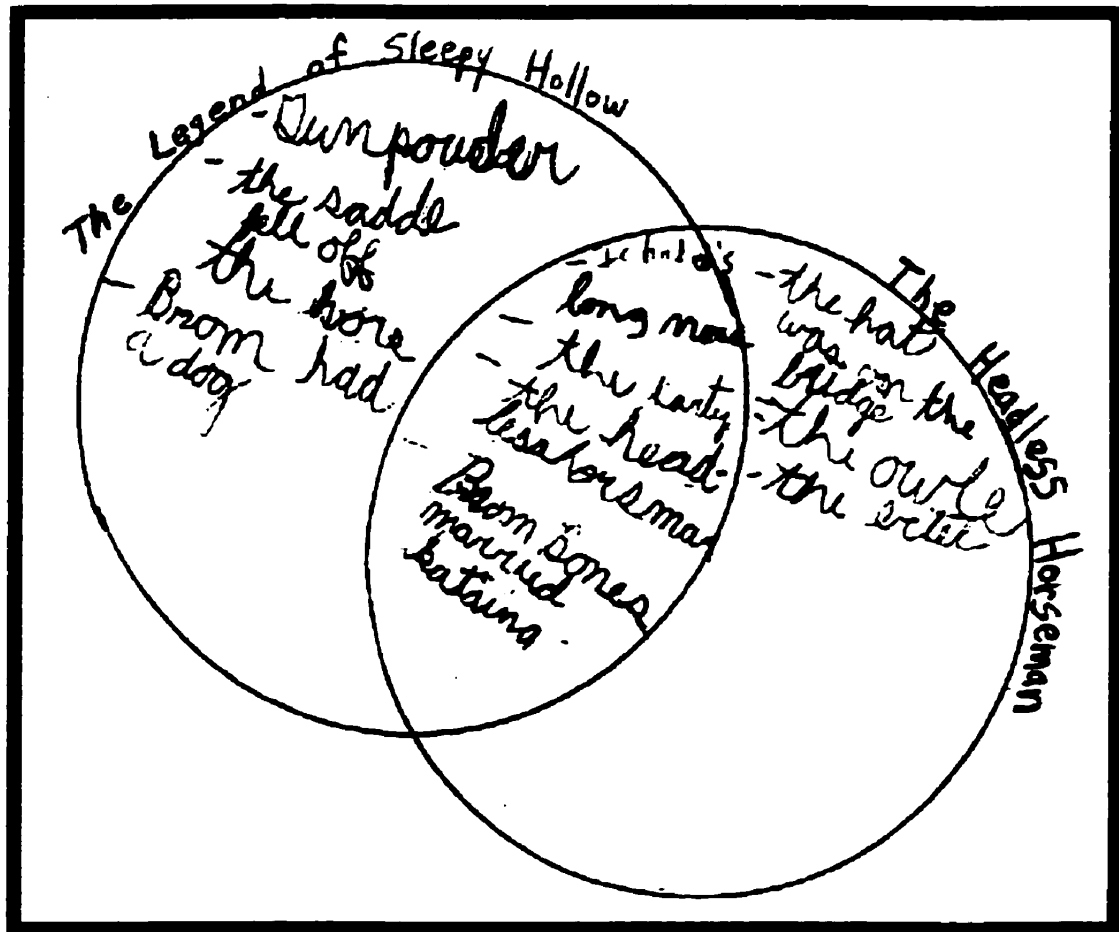


Figure 4 Nicholas' Venn Diagram

In Chapter Two, I described how Wes was very reluctant to read in the group and how Brenda gently helped him to read the word pumpkin on the page that he had volunteered to read. He volunteered to read after carefully studying the page. Had he judged that he could be successful in reading this page? Is that why he volunteered to read? Or was he confident because he had been successful with all of the responses to the novel so far? Would he have felt as confident if he had had to answer teacher-made questions? Was I seeing Wes as a student with strengths and abilities instead of from a deficit approach as Rhodes and Dudley-Marling (1988) had challenged me to do? Did success lead to more success and greater risk taking?

During this past year, my grade 4 group had chosen to learn more about dinosaurs. I found some stories that they might enjoy reading, and we read, discussed and responded to the experiences. One of my students found a story in the library about a group of students going on a field trip back in time, to the days of the dinosaurs. Bev was responsible for choosing the authentic literacy activities as we read the story:

**Journal Entry (March 10, 1999)**

*I began to read the story Magic School Bus with my grade 4 group today. As soon as I read a few pages of the text, Bev noticed that the many different characters all said things in the story. She said she knew this because of the cartoon bubbles over their heads: just like in the comics. She suggested that our group become characters in the story and everyone could read their respective*

parts. *What an inviting way to get everyone to read. Not only did my students become a character in the story, they showed expression and feeling in what they read. Bev also suggested that we do a beginning, middle and end sheet as a response to the story. The activity Bev chose was meaningful and authentic for herself and her classmates as they were experiencing Reader's Theatre in their classrooms. They were encouraged to act out characters and Bev felt that the story I read to them was a good choice for students to assume the role of the characters.*

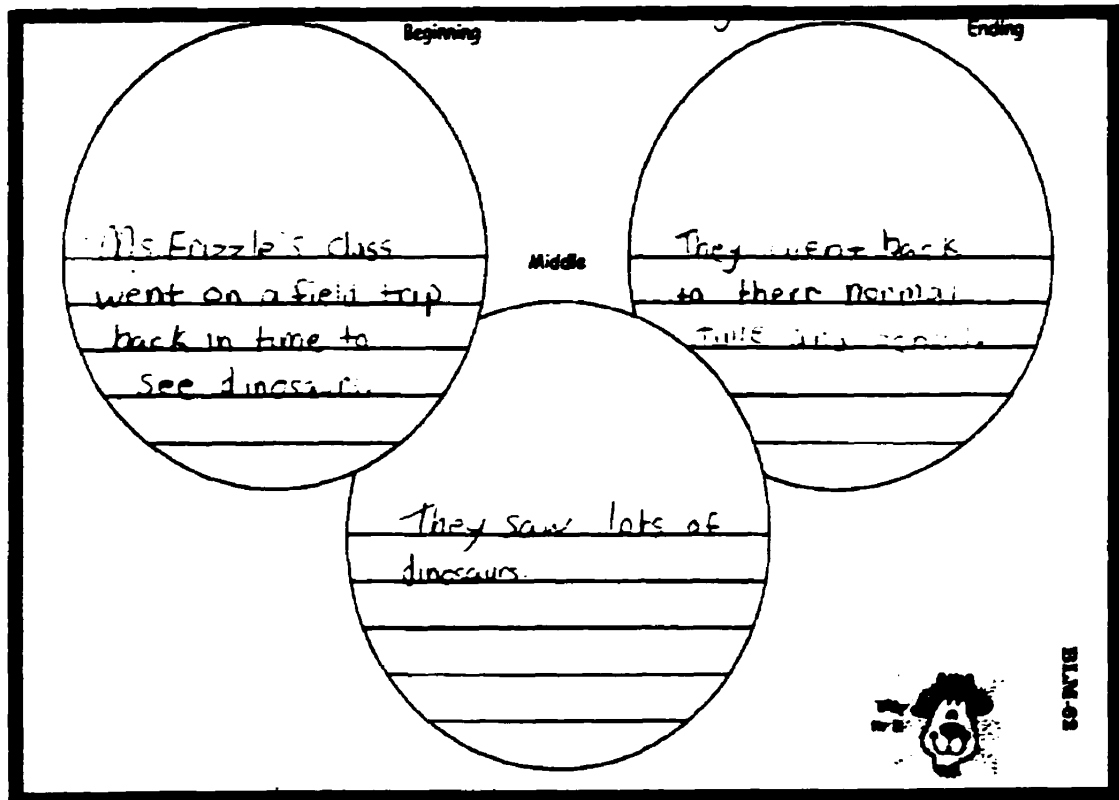


Figure 5 Bev's Story Map

Not everyone was in agreement with Bev's suggestion. (fig. 5) Two of my students wanted to write and draw about a magical field trip that their class could take. This incident has helped me further appreciate the need for authenticity as well as choice in literacy learning.

Last year my grade 5 students were interested in reading about Mount Everest. I think part of their interest came from the advertisement about a movie dealing with Mount Everest playing in the local Imax theatre. We had just read the chapter when Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norguay packed their supplies and headed to Mount Everest. Steve suggested that an authentic response to this chapter would be for him to write about his own expedition to Mount Everest. He would write about who would accompany him on his expedition and what supplies they would take. (fig. 6) Steve's response showed me that he used the information from the chapter to help determine what type of supplies he would need to be successful on his journey. He also told me that he used the words in the chapter to help him spell expedition and oxygen.

"Steve's" Expedition to  
Mount Everest.

Clarice, Steven, Amanda,  
would go on the expedition  
with me.

we would take.

- 1) shoes.
- 2) food
- 3) Clothes
- 4) oxygen
- 5) matches

Figure 6 Steve's Mount Everest Expedition List

When reading about children at a summer camp with my grade 5 students last year, Natalia came up with an appropriate, meaningful way to show me that she was understanding what she was reading. We had just finished reading the section where the characters at camp are sitting down to breakfast. In the story the many foods served are mentioned. Later in the chapter, the characters are again in the mess hall but this time they are eating supper. This novel is not just about eating at camp, but the mess hall is the setting for many of the hilarious situations the boys encounter at camp. Natalia suggests that the group members write menus for a camp of which they were in charge. This way everyone could



have the freedom to choose foods they liked. (fig. 7) What an engaging and meaningful activity. All of my students' responses were different, as each reflected the student's own choices in foods. Some of the favourite foods commonly enjoyed by eleven year olds, such as pizza and french fries, appeared on most menus. Again this was a meaningful way for my students to relate to the story and make connections to their lives.

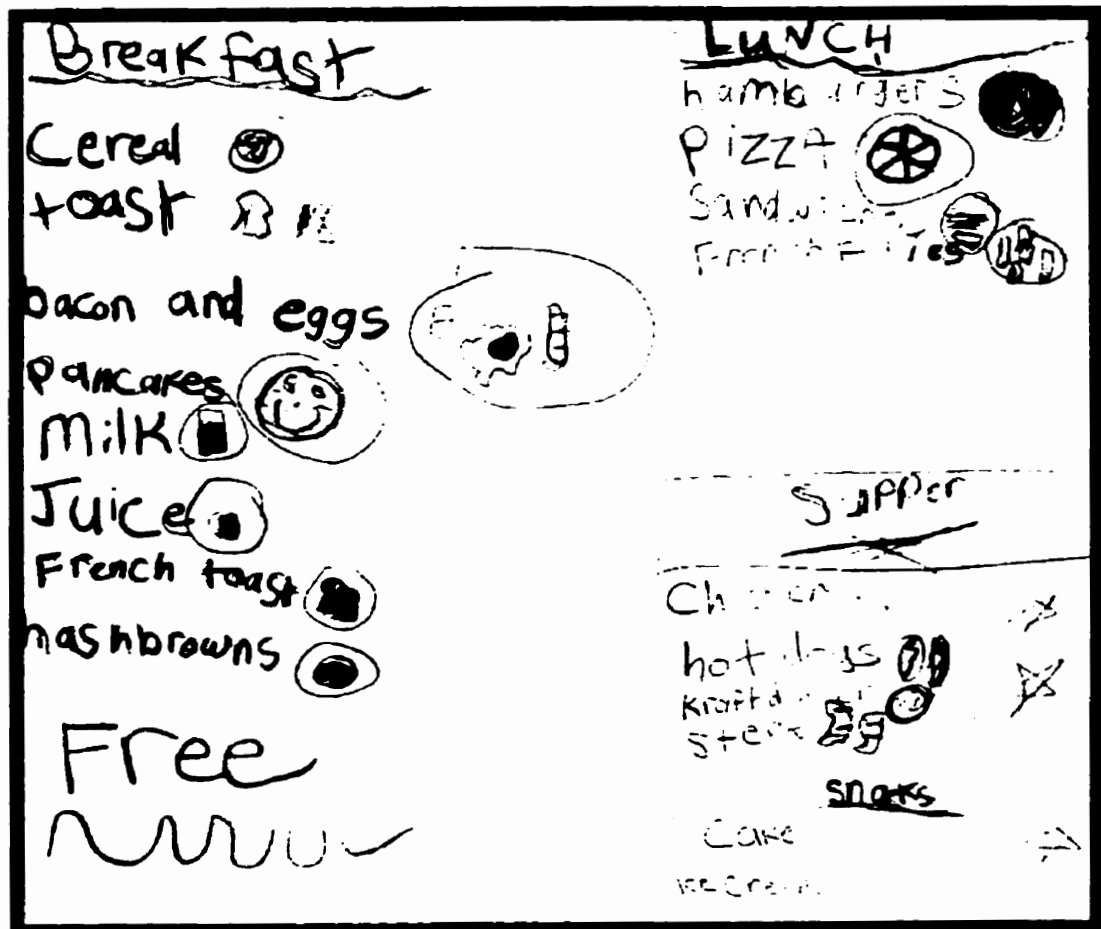


Figure 7 Natalia's Camp Menu

Margaret Moulton (1999) has written an article about the many genres of student writing. When given a choice as to the type of response her students could choose in their research, Moulton's students used forty-one different genres. This list included newspaper articles, tabloid covers, lists, sheet music, letters, diary entries, invitations, Doctor's reports, recipes, receipts, etc. The list is amazing in terms of the types of responses children came up with when given the opportunity to make literacy meaningful for themselves. Reading this account and the ideas that my own students have come up with has helped me to realise just how important authenticity is in reading and writing.

### **Who's Asking the Questions Here?**

In his article entitled "Did you ask a good question today?", Ciadiello (1998) argues: "it appears that student questioning behaviour runs counter to normative conventions of classroom discourse and role relationships" (p.210). As a teacher I usually made up the questions and my students answered them. Now, I felt I needed to put more trust in my students as learners and give up on some of the traditional roles I had played as a teacher and provide opportunities instead for my students to ask their own questions.

After attending a workshop several years ago, I was inspired by a strategy that was discussed. This strategy is based on prediction, but instead of students predicting what they think will happen next, students are encouraged to ask

questions about what they need to know for themselves in the story. One of my students came up with the phrase “asking our burning questions” as the name for this strategy. I began to think of the thought-provoking questions that my students had asked over the years in response to stories and novels we had been reading together. The questions they had posed were authentic for them as learners: they had had a true need to know the answers to them. After reading Spirit of the White Bison (Culleton, 1985), my students asked about Native land claim rights, residential schools and prejudice. Many of their questions and concerns required further research and provoked further discussions. Brenda, one of my students, even brought in a movie entitled Where the Spirit Lives, which deals with many of these issues.

**Journal Entry (January 26, 1998)**

*Today Brenda brought in an Aboriginal poster and a poster drawn by her aunt. She tells me that she wants to show and explain the poster, with many Aboriginal customs such as hoop-dancing, dream catchers, and medicine pouches, to the group. After doing this, she advises me to hang the poster in our classroom. She has also brought in a movie to show the class. She explains that it will help answer some of the questions that people in the group had about residential schools, treatment of Aboriginals, and Land Claims. Watching a movie is not something that I had planned with this group. I thought we would move on to our next novel. But I can see how passionate Brenda is about this movie and I know that viewing it will obviously be an authentic learning*

*experience to her. I have to trust Brenda and take my lead from her. As it turns out the movie is very thought provoking and a valuable teaching tool.*

Over the years I think of the many “burning questions” my students have had about the texts they were reading. These questions were genuine and authentic for them as learners and much more meaningful than any questions I could have asked them. When I used to make my teacher-prepared questions to check for comprehension after novel chapters, many of these questions were factual recalls of information which could have been answered without reading for meaning. I often call these “what colour was the hat” questions. Goodman (1982) illustrates this point in a story titled A Mardsan Giberter For Farfie. (fig. 8) The story uses nonsense words. After reading the selection there are five factual questions. Although the story does not use an English lexicon, one can still use one’s knowledge of English syntax to correctly answer the questions. These types of factual questions, much like the type I expected the children to answer in the past, can be answered without having an understanding of the story. Surely reading without meaning is not reading.

## **A MARDSAN GIBERTER FOR FARFIE**

**GLIS WAS VERY FRAPER. SHE HAD DENARPEN FARFIE'S MARDSAN. SHE DIDN'T TOLP A GIBERTER FOR HIM. SO SHE CONLANATED TO PLIMP A MARDSAN BINKY FOR HIM. SHE HAD JUST SPARVED THE BINKY WHEN FARFIE GIBBLED IN THE GORGER.**

**"CLORSTY MARDSAN!" SHE BOFFED.**

**"THAT'S A CROUSTICH MARDSAN BINKY," BOFFED FARFIE, "BUT MY MARDSAN IS ON STANSAN. AGSAN IS KELSAN."**

**"IN THAT RUSPEN," BOFFED GLIS, "I WON'T WHANK YOU YOUR GIBERTER UNTIL STANSAN." THEY BOTH SNERKLED.**

- 1) WHO ARE THE CHARACTERS IN THE STORY?**
- 2) WHAT HAD GLIS CONLANATED TO PLIMP?**
- 3) WHOSE MARDSAN HAD GLIS DENARPEN?**
- 4) WHAT DID FARFIE BOFF ABOUT THE BINKY?**
- 5) HOW DID THEY BOTH FEEL?**

**Figure 8 Goodman's A Mardsan Giberter For Farfie**

Earlier this year when I tried the “burning questions” strategy with my grade 5 group, one of my students who has always spoke his mind to me and the others in the group remarked that we should not ask “stupid questions like what colour was the boy’s hair”. I chuckled when I heard him say this. He and I were on the same wavelength. I think he was saying: make questions you think are meaningful and relevant: make questions that are authentic and “burning” for you as a learner.

### **Student Choice**

I have come to understand that students need to make choices in their learning for literacy to be authentic. In Uncommon Sense John Mayher (1990) discusses common sense perspectives on teaching and learning. In the “common sense” view, teachers are viewed as the sole experts and students are not empowered to make their own sense out of what they read and write. Mayher has helped me to appreciate the “uncommon sense” way of teaching and learning, where reading and writing are not done to the dictates of teacher demands, but, rather, are guided by genuine student choice. I am willing to trust that my students are able to tell me much of what they need to read and write.

A few months ago Cory, my student who has always been a reluctant reader and writer, asked me if he could write a letter to his social worker who no longer works in our school. No writing activity that I chose could ever have been

more meaningful to Cory at this moment than the writing he chose to do.

Goodman (1989) refers to such responsive teaching on my part as seeing “the goals of education as expansion on the learners’ strengths and maximum growth, not conformity or uniformity” (p.49). I believe children must be empowered to pursue learning agendas which matter to them. They must be invited to take ownership of their learning and be given support in furthering their intentions. This certainly does not mean leaving all choices to the students and the teacher sitting behind idly, not doing a thing. The teacher’s role is that of facilitator and guide, as in “leading from behind”. If I had said to Cory that he could not write the letter and that he must do what I had chosen for him, I would not have been encouraging and empowering him as a writer.

Over the past three years, my journal has filled up with entries about students who have made authentic choices for themselves as writers. Some of their choices have included: writing a letter to a friend who had moved away to another province; writing thank you letters to special speakers or presenters; making a memory book for themselves before they moved away; making birthday cards for friends and family members; and, writing a script between two characters adapted from a novel, as they acted out a scene. The writing they chose to do was meaningful: it was for real purposes and empowering for those who were trusted to make the decisions. My “power” as a teacher was not used to force children to

all do the same type of activity that I had chosen for them. Power comes from empowering children to be individual learners.

### **Literacy Lessons From Cory**

I have had the opportunity to be Cory's resource teacher for the past three years, during his grade 4, 5 and 6 years. During these years, Cory has been as much my teacher as I have been his:

#### **Journal Entry (September 12, 1996)**

*There's a new student in grade 4 and his teacher wants me to get to know him better. Cory has already told his teacher he cannot read. I go to get my grade 4 group today and Cory does not want to come with me. Why should he, he does not know me from a hole in the ground? My other students come with me to my classroom. I do not force Cory to come. Later, he finds his way to my room and he joins us but he sits in a chair in the corner. I do not ask anyone to read or write today. We talk. Soon Cory is talking. I find out two things about him. He misses his hometown and he enjoys fishing. I'm glad I did not push any reading or writing today. I need to get to know Cory better.*

The next day Cory found a Manitoba atlas in my room and showed me where he used to live. He drew a picture for me and he told me that he could not read. I wondered how I could help Cory to see himself as a reader. I realised this was a question I needed Cory to help me answer.



Over the next few days, I read many books to this group. I found that over time some of the other children in the group would volunteer to read a book to the group. My students were drawn to one book in particular. It was a book about hats: where the text described the hat and then you could put the book on top of your head, and “wear the hat” that you had read about. There must have been some magic drawing power in this book because every one of my students read it over and over again. One day, as the other students were writing, Cory chose to go over to the other table in my room and I could hear him reading the hat book. Later that day, he volunteered to read the hat book. Everyone praised him on a job well done. I pointed out to him that he could read. He still said that he could not. Does he feel this way because of his theory about what reading is? Does he see reading as just being able to read all the words correctly?

Slowly after that day, Cory would come to my room and borrow books from me. Up until his final last day in grade 6, almost three years later, he was still borrowing books from my room. One day Cory found some books that a previous class of mine had made. These were professional-looking books complete with fabric covers. Cory asked if we could make books like these too. That year we made four books. Students chose the topic for their books and most topics revolved around the holidays. I quickly learned that Cory could read anything that he wrote. I will never forget the first book that he completed. He was so proud of it and the way it looked, with its Hallowe’en fabric cover, that he read it to every

adult and child who would listen to him read. But still there were days when Cory told me that he could not read. Our struggles continued.

Over the course of our three years together Cory made many of the decisions about his reading and writing. I remember having a big book in my room ready for another group of students who wanted to learn more about animals. The book was about different animals and their habitats. Cory wanted to read this book and he chose meaningful response activities to show me his understandings. Cory even read this book to the group.

I had planned to introduce this group to poetry writing. We would start with a Haiku poem (made up of 3 lines with 5 syllables in the first and last line and 7 syllables in the second line). I explained to my class that traditionally Haiku poems are written about nature. Cory had an idea that was personally more meaningful. He was grieving from the accidental death of his grandmother. She had been the sole thought on his mind for several days. Prior to this he had often talked to me about how much he loved his grandmother and how he enjoyed spending part of the summer with her. As a matter of fact, a year prior to this Cory had written in his Thanksgiving writing activity that he was thankful for his Granny because she gives him food and love. Cory wrote a touching Haiku poem in memory of his grandmother. (fig. 9) He did not need to write about nature as Haiku poems are usually written; instead he needed to write about his grandmother. I am glad that I gave him the freedom to make this choice.



Figure 9 Cory's Haiku Poem

Throughout our years together I found that Cory's reading and writing interests were crucial to his learning. On some occasions, when Cory felt really down, he would still say that he could not read. I do not think he believes this but when he felt really upset I think it was easier for him to give up on himself and say he could not read. I have many journal entries about Cory, questioning why he always had so little trouble reading what he had written. I now understand that because his writing was so meaningful to him it gave him a reason to read. Isn't this what real reading is all about?

Cory taught me how important authenticity is in literacy. I have learned to listen to children, to trust and to respect them. Their learning has been enhanced by my believing in them, and by the relationships we have established in school. Cory and I still joke about his first day in our school and how he did not want to come to my room. Three years later it is hard to get him to leave my room. I would later come to understand how important the social nature of literacy is to learning.

## **Chapter Four The Social Nature of Literacy and Learning**

As I am looking through my purse, my 3 year old niece, Ravenne, spots my address book. This book is purse size, measuring 6 cm wide by 9 cm long. She takes the book out of my purse and asks me to read to it her. She opens the page and I read her the names and phone numbers on the page. When she reaches a blank page she looks and see no words or symbols, so in her mind there is nothing for me to read on that page. Surprisingly, she knows that and she proceeds to go on to the next page where there is print and something for me to read again. We continue this process for a few minutes and then Ravenne goes back to the blank pages. She asks me to read one of the blank pages with a giggle in her voice. She knows there is no print on the page and therefore nothing for me to read. She laughs when I don't say anything in response to her request to read this page. She says that she tricked me and laughs and laughs.

After we read the pages of the address book, Ravenne wants me to tell her a story. On the cover of my address book is a picture of a cat sitting under a tree playing a guitar. I tell her a story about a cat who goes to the beach and swims for a while. The cat gets tired of swimming so he sits under the tree and starts playing his guitar and singing. There is also a picture of a bird beside the cat. Ravenne points to the bird and asks me if the bird came to visit the cat. I add this information into my story and say that a bird heard a beautiful song being sung so he came to listen to the cat.

On another visit with my niece she again finds my address book, but this time she is the story teller. She shows me the cover of the book and says "My Story", I assume as the title for her story. She begins to turn the pages as she tells her mom and me a story about her going into the woods to find her mom and dad. She encounters a monster in her story who speaks in a loud, deep animated voice. The monster asks her why she is in the woods and he helps her to find her mom and dad. He turns out to be a "good" monster according to Ravenne. Her story sounds finished but there are still pages left in the address book so she continues. In a highly repetitive manner several other characters enter the woods, also searching for their moms and dads. The "good" monster also helps these characters find their moms and dads. When Ravenne comes to the last page of the address book she says "the end".

The next time I visit Ravenne she again finds the address book in my purse. This time she tells me she will read the monster story, but she wants me to be the monster in the story. When we get to the part where the monster is to ask the girl why she is in the woods, Ravenne reminds me that I am the monster. So in a similar loud, deep animated voice I oblige. We continue this story with Ravenne playing the roles of all of the characters who enter the woods while I am the monster.

In a recent telephone conversation with Ravenne she told me that I needed to come to visit her. She said there was a note in her house that said that Aunty

Carol was coming to visit her. After speaking to Ravenne's mom I learned that the note Ravenne was referring to was a picture with "words" on it that she had made earlier.

What Ravenne helped me to realise is that literacy is a social event.

Ravenne's story telling, her creation of an interactive story involving two people telling the story, and her explanation of a note she had printed and drawn were literacy events to be celebrated. Although Ravenne has never been formally taught how to speak or read, she has become a language and literacy user. Ravenne is becoming literate because caring adults interact with her in a print-rich environment. They read and speak with her, and she has had many opportunities to experiment with how oral and written language work. She enjoys talking with others so much that it is often difficult to get her to hang up the phone or to pass the phone to her mom when she is talking with me. Such social interactions seem to be a natural dimension of literacy learning and literacy use.

Smith (1981) explains that "learning is not an occasional event, to be stimulated, provoked or reinforced. Learning is what the brain does naturally" (p.108). Dewey (1938) argues that "all human experience is ultimately social: it involves contact and communication" (p.38). Literacy is a primary way of learning, and such learning takes place in a social context.

In Chapter One, I explained how in much of my own schooling I was expected to work independently. Most of the reading I did in school was an

isolated event. I described how my friends and I would have long evening conversations during which we discussed the stories we were reading in school. We would study for tests by quizzing each other on the phone and we would discuss our homework. Now I find it sad to think that at this time I felt like I was cheating and getting help with my homework by interacting in this way. I had unknowingly been making learning a social activity, something I believe learning should be.

Social-constructivist learning theory states that learning is both social and personal. Children need to interact with more knowledgeable others to help them find solutions to their own curiosities. All participants involved contribute to this learning. Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the Zone of Proximal Development stresses the importance of the contributions of the learner and others involved in the learning. Richgels and Wold (1998) state:

the child's labours - his or her learning, problem solving, puzzle working, knowledge construction are much more likely to be fruitful when they occur in the space between what the child might have done alone and what he or she can do with assistance from others (p. 19).

This space is what Vygotsky called the Zone of Proximal Development. As an educator who believes in the importance of the social process of literacy, I understand that the assistance that children need in their "labours" does not always have to come from the teacher. Peers are also sometimes just as capable of helping each other: I believe that this should be encouraged in a classroom. Each



child brings different strengths to an activity and a collaborative effort combining these strengths should be encouraged.

To understand learning as a social process, one must recognize the importance others play in mediating literacy learning. Collaboration among students, teachers and peers is essential. As Mayher (1990) expresses: the “common sense view” of teaching is that the teacher is the expert who fills the students - the “passive objects” or “empty vessels” that Freire (1970) refers to. In an “uncommon sense view”, educators are more genuine in their collaborations with students. Only in this way can true curriculum negotiation happen: when all parties involved have an equal voice.

As we become literate, we create meanings through the use of socially shared symbolic conventions. Because we share a similar system for representing meaning, we are able to talk to each other, read books written by others, and write to each other. Although there is a shared system for representing meaning, however, this does not mean that all members will elicit the same meanings from oral or written language samples. The potential meanings for written or oral language are multiple and personally and socially determined. Our past interactions with others impact the meaning we make in our current literacy activities. Our meanings are “coloured by” the experiences we have had. People can read the same text or hear the same conversation at other times and still have unique interpretations. In a classroom we can celebrate this diversity and not

expect that all learners will interpret texts in the same ways. This view of literacy implies that there cannot be a single, correct interpretation. As teachers, however, when we ask teacher-made comprehension questions, we are in essence telling our students that they must see the text in a certain way: that there can be only one correct answer.

Reading and writing do not take place in isolation. Ideas flow as written and spoken words take on meanings for readers, speakers and listeners. Literacy learning therefore is a social activity where students continue to learn as ideas are shared. As individual learners we actively seek relationships with others. We borrow others' understandings and experiences through literacy opportunities. As we borrow from others, we transform, strengthen and develop new understandings.

### **Sociability in the Classroom**

In my classroom I have been trying to invite children to collaborate with me and with their peers in the development of inquiry-based literacy experiences. In this way my understandings of the importance of authenticity and of the social nature of learning come together in practice. In the previous chapter I discussed how I consciously began asking my students to tell me what they were interested in learning. My students began to have a voice in their literature response activities as well. This change did not happen overnight. Not until I heard my

“wake up calls” from my students and I began to read their signs of boredom and disengagement did this process begin.

The very nature of my room and the size of the groups of children I work with, approximately five to fourteen students per group depending on the year, promotes small group interaction. My room has two round tables and a teacher’s desk which my students sit at more often than I do. Realising that I have the physical space for social interaction, I was determined to put my beliefs about social learning into action.

I remember one of my grade 6 students a few years ago finding a book about the Titanic in my room. She showed the book to other members of the group and they decided that they wanted to read it. A few days earlier I had been in a colleague’s classroom and I noticed that his students had made a large mural about a novel they were reading which they had then displayed on the wall. My colleague mentioned that it was his students’ idea to draw the mural. I suggested a similar activity to my students. They were excited about the idea of making a large mural of the Titanic. I asked them how they would go about making such a large picture. Carolyn said that they could use an overhead to enlarge a picture on the wall and then they could just trace the image. She said that she had seen her classroom teacher do this. As a group they looked through the pictures in the novel to find one that would be appropriate to trace. As there were five students in this group, they did not all pick the same picture. Two students agreed on a

picture where the Titanic was sinking. Two students wanted to trace a picture of the Titanic as was depicted on the inside cover of the book. The other student wanted to trace a picture of the Titanic as it looks today in the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. Negotiations started to happen without much input from me. After much discussion they agreed on tracing the picture of the Titanic as it was depicted on the inside cover of the book. By listening to their discussion I saw a true exchange of ideas. They decided that the picture of the Titanic as it looked today was not the most attractive picture so they eliminated this choice. Carolyn said that the picture of the Titanic sinking was probably not a good choice because it was so dark. She knew that a dark picture does not always photocopy well so it might be hard to trace. My job now was to photocopy the picture that they wanted onto an overhead transparency and they would be ready to begin. With a large sheet of white paper hung on the wall and the overhead reflecting the image, my students went to work on their task. They discussed who should trace which parts. At one point it got too crowded around the picture for everyone to trace so they had to decide who would trace it and who would not. Finally the image of the Titanic was completed. We took the picture off the wall and I asked them what they wanted to do next. They agreed that they needed to colour their picture. They proceeded to colour the ship, but when it came time to colour the water they chose to use paint. One student thought that painting some water splashing on the ship would be a realistic touch, however, he did not just go ahead

and do this. Instead he explained his idea to the group first and they all agreed it was a good idea. After the picture was coloured and painted the group looked at it and Carolyn suggested that it needed a title. The group decided that since Wes had neat printing he should make the title, which he willingly did. This was truly a group effort in which all members worked collaboratively to express their learning and meaning. The group members all took pride in the finished product. (fig. 10)

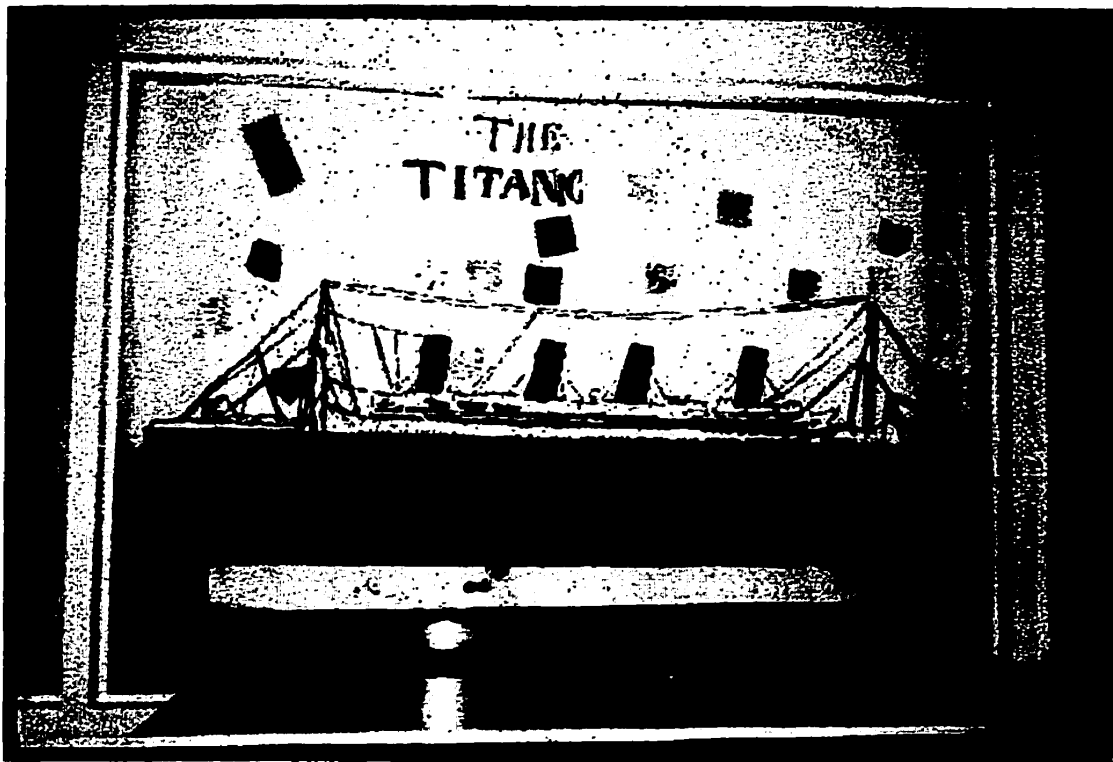


Figure 10 Titanic Poster done by the group

In our next class together we began to read the novel Finding the Titanic by Robert Ballard. Our first class consisted of just talking about what we knew about the Titanic (this was before the hit movie about the Titanic, so Leonardo DiCaprio was not a part of our discussions). We looked at all the pictures in the novel. The children were very amazed by the pictures of what the ship looked like inside: with its many dining rooms, grand staircase, and swimming pool. At the end of the class, Carolyn said that was an enjoyable class because all we did was talk. I knew a lot of learning had gone on as well. We learned that two members of the group had been on a big ship before and three had not. The ones who had been on a ship before described some of their experiences.

*Journal Entry (March 4, 1998)*

*Carolyn came to visit me today before school started. She said that she thinks the Titanic poster looks too bare. She thinks that maybe we could write on the poster. What a good idea. I suggest that she discuss her ideas with the group. Later, she tells the group her idea. They decide that they do not want to write on the poster because it would be hard to see the writing because of the dark colouring and paint. They decide that the picture would not look as nice and some of the details would be lost with too many words on it. Wes finds coloured "post-it" papers on my ledge. How about if we write on these papers and stick them on the poster, he wonders. Then we can write about what we are learning as we read. Why didn't I think of this? No, perhaps, it's better that they thought of it themselves.*

I encouraged social interaction throughout the reading of the novel. Some days we would read a section from the book together as a group. Individuals would volunteer to read if they chose to and sometimes I would read to them. Since not everyone was comfortable reading out loud I did not force this role on everyone. Some students chose to read an entire page or two and others chose to only read a sentence or two out loud. Eventually, everyone did volunteer to read out loud. Other days they read in pairs or triads and sometimes students read individually. While reading individually some of my students needed support from me or a peer. Before reading, during reading, and after reading, we had many discussions. I tried to invite all my students to contribute orally in the discussions. They learned with and from one another and I learned right along with them.

At the end of each chapter there were no teacher-made questions, but, instead, students negotiated which activities they would do. In response to one chapter the students wrote postcards to friends, where each of them took on the persona of a passenger on the Titanic. Another day they became the passengers and crew members themselves and acted out their roles aboard the ship. After reading the sections where Robert Ballard, the scientist searching for the Titanic, and his crew found the Titanic many years later, the group decided to draw pictures of some of the images Ballard's crew might have seen on the ocean floor. They related this to events in their own lives when they had searched and searched

for a missing object and how they had felt when they eventually found these objects.

Our discussions became very intense when we reached the final chapter of the book and learned about the two plaques that Ballard and his crew left on the Titanic. One plaque is in memory of the people who died in the tragedy and the other plaque asks everyone who visits the Titanic to leave it in peace. My students wrote and drew plaques that they would leave if they found the Titanic. Our discussions took us to places I had never intended to go. We talked about why there were not enough lifeboats and why the poorest people on the ship were the last to have access to the lifeboats. We talked about fairness and equity in the world and how people should not have to die just because they were poor. When I purchased the books I never anticipated such as discussion of social issues.

This learning experience was meaningful for my students while at the same time their learning was relevant and worthwhile. Students learned from one another. I was not solely in the role as teacher as expert, as I allowed my students to make meaning for themselves using the print. I encouraged our collective thinking about ideas in our discussions.



### **Sharing the Learning**

When any other students came to my room and saw the Titanic poster displayed on a window in my classroom (complete with the “post-it” notes), they immediately began reading the comments. If they could not read something they would ask me or a peer to read it to them. All of these students too were learning about the Titanic, even though they had not read a book about it. One student even brought me another book about the Titanic from his classroom for my grade 6 students to read. There was an enormous amount of sharing of ideas going on among students from many grades and many classrooms because the poster was displayed as an artifact.

At the same time my grade 5 students were reading The Headless Horseman and they wanted to make a large poster of their responses to it as well. As Cory said, “Why can’t we make a poster like that, but ours would be about the Headless Horseman?”

The group asked how the poster was made. I told them they needed to choose a picture from the book that I could reproduce on overhead paper for them to trace. There was not much negotiating within this group of twelve students about which picture they would trace. They all wanted to trace the picture of Ichabod Crane being chased by the Headless Horseman. As Peggy stated, “I think that picture is the best because both main people are in it from the story and that will probably be the scariest part of the book.”

With my large group of twelve students it was physically impossible for them to all trace the picture at once. Cory got the group organized by asking who liked to draw. We put the names of these people, who liked to draw, on sheets of paper and picked who would draw together. They decided that three people could probably draw together at once. Eight students wanted to draw and the other four wanted to colour. While some worked outside my classroom (as there was not enough free wall space for the large mural) the others looked through the book. Some students were reading in groups, some were sharing "cool" pictures in the story and others were looking at the book by themselves. All were using the pictures to predict and to make meanings for themselves.

Finally, the picture was traced and it was time to colour. The group decided what colours would be appropriate for the various objects on the poster. After the poster was coloured Cory suggested that the bottom right hand corner looked bare. He thought that a gravestone would be appropriate to give the picture a scary look. Before drawing the tombstone Cory made a rough copy on a piece of scrap paper and asked the group if it was acceptable. The children agreed it was so Cory filled the empty space with the tombstone. Steve thought it would be funny to print the name Casper (the friendly ghost) on the tombstone. Again everyone agreed, so he did it. As a teacher, I could have said that there was no Casper in this story so you cannot write that on the poster. I am glad though that I didn't, for if I had I would have shut down their connections and I would have

been telling them that their constructed meanings were not as viable as mine.

This collaborative effort showed me that my students could work together and negotiate their roles successfully. They brought in much of their background knowledge. The tombstone, the yellow full moon, and the RIP (Rest In Peace) symbol on the picture were not copied from the novel. They were contributed by my students who had socially constructed these ideas to create a scary tone in the poster. (fig. 11)

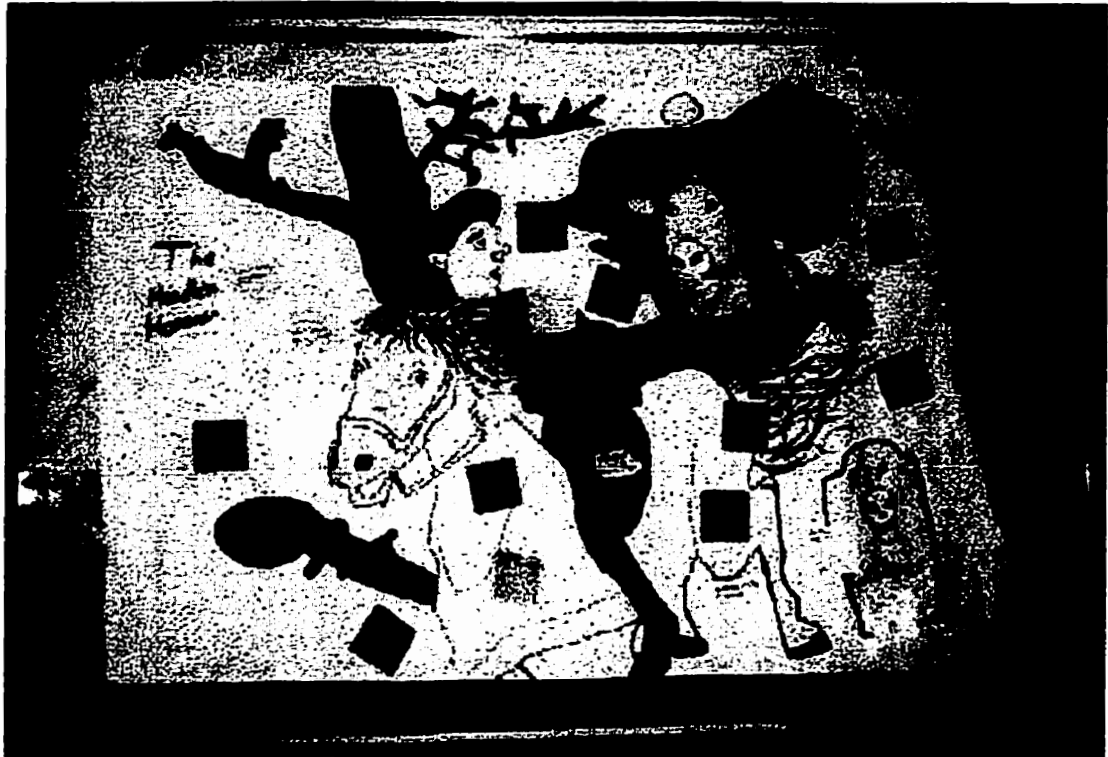


Figure 11 Headless Horseman poster done by the group

To add the final touches to their poster, my group decided that it needed a title. Steve suggested that he write the title because he did not get to do much colouring. The other members of the group agreed. Steve suggested that now the left hand side of the poster looked bare so this is where he would put the title. As we read the novel, the students also wrote messages on sticky “post-it” notes to attach to their creation. Now all children who entered my room were not only learning about the Titanic but also about The Headless Horseman. This learning was going on just by them reading the posters and asking questions. When students from a different grade would ask me questions about the stories I would tell them the names of the students who worked on the posters and suggest that they ask them. This learning and sharing of ideas was a natural process and not one that I had anticipated.

### **Celebrating Diversity**

The poster activities were examples of collaborative action for me. The children worked and thought together and this was initiated by a common commitment; in this case, to the completion of a mural. Short and Burke (1991) explain “the complex nature of commitment calls forth the second feature of collaboratives, the valuing of diversity” (p.24). The diverse talents of my students were evident in their work. Not everyone volunteered to trace the Headless Horseman poster, only those students who felt they had some talent in this area

volunteered. Those who did not volunteer were not excluded. They were the ones who did the colouring. Many of the students who volunteered to trace told me that they were not good at colouring so they did not want to do that. A person who was perceived to have neat printing was nominated to write the title on the Titanic poster. My students actively listened to one another's ideas and they thought together. When the poster looked bare to Cory he came up with a suggestion that the group agreed to. When Steve suggested a title he conferred with the group first. When Carolyn thought the Titanic poster looked bare she suggested messages. We found the suitable paper for the messages. When the grade 5 students saw the messages on the Titanic poster they too wanted to put messages on their poster. Ideas and ownership of the posters were shared by all. When it came time to take down the posters, everyone wanted to take them home. We had a problem of deciding how we would share our group project. After much discussions with the groups, it was decided that I would keep the posters, as a class collection, and that this was the only fair solution. As Steve said, "I can't take it home because it is not just my work, no one can take it home: that would not be fair." So the posters sit in my cupboard for me to enjoy and show to others.

Not all of my students are at the same level. When doing the poster activities, however, no one was left without a job. Everyone had certain strengths which were capitalized upon. Everyone was successful and felt engaged in their learning. Fostering a collaborative classroom climate with this two-way process

of learning and sharing with others allowed my students to act as unique individuals. Isn't this what schools are for and what learning is all about?

These types of learning opportunities helped me to see my students as capable, competent learners, rather than looking at them from a deficit perspective as children "lacking something". The roles of my students were not predetermined by me the teacher, rather, they were generated by the needs of the project. The roles were filled by students as they saw fit. The students who wanted to draw, drew, and the "neat printer" made the title. Children recommended one another for certain roles based on what they felt needed to be added to the posters. Children were seen in terms of their potentials, not in terms of their limitations, by both their peers and by me. No one was seen as "lacking anything".

I cannot help but relate my students' learning experiences to my own learning experiences in my Master's program. As I mentioned earlier, a cohort of teachers worked and learned together in many of our courses. We shared reflections, uncovered tensions and socially constructed understandings of teaching and learning. In one course, we even made a large mural, similar to the ones my students had made. This big community assignment, as the cohort named the mural, showed our growth in learning through drawings, pictures, and writing. Jerome Harste (1991) explains that: "learning, or the process of change, is social. That's what makes teacher support groups so powerful. When learners (teachers) support each other, powerful things happen" (p. xi). I believe that when teachers

support learners and learners support each other powerful things happen. I also believe that teachers need to be able to appreciate and believe that they are learners, as much as they are teachers, and children need to appreciate and believe that they are teachers as much as they are learners.

By supporting my learners, and by communicating my belief in their being able to choose activities and interests that would be meaningful to them, I encouraged them to support one another. By having positive expectations and focussing on my learner's strengths, I believe I facilitated the children's social learning. This could not have happened unless we had established a community of learners in the classroom: a classroom where both adults and children were encouraged and respected in their roles as teachers and learners.

## **Chapter Five A Classroom Community**

In the previous chapter I described how a learning community can develop when students and teachers are all learners and teachers together. I would like to now turn my attention to the meaning of “community”. The Greek origin of the word community is “fellowship”. Christenson and Robinson (1989) “have summarized much of the literature and suggest four main components for defining the concept of community - people, a place or territory, social interaction and identification” (p.5-6).

Before considering how, as educators we can encourage fellowship among the community of learners in our classrooms, I want to think about why a community of learners is so important to me in the first place. To do this requires that I further delve into my beliefs about children and teaching and learning.

### **A Transmission Model of Teaching**

Two views of teaching include the transmission model and the collaborative inquiry model. (Serebrin, 1995) In the transmission model of teaching, knowledge is a fixed body of skills which the teacher or expert passes on or transmits to the learner. The learner takes in this knowledge, memorizes and learns it and then at a later date demonstrates what he or she knows through



teacher-prepared tests, assignments and drills. Margaret Donaldson states:

one common but mostly unexamined way of thinking about knowledge is as a *thing* which we receive - an abstract kind of thing, certainly, but having none the less the thing-like property of being able to be handed over. We often speak of 'getting' knowledge as we might talk of getting a refrigerator or a new car -- of perhaps of getting praise from someone (cited in Serebrin, 1995, p.70-71).

According to a transmission view learning means taking in and giving back information. Students learn by receiving what is covered in the curriculum.

Working independently, taking few risks, and needing to be externally motivated are all part of learning in this paradigm. Curriculum is predetermined and knowing about the students' life experiences and interests is not particularly relevant to the teacher's planning. The teacher's role is to devise or cover a curriculum: often through telling. External or teacher-made assignments and tests are ways to check for recall of the information transmitted to the students. Power in the classroom belongs to the teacher or to outside others. The teacher tells the students what they need to know and what they have to do to demonstrate their knowing.

Students do not control their learning and therefore have little ownership or need to accept responsibility for their learning. Teachers do most of the talking in these classrooms and children do the listening. (Serebrin, 1995, p.64-68)

## **A Collaborative Inquiry Model of Teaching**

A collaborative inquiry model of teaching views knowledge as something constructed in a social context. Bruner argues “each of us interprets our experiences in terms of what we already know and value as individuals and as members of specific social and cultural groups” (cited in Serebrin, 1995, p.64). Learners make their own meanings based on their experiences. Learners, both teachers and students, come to know new understandings through the process of negotiating their knowledge with others. These new understandings further inform future challenges and experiences. All participants share knowledge and the teacher alone is not seen as the expert. According to Donaldson:

most of the knowledge that matters to us--the knowledge that constitutes our concept of the world, of other people and of ourselves--is not developed in a passive way. We come to know through processes of active interpretation and integration. We have strategies of many kinds for finding out. We struggle--and it can be a long, hard struggle --to make sense (cited in Serebrin, 1995, p.71).

In a collaborative inquiry paradigm curriculum is created by students and teachers working together. Students’ interests and needs are valued and they are encouraged to explore their own inquiries. Short and Burke (1991) argue that learning is “an intentional, active and focussed process of meaning-making and meaning-sharing. Students are engaged in activities that enable them to search for answers to their own questions” (cited in Serebrin, 1995, p.66). Collaboration and working with others is expected. Making mistakes and risk taking is integral in a

classroom based on collaborative inquiry. These processes were demonstrated by my students during the collaborative poster-making projects detailed in Chapter Four.

The teacher's role in this view becomes one of learner and facilitator. The teacher is a reflective decision maker who intentionally helps children engage in inquiry. The curriculum is negotiated and open-ended. Students are seen as having strengths rather than from a deficit perspective.

Many of the uncomfortable feelings I had as a resource teacher, described at the outset of this study, stem from the fact that I was operating from a transmission model of teaching. I had believed that programs and disconnected "quick fix" methods would improve the literacy learning of my students. Developing a classroom climate that fostered a collaborative inquiry model of teaching and learning came about gradually through a process of examining my own practices and listening to my students' voices. In viewing learning and teaching from this perspective, the classroom needs to function as a community. Short and Burke (1991) describe such a classroom as being a community of learners where risktaking, reflection and collaboration are inherent. Learners and teachers both offer "learning invitations" to one another.

### **Physical Space**

Perhaps the easiest change to make in a room in order to make it conducive to a community of learners is the physical space. My classroom, by virtue of its size and organization, is arranged in a way that promoted a sense of community. I have two round tables in my room and a teacher's desk. My desk is used when there are too many children in my group and we simply do not all fit around the two round tables. Sometimes pairs or triads of students will request to work at my desk if they need more space. I also find that sometimes individuals who are having a difficult time cooperating or if they are having a tough day emotionally will request to sit by themselves at my desk. I trust that my children can make these choices by themselves, but on occasion I have to make these choices for them. I will sometimes ask a child to sit at my desk if I think he or she will be more successful working there. I believe the design of a room contributes in a basic way to the creation of a supportive community.

### **Offering Invitations**

In the following poem, written by Judith Newman (1992), the essence and necessity of providing invitations in a classroom are evident.

#### **Like Grandmother**

I discovered engagement  
In my grandmother's kitchen  
Her body supporting my four year-old frame

Helping me shape bagels  
And knead bread  
For the whole family to eat.  
I discovered engagement  
On my grandmother's sofa  
Her deft hands helping mine  
Ply a crochet hook  
Weaving garments for my dolls.  
I discovered engagement  
By my grandmother's side  
Teaching her to spell  
While she helped me  
Become a woman.  
My engagement brought  
Independence and community  
Wonder and responsibility  
But where's the engagement in school?  
"First ya gotta control 'em,"  
That's what I hear.  
"They won't do anything unless ya make 'em".  
So it's no lockers between class,  
No trips to the bathroom (even if you're sick).  
It's late slips and detentions  
And in-school suspension.  
There's no working together, no adventure  
Or excitement at learning something new.  
"If it's aversive enough," I hear,  
"They'll comply."  
But compliance brings  
Dependence and hostility  
Resistance and rebellion.

I try so hard to be like my grandmother  
Offering invitations to wonder and explore  
But the confining walls we impose on kids  
Serve only to alienate.  
My grandmother knew something we have forgotten-  
We must welcome them warmly into our adult world.

A community of learners is one where invitations to wonder and explore are offered. Invitations will only be accepted if a teacher has a relationship with her students. I believe that building such relationships with my students is one of my most important roles as a teacher. These relationships must be respectful, trusting and caring. These are not built overnight.

### **Relationships**

A relationship is an interaction between two or more people. Just as in my own personal relationships, with the friends I am closest to, there is an inherent respect and trust. Central to building a classroom community then are trusting, caring relationships. This cannot be forced on children, much in the same way that learning activities cannot be forced upon learners. Relationships take time to develop. They begin with genuine caring for students. Noddings (1984) suggests “the primary aim of every educational effort must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring” (p.172). My students have taught me much about caring and my relationships with them in many of the conversations we have had:

### **Journal Entry (November 6, 1998)**

*Cory and Steve tell me about how they were not behaving for the substitute music teacher yesterday. As they relay the story Steve tells me “we just walked into the room and she started screaming at us. She thought we were going to be bad, she didn’t even give us a chance.”*

*"So we were mean to her. We didn't listen and we would not do what she asked," added Cory.*

I talked further about this incident with Cory and Steve and I told them how hard it can be to be a substitute teacher and not know the children. I tried to get their perspectives on relationships. I asked them how she was different from their other teachers. They explained that their other teachers knew them and took time to get to know them.

"Like you," Cory said, "you don't force us to do stuff. We have choices."

"You take the time to ask us about what is wrong if you know we are sad. And if we can't work, you find out why, you don't yell," adds Steve.

Cory and Steve have shown me how important relationships are to teaching and learning. Just the fact that they could tell me about how they had misbehaved was only possible because they trusted me and we had built a relationship with each other. Who wants to admit to their teacher that they were "bad"? I wanted Cory and Steve to understand that their feelings were valid, but perhaps their behaviour with the substitute had not been appropriate. We discussed other ways that they could have dealt with such a dilemma.

As a resource teacher, when I am away at an inservice or ill, the school does not hire a substitute teacher for me. This past year, however, when I went away for a five week educational leave, I had a substitute. I chose a person who I wanted to "sub" for me based on interactions and working with her in the school

before. I was glad that she was available. Of course, prior to my taking my leave, I discussed the situation with my students.

**Journal Entry (November 10, 1998)**

*"They better get someone good to sub for you when you go away," says Cory.*

*"Someone who will understand how we learn and let us do stuff like you let us do," responds Steve.*

*"What do you mean?" I ask.*

*"Well someone who doesn't force us to read out loud or someone who knows that sometimes we just talk," replies Cory.*

*"Someone who knows how to teach us," says Peggy.*

*"Will you make sure that the sub knows how we learn before you go away?" asks Steve.*

*"We don't want someone who is going to think we are dumb," said Cory.*

This conversation left me feeling excited and numb at the same time. How would I leave material for the substitute when most of what I do with students is based on what they need to do or what is troubling or puzzling them at the moment? I did not feel comfortable leaving no prepared materials for my substitute so I made sure that my groups were all well into a novel study before I left. I left possible response activities as a guide for my substitute. I met with her several times before I left and I could see that she and I shared similar philosophies. When I explained that the ideas I had left were just suggestions, my



substitute replied by telling me she would take cues from the children in their response activities. I felt that my students would be okay.

**Journal Entry (January 11, 1999)**

*Cory has one of his usual after school visits with me today and he tells me about his day. Cory says that they had the same music sub and she was mean again. I was bad again. I ask him if he is going to be "bad" for the substitute who comes in for me. He responds by saying no, she'll be in for a long time, not just one day like most subs, and you said that you would make sure she understands about how I learn and that she will treat us nice and give us a chance.*

In his own way Cory was telling me that relationships take time to develop and do not happen in one day. I am reminded by Cory of my promise to my students that I would make sure that the substitute who replaced me would know about them and their learning.

**Journal Entry (January 18, 1999)**

*The substitute teacher who will be in for me comes in to spend the morning with me and meet some of my students. I make sure I tell her about some of the learning activities we engage in and how the children are in charge of their learning and choosing what they need to do. With my grade 6 group I encourage the children to tell her about their learning. They show her some of the activities they do. Cory tells her that he cannot "read good". Later I tell her that reading out loud is always a choice in my room and she understands.*

For the first two weeks of February, 1999, I am away on my educational leave. I keep in close contact with my substitute and I come to school each Thursday after school for weekly skating with my students. While we skate they tell me about how things are going in my absence. Steve tells me that the sub is “nice like you”. I can see that they are developing a relationship with this teacher. In conversations with my substitute she tells me that she is learning so much from these students. She looks forward to coming back in May for another three weeks. She explains how important it was for her to meet the children with me, prior to my leaving. I am glad we took the time to do this. It has helped the children to appreciate that we both care about them.

**Journal Entry (February 15, 1999)**

*It is the last day of my two week educational leave and I have come to school a little earlier to check my mail and get things in order for tomorrow. At 3:25 p.m. Cory comes rushing into my room. He looks surprised to see me. He tells me that he came to see my substitute because he knew it was her last day. My heart melted when he gave her a big hug and told her that he would see her again in May. Cory thanked her for helping him.*

Later, I talked with my substitute about how the two weeks had gone. She conveyed that it took time to develop a relationship with the students. However, she did not give up on them. She employed many of the strategies I use and she tried to respect what each child brought to the learning environment. When she

told me how impressed she was by how the students chose their own learning activities and how they were not afraid to speak their minds I felt proud. It is easier to build a relationship with people who see you as accepting and who listen to your voice.

### **A Community of Readers and Writers**

How am I going to help my reluctant writers write each day? I have tried to have them write about any topic they chose, but this seems to be too vague for them. They immediately say that they do not know what to write. I know that I must support my students by perhaps making a list of possible writing topics with them. I want to provide them with an opportunity to write that will encourage them to experiment and take risks. I know how my own journal writing has been powerful for me as a writer, so I decide to try this with my grade 5 group.

### **Journal Entry (November 6, 1996)**

*As we are walking to my room Brenda asks what we need the scribblers for. When I picked up my students this morning from their regular classrooms I asked them to bring an empty scribbler with them.*

*"We are starting journals today," I reply.*

*"Oh, I hate journals. I did that in grade 2, that's for little kids," she responds.*

*How will the rest of the group respond to journal writing? We enter the room and sit at the round table. Not everyone has an empty scribbler. We decide to cut the scribblers in half and then each student will have a half scribbler*

*journal. I begin by saying that we will be starting journal writing today. I want my students to write in their journals every day. By writing in their journals, they will have a chance to dialogue with me and write about whatever they want. I hope this invitation to write will help them to take risks. I also hope that by writing every day they will become more confident and fluent writers who understand that we write to convey meanings.*

*"What are some things that you can write about?" I ask.*

*"You can write about your pets, like my dog," replies Carolyn.*

*"I can write about the snow," says Brenda. It has been snowing all evening and we just had a discussion about the weather.*

*Nicholas replies, "You can write about what you did last night."*

*I add, "Or you can write about what you are going to do today."*

*Carolyn suggests, "We can use the egg timer to keep track of the time!"*

*We all agree that this is a good idea as Carolyn walks over to the shelf to get the egg timer. I then tell my students that I too will write in a journal. I will read and respond to their journals every day and they can read and respond to my journal if they wish. I want my students to know that I am interested in what they write. I am inviting them to read my journal as well and make comments. I want them to feel comfortable with me and therefore to be able to take risks in their writing.*

*The egg timer is turned over and we begin. Within ten seconds, both Carolyn and Brenda have walked over to me, journals and pencils in hand. Both students want to know how to spell a word. I ask everyone to stop. I say that I forgot to mention to the group that I want them to spell as best they can. I am more interested in their stories than their spelling. I know that if they worry about their spelling first they will be asking me for help a lot. They will probably*

*not want to take risks in their writing. We begin again! This time everyone writes for five minutes.*

*Carolyn notices that the sand has run out in the timer and she yells, "Stop!"*

*Nicholas continues writing. Brenda says that she has not finished yet. They both continue with their writing. We discuss our writing and our thoughts about the writing. Everyone reads their writing to me. We talk about the five minute timer and all agree that this is a good amount of time. I know that all of my students are reluctant writers. I think we will stick to the five minutes for now.*

I see this five minute free write as a vehicle for generating writing ideas that my students may want to take further. Perhaps they can use this writing as a kind of writer's notebook, with thoughts and ideas to pursue further at another time. I need to help my students to risk just starting this short writing experience now and I will help them later to take their writing through an authoring cycle where they are responsible for planning how to use their notebook writing. They can conference with me and with peers and revise and edit their writing for a more public audience.

How was this negotiated learning experience an example of building a community of learners? First, as the teacher I chose a writing activity which I thought all of the children would be successful at. There was time for discussion about what they could write. Although at first Brenda thought that journals were "just for little kids", her attitude changed when she realised that they could write

about whatever they wanted to. In grade 2 she explained they had only copied from the board into their journal.

Carolyn suggested the egg timer as a way of limiting the time for this task. The group agreed and the egg timer helped to focus their efforts. I did not expect them to write for longer than that since most of my students have been reluctant writers. Once I told them that their spelling did not matter, and that I just wanted them to express their ideas, a sense of calm settled over the room. In their first attempts at writing both Nicholas and Carolyn wrote about their pets. (fig.12 and 13) I read their journals later that day, but I did not fill them with red “teacher marks”. Instead, I wrote comments to my students based on their writing. As we continued the journal writing each day my students would look forward to my comments and respond to them. From that day on the journal writing began with them reading my comments and responding if they wished. Some days my students would just read what I had written to them and then start on their next piece of writing.

I have a dog his name is pudle.  
 He is a black full dog his hair is  
 like a man's he has a tall and a  
 dog bone a ball a rope and dog biscuits  
 and has a big dog band he is strong and  
 we fed it left over  
 Your dog has lots of stuff - ropes,  
 bones and biscuits. It sounds like you  
 really like your dog. It do really like  
 My dog that's who I love it best  
 You're dogs are lucky to  
 have you as their owner.  
 - the me that

Figure 12 Nicholas' journal entry

Nov. 6  
 My Pet  
 It is a dog in my home.  
 I fed him food today. I love  
 him a lot.  
 I like my dog too. What do my  
 feed my dog wet food & dry food  
 He too I feed my dog dry  
 food mostly and wet food sometimes

Figure 13 Carolyn's journal entry

I have seen so many children devastated by teacher's red ink marks in the past. I knew I did not want to cross out every word that they misspelled or they would never want to continue taking risks in their writing. I was looking for authentic writing that was meaningful for my students and not perfectly spelled words. Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984) argue that "it is only when dysfunctional strategies are suggested - such as those associated with error-free writing - that disengagement becomes the favoured option and the unfortunate mode for many writers" (p.140). A community of learners engages together and takes risks. If all aspects of their writing, such as their spelling, need to be perfect from the outset, risks will not be taken. If the children receive their journals back from me with red marks all over them, further risks will be less likely.

We continued with journal writing all year and my students came up with their own ways to make their journals meaningful. If they needed to draw they did. Students even worked together some days to write in one person's journal and then in the other person's journal the next day. Time was given after journal writing for my students to share their entries with others. I encouraged everyone to write responses to one another's journals, if they wished. Their responses took the form of questions about the piece or encouraging comments made to one another. I modelled the same kind of response and avoided the infamous "red pen".



Community members respect for others' feelings and trust were central to our relationships. Brenda and Cory helped me to see how important it was for me to respect what they needed, or didn't need, to write on a daily basis. Brenda showed me this through her journal entries. And, finally, Cory showed me this through his actions. Cory showed me this one day when he wasn't feeling well, but wanted to stay in my room to hear a story. He could not write that day so he just put his head down to rest. He chose not to go to the "sick room", but, rather, to stay with the group so he wouldn't miss the story. I was not the only one who could make decisions in our community.

**Journal Entry (May 2, 1997)**

*Brenda walks into the room today with a sad look on her face. When I invite her to talk she refuses. Before I know it, Carolyn has handed out the journals. The egg timer is turned and everyone is writing. Brenda sits at my desk all by herself and writes for a short while and then puts her head down. Her journal entry for the day includes the words "No OK". (fig. 14) I did not force Brenda to write anymore, that is what she is capable of doing today. If I want Brenda to be part of a classroom community that is inviting, I have to respect her decision.*

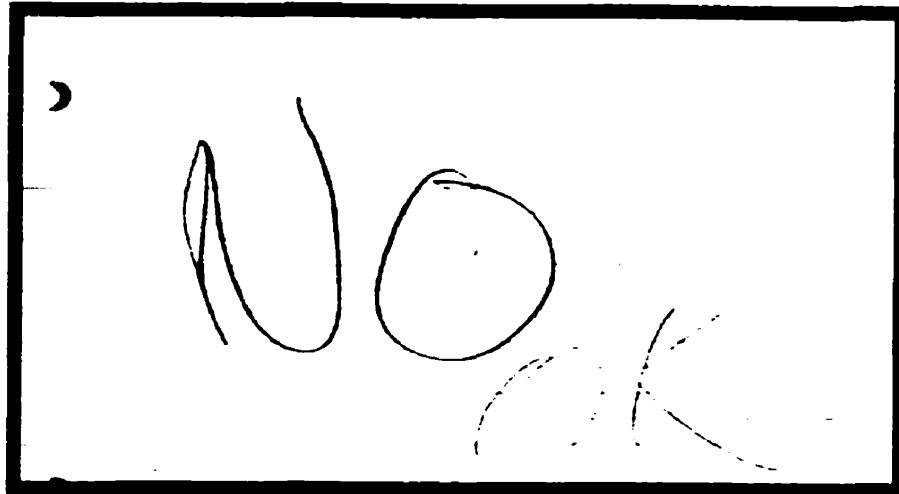


Figure 14 Brenda's journal entry

Brenda wanted to talk to me later during our time together, when the other students were reading and responding to one another's work. If I were a teacher who had to transmit knowledge at every given moment, I would not have had time to listen to her. It turned out that she was very sad about a friendship problem she was having with other children in her neighbourhood. I listened as she cried and told me that she had no friends. She cried in front of the other class members, something I do not think she would do if she did not feel comfortable with her peers. Carolyn replied by saying that she was Brenda's friend and invited her to read her journal with the group. I had planned that as a class we would continue reading a novel about Mount Everest we had recently started. Instead, we had a more pressing issue to discuss. I asked Brenda if we could talk about friendship problems with the whole group. We talked about how alone you feel when you

have no friends. Nicholas said, "I didn't want to come to my new school last year because I did not know anyone and I didn't have any friends."

We shared ways for making friends and then we tried to help Brenda generate strategies that would help her with her friendships in her community. Brenda's "No Ok" in her journal was her way of saying that she could not write today; she was just too upset. This would be a risky thing to do in some classrooms, but this was a room that fostered a sense of community: it was a place where people share not only their ideas but also their problems with others.

My role as a teacher was to help my children feel comfortable in the classroom so that they would take risks. Did Wes volunteer to read out loud (as I described in Chapter Two) because he knew Brenda was sitting close to him and she would help him if he needed it? Did he know that no one would laugh if he made a mistake?

**Journal Entry (October 8, 1998)**

*My grade 6 group is settling into my room. We are about to read a novel about the Titanic. Of course this is a popular topic, especially since the release of the movie. The first question my group asks is, "Do we get to see the movie Titanic?"*

*"I can bring it in, I have it at home," offers Peggy.*

*Yes, we will see a movie about the Titanic, I answer, "but it is not the movie that was just recently in the theatre. I don't think the one in the theatre is suitable for me to show in school," I explain.*

*My students and I then get into a discussion about nudity and swear words in the Titanic movie and popular culture in general.*

*"Ms. Moar can't show us a movie like that at school," says Steve.*

*"How about if we cover our eyes when they show the bare boobs and when they are having sex in the truck? We all know those swear words anyway. Then can we watch the movie in school?" asks Cory.*

*We talk about my responsibilities as their teacher. We end this discussion with my students accepting the idea that we will see a movie, but not the big screen movie of the Titanic.*

*My students have such a lot of prior knowledge. With the recent release of the movie Titanic, which eight out of my nine students have already seen, they will be bringing some knowledge about this subject. The novel we are going to read is about Dr. Ballard and his crew and how they discovered the Titanic. Everyone is interested. We begin to read the novel. As always, I ask for volunteers to read out loud. If there are no volunteers I am quite content to keep reading to them myself. Cory's hand goes up. He wants to read. He reads an entire page with about forty-five words on the page. He read about thirty of the words independently. I help him with the rest. No one laughs as he tries to read. He has read. I congratulate him. This from the same boy who has told me and many other adults in the building that he could not read. He has shown us that he can, but how do I help him to see that he can read? This is not the first time he has offered to read in our group.*

**Cory has told me that he feels more comfortable reading in the group in my room because no one will laugh at him. In his regular classroom he reads only material that he has written himself. Like most of my other students he is usually**

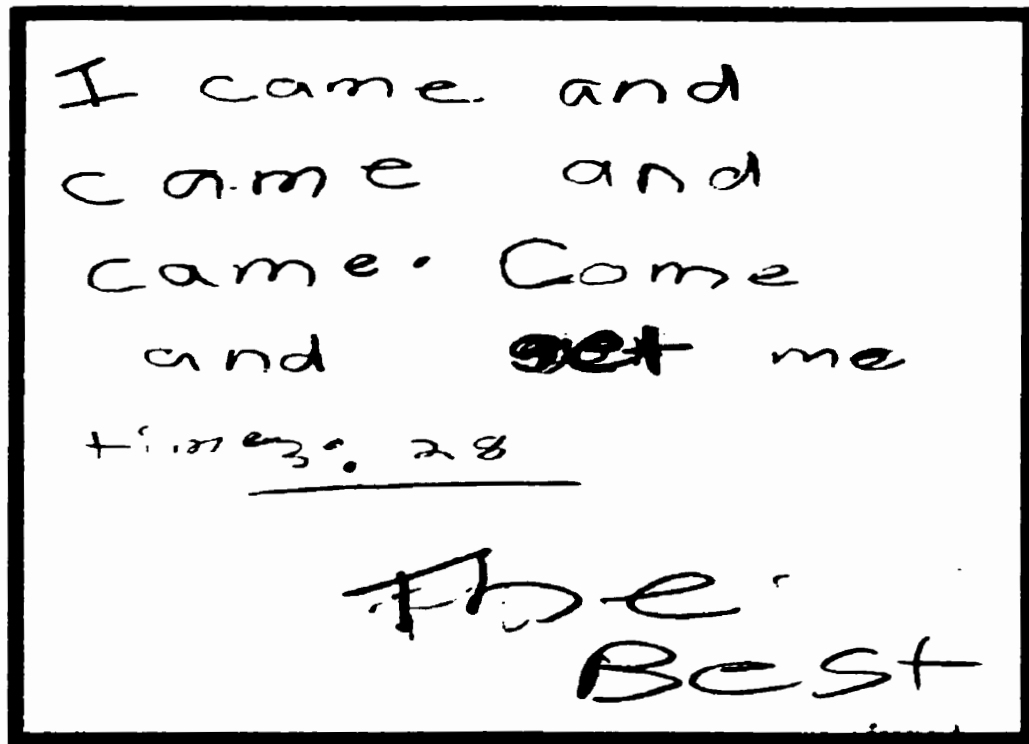
successful when he reads writing he has authored. It also makes a difference that we have taken the time to build a community of learners in a classroom: this is a safe place to risk.

In early 1999 Cory and Steve started leaving me notes on my desk if I was not in my room when they came to see me. This form of communicating encouraged writing for a real reason. I decided to extend the invitation to include reading as well by sometimes leaving notes for them and others on my desk. Most of the notes I get from students are requests for me to come and retrieve them because they need to talk to me about something. Sometimes they need to talk about something personal that is upsetting and sometimes they just want to share some news with me. The purpose of Steve's note (fig.15) was that he wanted to share something with me that he had created which he thought was funny. Steve found a picture of the Spice Girls (a very famous all girl band, especially among eleven-year-old boys). Steve had cut out a picture of his face and glued it on a picture with the Spice Girls. I laughed when I saw what Steve had done and I asked him if he wanted to share it with the group tomorrow.



**Figure 15 Steve's note to me**

**Cory's note to me (fig. 16) reveals how urgently he needed to see me and how many times he came to my room looking for me. I was away at a meeting and I was not in my room most of that afternoon. When I found Cory he wanted to read me the final copy of the camping story he had written. Obviously he really wanted to read it to me badly. Keep in mind this note is from a boy who some days says he can't read! Well he could certainly read that day!**

A handwritten note on a white background, enclosed in a thick black rectangular border. The text is written in a cursive, somewhat messy style. It reads: "I came and came and came. Come and ~~get~~ me + money. 28" with a horizontal line under "money. 28". Below this, the words "The Best" are written in a larger, more stylized cursive font.

I came and  
came and  
came. Come  
and ~~get~~ me  
+ money. 28  
The  
Best

Figure 16 Cory's note to me

The next note from Steve (fig. 17) records not only that he needed to see me, but he taped my cupboard key to his note. This is the cupboard where I keep my purse and my candy. Steve was thoughtful enough to leave the key on my desk so that I would not be in a panic looking for it. As well, Steve needed to tell me that he had found a book about prisons like Alcatraz (the subject of a novel we are reading about). He was anxious to show me this book and to ask me if I could read it to the group tomorrow.

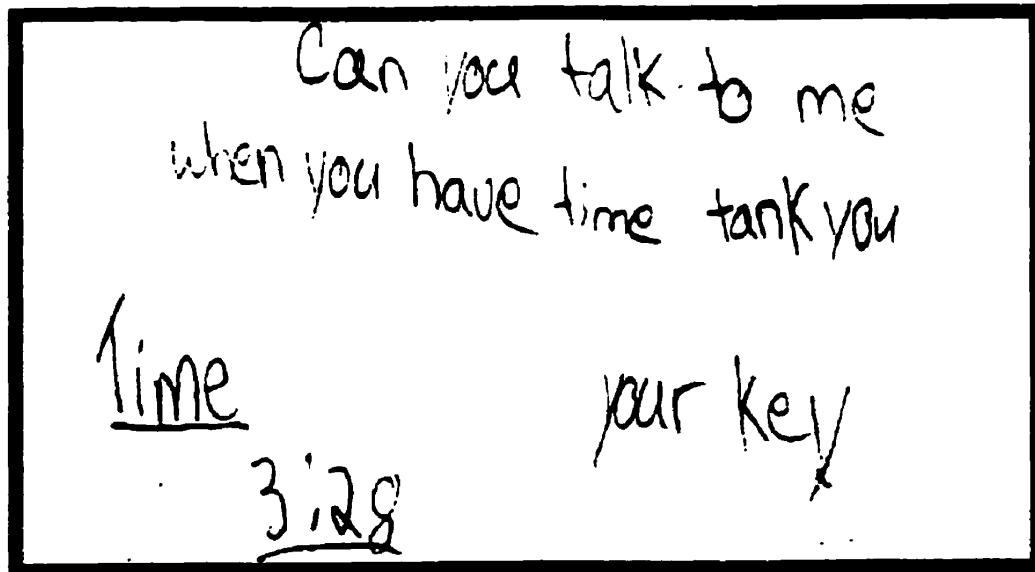


Figure 17 Steve's second note to me

I have countless notes in my personal portfolio from my students over the past few years. Reflecting on my practice has helped me understand the importance of these notes. A few years ago I would have thrown them away after I had read them. Now I keep them in my portfolio, sometimes as a reminder of how important a safe classroom community is to children. The children are not afraid to leave me notes in part because no one is worried about spelling all the words correctly in the notes. I have never received a note I could not decipher, and even if I had I would have had confidence that the author of the note would be able to read it to me if asked.



One day when Cory was exploring in my room he came upon my personal portfolio. I watched as he and a friend looked through it and read my personal teaching joys. In my portfolio I keep samples of children's writing, artwork and notes. Cory could not believe that every note he had written to me that year was in my portfolio.

Cory was also famous for leaving me a note that either said "Cory The Best" or "Cory Sucks". On the days when the note said "Cory Sucks" I knew he had probably needed a little more support from me. On these days I made a point of seeing him right away. Cory and I were both fortunate in that his regular classroom teacher was flexible and willing to allow him to come to my room whenever he needed a visit. A safe classroom community needs to be accessible at all times.

### **Discussions In A Classroom Community**

In my journal I have written extensively about the many discussions I have had with my students. We have discussed their fears about going to a foster home if they are "bad", that there is not always food in their homes, about the death of family members, and the peer pressures they face in relation to alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs. These issues are of serious concern to them. They want to talk about them and to hear other people's perspectives on them. I see my job as teacher being to help build a classroom community that supports discussions of the kinds

of issues that truly matter to the children. Struggles with sexual abuse, physical abuse, violence, prejudice, and gender stereotyping have all emerged in the writings of my students. We have followed the lead of these writings in our discussions. We have examined the children's understandings, and in doing so, we have set their problems in the larger context of the world around them.

Noddings (1984) argues "if dialogue is to occur in schools, it must be legitimate to discuss whatever is of intellectual interest to the students who are invited into dialogue" (p.183). I believe that this open dialogue can only occur when relationships are built between teacher and students and when a sense of safety is secure in a classroom.

If the children did not feel as if they were in a community of learners where what they had to say would be valued, I doubt that these controversial issues would ever have been brought up in our discussions. In classrooms where children's voices are silenced, they may wonder about such issues too, but never speak of them because they fear being shut down by their teacher or others in the class.

## **Building A Learning Community**

For me, a learning community is a democratic community where justice and equality are practised ideals. Children are invited to take risks, to share ideas freely, and to reflect and collaborate. In such an environment I need to continually re-examine my role as teacher and learner so that my students in turn will take appropriate and challenging risks and gain greater control over their learning. I want my students to see that I value their voices and that their voices are heard not only in our discussions, but also in the way I treat them. I have learned to trust and respect my students and to expect the same from them. These are conditions necessary for the emergence of a learning community.

## **Chapter Six Some Final Thoughts and New Beginnings**

As a teacher, the process of change has not been an easy one. Being part of a supportive Master's cohort has certainly helped. When the cohort came together, our initial common goal was to obtain our Master's degree. As we came to know each other through our reflections, conversations and readings, we struggled together as colleagues to make sense of our educational worlds. We explored issues that were important to us and these shaped our subsequent learning experiences as a group. We embarked on our paths as reflective practitioners knowing confidently that we had the support of one another.

Looking into the "reflective practice mirror" has been a little scary. I did not always like what I saw. From the outset I needed to acknowledge that as a teacher I make mistakes and I had to be willing to come face-to-face with the teaching decisions I make on a daily basis. Through my studies in teacher action research, I have come to realise that as a teacher I do not have all of the answers, but rather, I have choices and decisions to make on a moment-by-moment basis.

Reflective practice and journaling have provided me with a means of uncovering: my beliefs about literacy education in a resource program, the gaps between my beliefs and what I was doing in the classroom, and a curricular action plan for addressing such gaps. Listening to my students' voices has empowered me as a teacher and as a learner.

## **My Role As A Resource Teacher**

### **Journal Entry (June 11, 1999)**

*As a resource teacher, I often struggle with what my role really is. Anyone who knows me knows that I grew up in a car family. I have three brothers and three sisters but my dad has often referred to me as his fourth son, simply because I share my brothers' interests in cars. As a matter of fact, I had even thought about becoming a mechanic many years ago. My need for writing about kids and cars came about after a discussion with colleagues. I was talking about my role as a resource teacher and how I sometimes feel like the teacher who should "fix up" children. I commented that I am not a mechanic nor do I think that children need fixing. A colleague replied by saying that kids do not sit inertly, like a car, for you to "fix" them, nor should they. I am teacher and learner: I am not a mechanic.*

In earlier chapters I described how the roles of resource teachers vary in many ways from school to school and from school division to school division. Many of the courses I took as a specialist in Special Education focussed on understanding how children with special needs are different from so called "normal" children. By viewing children as different from the norm, we are forced to see these children from a deficit model perspective. Instead of focussing on the children's strengths and how they learn, such a perspective focusses on what they cannot do. Sometimes what they cannot do is conform to a one-way, "one-size-fits-all" approach to teaching and learning. If they cannot do something the way

“normal” children can then there is something wrong with them: something is broken. If something is broken, we fix it. So, hence, we search for the magic “silver bullets” (Spiegel, 1998) that will fix them.

Programs are produced that claim to improve the reading scores of children by two grade levels in six months. These magic programs sell like hot cakes to people wanting to improve the literacy skills of all children. The producers of such programs make more and more money and soon they are not just advertising to schools, they are advertising on television, on the radio and in newspapers. Parents are persuaded that they can “boost” their children’s reading levels by following one of these programs at home.

I do not want to make it sound as if we do not have ideas about what will work for children with “special needs”: children who learn differently from their classmates. I have learned through my experience that children with special needs, not unlike any other children, need instruction that supports their continuing development from wherever they are. This means that teachers need to take an active, reflective role in examining how their practices impact learners. I do not believe that expecting everyone to do the same worksheet in the same way; or, going through a “magic” set of drill and exercises; or, reading a number of isolated words on flashcards is the answer to improving literacy in our schools. As Spiegel (1998) argues “rather than trying to shoot each child with the same silver

bullet, we need to recognize, celebrate, and work with this wonderful diversity”  
(p.116).

### **Who Am I And Whom Do I Teach?**

I am a resource teacher, but what does this really mean? Am I the fixer - the mechanic? What is my role as a teacher? I have struggled with labelling children and with identifying my role in a school. Much of the literature about resource teachers and resource programs focusses on the teaching of different or special children by a different or special teacher. Mostly the label of “different” implies that there is something wrong with the child. When this term is applied to the teacher it suggests that we have a different approach to teaching, an approach that provides for some quick “magic fix up”. In my case this is not so. I do not have a magic bag of tricks and if I did I would gladly share this wisdom with every educator so that we could all help “different” children.

Through my conversations and shared writing with a close friend, who is also a resource teacher, I have gradually begun to identify what is essential to my role. I teach as a resource teacher just as I would teach if I were a “regular” classroom teacher. My beliefs about supporting learners, providing opportunities for authentic learning and for social interaction are a part of me no matter how I am classified: as a resource teacher or as a “regular” teacher. Perhaps the only difference is that I work with smaller numbers of children. My group sizes average

from five to twelve students. My beliefs about literacy and learning are not different because I am a resource teacher, the “different” teacher, or because I teach those “different” children. However I am thankful for the many children I have had over the years because they have taught me how to be a learner and a teacher. They have been and will continue to be the guides on my journey.

### **Resistance To Change**

Change in one’s own practice is never easy. We become very comfortable in what we do and change can be scary or even seem unnecessary. We tell ourselves “I’ve taught like this for twenty years so why should I change?” Or we tell ourselves that we do not need to adapt what we do because our students need a very structured environment in order to learn. When I hear this comment I listen to what is meant by the term “structure”. Often it boils down to the teacher maintaining control and power in a classroom. But in an environment that follows the tenets of collaborative inquiry there is also a lot of “structure”. Children are not in sole control of their education, but they do have a voice in making decisions. Indeed, there is more structure in the sense that the teacher has to create a plan that allows the children to potentially head in many different directions, based on their current experiences and what is worth knowing and doing. In a collaborative inquiry environment, learners are involved in learning experiences where they are encouraged to wonder, explore and collaborate. This requires greater



thoughtfulness and planning than if the teacher were handing out worksheets and directing all the activity.

In terms of control and power in a collaborative inquiry-based classroom there is genuine sharing. Both teachers and children control their learning experiences. My experience with my students has shown me that they are capable of using this control and power in ways that help them as learners.

As an educator I have needed to risk and to take the time to reflect upon my practice. I have had to examine my own beliefs, and, in doing so, I have become aware of the choices I make each day. A poem I wrote for my professional portfolio summarizes some of these thoughts.

**Journal Entry (June 5, 1997)**

*The most useful professional development for me  
Has been paying attention to my students, seeing what they see  
Just by listening, hearing and taking a look  
They've taught me more than I've learned from any book.*

*Being a student myself over this past year  
Has forced me to take a look in the mirror  
What do I ask them to do, would I want to do that  
An experience all teachers should try, wearing the student's hat.*

(Statement of Growth, C. Moar, 1997)

I have thought about many questions over the past four years. In what kind of world do I want to live? What kind of citizens do I want my students to become? Do I want to school silenced individuals who conform to all rules,

always doing things the same way and not challenging others around them? Do I want to educate learners who will speak up for themselves and against the injustices in our world and feel confident and valued for doing so? Do I want to help develop learners who see things in only one way or learners who are not afraid to push the limits and question the world they live in? Do I want to educate learners who read, write and learn because they are told to? Do I want to participate in schooling children who will expect someone to “give” them knowledge? Do I want to educate children who are lifelong learners and who create knowledge for themselves? Vito Perrone (1991) challenges me to ask myself these questions:

What if students learn to read and write but don't like to and don't want to? What if they don't read the newspapers and magazines, or can't find beauty in a poem or love story? Will these students be optimistic about the world and their place in it, and participate in politics and community life? Will they be able to locate the Union of South Africa but never understand the pain of apartheid? (p.11)

Do I want to participate in schooling learners who are competitive and are used to working alone or do I want to educate learners who collaborate to solve problems? I need to think carefully about my answers to these and other important questions and remember that the children I am teaching today will be the adults of our world in a few years.

## **Policy Traps**

As an educator I have to be conscious of the fact that there are people who will claim that they have answers to all of our dilemmas. The programs such people devise, with their “silver bullets”, are supposedly designed to reach and teach all. In some jurisdictions, particular programs are mandated as “the way to teach all children”. In such circumstances, I am reminded of Hoffman’s (1998) caution: “each time, as classroom teachers, we offer our students only one method or approach because we know it is best and ignore all other options, we transmit a narrow vision of learning to our students” (p.111).

As educators we must speak against programs and “one-size-fits-all” approaches to teaching that are imposed on us. I must be an advocate for the children I teach and for their learning. I will speak out against shooting our children with “silver bullets”.

If I am truly interested in teaching children and not just teaching them to fit into a standardized world, then policies which lead to common curricula and standards testing become a huge concern. “One-size-fits-all” curricula and testing procedures do not, I believe, support teaching from the individual learner’s perspective. I agree with Denny Taylor (1993) as she argues that standardized curricula and standards testing are not only ways of controlling what and how children learn, but also a means of controlling the decisions teachers make about how to teach.

Last year the grade 3 children in my school were subjected to six gruelling days of standards tests: four days of English Language Arts testing and two days of Mathematics testing, prepared and distributed by the Government of Manitoba. The grade 6 children were subjected to three days of English Language Arts examinations which were to account for 20% of their final English Language Arts mark on their report card. One fifth of their grade, which is reflective of their entire year in grade 6, came from a glimpse of their learning on a test that their teacher did not even have a voice in making. Is such an experience worth 20%? Not if I believe learning experiences are to be negotiated, authentic, and to encourage social interaction and community. Am I too far away from the day like teachers elsewhere I will receive an extra "bonus" cheque if my students do well on the standards tests? Will there be a bill in the mail stamped "payment due" if my children do not do well?

## **Places To Go**

The more I read about teaching and learning, the more I see the need for me to keep questioning what I do and the choices I make. Am I teaching to raise responsible citizens who care about one another and their world? Am I encouraging adventure, creative expression and inquiry? Am I teaching children or programs? Am I encouraging “responsible rebels” as Heather-jane Robertson (1998) challenges? Do I “problematize the curriculum” with children as Maxine Greene (1998) challenges me to do? Am I striving for John Dewey’s (1938) visions of a democratic society and a world of justice and equality?

## **The End of The Beginning**

I have experienced how the process of teacher action research has forced me to examine my beliefs about children, teaching and learning. My own learning journey has been a non-linear, authentic experience for me. Interacting with others in a safe, caring community of learners has been important. My learning is mirrored by how I see and understand children as learners and teachers. All of us wear both of these hats in the classroom. Even though the story of this thesis is momentarily finished, I will have new stories to tell in the future. I am sure that as soon as this work is bound I will say to myself, “I should have told that story”. Or my children will teach me another lesson about learning. I will never be finished being a reflective practitioner because it has become a part of who I am as a

teacher. Just as this is the end in some sense and a beginning in another sense let me “end” with a quote from the “beginning” - “Ultimately the process of inquiry begins with a question or with confusion. The journey I take to answer that question or see that confusion often leads to places I never intended to go” (Gallas, 1996, p.22). I still have many questions, but, as a teacher, I know I always will. My students in the coming years will, no doubt, lead me to many presently unknown places.

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