Journey of Empowerment:

Joint experience in literacy learning and teaching in kindergarten

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ABSTRACT

The engaged classroom is a space where teacher and students come together to share in the acts of teaching and learning. They embark on a collaborative journey of empowerment and through the process reciprocally influence each other's growth and emancipation.

Through an autobiographical exploration of my experiences as a student and as a teacher, I present an exploration of the concept of empowerment. I explore its significance not only on the level of literacy development in my kindergarten classroom, where I teach French in an Armenian heritage language setting, but also on a more personal and professional level. Working in the theoretical framework of teacher self-study, I present an epistemological exploration of postmodern feminist research paradigms and discuss the various aspects of autobiographical research. I build my thesis on the context of the heritage language school and the critical analysis of my past experiences. I present an account of the reflexive process I have engaged in during the past five years, which, coupled with the theories of critical and feminist pedagogy, has brought forth the main thesis of my dissertation: the interconnectivity of teacher and student empowerment. In the hope of providing some practical material, I include an appendix where I describe a collection of literacy activities from my kindergarten classroom.

My work provides insight into a teacher's journey of meaning-making and empowerment, which will, I hope, be useful as part of a larger exploration of teachers' work and students' experiences in classrooms.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans l'espace de la classe « engagée », l'enseignant(e) et ses élèves partagent les tâches se trouvant aux deux pôles du domaine de l'apprentissage. Ils embarquent de manière collaborative pour un voyage d'autonomisation, à travers lequel l'émancipation de chaque individu se voit réciproquement influencée par celle des autres.

À travers l'exploration autobiographique de mes expériences en tant qu'élève et enseignante, je présente différents aspects de la pratique d'autonomisation. J'explore leur portée non seulement au niveau du développement de la littératie dans ma classe maternelle, où j'enseigne le français dans le contexte d'une école de patrimoine arménien, mais aussi sur un niveau plus personnel et professionnel. Travaillant dans le cadre théorique de l'étude personnelle de l'enseignant, je présente une exploration épistémologique des paradigmes de recherche féministe post-moderne et discute des différents aspects de la recherche autobiographique. Ma thèse, élaborée à partir du contexte de l'école de langage patrimonial et de analyse critique de mes expériences passées, révèle le processus de réflexion dans lequel j'étais plongée durant les cinq dernières années. Le lien que je fais par la suite avec les cadres théoriques des pédagogies critiques et féministes, me permet de mettre en évidence l'incontournable inter-connectivité de l'autonomisation de l'enseignant(e) et de l'élève. Finalement, dans le but de partager mon expérience au niveau pratique, je décris en annexe un éventail d'activités provenant de ma classe de maternelle.

Par l'entremise de mon travail, je présente un aperçu du parcours de définition et d'autonomisation d'une enseignante et je tente d'enrichir le domaine de recherche reposant sur l'exploration du travail des enseignant(e)s et des expériences des étudiant(e)s dans nos écoles.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Unveiling

In the light of the educational reforms in Quebec that were introduced in the year 1999 by the Ministry of Education, the various discourses about student centred classrooms, cross-curricular teaching approaches and critical pedagogy have left the sheltered theoretical realms of academia and penetrated the actual sites where these need to be applied: the schools. As could have been anticipated, the interpretations of these concepts and their actual application by teachers in their classrooms have been somewhat hesitant and disputable. The reforms are challenging in the sense that they demand of teachers a shift in their conceptualization of the purpose of education, a reshaping of their pedagogical understandings, and concurrently a transformation of their perception of their role as educators. The reforms seem to have played out very differently in various settings. My personal experience as an educator has shown me that there is much resistance on the part of most teachers, who have already been set in their ways for years and do not see the point of the reforms.

In this thesis, I bring forth my own experiences with these issues as a practicing kindergarten teacher, to shed light on the debates that have been set off in many staff rooms. My main purpose here is to show the interconnectivity of teacher and student empowerment and how they play out in the actual classroom, specifically in terms of French literacy development in a heritage language school setting. In doing so, I found it necessary to explore two distinct but closely connected themes: that of my own empowerment as a person and as a teacher and that of my students'

empowerment as bearers of knowledge and socio-culturally situated human beings.

It was the difficulties that I faced teaching French at the Kindergarten level in an Armenian heritage language school in Montreal that initiated this thesis. I was working with students whose socio-linguistic contexts went beyond that of the already complex Quebec society, where French and English coexist as two official languages, to include that of the Armenian community with its heritage language and culture. I was pushed to engage in the kinds of reflections and transformations which are now being demanded of teachers all over the province.

My thinking and the reflexive work that followed were much influenced by educators such as Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux and bell hooks. Their writing, situated in the theoretical frameworks of critical and feminist pedagogy, helped me re-conceptualize the aims of the educational project I was engaged in. They also helped me to recognize the crucial influence that my politically, culturally and socially situated self had on my understanding and application of this project. The recognition of the fundamental role I have in the classroom made me realize that I was not merely a machine programmed to teach, but a thinking and feeling person whose interpretations and choices were informed by her past experiences. This led me to explore the research areas of autobiography and teacher self-study. Given my topic of inquiry I had to put myself in the centre of my research. The autobiographical approach to qualitative research, which allows for the development of forms of knowledge that value the personal experiences and practical knowledge of teachers, provided me with an epistemological and methodological framework. Working in the area of self study, I have adopted a constructivist approach to memory.

Throughout my thesis it is my present sense of what happened in the past that provides me with the words to name my experiences as a child.

Ethical issues have been particularly challenging, especially in terms of confidentiality. I have given pseudonyms to the people or institutions that I mention in my thesis. I have provided neither the name of the school I work in nor any specific details about it. Yet, I realise that, having my name printed black on white on the cover of this thesis, many people who know me will be able to uncover some of the identities that I have tried to hide. Furthermore, in various instances I have included memories and discussed issues related to my family. These may be disturbing at times, but they are essential to my work and are included only to inform and set up the essential context of my thesis. My family has had the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the material and have given me their consent to publish it.

Throughout the five years I was engaged in this research, I worked concurrently on two themes which I have found to be deeply interconnected: the empowerment of students in terms of literacy development on the one hand and my own empowerment as a person and as a teacher on the other. In presenting this reflexive process, I have had to make certain choices about not only the content of my dissertation but also its form.

I entitled my introduction *Unveiling*, because for a very long time I kept most of my thoughts and my writing to myself. Due to its very personal and self-exploratory nature, I was reluctant to share my work with others. I have found that in teacher self-study one of the most difficult parts is allowing the personal to enter the public realm. Realising that my own

story could actually be inspiring and useful to others, I found the courage to make public the very intimate aspects of my own self and decided to unveil my work.

As my thesis is made up of many different intertwining currents, I want to give an overview of the chapters to come.

I have started by exploring the postmodern feminist paradigms which have provided me with a framework within which I have found ways of learning and knowing. Writing about the autobiographical approach to research, I discuss its crucial role in providing a forum where contextual knowledge emerges. I go on to explain how choosing autobiography as a method of research strengthens my thesis in that it goes hand in hand with the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy and creates a space where ideology and action come together; a space where I practice what I preach. I then go on to explain the reasons why I chose to use stories as a tool for inquiry.

After establishing my position within this research framework, I present the particular setting of the school where this work took place. I shed light on the socio-linguistic context of the students who attend the Armenian school and explain the difficulties and challenges I faced teaching Kindergarten in French.

In the following chapter, *Memory's work,* the investigation and analysis of my past experiences and their effects on my present, come together to give grounding to the emergence of my own empowerment. After a discussion on memory, I reflect on how my understandings of my Armenianness have evolved over the years and come to take their present shape. I also reveal much of my experiences of alienation, rejection and oppression,

which have left a lasting mark on me and have contributed not only to the creation of a fragmented self but also to the discovery of the teacher in me. The process of making meaning for myself has been empowering in itself.

Finally, by bringing my experiences with my students to the foreground I show how through my own experience of empowerment, I have been able to redefine the goals of education for myself. In my chapter *Education for empowerment*, I discuss the issues of power in the classroom, explaining that teachers must let go of their own power, in order to empower their students. I explain how by doing this, they can give the stage to the children and encourage them to use their own voice and become active participants in the educational project. Finally I discuss how literacy development and language become essential tools of empowerment in the engaged classroom, how these give students a language to communicate and to name the world they live in. As the students learn to respond to the various texts around them, define their ideas and create new understandings of the world, they are empowered as bearers of knowledge and as human beings who have agency.

In the appendix, I provide a detailed inventory of the literacy activities I have incorporated in my kindergarten classroom, which I hope will offer a supportive foundation to the rest of my study and some "hands-on" ideas for practitioner.

My research - which is based on my experiences as a student and as a teacher - is woven together with pieces of memory writing and journal entries, references to key materials which have presented themselves in my classroom, textual resources from various authors as well as my long term reflections and personal analysis. Together they provide insight into

a teacher's journey of meaning-making and empowerment, which will, I hope, be useful as part of a larger exploration of teacher's work and students' experiences in classrooms.

CHAPTER ONE
WAYS OF LEARNING - WAYS OF KNOWING

> Discovering the ways in which narratives help us rename
> ourselves helps us view the debate among competing theories of
> knowledge from a developmental perspective. The question
> becomes not what is the "right" standpoint of knowing but how
> we can come to understand, individually and collectively, the
> forces that nourish greater inclusiveness, change, and growth over
> time (Helle 1991, p. 55)

POSTMODERN FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY

Postmodern epistemologies are driven by the ideas of liberation and
redefinition of the conceptualisation of "knowledge". Feminists
contribute by asserting the importance of emotion, experience and values
as alternative or additive to the ways of knowing characteristic of the
patriarchal tradition.

In accordance with the non-positivist view of the truth, "all that we can
ever know is the product of an active mind in commerce with a world"
(Eisner 1991, p. 51). Knowledge is constructed. It is through our
experience of the world that we can arrive at what can be accepted as
truth. Furthermore, "our experience of the world is a function not only of
its features, but of what we bring to them" (Eisner 1991, p. 60). This
implies that there is a transaction between the mind and the world. This
transaction is what is referred to as experience. Knowledge in this case

does not stream from objective or subjective views of the world but through the relation of these two within the located self of the knower or researcher. This is how, and why, in qualitative research, the human becomes the central instrument of interpretation. The researcher, the one who comes to know, is the instrument, which filters the information and gives it meaning according to prior experience and knowledge. According to Narayan (1989), feminist epistemology has

> tried to reintegrate values and emotions in our accounts of our cognitive activities, arguing both the inevitability of their presence and the importance of the contributions they are capable of making to our knowledge. (p. 257)

Taking knowledge out of its sterilized and objective realm and bringing it into our infected and subjective world changes the entire concept that there is one truth "out there". Contrary to the positivistic view of the world, where knowledge is viewed as objective and quantifiable, the qualitative approach allows for a more subjective construction of knowledge. It puts the emphasis on multiple and situated views of the world and opens up the possibility of seeing knowledge as part of every person, academic or not.

In qualitative studies, the key factor becomes perception of the world, which is closely linked to secured frameworks, knowledge and experience. These are in turn influenced by paradigm, as well as gender, race, ethnicity, and social and economic status. As Eisner (1991) writes, "our prior experience is shaped by culture, by language, by our needs, and by all of the ideas, practices, and events that make us human" (p. 47). Consequently, every person coming from a different "location" and

background will have a different perception of the debate or the truth. Narayan (1989) writes that, "it is our differences that make dialogue imperative" (p. 261). She stresses the value of differences in perception and understanding, and asserts that it is actually the lack of commonality that allows the redefinition of social relations that are imposed by the traditional and dominant groups.

Furthermore, Eisner (1991) writes that, "what we come to see depends upon what we seek, and what we seek depends [...] on what we know how to say" (p. 46). This reiterates the importance of language and experience in qualitative research. Without a certain conceptualisation, one cannot say certain things and consequently will not look for them or see them. For example, as a teacher and a researcher, I realize that the stance that I take and the philosophy that guides my work are clearly embedded in the fact that at various stages of my life and in multiple settings I have felt myself to be a complete outsider. The fact that I have been out of place and have struggled to find my place makes me sensitive to certain issues or contexts in ways that would not have been if it were not for my experiences. As Narayan (1989) writes,

> Feminists have also argued that groups living under various forms of oppression are more likely to have a critical perspective on their situation. [...] The insights and emotional responses engendered by these situations are a legacy with which they confront any new issue or situation (pp. 262-264).

TEACHER AUTOBIOGRAPHY – THE REFLEXIVE RESEARCHER

Teachers' autobiographies, life and work experiences, have the potential to give insight into the kinds of teachers they are, provide meaning for their actions and understanding for their pedagogical beliefs and approaches. (Cole & Knowles (2000), Clandinin & Connelly (2000), Graham (1991), Mitchell & Weber (1999), Neilsen (1999), Witherell & Noddings (1991)). Cole and Knowles (2000) assert,

> that to understand teaching in its complex, dynamic and multidimensional forms, we need to engage in ongoing autobiographical inquiry (p. 15).

The point of engaging in autobiographical reflexive inquiry is not to valorize teachers' narcissistic inclinations, but to give voice and meaning to teachers' practical experience (Grumet, 1991) and include them as "authoritative components of teacher knowledge."(Cole & Knowles 2000, p. 7) Autobiography allows for the

> (re)examination of professional practices [which] are performed in relation to formal and informal theories about the nature of learning and teaching. (Cole & Knowles 2000, p. 19)

Reflexive inquiry allows practitioners to embark on the various debates regarding pedagogy and education.

The convergence of my graduate studies and my practice has given me the opportunity to conceptualize my pedagogical understandings and beliefs, and reshape my teaching approaches. Throughout my thesis work

I use this combination as a basis for further exploration. As Cole and Knowles (2000) write,

> Reflexive practice comes about by melding the two kinds of theory and process of theory generation, that is, by considering elements of general theories in the context of one's own particular theories. (p. 10)

By engaging in reflexive inquiry, I use my personal experiences and practical knowledge as a site for negotiating and making meaning about the interconnectivity of teacher and student empowerment and how they play out in the actual classroom in terms of literacy development. According to Cole & Knowles (2000),

> Inquiring teachers are intent on revealing theory-practice dichotomies for the purposes of self-awareness and improvement. Understanding and closing this kind of theory practice gap is the focus and intention of reflexive inquiry. (p. 11)

When teachers are directly involved in a research process, which provides them with a forum, they can explore their own problems and "develop increasingly sophisticated understandings of their situation" (Stringer 1993, p. 150). Through the process they break away from "the reproduction and maintenance of sometimes destructive social norms" (Stringer 1993, p. 141) and are also empowered because they take control in defining their problems and taking decisions for action. They transform their personal views about research, as well as their perception of themselves as beholders of valuable knowledge. The combination of the practical knowledge of teachers and the theoretical knowledge of the

researcher can foster socially responsive research with a focus on the "micro-analysis of events at the local level." (Stringer 1993, p. 160)

My own research is the product of reflexive inquiries into my own experiences as a student and a teacher. I am both the researcher and the researched. Lather (1991) writes that,

> by requiring that the subject and object of the research be the same person [...] the method avoids both appropriation of the experience of the "Other" and the inherent disparity between the writer and the written about. (p. 96)

The combination of my own two roles as practitioner and researcher puts me in a position where I can conduct a type of research which is socially responsive, although it is focused on my practice with my students and myself. As Callaway (1992) writes,

> reflexivity, [...] can be seen as opening the way to a more radical consciousness of self in facing the political dimensions of field work and constructing knowledge. [...] Reflexivity becomes a continuing mode of self-analysis and political awareness. (p. 33)

CONTEXTUAL KNOWLEDGE

In qualitative studies, the general purpose of conducting research is to reach an "understanding [of] a situation as it is constructed by the participants" (Maykut & Morehouse 1994, p. 18). This understanding is contextualized and does not allow for, nor attempt "sweeping generalizations" (Maykut & Morehouse 1994, p. 21).

The outcomes and conclusions of the research can be used by "individual schools and classrooms, where [policy] is made and remade in the course of daily practice" (Finch 1988, p. 185) as well as by policy-makers. There is a need for the development of forms of knowledge and understanding concerning the issues that students and teachers face daily in the context of our school. The administrators, teachers or parents often try to find solutions to the various problems, but they always do this by looking on the outside instead of trying to fully understand the situation inside. They appropriate techniques and methods that have worked to fix other people's problems. These often do not take into account the specific context of the school or the situation of the students, for instance those struggling within a multilingual setting. The reforms that are established within the school (whether at the individual classroom level or whole school level) often fail and the blame always rests upon the students. Through my own research, I provide understandings of my specific school context, from the standpoint of an insider, and propose alternative ways of seeing and thinking about issues related to literacy development.

As a practicing teacher, I find myself at the receiving end of the many policies established by the school's administration and the Ministry of education of Quebec. But I am also a researcher. I use this standpoint to inform the debates and influence policies, especially how they are played out in the classroom. To give more grounding to my work I make use of concepts and theories in the process of creating and presenting my data. Finch (1988) writes that,

> an important way in which [research] influences policy is through
> providing new conceptualisations which redefine the terms of the

debate, refashion its boundaries and illuminate features which had previously been hidden. (p. 196)

This is exactly what I want to do. Finch goes on to say that it is by bringing together theory and data that this can be accomplished.

Qualitative techniques have the strength of providing a deeper understanding of particular "natural" settings. They "facilitate the study of situations in the round, reflecting the complexity of the total setting" (Finch 1988, p. 188) and permit the emergence of themes from the site itself. They take place over longer periods of time and focus on the "processes through which those outcomes were produced" (Finch 1988, p. 188) instead of simply enumerating results. My experiences as a teacher within the school have the potential of illustrating issues and providing possible interpretations. The findings of my research are contextualized and situated within my own experiences. I do not try to make generalizations based on the context of my classroom, but I provide reflexive accounts of my experiences, and seek to understand them in a larger theoretical and cultural context. The insights that have resulted from my research may have application or relevance to other related situations.

IDEOLOGY AND ACTION

There are strong parallels between postmodern feminist epistemology and critical pedagogy. Both emphasise criticism and redefinition of cultural practices with the purpose of changing the institutionalized perceptions and practices of society. Both are driven by the need to have an impact on society, praxis (theory and action). Both ideologies try to break the

dominant position of the "knower" – the researcher, the teacher – and put the research participant and students in the centre of the activity as powerful actors in the search for knowledge. By writing texts that are "non-linear, polyvocal, multi-leveled and open to multiple readings" (Lather 1991, p. 93), and that are transparent in ways that show the process of inquiry, the researcher brings "the reader into the inquiry as an analytic partner" (Lather 1991, p. 94). This also contributes to the demystification of knowledge, breaks the dominant structure of knowledge production, and empowers researcher, participant and reader as active participants in the act of knowledge construction. It also produces a blurring of the boundaries "between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', 'teachers' and 'researcher', 'knowing' and 'doing' " (Lather 1991, p. 97). In a similar way, critical pedagogy places the student and the teacher in a position where they are co-participants in the creation of knowledge and become both "student" and "teacher".

STORIES FOR MY READERS

> As we listened to each other's stories and told our own, we learned to make sense of our teaching practices as expressions of our personal practical knowledge, the experiential knowledge that was embodied in us as persons and was enacted in our classroom practices and in our lives. (Clandinin 1993, p. 1)

Qualitative research is driven by the need to provide critical perspectives "to the current problems of ordinary people" (Stringer 1993, p. 146) or ordinary teachers. Every day, I see how most practicing teachers become secluded from academia and after a few years lose touch with the educational world outside the confines of their classroom. "Impersonal

procedures and an elusive argot confine the activities and outcomes of scientific research to a narrow audience of fellow scholars. In the educational arena few teachers and administrators read the academic journals in which most research outcomes are reported" (Stringer 1993, p. 155). Educational research needs to be made readily available to teachers to help them deal with the various issues and difficulties they confront daily. Furthermore, research has to fit the audience for which it is intended through its content and form. It is the

> responsibility of researchers to find right points and right groups
> in the policy-making process who can make use of our work, and
> then make it available to them in an accessible form. (Finch 1988,
> p.194)

Any research, whether it is to influence policy or not, has to take into account the reader. Who is the research for, what are the audience's needs and interests, what paradigms do they work in, what kind of texts will they respond to and so on. These are important questions that any researcher has to take into account. For my research, I see my audience as being encompassed by the teachers in our school, or other teachers who work in similar settings (heritage language schools, immersion schools, second language teachers) and colleagues involved in education in a variety of other ways: school committees and administrations, policy makers, university teachers and educational researchers.

Incorporating narratives and using them as the basis of my research provide not only an alternative to dry theory but also help engage my reader by encouraging a personal and emotional response on their part. In *Teacher's stories*, Thomas (1995) explains:

We seem to acquire the art and craft of storytelling alongside our language learning and become gifted with the capacity (or cursed with the imperative) to cast our experiences in narrative form. They are devices for communicating, interpreting, and giving meaning to our experiences. So powerful is the impulse to tell stories, there is a sense in which 'we are told by our stories'. (p. 3)

Using journal excerpts and memory work, I weave my text around my knowledge of educational theory and my knowledge of practice. Eisner (1991) writes,

As different kinds of data converge or support each other, the picture, like the image in a puzzle, becomes more distinct. In the best of circumstances the interpretation appears inescapable. (p. 56)

I believe that personal stories give more way to ordinary "non academic" people to relate. Stories let people into the world of the author (the researcher, the practitioner) in ways that allow for the transference of the experiences. Readers can more easily respond to the text, relate it to their own experiences and make meaning for themselves in ways that would allow them to redefine themselves, their own practice and understandings. Qualitative research aims at presenting a picture that "reflects the world which teachers themselves inhabit and yet helps them to see it, and themselves within it, in fresh ways" (Nias 1993, p. 144).

A reader's response to any research work depends on its coherence and transparency. To determine its reliability and especially its utility, in reference to his/her perspective or positioning, the reader needs to know who the researcher is, where s/he comes from, which framework s/he is

speaking from, how s/he collected and interpreted the data. As Thomas (1995) writes, "[...] narrative allows us to see the events which have led to reflective transformation" (p. 7). A strong parallel between the form and the content of the work reinforces its effectiveness.

Teaching, I believe, is a form of storying. Good teachers are familiar with stories. They tell and listen to stories daily. Through my work I hope to especially reach those who do not and inspire them to engage personally or collaboratively with their students in the reflexive process characteristic of narrative stories and autobiography.

All stories are situated within a particular context of time and space. I have chosen to begin the telling of the story of my journey at the school where I have been teaching French in kindergarten.

CHAPTER TWO
WHERE IT ALL HAPPENED

Journal excerpt

March 2000

Tamara was a five-year-old girl who I had met during the summer. She attended the Armenian summer camp, which I had been directing for three years. Tamara was a lovable little girl, who liked to laugh and play with her friends. She was of an independent nature and very expressive.

In September of 1999, two weeks after camp had closed its doors; Tamara walked into school a little worried. She had a sad look on her face. She knew the building she was in, since she had spent most of her summer days there, but the faces were all new. As I walked into the cafeteria where the new little kindergartners were gathered having their milk and cookies, I saw quite a few children that I had already met during the summer. When I got into Tamara's range of vision, her face suddenly lit up and she smiled. I knew what that smile meant: "Hey! I know you!" Boy, was she in for a big surprise! I came close to her and right away she jumped up and started talking to me. I smiled at her and said in French: "What did you say? I didn't understand." Needless to say she was quite confused. She attempted to communicate with me once more, but again I told her I couldn't understand what she was saying. Her face closed up again. She sat down on the bench and looked at me in confusion. She obviously could not understand the sudden change in me. She had just spent a summer with me, and she knew I could speak Armenian. But there I was, only a few weeks later, communicating with her in French only. She obviously could not understand that I was now going to be her French teacher and hence not speak in Armenian anymore.

Tamara did not speak to me during the first month of the school year. She would come into my classroom and participate in all the activities but would never share anything orally. Twice I had to change her clothes because she hadn't told me that she needed to go to the bathroom. When her parents came to the first parent-teacher meeting, I explained that she didn't communicate with me and asked them about her background in French. They told me she had attended the school's nursery for two years before coming to kindergarten. This meant that she had been taught some French before coming to my class. I also knew she was comfortable with me, since she came and hugged me every morning. So what was the problem? The parents helped me on this one. She was intimidated. She didn't want to speak with me, because she didn't know how to speak French.

Many children face this problem as they walk through my classroom door. They do not know how to speak French. With a few words here, a little charade there, they manage to communicate their immediate needs. On my part, I have to use all of my acting skills to be able to make them understand that it is time to do such or such a thing. Yes! One might say that the kindergarten teachers of our school run a playhouse in September. Given the unique linguistic context of the students, we often seem to have no other choice.

A PARTICULAR SETTING

The Armenian community in Montreal was established in the early-sixties. It has grown since then, due to immigration from various countries such as Armenia, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, Egypt, Iran and so on. The community, comprised of close to 30 000 members, has many churches, schools and community centres which play a major role in sustaining the

Armenian heritage and culture in conjunction with helping its members integrate into the wider Quebec and Canadian communities.

During the Armenian Genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Turkish governments between 1915 - 1922, the Armenian people, living for generations in what is now known as eastern Turkey, were deported from their ancestral land with the purpose of extermination. The survivors were forced to settle in various host countries. Though Armenian diasporan communities have existed for centuries, it was the Armenian Genocide that made this situation a prevailing reality. Persistently, Armenians have learned to adapt and integrate into their host countries while simultaneously safeguarding their own culture. The prevalence of multiple languages and identities has become a leitmotiv in Armenians' daily realities. In the case of Canadian Armenian citizens, as time has passed, first, second and third generations have become more and more enmeshed in multiple communities, exposed to various languages and become conditioned to develop multiple identities. The complexities of becoming multi-literate within a community such as Quebec, where two official languages coexist, while sustaining development of literacy in the heritage language, which is sometimes coupled with a fourth language, are more and more elusive and intriguing.

Playing a major part in preparing the future generations of Armenian children to face these complexities, the school I teach at has the double mission of preserving the Armenian cultural and linguistic heritage, while helping students integrate into the wider Quebec and North American society. Catering to students from kindergarten to secondary five, the school offers French immersion programs, English as a second language

and Armenian heritage studies. The children who attend the school have one or both parents of ethnic Armenian background.

SITUATED MULTIPLE LANGUAGES – A DELICATE (IM)BALANCE

The great majority of the school's student population speaks Armenian at home and is enrolled in activities at the various Armenian community centres. English seems to be the prominent mainstream second language used in most homes. Early on, the students gain a certain knowledge of English due to the time spent watching Disney movies or television programs with their parents. As they grow, the English language takes a more prominent role due to the overwhelming influence of media and pop culture. Students are obviously exposed to French literacy through their various contacts with the wider Quebec community, but their active engagement with the French culture and language is still mostly contained within the context of the school, and there, mostly in the classroom. In the school, the children speak in Armenian to the Armenian staff of the school and amongst themselves, although the French teachers often insist on the use of the French language in class.

The school has a unique setting. Like all other heritage language schools, the raison d'être of the school is to preserve the Armenian cultural heritage. Although starting from grade one students get instruction in three languages (French, Armenian and English), given the mission of the school, priority is placed on the Armenian language. Throughout the six years I have spent working there as a teacher, I have noticed how almost all interactions outside the classroom are in Armenian or English. The French language seems to be present only in the classroom and that, only when the students interact with their French teachers. This limitation

seems to be present throughout the children's schooling. My observations have led me to conclude that, in the majority of cases, French ends up being viewed as a language of instruction and nothing else. The results of this restricted exposure are such that even after eleven years of schooling in French, many students that I have met, who achieve highly on the Ministry exams, do not feel comfortable communicating in French and often prefer pursuing their studies in English language CEGEPS and colleges.

THE GATEWAY TO FRENCH LANGUAGE

When students come to our kindergarten classrooms, and this is true for most of them, the only contact they have had with the French language is during their two years of nursery school, for two or three days a week. It is in Kindergarten that the students get truly immersed into the French language. As Kindergarten teachers, our challenge is to make this language important to the children from the start; show them that it is not only a language for learning, but that it exists outside the classroom walls and that they need it to interact with the "outside world". Hence, teaching in Kindergarten becomes the gateway to the rest of their schooling. Right from the start, they must learn to love the language, get a taste of their multiple identities (Armenian, Quebecois and Canadian) and find a balance between all.

TEACHING FRENCH IN KINDERGARTEN

Teaching kindergarten at this Armenian school has been a challenge for me from the start. Throughout the six years of my teaching career, I went through many different stages and changes. I had to understand the

particular situation of the school and learn to adapt to it. My being of Armenian origin did not necessarily help me, since I had myself left the school after kindergarten and pursued my studies in a French private school in Montreal. My contact with the Armenian community had been for many years limited to the Armenian Saturday school and had completely vanished after my grade eleven graduation. It was re-established only after I had completed my undergraduate degree in education and had started working as the director of one of the community's summer camps.

My involvement with the Armenian community deepened in October of 1996, when I was offered a long-term replacement position as a Kindergarten teacher in the Armenian day school. I had just come out of university and had to adapt to the work environment, "the outside world", as my professors used to call it. I remember watching the other experienced teachers and following in their footsteps as much as possible. After a while, my personality broke through and I began to put more of my own character into my teaching. I started changing things by implementing my own ideas as well as what I had learned at university. Soon, there was much more play, song, discovery learning, story telling and so on.

Until 1997, the students would spend half the day in the French language classroom, followed by lunch and naptime, and an afternoon in the Armenian language classroom, and vice versa. A year later, when the Ministry of Education of Quebec created the full time Kindergarten, things changed. The students found themselves spending most of their day in the French classroom and the number of Armenian language classes was cut back. My colleagues and I found ourselves facing a new challenge.

We now had only one group of students, but twice the amount of time to spend with them. At first, due to the lack of any clear guidelines, we did not have any idea about what changes we had to implement in our programs. Searching and collecting from here and there, we pulled together enough material to keep us going until the end of the year. We supplemented our programs by adding instruction in writing, phonics, activities for additional vocabulary acquisition, and so on.

The following year, upon the teachers' request, the school invested a great amount of money and ordered new material (textbooks, activity books, posters, storybooks, tapes...) built around the idea of the integration of all subject areas. At first I was quite excited about it. I remember thinking that this was going to be the answer to all the problems we had encountered the previous year. Unfortunately the material, which was geared to students fluent in the French language, soon proved to be incomplete and not appropriate for our teaching situation. The idea behind the program was amazing but it did not fit our needs. Again we started pulling out our own material. I was very unhappy and discouraged.

For the first four months of that school year, after helping my students get on the school bus each afternoon, I sat down and asked myself what it was that I had done that day. I was not satisfied. I kept asking myself: Why am I doing these activities? What goals am I working towards? I shared my malaise with the other Kindergarten teachers and desperately tried to pull out of their mouths the answers to my never-ending questions. Unfortunately, not only did they not know what to say to alleviate my worries, they could not even relate to them. We were on very different wavelengths. They were satisfied with the teaching material they had put

together and did not see a need for improving the program or changing teaching approaches.

In January of 1999, the courses that I started following for my master's degree came as my saviour. They helped me recognize the causes of my uneasiness. I had spent the last two and a half years stuck in a traditional mode of teaching, where language was taught almost as an exact science. I was pouring an unbelievable amount of vocabulary and other language related concepts into the minds of my students but never attempted to make the language they were learning meaningful for them. I was teaching everything as a set of abstract ideas. In addition, everything I did in the classroom came from the workbooks, the photocopied sheets, or the curriculum, which was somehow dictated from the materials at hand. Everything seemed to be coming from the printed page, which I was administering to the children, without giving any consideration to their individual abilities or interests.

The journey I embarked on after this realization is what I bring to you here. It has led me down many paths of exploration and especially pushed me to look back at my past.

CHAPTER THREE
MEMORY'S WORK

Journal excerpt

December 7th, 2002

We were sitting in the spotlessly clean, almost sterile kitchen of my friend's newly acquired apartment. The bright yellow light was shining on the bare white walls and reflecting on the equally white dining table, while the festering and stinging smell of fresh paint was intruding on the luxuriant aromas of our port glasses. Immersed in another one of our conversations, we were calling to consciousness our experiences, telling our stories, dissecting and sharing the meanings that we had come to extract from them and pondering on how they had shaped us over the years. Our words moved us along the curves of our lives, until we somehow found ourselves facing one of those universal questions: who are we? What makes us who we are? I had often thought out these issues in the seclusion of my intimate conversations with myself, but never had it occurred to me to interpret life in the way that I was confronted with that evening. My friend said that over the years he too had spent long hours struggling with these ideas and had come to the understanding that he was who he was because of his memory. "My memory is what shapes me and makes me who I am," he said, "it is because of my memory that I know what I know. In a sense I am what my memory tells me I am." Although until that moment I had felt quite comfortable in the privacy of a conversation that had carved its way through the depths of my being, I was suddenly taken over by an overwhelming sense of discomfort. This comment was making me question my entire understanding of life and humanity; the existence of a mind, a body and a spirit, concurrently working to shape the beings that we are. Not knowing what to think, I surrendered to a self-imposed deadlock and

blocked out the words that were creating turmoil in my neatly ordered world of understandings.

*A week later, I was walking out of the movie theatre, after having watched Arto Paragamian's latest big screen movie **Two Thousand and None**. As usual, I was lost in a labyrinth of thoughts. Built around the turmoils of a man who is afflicted with a terminal disease that causes his brain to grow until he first loses his memory and finally dies, the film dealt in part with issues of identity and origin. As I am extremely interested in these topics, I had taken much pleasure in living through the film. However as I was leaving the theatre, I could not bring myself to ponder on its different levels of meaning, as I would normally do. I was haunted by the particular images of his death and somehow kept dismissing the rest of the movie. There he was, sitting on the grass, with his ex-wife and best friend on either side of him, seeing his life flash before his eyes. But what he was seeing was only a fragment of all the experiences he had lived. They were only the parts that were actually kept in his memory; that is, everything that had occurred after his initial loss of memory. This man who had spent all those last days of lucidity trying to return to his roots and rekindle his past and his childhood, was left with absolutely no sense of who he really was.*

*Lately, I have been reading Edward Said's memoir, **Out of Place** and I feel like I am coming to a new understanding: we, who are shaped by our past and our different experiences, cease to exist as who we are, the moment our memory leaves us. It is because of our memory that we are who we are. I almost want to superimpose the words memory and person, or memory and self.*

Reading through the pages of Edward Said's memoir, *Out of Place*, getting deeper into the intricacies of his relationships and experiences, I came to know the person that he was. His memoir, the sharing of his memories, was an open door into his self with which I found an indescribable and

often unexpected affinity. The different levels on which I could relate to his experiences were at times painful. Said (1999) wrote,

> I have retained this unsettled sense of many identities – mostly in conflict with each other – all my life, together with an acute memory of the despairing feeling that I wish we could have been all-Arab, or all-European and American, or all-Orthodox Christian, or all-Muslim, or all-Egyptian, and so on. (p. 5)

My deep association with certain aspects of Edward Said's memoir came from my own baggage of experiences. As part of my ongoing and desperate attempts to find a way of fitting into the various contexts making up the whole of my reality, I have created, in my mind at least, a different name for each of my different selves. I present my first name, "Diane", with a different pronunciation in each of the different languages I speak: "Diane" [deeyaan] in Armenian, "Diane" [deeyan] in French and "Diane" [dye-an] in English. Alternate aspects of my being are called forth by each of them, as I associate each one with a certain language, a certain self, a certain activity, a certain time in my life and a certain group of people. There was a time when I allowed no interchange, and actually felt some kind of resentment every time I heard them misused. My second name, "Taline", my only true Armenian name, is most of the time lost between my two used names or simply deleted which seems to me a good representation of the long time hidden and mostly unexplored aspect of my Armenian origin. My last name, "Baygin", was forced upon our family by the Turkish government's decision to have all the Armenians living in their country change their name. That is how, the name "Zadiguian", our real family name, has been erased from our pasts and we have been left with a Turkish word hanging around our necks. I

still wonder about what made my grandfather choose to completely change the name from "Zadiguian" to "Baygin", instead of simply dropping the "ian" suffix or switching it to "oglu", as most other Armenians living in Turkey had done at the time. Whatever the cause, this decision has had a major impact on me, by the simple fact that I have often been made to feel non-Armenian, and this, by Armenian people, on the basis that I didn't bear my Armenianness in my name. These disparities within my names have contributed to my feelings of indecisiveness about who I am and where I belong, and have been intensified by the various contexts and situations I have had to live through.

Griffiths (1995) describes how the process of becoming, deeply rooted in one's memories of the past, is also dependent on the ways in which one deals with that past, tries to understand it and use it in the creation and recreation of one's self. She explains:

> Authenticity is an exercise of a politics of self, in which transformation of some or all of the self is possible, but which acknowledges that such transformation starts with what is there already. This is freedom but not total freedom to create oneself. A self is always rooted in its past. (Griffiths 1995, p. 185)

FINDING AND UNDERSTANDING THE ARMENIAN IN ME

Journal Excerpt:
April 2001

It all happened so suddenly. I still don't believe it. "Thank you for the journey". These were the final words I had written in the little black guest book placed on

the pedestal next to the brick wall that supported the fifteen pictures taken in Western Armenia (Historical Armenia, Eastern Turkey, call it what you wish). Little did I know that my journey was about to start. As I got back into the car, I was invaded by my emotions. Arpy sat in the passenger's seat next to me; Nour was in the back. Both were lost in a conversation about...well, I can't even remember. I could hear their voices but I was far from listening to them. A voice inside of me was calling; images were jumping into consciousness. "Thank you for the journey". I kept repeating these words in my head. What did this mean? Looking at those pictures, my heart and mind had been stirred. But why? I remember looking at the photographs and thinking that this was where I came from. These were places, churches, landscapes where my people had lived, prayed, walked. I knew so little about the actual sites, yet it felt like I could feel them inside me. As I was driving, I kept thinking: why is this affecting me so? I had seen these pictures before, in the photographer's home. I remember thinking that they were beautiful pictures. The colours, the textures, the angles... I admired the photographer's artistic eye. He had captured images of an Armenia that I had heard of and learned about. I remember thinking that it was nice to be able to get a glimpse of the scenery through the lens of a familiar person and wishing that I could go there myself in the future. But none of this emotional stuff! What was happening to me now? During that entire car ride and for the rest of the afternoon, I was crying.

The night before, my friend Arpy had interviewed me about my literacy practices in the French, English and Armenian languages. As I recounted stories about my first literacy memories, my best and worst memories, issues about my Armenian identity kept coming up. For the first time in my life I said what the Armenian language represented for me: my grandparents' language. It was for them mostly that I went to Armenian Saturday school for eleven years. Yes, the Armenian language was the language of communication in my home, but for some reason, I

only saw my grandparents, more precisely, my maternal grandparents as Armenian. As I was talking during the interview, I started trying to explain why it was that I associated my "Armenianness" mostly with my grandparents.

The combination of these two events, so closely placed in time, threw me in a state of consciousness that I was not ready to confront. The tears flowed down my face; my mind went blank.

Part of the difficulty I have experienced in defining who I am and where or how I belong, I have traced back to my family situation. My parents: two people, having completely divergent mentalities and distinct pasts, coming from different parts of a country where they had tried to hide away from their origins- my father for reasons of survival, my mother in a desperate attempt to overcome the effects of the traumatic past of her family. Living in Turkey, my father's family had only spoken Armenian at home. My father and his brother, being boys and having spent much time outside of the home, spoke mostly Turkish. Upon marrying my mother and coming to Canada, my father has tried to reclaim his roots by learning to speak Armenian himself. Giving us Armenian second names and sending us to Armenian daycare and Saturday school have been his way of making sure that his children grew up as Armenians. My mother, on the other hand, despite her deep attachments to her Armenian roots and her desire to raise us as Armenians, has made every possible effort to get away from the Armenian and Middle Eastern society and mentality that she grew up in, trying to reconstitute in this "new world" an environment mirroring the one she was immersed in during the couple of years she had spent studying abroad in France. These bipolar forces are what have created a space, in which my brothers and I have grown up, and which has neither been truly Armenian, nor French, nor Canadian for

that matter. We could not speak anything but Armenian at home, but were not sent to Armenian day school; it was the French educational system that was valued. We did attend Armenian Saturday school, but never took part in any of the activities of the community, which, I began to assume, was a place where we did not belong.

I have grown up with a constant feeling of not being right, of not belonging. I have gone through most of my education in a European French School attended by children clearly belonging to a different, not to say superior social class than mine, and who had the advantage of growing up in homes where European mentalities and ways of life prevailed, even if they belonged to various minorities. I, on the other hand, came from a home where, although French education was greatly valued, only the Armenian language and ways of life were allowed. I grew up never being able to make or see any connections between my family life and that of the "French society" of the school. Part of my uncertainty also lay in the fact that every Saturday, I was shoved into a world of Armenians, where I still did not belong. I would feel like an alien, coming into the community school after having spent the entire week in the "stranger's world" as they would call it. I would see Armenian school as a place where I would meet other Armenian "aliens" from diverse planets. The only links that we had with each other was our displacement and not our Armenianness.

This is how I grew up living in three, more or less connected bubbles - French day school, Armenian Saturday school and my home, which was in itself a confusing combination of what both of the others represented. This puzzlement in terms of identity and the uncertainty it has created in

my life is well represented by the sometimes haunting reminder of the absence of any kind of memory of my family history.

Growing up, I did not know the difference between Armenians and Turks. We spoke Armenian at home, but my parents were from Turkey and would often use the Turkish language, especially when they wanted to have a private conversation. For a long time, I was kept in total darkness, not knowing anything about the monstrosities of the Armenian Genocide perpetrated by the Turkish government between 1915 and 1922. In fact, I remember thinking that my family was actually Turkish Armenian (whatever that meant). Where the severe problems would come out was in Armenian Saturday school. On several occasions, I would hear horrible depictions of the Turkish people and detailed accounts of all the savage things they had done to the Armenians, and would get completely confused. I can still remember the first time this happened. I was around six years old.

Memory:

Sitting on the edge of a bench placed in front of the gym's stage, I was looking at the horrible and terrifying black and white pictures that were being projected on the screen, one after the other. I remember thinking angrily to myself: Why are they showing us all these? This is so disgusting and horrible. Who could do this? And the answer came from one of the speakers: The Turks! The Turks?, I thought. How could they say that? My family would never do such a thing. What are they saying! That's me they are accusing, my family, the people I love. As my confusion and anger grew, I remember feeling a kind of physical distance. My mind took over and the rest faded out. I saw myself getting into a bubble, away from the rest of the crowd, which was clearly Armenian and clearly hostile towards the Turkish people, which, at that time, I believed I belonged to. I

remember thinking that day that I should be very careful never to let anyone find out about my Turkish background, for fear of what would happen. I also never mentioned the event at home.

It was only years later when the topic of genocide actually found its way through the great wall of silence that my mother had built, that I began to understand. My grandparents, who had moved from Istanbul to Montreal when I was about five, were the ones who eventually mentioned the genocide in my family circle.

Journal excerpt
March 24th 2002

On Friday I went home for lunch. I mean my mom's house. It had been a while since I had seen her and wanted to spend some time with her. The writing that I had been doing over the last week, Lorne Shirinian's talk[1] which I had attended on Thursday night and the memories of a week-end spent in my friend Jane's family house in Thetford Mines had all put me in a state of wonder and questioning.

I cannot recall the last time I had a conversation with my mom about my family history. Actually now that I think about it, some things had probably come up around the time my grandfather passed away two years ago, but at the time, my mom was very fragile, as was I, and resurfacing memories had a soothing quality that was tainted with grief.

I can't remember how I was able to initiate the conversation now. I originally wanted to ask my mom about her memories of my own childhood and hoped that she could provide some explanations in regards to the choices she and my father had made concerning me. I couldn't do it. Asking such questions might have

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[1] Lorne Shirinian, poet, writer and professor of Comparative literature presented his latest book "Writing memory : the search for home in Armenian diaspora literature as cultural practice ".

revealed the issues that I was dealing with in terms of my thesis and I was not ready to let my mother in on anything.

So, not being able to get to the topics that really interested me without arousing questions on her part, I went completely around the subject to talk about my great grandmother. This started the most wonderful conversation and much discovering emerged on my part. Not only was I able to finally get a glimpse of a distant past but also came to understand why my mother had for years kept us in the dark in regards to the genocide.

During our talk, she was reluctant to talk about certain things. She would give me detailed accounts of certain periods of time and then skip over others, especially those concerning the genocide. When I kept going back to my initial question, asking her if she knew any other details about my great grandmother's life stories, she said that my great grandmother would often tell her about her childhood and that every story would unmistakably lead to stories of the genocide. These had a traumatising effect on her. She would relive the events in her dreams. It was as if she had seen and lived through the horrors of the genocide herself. The vivid details would terrify her and almost make her want to kill herself. She was unable to tolerate the memory of the atrocities and refused to hear about them. Every time the topic came up, she would either leave the room, try to hide away in her thoughts in order to block the conversation out of her mind or literally order her grandmother and her parents to stop speaking about it. All the memories of the past being so closely linked to the genocide, my mother has made a conscious effort to cut herself off from the past. This is why, in the same way, she has, for years, hidden this past from her children.

I had always been very angry towards my mother because she also never let my grandparents tell us about the genocide. After this long conversation with her, I was able to understand that part of her choice

was motivated by a need to protect us from the traumas that she had endured and put an end to the intergenerational transmission of these memories. I remember now, how throughout my childhood, I would manage to hide from my mother in order to ask my grandparents about their past and the family's stories of the genocide. In my desperate attempts to try to fit in one or the other of my worlds, I had to know how much my family history was part of the collective Armenian history, which I was bombarded with at Armenian Saturday school. I actually remember feeling somewhat happy that my family had also been part of the deportations in 1915. It made me belong.

It was only a couple of years ago, sometime before my grandfather got sick and passed away, that my brother and I were finally able to get a glimpse of our family's history and their experiences during the genocide. We were sitting at the kitchen table, and somehow, rather clumsily, we initiated the topic of the Armenian genocide. My grandfather was quite reluctant to speak at first, partly due to the pain of revisiting that dreadful past. With our persisting questions we finally convinced him to tell his story and ignore my mother's interruptions and interjections in the background. I suppose he must have felt our desperate need to discover that part of our history and our selves. Unfortunately, we never taped him or took any kind of notes. None of us really remembers now the details of what he told us that day; all we have been left with are snippets of memory: siblings shot in front of my grandfather's eyes, others lost forever, families being torn apart, years spent in countless orphanages, never ending displacements from one country to the other, parts of a family managing to reunite years later and survive the memory of its past.

My understanding of my Armenian identity has evolved with time and I have found ways of reclaiming it. After going through the stages of complete denial and rejection, the various curves of my life gently brought me back to my roots. An unexpected job within the Armenian community, establishing meaningful friendships with countless individuals of Armenian background, a month spent in Armenia, all these contributed in their way to help me carve my place and define my Armenianness. The uncertainties of my childhood still have their effect and I often find myself thrown from one end of the spectrum to the other when I think of what it means for me to be Armenian.

A WORLD OUT OF MY REACH

As a child, a further complication came from the fact that I grew up surrounded at school and in our neighbourhood by a class of people to which I desperately wished I could belong. We lived in one of the upper middle class areas of the city and I attended a French European private school. My family's financial status, which did not permit us to live up to the extravagant expectations of our surroundings, further cultivated my feelings of displacement and inferiority.

As I grew up, not having the financial resources meant not being spoiled like the other children, not having the latest gadgets, not having a new pretty dress for every occasion, not travelling to various continents during the winter and summer breaks. My peers' demeaning comments about my clothes or my school supplies, their constant reminders of my "deficiencies" lead me to believe that I was poor and inadequate. In hindsight, I realise that my parents made all sorts of sacrifices in order for us to receive a good education and live in a pleasant neighbourhood.

They provided us with everything that we needed; our lives were far from being deprived in any way. If it had not been for my peers' attitudes and comments, I never would have felt inferior to them in that way. My parents never made us feel we were poor. Not that we ever really were.

I left the Armenian school environment, which I had attended since nursery, at the end of my kindergarten year. I still remember how the adults looked at me with disappointment in their eyes. "So you are going to go to a French school next year?" Yes I was. I somehow seem to recall some kind of pride in that move. Although I had absolutely no say in that choice, I remember feeling quite happy that my future lay in the outside world. To this day, despite the hardships I have endured, I am glad that my parents took the decision of sending me (and later my three brothers) to a French school. But this was not any French school. It was Collège Jean-François: a renowned European French school, where I would spend the next twelve years of my life. My mother, having gone herself to a French Lycée in France and completed her French Baccalaureate, wanted us to have the same kind of education as she had had. My father was against this move from the start, as I discovered much later. But my mother, being both strong and stubborn, had insisted on it and managed to convince him. At the time, the school, which had limited space, was quite selective of its students. It gave priority to children whose first language was French and came from a Catholic religious background. My being Armenian and my lack of knowledge of the French language had made it very difficult to get in. My mother tells me years later how she had visited the school principal's office countless times and pleaded her case. She had even taken her own report cards and diplomas from France to help in the final decision-making. After much insistence, they finally

accepted me. The prospect of stepping into the outside world at the age of six had been quite exciting for me, but walking through the doors of my new school turned out to be the beginning of a life of not belonging.

FROM REJECTION TO OPPRESSION

I remember my grade one classroom. It was organized in such a way that the individual desks stuck one next to the other, forming a big square which was outlined with the bodies of unknown children's faces. The teacher, walking around and smiling, was giving various instructions in a language that I could hardly understand. The little French I had learned in Armenian school didn't help me much and I had to rely on my peers' actions and reactions to make out some kind of meaning. My poor knowledge of the French language also made it very difficult for me to communicate with the other children and establish a relationship with them. I would try to join in their tag games during recess. The boys would run after the girls to catch them and take them to the back fence of the schoolyard and kiss them. I would play with them, and run as fast as I could, but why? Every time I would turn around to see if one of them was at my heels, I would be quite proud at first to see that I had run so fast that no one had caught up with me, but soon I would understand that no one was actually running after me to catch me! Most of the other girls were sought after, but not me. I was a stranger amongst them.

Later in that same year, I was going to turn seven and my parents were organizing a birthday party for me. My parents were quite wonderful in that sense. When I look back at pictures from that year's party, I cannot believe the number of children my parents had brought together at our house. But one person was not there. Her name was Claudia. She had

not been invited. My family had not wanted me to invite her. Why? Because she was black. It's sad how innocent a child can be. I was quite innocent... When confronted at school by my peers about why she had been left out (and she was one of the popular girls, taller and bigger then all of us and a leader) I decided to come clean, or so I thought. I explained that it was not me who didn't want her there but my family. They all asked me: "why?" And I responded: "Because she is black." I should have known the reaction that I would get. But I didn't, unfortunately. Most people did show up at my birthday party, but after that event I remember that my peers started rejecting me. Claudia, who was furious at me, and rightfully so after the racism that had been shown to her, started mounting others against me. I was rejected. Simply rejected. Not a part of the rest. And I was going to stay that way for the many years to come. I was branded and that was it. I think that year I was left with only two friends at school. Or at least I remember that I spent many recesses during winter, playing war with two boys in my class. The girls rejected me completely, and so I spent my time with the boys.

The next year things only got worse. I got to be friends with Katie, Maya and Viviane. This was probably the first twisted relationship I had with people and I guess, for some time, it became a model for all the ones to come. Katie and Maya were very close friends. Their parents knew each other and they spent much time at each other's houses during weekends. Viviane and I were never able to join them during those playtimes. In fact, even at school, we never got to actually play *with* them. Instead, we would end up taking the place of their toys. We were their little live puppets, responding to their every whim and acting exactly the way they

wanted us to. We would all be "friends" one day, and the next I would sometimes be rejected and teased or Viviane would be the one suffering the same trauma. We took turns. Or actually they made us take turns at being the oppressor and the oppressed. Either role made me feel horrible, but when I was in the oppressor's corner, I wanted to belong so much that I took on their attitudes and mimicked their actions. I still remember participating in one of their traumatizing sessions. It was wintertime. We were outside for recess. I remember vividly Viviane being cornered with her back on the green fence and her front blocked with our three bodies: Katie's, Maya's and mine. I remember taking her hands and commenting on how they were either too small or not pretty. God know what kind of ridiculous remark I made, but the aim was to make her feel that she wasn't good enough, that she was different and unworthy to be a part of the threesome. Needless to say, the next day, or a couple of days later, I was the one with my back stuck to the fence and being examined for some sort of impurity. Viviane, who had taken on a vengeful attitude, was probably the harshest of them all.

I have many stories like this one, but try to suppress their memory. Calling them forth is much too painful. For many years, I kept these carefully hidden inside me, even when the taunting turned into collective oppression.

I say collective, because as the years went by, the number of people who had taken it upon themselves to make my life miserable had multiplied to such a degree that I actually reached a point in secondary one or two, when the thought of killing myself started crossing my mind. I could neither bear the constant demeaning remarks about the hand me down clothes that I sometimes wore and the foreign food I ate, nor the various

nicknames I was given. Yet, I somehow found a way to survive, partly due to a couple of students' support and mostly because of the respite I would be given while the attention turned on someone else. The culmination of my suffering came in secondary three, when the oppression I endured turned into abuse.

Memory:

One day, we were sitting in class and I was eating a big cone-shaped lollypop that I had just bought at the corner store during recess. I was enjoying sucking on it for a while, until I realized that a couple of boys in the class were watching me with delight. I didn't understand at first, but when one of them imitated the movement of my lollypop going in and out of my mouth, I knew that their imagination had turned on the "sexual" headlights.

After that day, the sexual remarks never ceased. I cannot remember now what they were, but I know that any and every conversation I would have with one of them, would turn into a conversation full of sexual connotations. It was almost like a game they would play with me. I am ashamed to say this now, but I guess part of me played along because it was a way through which I could finally "bond" with part of the "cool" group in my class. Being also quite taken by one of the boys, this game gave me the opportunity to spend some time with him, or at least get closer.

Either way, soon the conversations, which seemed pretty harmless at first, turned into acts. One boy in particular would take much pleasure fondling me. He would creep up behind my back and grab my breasts, as I would be looking for something in my locker, walking up the stairs or standing in a hallway talking to someone. This went on for a while. I would answer back, tell him off, try to fight back and so on. But nothing would do, until one day, I found myself crouching

on the floor in front of my locker, trying to protect my body from the invading hands that were trying to touch me, and crying. A big group of people was standing around in a circle, watching and laughing. I could not do anything. I had turned into a show. The students, boys and girls included, almost saw this as something normal at that point. It was horrible. No one was helping me. I don't know where I found the courage and the strength that day, but I got myself up, stood in front of my "predator" and slapped him across the face. It must have been a very hard slap, because (and I don't know if this was only in my mind or if it really happened) suddenly there was no sound in the room. The feeling of standing up for myself by slapping that boy was so wonderful, that somehow I managed to jump up again (yes, jump, since this boy was much taller then I was) and slapped him twice more. He stood there, dumb- stricken, while I turned around and ran to the bathroom. After that day, people came around. They started seeing him as an oppressor and stood by my side. He never did it again.

The scars of this episode of my life followed me for a while in my intimate relationships. I would often get defensive and cringe at the approach of a hand.

FRAGMENTATION – IMAGES OF SELF

> Just as people grow in particular bodies, people grow up in particular places and their selves and subjectivities develop accordingly. (Griffiths 1995, p. 85)

My experiences of socialization in school created in me not only a feeling of displacement but also of inadequacy. The many years spent to change myself in order to fit others' expectations left me with an acute sense of inferiority and consequently a deep lack of self confidence. Freire writes,

> Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are no good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything – that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive – that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness. (Freire 1993, p. 45)

The feelings of inadequacy, which have followed me for such a long time, were transformed when I finally found the courage to revisit my past and question its effects on my present self.

Journal excerpt
Sunday, March 31, 2002

I haven't been able to sleep peacefully lately as I usually do. My dreams are haunted by memories from the past. I say haunted because they are not pleasant one. I wake up crying or sobbing in my sleep. Reading Morweena Griffiths' book entitled **Feminisms and the self: The web of identity** *has brought forth all sorts of memories. Memories of rejection, or confusion, split selves, undefined selves...*

Yesterday I went through some of the book, read a few pages here and there (whatever seemed really interesting for me at the moment) and as usual I started departing from the text and got lost in my thoughts. I eventually started getting restless and could only sit through one more chapter or so. Some time later, after having done every little thing that needed to be done around the apartment (this is what usually happens when I can't work; I do chores), I remembered my friend Jane's words "Create all sorts of texts, draw, paint, photograph. Do what you really want to do and see what comes out." And so I did.

I have huge bristle boards stored under my bed mattress. I had been saving them for one day when I would be painting something special, but at that point it didn't matter. I wanted something to draw on, something big, wide, almost endless in order to not be constrained by the lack of space. I placed it on my bed, kneeled on the floor and started drawing.

Whenever I start drawing, I don't have a particular subject in mind. I just try to let go of my mind and heart and see what comes out. The other day, I was watching a movie where a painter said: "You will never be a good painter as long as you are afraid to let go." I thought that was funny. That's what I do. Yes, I actually get scared sometimes. It can be so intense and also so revealing... but I enjoy it tremendously and it is usually my only venue for true self-expression, one that is not controlled or censored.

So I started drawing. I tried a line here another there and soon I put aside the thoughts in my mind and concentrated on feelings. I seem to draw with feelings drawn by the memory of shapes, of curves, of lines, of textures. As I draw, I can almost feel, smell or touch what I am drawing. I take great pleasure in these private passionate moments. At the same time, it seems that once I have surrendered to the movements of my hand and being, my mind becomes clear. Drawing or painting becomes a meditation. And that is when I start having interior monologues or discussions that I entertain with my own self.

Yesterday I started writing my thoughts down on the actual drawing. I wrote "Images of self". I always have images in my head of how I want to be, how I want people to see me or perceive me. It is as if I can picture myself doing something, almost like an out of body experience. Stepping out of myself and imagining what I would look like. I see myself in all sorts of situations and try to re enact them in my real life, make the images real. I create myself according to the images imagined. Obviously these come from images that I have seen and that

have pleased me or inspired me and I want to appropriate them, make them part of myself. I try to recreate the images that are in my head. I also shape myself according to situations or people. Having always tried to be a person that would be accepted, I have learned to show certain aspects of myself to some people and other aspects to others.

I am a fragmented being on many levels. Fragmented as Armenian and Canadian, fragmented as a woman who has most of her life associated or tried to associate more with men, trying to dissociate with my femininity, fragmented because I have a past so far away from Armenians and a present so steeped in Armenianness, fragmented because I am a teacher but also have a creative side that wants to come out through art, fragmented because I have to be both the academic and the kindergarten teacher.
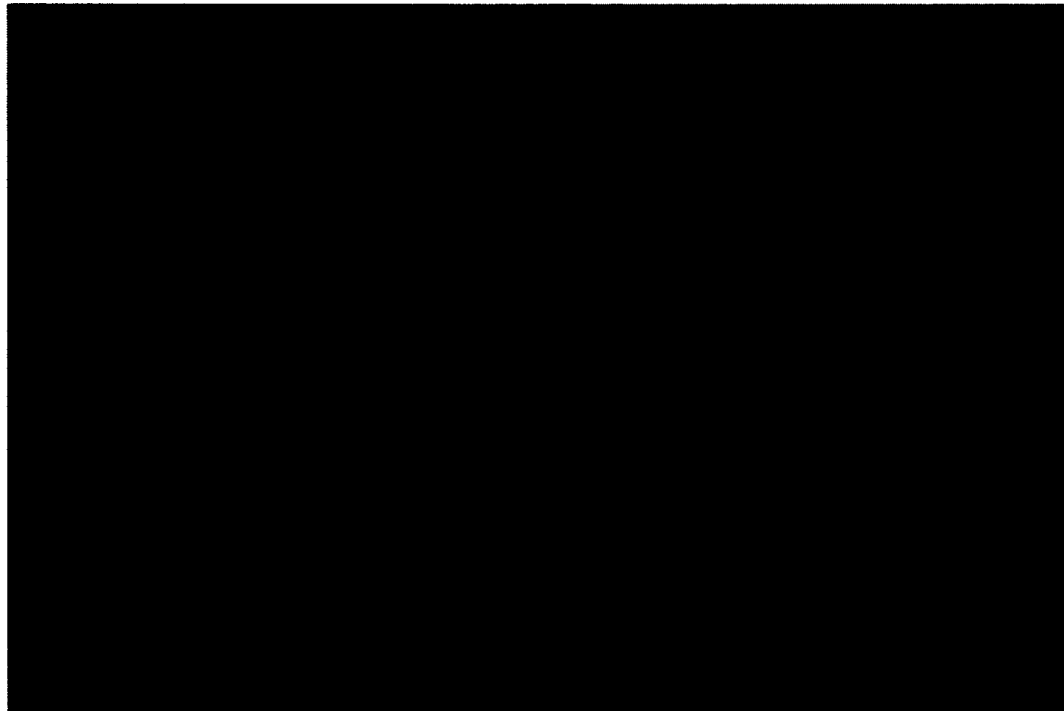
IMAGES OF SELF

Yesterday my roommate's boyfriend saw what I was drawing and said that it looked like a woman who was not attached properly. I thought: Yup! Not

attached and not properly! That's how I feel often. Pieces of myself come together to make up who I am, but not even I can describe that.. It is so fragmented, so intricate and spread all over the place that I can't make sense of it. I understand more and more everyday. This reading and writing and thinking help me do that. It brings a kind of awareness that makes me figure things out.

Journal excerpt
Saturday April 13th 2002

I am starting to understand notions about the self better. Yes, it is fragmented but at the same time it all seems to be attached. Every single part is attached someway or another to another part, which is also attached to another, and another, and another and so on. The pieces are all attached but not properly.

> [A] self is made up of a number of different, sometimes incompatible, 'selves', all of which, taken together, make up the self as a whole. A self can participate in different, partially incompatible communities. It is not unusual for a self to be surprised by itself, as different 'selves' take precedence. [...] I argue that authenticity is more likely to be reached by an acceptance of the fragmentary nature of self, than by clinging hopelessly to a dream of unity. (Griffiths 1995, p. 181)

When I was reading Edward Said's memoir, the overarching feeling of displacement present in his book had touched me very deeply. Three words, scattered all over the pages of this memoir, had invaded my entire being every time I had uttered them in my mind's voice: out of place. These words had rushed to the centre of my being and engulfed my heart and my mind with the treacherous memories they called forth. Reading the book had been quite difficult at times, but one thing had kept me

going: the need to find out how Edward Said had been able to overcome these feelings and difficulties. I remember how, as I got closer to the final pages of the book, my anxiety had grown stronger and stronger. I had kept thinking: Am I going to find an answer? In his final words, Said (1999) wrote,

> I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance. These currents, like the themes of one's life, flow during the waking hours, and at their best, they require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are "off" and may be out of place, but at least they are always in motion, in time, in place, in the form of all kinds of strange combinations moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each other, contrapuntally yet without central theme. (...) With so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place. (p. 295)

Griffiths' and Said's work have helped me come to a balanced state and an understanding of myself - my characteristics, my role and my place. I have learned to accept the feelings of displacement, to overcome the feelings of inadequacy, to understand the fragmentation that has resulted and to appreciate the fluidity of my self. Finding a language to verbalize and understand my own thoughts and feelings has been empowering. I have realized that my past experiences have shaped me into the kind of teacher I am and have made me sensitive to many issues that others just do not seem receptive and attentive to. I have found a place for myself and a space within which I can have agency and create change.

FINDING AND DEFINING THE TEACHER IN ME

> I never had a fantasy of myself as a professor already worked out
> in my imagination before I entered the classroom. I think that's
> been meaningful, because it's freed me up to feel that the
> professor is something I become as opposed to a kind of identity
> that's already structured and that I carry with me into the
> classroom. (hooks 1994, p. 132)

I started teaching in September of 1996, although my experiences with children and my love of being with them date much further back, as it usually does for most teachers that I have met.

However, when I think back to my childhood, I really, honestly do not remember ever wanting to be a teacher. As a child, I used to spend my time playing doctor not teacher. I wanted to be a doctor, a paediatrician to be more exact. I adored my own paediatrician and wanted to be just like him when I grew up. I really loved children and wanted to work with them, help them and take care of them. Whenever I would visit family with my parents, I would end up taking care of all the children present. I would play with them, organize activities for them, entertain them and make sure that they kept out of trouble.

Unfortunately, by the time I reached the age of 17, I had given up on my plan of becoming a paediatrician. My marks in biology had gone down so much that by the time I had to make a choice about what kind of studies to pursue at university, I already had to give up on the possibility of going into medicine.

At the time, I had had the opportunity to act in many different theatre productions, as well as a short film, and a new passion had emerged in me. That was how I decided to go into theatre studies. My parents were extremely uneasy about the idea and actually strongly opposed it, saying that I would never be able to make a living out of it. I remember feeling completely lost. Some of my friends had gone to see the school's orientation counsellor, and had taken some kind of standardized test, which was supposed to give a list of the possible professional directions that one might want to take. With a bit of suspicion, (mainly due to the fact that one of my friends had received her results a few days earlier and had read that the best thing for her would be bonsai gardening, which was far from being something that she was interested in) I also went to take the test. I remember to this day, how it was easy to see how my answers would direct the results and I consciously/unconsciously responded in such ways that I would get back a sheet confirming that I should go into theatre. I think it took a few days before I was given my results. I can't remember now what they were. I think theatre and film were in there, but teaching was listed as one of the main options. At that point I realized that teaching would be the most appropriate field for me to go into. Not because I really wanted to pursue a teaching career, but simply because it would calm my parents down and I would always have something to fall back on. I had always loved kids and had wanted to work with them as a paediatrician. That option having been crossed out, I thought that the next best thing for me would be teaching. I also thought about how I enjoyed teaching my peers. I had always had a mind for mathematics and often spent time explaining concepts to my friends in a language other than the teacher's, which seemed to help them understand things. I remembered how one day, in secondary three, I had left my desk

and was kneeling next to a girl, explaining the math lesson to her, as I often did. The teacher walking by had looked at me and said: "Diane, that's enough. That's my job." I have to say that I was quite delighted by that comment. Bringing all this together, I made up my mind and applied to a couple of universities, with the idea that I would get a teaching degree and then go onto theatre studies.

After graduating from McGill with a B.Ed. under my belt, I was offered a job and started working within a month. Even at that point, after having completed my degree and having seen how much I loved teaching, I still was not convinced that this was what I was going to do. Even before graduation, all my university friends had busied themselves with sending out CVs to as many schools as they could. I too had prepared mine, although much later than everybody else, and had given it in at only one place. Just one! And I had gotten a job! Sometimes I think that it was just meant to be. One thing led to the other and I became a kindergarten teacher.

Though I had never felt this as being my calling, from the first moment I stepped into the field of education I knew what my mission was: I had to create an environment where students could blossom, academically, spiritually and socially, an environment that was very much different from the one I had spent my childhood in and which would not permit the recreation of the kinds of experiences I had to suffer. In *Teaching to transgress*, bell hooks (1994) writes "we have a real concern with education as liberatory practice and with pedagogical strategies that may be not just for our students but for ourselves" (p. 134).

My becoming a teacher has helped me become to a certain degree, the kind of person that I am. In trying to "correct" the difficult situations that I have gone through as a student, I have had to think of my experiences, the ones that have hurt me and scared me, and the ones that have inspired me to learn more and become more. When I started teaching my main goal was to make kids happy in school. I wanted them to feel safe, feel accepted and free to be themselves. I was constantly on the look out for kids who were taunted by their peers, kids who were alone during playtime or recess. I would put all my efforts in just being with the kids, showing them interest, attention and affection. I am not sure when this happened exactly, whether it was there from the beginning or not, but for as far as I can remember, I have spent great time and energy in creating a healthy community in my classroom, where there was much confidence and understanding between the children and me. My favourite moments in the classroom have always been the ones that make this connection transparent. hooks (1994) writes,

> [...] as teachers I think our emphasis has, over the years, been to affirm who we are through the transaction of being with other people in the classroom and achieving something there. (p. 135)

Affirming who I am through my interactions in the classroom, wanting to create a certain environment in my classroom, I had to reflect on my experiences, I had to go back and try to be in touch with the feelings that I had as a child.

One of my best memories of school dates back to my own kindergarten year. My Armenian language teacher, who later on actually happened to be my own students' Armenian language teacher, made me feel like I was

special. The images of that particular day have remained in my mind for years.

Memory

I was sitting in the classroom at my desk. Madame Marie, or Oriort² Marie, as we used to call her, was at her desk. I was humming or singing a song by myself. Oddly enough, since I was attending an Armenian school, and not so oddly since my parents were both originally from Turkey, I was singing a Turkish song. Oriort Marie called me to her desk and asked me to sing the song in her ear. As I sang, I started forgetting the words to the song. She then turned to me and sang the rest of it in a whisper. She asked me where I had learned it and then told me "You can sing this song with me, as you did now, but do not sing it again in this school". I returned to my desk, after stealing a kiss from her. One child said out loud: "What did you tell her?" and Oriort Marie said: "That is between Diane and I". I still remember how proud I felt at that moment. I had a special bond with my teacher, a secret that I shared with her.

Years later, in university, I still thought of her as the most wonderful teacher I had ever had. That feeling, which I had thanks to her, is something that I try to create in each child that crosses my path. I like having special moments with the students, whether it is during an activity that we do together, a casual conversation that we have, or our learning moments.

Over the past six years my passion for teaching has grown despite the fact that deep down I continue to wonder about what might have become of me if I had pursued my studies in theatre or arts. At the same time, I have come to know that a very important part of who I am is closely linked to

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² Oriort : Miss, teacher in Armenian

teaching and education. But this, I have discovered over the years. Teaching has become more than a job or a way of making a living. It has become a way of living and growing.

This growth came mostly when I started questioning my teaching practices and questioning the purpose of education. Through my graduate studies at McGill and my experiences of teaching, I was able to redefine myself. I understood that education is about liberation, about helping others acquire the tools for self-discovery and affirmation, about exposing others to the world around them and helping them see and experience the influence it has on them and in turn the influence they can have on it. My reflections about education and my teaching practices led me to reflections about myself. I realized that the choices I make in my classroom are deeply affected by who I am. This created in me a need to better understand who I am, why I do certain things and why I do them the way I do.

I came to understand that I teach the way I do because of my personal longing to be liberated, my personal need to question things, to come to new understandings that often do not coincide with the norm. Freire (1993) writes,

> [...] oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force,
> one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only
> by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in
> order to transform it. (p. 33)

In the winter of 2001 I went through such a process. I found myself requestioning all the "certainties" that had been passed on to me through the years. This was a result of long hours of thinking over ideas

discovered in my classes and discussions with friends. I realized that, I, who thought myself to be free of oppressive control, was actually dominated by the rules constructed by my culture and my society. I broke up into pieces all my assumptions and then tried to reconstruct them, to give new meaning to my life, my relations, and my world. Griffiths (1995) writes,

> Self-respect and re-understanding experience led to new emotions about other experiences. One of these emotions was a mixture of painful puzzlement and bewilderment as previous perspectives became overturned and I felt uncertainty and a sense of vertigo about how many other perspectives and feelings were about to change too. Old certainties with their alliances were lost and I moved into the unknown, with new alliances to be forged out of new loves and hates, facing new rejections and hoping for different acceptances. (p. 24)

In the same way, I hope to teach my students to be themselves, to discover who they are, and who they can be and strive for the best they can be. I want them to learn to think critically and act upon things. I want to provide them with the tools that they need and help them see how they can use them.

Being willing to be critical about my own teaching practices has been an important key to my own growth as a teacher. It is something that has come naturally to me. I am not sure why it was so. Maybe it is part of my character. I have always requestioned myself, my behaviours and to some degree my thoughts. In *Teaching to transgress*, hooks (1994) writes,

I feel I have benefited a lot from not being attached to myself as an academic or professor. It's made me willing to be critical of my own pedagogy and to accept criticism from my students and other people without feeling that to question how I teach is somehow to question my right to exist on the planet. (p. 134)

Journal excerpt
January 05, 2001

When I took my first course towards my master's degree, I immediately found myself changing my approaches in class, questioning every thing I did and finding new understandings. At the end of the course, I put together a presentation, which detailed the ways I had done this and how things had taken a new shape in my class, especially things that pertained to literacy. After the presentation, one thing that caught my classmates' attention was the degree of self-criticism that had gone into my work and how it was done with no fear. When I think of my teaching self, the first thing that comes to my mind is how I always strive for change. I rarely do things the same way as the previous year. I guess that is something that scares me. I always feel that the second I stop innovating I will become a dull and uninspiring teacher.

My critical stance in regards to myself as a teacher has been closely tied to my questioning of the educational goals and how they are put into practice in the classroom. I have found that by going through the reflexive process and revisiting the issues of my past – defining my Armenianess and dealing with the alienation, rejection and oppression – I have experienced the process of empowerment for myself. The actions that I have taken from there on and the choices I have made as a practicing teacher have been my own way of having agency and bringing change. Having gone myself through this process, I have realised that my

development as a person is dependent on the constant search for empowerment, the never ending questioning and thinking about various issues and the actions that follow. In the same way, I have come to the conclusion that, there can be no real education for students without the quest for empowerment.

CHAPTER FOUR
EDUCATION FOR EMPOWERMENT

> Apart from inquiry, apart from praxis, individuals cannot be truly
> human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-
> invention, through the restless, impatient continuing, hopeful
> inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and
> with each other. (Freire 1993, p. 53)

Course log excerpt

April 19, 1999

*I had many ups and downs during the course of this first semester. I discovered
many new ideas and rushed into implementing them in my classroom. The
situation was close to getting disastrous, but I got a hold of it just in time. I
slowed down, organized my ideas and changed things step by step. I must say
that the results have been wonderful. The whole environment in my classroom
has changed. My students are constantly learning, discovering new things, and
experimenting with language on their own. I found a way to stimulate them to
learn. I am amazed to see how much my own learning has influenced my
students' progress. Every day they discover new things about themselves, their
abilities, the world around them... I am so excited. Every day, I walk out of
school astonished. There is so much learning going on in my classroom. I never
thought this was possible. During the past few days, about six children have
started writing alone in their journals, using invented spelling (and we only
started all this in March!) They are so happy and proud of their achievements. I
must say that I get quite choked up inside, each time I see their faces light up
when they come to realize that they are becoming writers. Wherever I go, I can't
seem to be able to talk about anything else. My colleagues are starting to get tired*

of my enthusiasm, though they are very supportive and get as excited as I do about the students' achievements.

When I started thinking about the problems of language acquisition in our heritage language school, I could not limit myself to a single issue. As I plunged myself into the research and started assessing these difficulties, I was constantly pushed to think about other related aspects of the issues. I found myself lost in a maze of ideas. At first I tried to ignore the multitude of questions that emerged from left and right, but soon realized that I had to deal with matters that were far beyond that of the simple acquisition of language. One question seemed to constantly come up in my mind: What is the purpose of education? My many hours of reading and reflection led me to the concept of empowerment which has become the main theme of this thesis.

Empowerment has a very different meaning for each one of us. Some educators believe that they are empowering their students by transposing knowledge into their young minds. In some way, they are reaching their goals. But is that enough? Is education all about knowing facts, solving math problems, learning grammar? I believe it is not. A student might know how to answer questions on a language test, but what is the point, if, for instance, s/he cannot use this knowledge to express him /herself in front of others? As hooks (1994) writes,

> Engaged teachers know that even in the worst circumstances, people tend to learn. People tend to learn, but we want more than just learning; it's sort of saying even under the worst circumstances, people survive; we're not interested in simply surviving here. (p. 159)

I believe many things come into play when we think of empowering our students. Part of the teacher's job is to transmit knowledge and skills. No one can deny the importance of this. Teachers do have a certain baggage of knowledge that they have to teach their students. There are certain things that the latter have to learn. In the school where I work, I believe that the students can be considered empowered in that sense. They are trained to achieve in the academic world. The school provides enriched programs in mathematics and sciences. A great emphasis is put on drill work. Throughout their schooling, students are bombarded with knowledge, which is tested. Even when the lowest achievers leave the school to continue their education in other institutions, they have a tendency to do quite well and are usually praised for their capacity to work. When compared with other schools in the private sector, the school has consistently ranked in the top 10. Does this mean that the students are very knowledgeable or high achievers? I don't know. Does this mean that they are thinkers? Does this ranking show a high level of education, or does it simply show that the students know how to take a test?

In Empowerment as a pedagogy of possibility, Simon (1987) writes,

> too often education stops with the intent of ensuring that all students acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and credentials to "make it" in the tough competitive world of existing social forms. [...] Teaching and learning must be linked to the goal of educating students to take risks, to struggle with ongoing relations of power, to critically appropriate forms of knowledge that exist outside of their immediate experience, and to envisage versions of the world which is "not yet"- in order to be able to alter the grounds upon which life is lived. (p. 375)

I believe that as educators we have to elaborate or even change the curriculum in such ways that will enable us to reach these goals. When thinking of creating a pedagogy of empowerment, we

> must expand the definition of pedagogy in order to move beyond a limited emphasis on the mastery of techniques and methodologies. This should enable students to understand pedagogy as a configuration of textual, verbal, and visual practices through which people understand themselves and the possible ways in which they relate to others and their environment. (Giroux 1997, p. 242)

Education is a means of defining one's self, one's environment, community, society, culture, as well as the world. It is a tool that enables us to participate in the struggle of finding and making meaning for ourselves about world; defining our realities. Once we step into the wider society, education is what gives us the power to choose between fitting in the outside world and taking risks to requestion its realities, criticize it and challenge it to instigate change. Education is what gives us the tools to do all this. In my view, being educated means having power: power to understand, power to challenge, power to change for the better. In this sense, as educators we must see our role as actors in the empowerment of our students.

LETTING GO OF POWER TO EMPOWER

When we speak of education based on empowerment, we have to realize that there needs to be a fundamental change in our understanding of pedagogical approaches as well as in our perception of the roles of the teachers and students. There has to be a relinquishing of power on the

part of the teacher. She cannot see herself nor act as the sole bearer of knowledge and authority. In a classroom where liberatory practices prevail, the students and the teachers become co-participants in the creation of knowledge. As Freire (1993) writes,

> Education must begin with the solution of teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students. (p. 53)

Both must approach the context and the content to be learned with curiosity. Without this curiosity on both parts, there can be no real learning, only transmission of knowledge and skills. They both become objects of the process they are engaged in. (Freire 1993)

Journal excerpt
January 7th, 2002

During my interview for the kindergarten position, I was asked how I imagined the children to be in my class. I remember laughing at that question and saying that if I ever had a class that was quiet I would really start worrying. To me, it would mean that the kids were there only as bodies.

I remember how during my first years of teaching, my colleagues would shut their classroom doors because they were disturbed by the constant noise we made or the music playing in the classroom. I don't see much of that any more. Maybe it is because they have gotten used to it and stopped noticing it or maybe my classroom is not as rowdy as it used to be. Then again, I have to say that in my class the noise level tends to be pretty high, which is not always a good thing, but I let it be when I see that it is productive noise. The kids often talk, even during seated work, which, in other classrooms, would be total silence time. My idea is

that kids learn through their interactions with each other. They often discuss various topics or issues meaningful to them and try to come to new understandings or bring others to new ones. I can see how my being Armenian and my ability to actually understand what the children are talking about, gives me an advantage that other French language teachers in the school don't have. I always know what they are talking about and can be more sensitive to noticing actual learning moments, even when they are not directed by me. When I read a story for example, and hear two children talking about it, I can be sensitive to their spontaneous responses, simply because I can identify them as such. I let the kids be for a short while and without taking away their excitement, nor letting the flow of the story be too disturbed, I call back their attention to the story and proceed with the reading of the text.

Finding a comfortable and satisfying way of letting go of the power invested in our hands as teachers, creating a curriculum and a classroom environment which is conducive to real learning is a difficult process in itself and requires a certain openness on the part of the teacher and a great deal of risk taking. Part of the challenge in my case, was in dealing with the attitudes and comments that I would receive.

Memory

It was teacher evaluation time at the school. We all got notice of when the pedagogical director or the principal would be coming into our classroom to observe us. Unlike most of my colleagues, I decided not to put on a show that day. I followed the schedule of activities that I had already planned for that day, thinking that whoever came to watch me should see what really goes on in my classroom. It so happened that at the time I had organized a pen pal letter writing activity with one of the other kindergarten classes. The pedagogical director came in as we were about to open the letters we had received that morning. He sat

down in a corner of the room and started taking notes. I announced to the kids that we were going to check our mailboxes. Normally I would have told the children to just get up and get their letters, but on that day, just to have some kind of "traditional" order, I called up the kids in groups of four. They all came in turn, took their envelopes, went back to their seats to open their mail. After taking a first look at it, they started coming up to me randomly, asking me to read what was written. Soon, I had kids all over the place as usual, showing each other their little piece of paper, trying to decipher the writing or going about the classroom getting the material they need to respond. Since I teach at the kindergarten level, the great majority of students cannot write, so I had prepared big sheets on which I had written various messages or questions, which we had come up with collaboratively. Next to each sentence, I had drawn a small illustration to which they could refer to in order to figure out what was written. Often though, they would forget and ask either a friend or me what the text said. The students were quite subdued compared to usual times that day (probably due to the presence of an unknown person) and were all engaged in their writing. I concluded the activity thinking that it had been quite successful. The children had enjoyed it and all of them had produced letters that were placed in the big mailbox, ready to be sent off to their pen pals. When I received my evaluation a couple of days later, I was completely outraged. In general, the evaluation was very good, but some of the comments simply drove me up the wall. The pedagogical director had written that I did not have good control over my classroom, that I was not well organized. It was too chaotic. He had said that for example, I should have had each child come up and open the letters individually, and read them out loud to the entire class. I was so mad. I had reasons for doing things the way I did. I didn't want to take charge of the activity. These were their letters. I had no reason or right to open them, and even less to read them to the entire class. I didn't see the point of having the students sit passively at their desks until all letters had been read. Why should everything be done in that

orderly manner? Why not let things happen at each child's pace? Why must I direct and control the whole unravelling of the activity? I believe that you must provide situations for the kids where they can engage in various literacy behaviours and then you let things go. The role of the teacher is then to stick around, make herself available to the children to provide them with the help they need, but in no way should the teacher keep the total control. The kids need to figure out how to take control over their own activity, and through trial and error learn to do things and see that they can. I explained my position to both the pedagogical director and the principal, but to no avail.

Relinquishing power, redefining the role of the teacher is difficult because saying that we let go of the power is one thing and doing it is another. A teacher's power can have many different facets and these can be conveyed through many different features. One of these is the physical presence of the teacher, the way a teacher acts in the classroom, the way she exerts her power through her words or body language.

In the classroom, I am constantly aware of my body in respect to the children. I always try to make a point of bringing myself down to their level - sitting with them in circle on the floor or even lying down, kneeling next to them during seat work or coming down to their eye level during private conversations. The reason I do this is that I don't want them to feel inferior, feel like there is this body that is hovering over them, leaving them in her shadow, silencing them and making them invisible. By way of this, I also try to be an example to them. I want them to feel comfortable and learn to take on the kinds of behaviour that will help them become more caring, supportive and compassionate people as they grow up. I want them to see how one person can make others feel good

about themselves and confident about their capacities to think and create, and intrinsically want to do it themselves.

Unfortunately this is not what I always see, mainly because at certain times I find myself acting in an authoritative manner in certain situations or with certain kids despite my attempts not to do so. At moments of great anger towards my students, or times when I want to give very strict and clear instructions, I too feel the need to go and stand or sit behind my desk. The desk creates the physical separation that I try to convey. If I am standing or sitting at my desk, waiting for my students to calm down and stop talking (or yelling) because they have gone over the limit of my patience, I feel I am in power by creating that physical distance. That's when I mean business and my students know it. I usually don't have to do or say anything else. One student usually will notice and tell the others to calm down.

The students in turn, when put in a position of power, when asked to watch the class for a moment for example, seem to often end up exerting power over their peers. I realize that this is a direct result of my own attitudes in class, as well as their other teachers'. The children mimic our behaviours. They look up to us and want to be like us, consciously or unconsciously, whether they themselves deem our behaviours and attitudes as right or wrong. I have seen how, whenever they feel or see that the teacher has a negative attitude towards a child, they also take on that negative attitude. I am thinking of certain children that I have taught and towards whom I have tended to be harsh or dismissive. I saw how the other students did the same thing. They were like mirrors. Freire (1993) writes,

[…] at a certain point in their existential experience the oppressed feel an irresistible attraction towards the oppressors and their way of life. Sharing this way of life becomes an overpowering aspiration. In their alienation, the oppressed want at any cost to resemble the oppressors, to imitate them, to follow them. (p. 44)

I often wonder about the way my students perceive me. I know many of my students, past and present, have played or play "school". They take on my role. I would love to actually see this. I wonder what I would see. Would they be re-enacting my role as an authoritarian figure, telling the students what to do and how to do it or would they be helping, caring, and attentive to their "pupils'" needs and voices, I wonder. I keep thinking about how being an "oppressive" teacher not only puts children in a situation where they are denied humanity, and objectified, but also teaches them and the others to be oppressors. Part of the teacher's role is not to only give voice to students but also to not be an oppressor in the way they deal with the students. What we teach children is much more than the curriculum. Our words and ideas are always coupled with our attitude and actions, and these are often what the children learn first.

Journal excerpt
April 14, 2001

Arpy, Nour and I met again today at the Starbucks on the corner of Parc and Laurier. Our conversations went from my uncertainties, to my questions about my practice, to the difficulties I encounter at school dealing with people's comments and looks. I talked about how I feel I am a flaky teacher, how not following the prescribed methods of skill-based schooling make me feel like a failure. I also told them about how Christine's comment affected me. The other day, she said that my students were the worst. They had given her a very hard

time during the two weeks she replaced me. They were all over the place, like little popcorns or something she said, and they were very difficult to control. She turned to me and said that it was great that I was encouraging them to be independent but that I needed to structure them more. I was so frustrated!!! But then, funny how her comments pushed me to change my behaviour with the kids. I turned to them right after this conversation and told them about how mad and disappointed I was. A couple of minutes later, I had them walking down the corridor in two perfect lines, (like detainees in a prison – I always get that image when I have them walk like that and all I want to do is laugh, first at myself for making them do that and also at them, because of how they look!). Poor kids! I really felt bad after that. Why is it that one person's comment makes me act like that with the children? That is not how I think, that is not how I want to be with the children, but I always seem to revert to a disciplinarian as soon as I see myself not complying with the teacher image that is expected of me in the school environment where I work. This makes me think about the power teachers exert over children. I often wonder about that. Teachers are in a position of power where they can have students do what they think is right. They work on their own assumptions of what is the right behaviour, what is the right way of doing things, or thinking about things. I wonder if my assumptions are right. What if they aren't? What right do I have to impose my view and assumptions on the children?

I think about how some teachers often freak out when they see my students question their authority. I encourage them to do so, but once they are outside the confines of the classroom, or not in my presence, they often keep the same attitude and they get into trouble. I can't remember the number of times teachers have walked into my classroom and said something like, "so and so reacted in such a way (which was not acceptable) when I told him or her to do such and such a thing!" What am I to do with this? Should I forget about my pedagogical beliefs

and concentrate on preparing my students to conform to the conventions of the outside world? I keep entertaining internal dialogues like this with myself, whether I am driving in the car, cooking or even teaching... I start thinking about every little move I make in the classroom, the messages that I transmit through my words, the possible impact these might be having on the children. I often wonder about whether I am going too far; trying to break conventions myself, I might be exposing them to attitudes or behaviours that might have a negative impact on them in the future.

Journal excerpt: The Prime of Miss Jean Brody
December 12th, 2001

"Give me a girl at an impressionable age and she is mine for life" (Neame, 1969, motion picture).

I was disturbed to the bone every time I heard Miss Brody utter these words at various points during the movie we just watched this afternoon at Jane's place. I was disturbed, almost enraged at the idea that someone could take it upon them to shape in any way, the mind of a young child. Simultaneously, I couldn't help myself getting exhilarated by the idea that a teacher like Miss Brody might exist. I almost looked up to her too.

After the movie ended we had a conversation, which to my great regret was cut somewhat short. As we talked, my ideas started coming together. I realized that there is a great part of me that is just like Brody. When I go into my classroom, I go in with an agenda, that of making my pupils learners. I want to stir their curiosity and their imagination; I want them to build confidence and learn to enjoy learning in such a way that they make it an internal and essential part of their lives. When I think of this, especially after such a movie, I get scared by the power I have over these "impressionable minds". I almost feel guilty at times. This, for many reasons: First, I actually often find myself requestioning my own

ideas about education. As they seem to be in constant evolution and redefinition, I wonder about the validity and truthfulness of my values, thoughts, ideas, and approaches. I realize at the same time that I could not be teaching anything else, or any other way, if I want to stay true to myself and to my passion. I cannot be a disinterested and detached teacher, sticking to the prescribed curriculum and distancing myself from the every day life of my students. The difficulty or the confusion arises in my case from the fact that I tend to be quite unorthodox, I actually try to break the conventions that are around me, I redefine values and ideas for myself all the time and teach my students in ways that uphold those values and ideas.

The second reason why I worry and often feel guilty is because I wonder about how much I actually prepare my students for the school system. It is always very difficult to see my students leave me and go into other teacher's classrooms. I catch the look in their eyes. They always seem to be questioning me. "What is this? This is not what we know. This does not reflect our experiences in your classroom. How can it be?" My heart breaks every time. The only way I can console myself is by telling myself that I showed them some things that will stay with them their entire lives, or so I hope. I showed them the pleasure in experimenting, discovering and learning. I have opened their minds and given them confidence in their abilities.

As I teach I often catch my inner voice, questioning my actions and the words I utter out loud. It is a constant play between two entities that exist in the same body. I am in constant, constant reflection.

In *Teaching to transgress*, hooks (1994) writes,

> the classroom should be a space where we're all in power in different ways. [...] I try to show how much my work is influenced by what the students say in the classroom, what they

do, what they express to me. Along with them I grow intellectually, developing sharper understandings of how to share knowledge and what to do in my participatory role with them. (p. 152)

My entire growth as an educator, I owe to my experiences with students. It is through their responses, their behaviours and attitudes that I have been able to shape myself into the kind of teacher I am or refine my pedagogical approaches. In order to teach children, I have needed to learn about them, their interests and their experiences. I also have had to learn what motivates them. This learning on my part was not something that took place during a defined period of time at the beginning of the year, but throughout my time with each group. All the theories that I learned in my graduate classes at McGill or that I read about were interesting, but it was only when I saw the students' responses to these theories as I tried to apply them, that I learned how viable these were in my situation and how I could make use of them. My students have taught me to be a teacher. I have assumed the role of a learner. Without this openness, there could have been no progress on my part.

As hooks (1994) explains,

> [...] our purpose is to be, for however brief a time, a community of learners together. It positions me as a learner. But I'm also not suggesting that I don't have more power. And I'm not trying to say we're all equal here. I'm trying to say that we are all equal here to the extent that we are equally committed to creating a learning context. (p. 153)

Journal excerpt

January 8th, 2002

During my student teachings, I used to prepare detailed lesson plans. When I got my first teaching position in kindergarten, I stopped doing it. I would prepare detailed weekly plans instead. At the time, sticking to the plan was extremely important to me. Whenever I did not cover all the material I had prepared I would feel like I had failed. But with time, I learned to be comfortable with following the students' rhythm. After a couple of years, I started to plan less and less, and finally, one year, I almost literally stopped planning. I remember how I would get on the road that lead to L'Acadie circle on the way to school, and spend five minutes planning what I would do with the kids until they left for lunch. The afternoon planning would take place sometime during my break or not at all. I would rely on spur of the moment inspirations and end the day in that way. This was pretty extreme on my part. In my search for a student-centred curriculum and approach, I often wasted students' time in class, trying to organize my thoughts and gather the materials needed as they would sit there, waiting for me. The positive side was that I learned to rely on the students and their moods to find inspiration. I would follow them completely and feed off their curiosity. We had set routines in the morning, which would unfailingly provide ideas for further activities and explorations. When these were not present or when I felt like I was not inspired or when the kids were very much out of control, I would go back to their workbooks and have them complete the pages which we had to complete anyway by the end of the year. Funny, we never did. Maybe we did have much more interesting things to do. Actually I do believe we did. The workbooks, I saw mainly as compulsory activities, which prevented us from engaging in real and meaningful learning activities. It was mainly for this reason that finally this year, I opted for no workbooks at all, except for the calligraphy one which is

obligatory, since a couple of years ago, due to our actions and pressures, the grade one teachers decided to let us cover print letters.

Not having workbooks, and not being completely satisfied with my work with the kids the previous year, I now put much more effort in planning activities for the kids. I set up my schedule in such a way that I can be assured to provide them with all sorts of experiences, lots of opportunities to express themselves, lots of stories, poems, songs, lots of manipulation and play time. Although I have gone back to planning, I have been able to find a good middle ground. I am always ready to change things around according to the situation, especially when I see the learning potential it has. My activities and projects are always based on the students' interests and take on the shapes that the children give them. The themes emerge from the kids and the final products are always fashioned by the students themselves according to their individual level of interest, their preferences and abilities.

My six years of teaching, have taught me that as the teacher I am the provider of a stage for learning. Having new actors each year, the plays are never the same. Indeed, the context of the classroom is ever changing. Each year a new group comes into my classroom with social conditionings and circumstances that can be as similar as they can be different from the previous one. Each time, I have to undergo a change, a change in my understanding of group dynamics and needs. They all come with new experiences and backgrounds, and it is from there that I have to act. There are no set situations, no one set way of doing things or approaching issues. Often it is not the same issues that come up. Sometimes, I myself do not respond to the same issues as the previous year or as with the previous group. Every year, because of the "new community" that takes shape and the new meanings that I myself come to, I am reborn as a

teacher. Sometimes I go forward and sometimes I go back to certain things that I might have done in the past but lost sight of through the years.

As hooks (1994) writes,

> "Engaged" is a great way to talk about liberatory classroom practices. It invites us always to be in the present, to remember that the classroom is never the same. Traditional ways of thinking about the classroom stress the opposite paradigm – that the classroom is always the same even when students are different. (p. 158)

Two classes can hardly be the same, by the simple fact that the bodies, the people present in the classroom are not the same, except for the teacher.

Memory

A couple of years ago, I had a child in my class who was extremely interested in books. She would read texts and write by herself at quite an early stage. She loved poetry, to which she was introduced to in my class. Around the month of February, she came to class with a poem she had written. Soon after, many other students started bringing in their own original work. They would sometimes write it, and other times dictate to a parent. They would bring them in, and we would read them during our reading time. This same child, Karine having learned how to read, also started bringing in books or poems, which she herself would read or tell to her peers. Again this created a certain dynamic in the class. Others also started doing the same.

Every year I try to encourage my students to read and write. I always get interesting responses from the kids. But these are never the same. The

year I spent with Karine and her friends was the only time that such tremendous excitement and interest was shown, and it was all due to the students.

GIVING THE STAGE TO THE STUDENTS

Students become active participants in their learning when the teacher, relinquishing her own power, helps them find their voice; a voice to express their ideas and their struggles; a voice to define their identity. "A pedagogy of empowerment is important for it points to valuing legitimation of the expression of student voice" (Simon, 1987, p. 377).

Students find their voice when they are encouraged to participate in a discourse, with the teacher and with the other students. Giroux and McLaren (1986) write,

> [voice] is related to the discursive means whereby teachers and students attempt to make themselves "heard" and to define themselves as active authors of their worlds. (p. 235)

Through the dialogic approach (Freire), students are encouraged to use their knowledge to make new meanings, to defend their ideas, to understand others' ideas and act upon their world.

In a heritage language setting, it is difficult, at the kindergarten level, to have all the students speak in class in French. The children who do not have a mastery of the communicative tools needed to express their thoughts in French often show a lack of confidence. It is the teacher's responsibility to help them conquer these difficulties.

Journal excerpt

November 3rd 2002

During the last couple of years I asked the kids to bring in toys or books to show to others. This always got them to actually speak in class. At first they would just say what it was but with time the presentations would get elaborate with details. They would talk about how they had come to own the item, who had gotten it for them and how they used it. This year I take time every morning to have the children share an item of news from their personal experiences. This gives me the opportunity to hear about their activities at home, about their family and their interests. I record the news shared by each child. I love watching their reaction when they see that their words have been written down and that I can read them back to them. We often read the news from previous days or months. They love this. It is interesting how some of them have started to be able to recognize the name of the child in the next paragraph before I start reading it. I always make sure that I include their names in the text. This shows me that they are starting to be able to sort out the words and the letters in a text.

The most interesting aspect of this activity has been the simple excitement and interest that the children have shown in regards to it. Since the beginning of the year, this has been the only place where absolutely all the students have wanted to participate. To this day, this is probably the only time that a few students elicit interest in participating, sharing, speaking, having their voice heard.

The students always show great interest in these activities, but often fail in some aspect of it: they do not listen to each other. As hooks (1994) writes,

> Even though students are speaking they don't really know how to listen to students. In regards to pedagogical practices, we must intervene to alter the existing pedagogical structure and to teach students how to listen, how to hear one another. (p. 150)

Over the years I found ways of encouraging listening. I had the students ask questions to each other after they had presented whatever they had brought to school to show their friends or shared their item of news. This would give the children more incentive to actually listen to what their friend had to say. At the beginning, some kids would ask questions that had already been asked. They would sometimes ask questions to which answers had already been provided by the speaker. Some students would also memorize certain questions and ask them whether or not these were relevant to the subject. Soon, they would realize that in order to participate properly, they had to actually listen. I found that another difficulty lay in the fact that when a child spoke, s/he would often direct his/her words to me, the teacher. I always tried to remind the students that they had an entire audience in front of them and that one way to make sure that others listen to them is to actually make eye contact with them. Listening this way became an integral part of the activity and they began to better develop their communication skills.

A LANGUAGE TO COMMUNICATE - A LANGUAGE TO NAME THE WORLD

Using language to participate in these communicative events or to achieve certain goals is a learning experience all in itself in an immersion situation. As Giroux and McLaren (1986) write,

> it is through language that we come to consciousness and negotiate a sense of identity...As language constructs meaning, it shapes our world, informs our identities, and provides the cultural codes for perceiving and classifying the world. (p. 230)

In this sense, language becomes one of the most important tools in education. Unfortunately, what I see happening in our school is that language is taught as a simple set of skills through

> programs that focus on discrete units of language taught in a structured curriculum with the learner treated as a passive recipient of knowledge. (Collier 1995, recommendations section, ¶2).

Students hardly ever have the opportunity to use the language to interact in meaningful and challenging settings. As such, language is hardly a tool for negotiating identity; it is simply another facet of the curriculum, something that is tested and marked. Pennycook (1990) writes,

> If we view ourselves as educators whose principal aim is the empowerment of our students and whose transformative project is to go beyond helping students simply to "make it", then clearly we must do more than teach functional language skills within a competency based curriculum. (p. 311)

I believe that the students' ability to use a language depends on the learning experiences that teachers provide and the teaching methods they use. What better way of empowering students than providing learning situations which encourage meaningful interaction through co-operative work or project-based activities? Teachers need to integrate reading and writing in a wide variety of genres, and provide the students with real audiences in order to make communication meaningful, otherwise,

> [language] will remain abstract and largely trivial unless students have the opportunity to express themselves – their identities and

their intelligence – through that language. (Cummins, 1999, section C, ¶3)

In my kindergarten classroom, the students have a very limited knowledge of the French language. As they learn the language, they also learn to use it. This in itself is a motivation for them. Freire and Macedo write (1987),

> [...] critical mastery of the standard dialect can never be achieved fully without the development of one's voice, which is contained within the social dialect that shapes one's reality. (p. 129)

All the learning in my classroom is based on communication and meaning making. The students participate in group discussions about many topics that are of interest to them. They prepare and present puppet shows to their peers. My students are introduced to the written word through storybooks, songs, daily secret messages, and so on. They are encouraged to write explanatory sentences, using invented spelling in their daily journals. They dictate and recopy stories that they create during playtime or after completing art projects or drawing. They use written language to write notes to their parents, their friends or pen pals. In all possible instances I encourage the children to use the French language to communicate in meaningful ways. It is by participating in meaningful activities, which encourage communication in the French language that they learn. As Cummins (1999) writes,

> students must have the opportunity to communicate powerfully in a target language if they are going to integrate their language and cognitive development with their growing personal identities. (conclusion section)

As educators if we want to give the students the opportunity to find their voice or new voices, we have to let them struggle with meaning making. We have to give them the possibility to use this voice, to learn how to use it. Students have to be given the chance to see that their voice is legitimate, that it is meaningful. It is as they learn that their voice has power, power to teach, power to change, to influence, that they will want to master their voice, and try to find new voices. It is not enough to tell students to participate in a debate once a year and to vocalise their ideas about a topic. In all instances, the students have to be pushed to use their voice, to think, to find new and meaningful representations that can take on many shapes. As Freire and Macedo (1987) write,

> Reading the word and learning how to write the word so one can later read it are preceded by learning how to write the world, that is, having the experience of changing the world and touching the world. (p. 49)

Furthermore, by presenting and defending their position in such discourses, students make their learning conscious. It is when you use your knowledge to express something that you make the learning conscious and the thinking and the progress obvious. As I was writing various papers for courses, I realized how much I had learned, how much the content of the courses had made me think, had challenged my ideas, had helped me create new concepts for myself. These discourses gave me a voice to express my ideas and to assert them with the support of the authors whose works I had read. Through the process of presenting and defending my ideas during discussions with peers and colleagues or while writing my papers, this new knowledge became evident and meaningful to me. All that learning gave me power and knowledge, but it

was only when I started using the ideas, when I started struggling with them to find my voice to participate in a discourse, that the pieces came together, that the ideas became clear, useful and meaningful. The same goes for all learners. It is when students are pushed to find their voice, that learning takes place. Freire (1993) writes,

> Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education. (p. 73)

By participating in communicative events (expressing and understanding various messages) and developing a mastery over the tools (language, signs, symbols) needed to be able to participate in specific discourses and activities, students become literate. As Giroux (1987) comments,

> Central to Freire's approach to literacy is a dialectical relationship between human beings and the world, on the one hand, and language and transformative agency, on the other. Within this perspective, literacy is not approached as merely a technical skill to be acquired, but as a necessary foundation for cultural action for freedom, a central aspect of what it means to be a self and socially constituted agent. (p. 7)

READER RESPONSE IN THE CLASSROOM

Students become literate when they are encouraged to communicate their responses and interpretations of the world surrounding them, by relying on their personal experiences and cultural background. In *Literature as exploration*, Rosenblatt describes an example of this phenomenon through

her transactional (reader response) theory, which places the reader and the text in a reciprocal relationship. She explains that when these two players cross paths, a transaction occurs between them and it is, "in the live circuit set up between reader and text" (1938/1983, p. 25) that the literary work takes shape. Each comes into play with a certain baggage. It is their combination that creates the actual work. In Rosenblatt's (1978) words,

> The concept of the transaction with the environment provides the model for the process in which the reader and the text are involved. Each becomes in a sense environment for the other. A two-way, or better, a circular process in which the reader responds to the verbal stimuli offered by the text, but at the same time must draw selectively on the resources of his/her own fund of experience and sensibility to provide and organize the substance of his/her response. Out of this the new experience, the literary work, is formed. (p. 43)

When Rosenblatt speaks of text, she limits herself to literary works. I have come to give it a broader meaning and use it to identify anything that conveys a message. Thus the word text encompasses oral language in addition to the written (poems, fiction, non-fiction), visual arts (pictures, paintings, collages, films, photographs, sculptures...) as well as music, dance and dramatics. With the multitude of shapes that a text can take our understanding of the word "reader" changes. Thus, when speaking of the reader we must not think only of a person sitting with a book in his/her hand but of anyone coming in contact with any type of text. In what follows, as I continue to talk about texts, reading, and readers, I want

to make clear that the ideas I describe are not limited to what is traditionally known as text.

During the encounter of the text and the reader, the latter brings his/her past experiences, thoughts and feelings to respond to the text and consequently shapes it and gives it meaning. Rosenblatt (1938/1983) writes, "Any literary work gains its significance from the way in which the minds and emotions of particular readers respond to the verbal stimuli offered by the text" (p. 28). As this meaning, this response, is a product of the coming together of the stimuli provided by the text and the reader's personal baggage, one cannot expect to find a unique and universal explanation or understanding of a text. When reading a text, the reader focuses his/her attention on the meaning of the words but also on what those words mean for him/her personally. Each person has a different mental image or understanding of a certain word depending on his/her experience with that word. When a person who has never left South America for example reads the word snow, s/he probably thinks of something white and cold. On the other hand, for a person living in Montreal, the word snow has significance far greater than the simple description of its characteristics, since s/he has seen, smelled, tasted, touched and heard snow. Different feelings, thoughts, experiences and images come to his/her mind, whereas the other may only picture what s/he has been told about snow. Both of these people might know what snow is, but their experiences with snow are very much different, hence their response to the word will be extremely distinct. Thus, we can affirm that no two people will have the exact same response to a text. Furthermore, "the same text will have a very different meaning and value

to us at different times or under different circumstances" (Rosenblatt 1938/1983, p. 35).

As responding to text is such an individual or personal activity, when reader response is introduced into classrooms where a certain environment of trust and sharing exists, the results can be tremendously exciting.

In a classroom, response can take many shapes: physical, oral or written. A response to a text can be presented physically by acting it out or using movement to portray it. Orally, the sharing of responses can take place through discussions as a whole group, in small groups or one on one encounters. Responses can also be shared through the writing of keywords or text, as well as drawings or art works, which in turn can become texts that provide stimuli for further response. Through such an approach, the students find themselves in a context where they are provided with many ways of expressing their voice. Traditionally, educators tend to concentrate on the oral and written expression of thoughts and ideas, and dismiss the other possibilities; dismissing the fact that one facet of self-expression can be found in creative arts. As Becker (1997) writes,

> being an artist means developing a creative approach to the
> complexity of the world, and solving the problems that one poses
> to oneself through a visual medium, whatever that medium may
> be. (p. 15)

Students have to be encouraged to define their ideas, their understanding of life, society, the world and represent it through the use of creative arts. Dance, song, poetry, painting, drama, these are all means of expression

and self-affirmation. Not everyone is good with words; some people need to be given other ways of expressing themselves. This makes one think about what kind of message we send students when we provide limited tools for self-expression. In a sense we are telling students that if they cannot express their ideas orally, then they do not have a voice, they have nothing to say. We never think about the fact that maybe the means of expression expected in the curriculum do not necessarily fit all students. According to Freire (1993), "a positive condition of freedom is the [...] awareness of human creative possibilities" (p. 118). In my kindergarten class, where the students have a very limited knowledge of the French language, I push the students to use different ways of expression: drawings, physical representation, movement, artwork and so on. At our level this is accepted as a legitimate way of representation. However, when it comes to grade one and subsequent levels, the only valued means of expression are partly oral and mostly written. The media offered by creative arts for self-expression are often ignored by educators. This is not surprising, since as soon as there are budget cuts, the art programs are the first ones to be erased from the curriculum.

In a student-centered classroom, all learning takes its roots in the intimate and personal interaction between teacher, students and text. As an interpretation is not only linked to the stimuli provided by the text, but also depends on the student's individual experience; no judgment can be made on the responses (as long as they are supported by the text). As a result, the dreadful idea of failure vanishes. In student-centered activities, the children "are made aware of several possibilities of meaning" (Dias 1996, p. 79) and become tolerant of ambiguity. In this safe framework, the students learn to open up, use their voice and take risks. Valued dialogue

promotes the students' ownership over their ideas. As a result they become more confident and find ways of furthering their thinking. By engaging in such activities, they learn to value their personal responses, start shaping texts for themselves and ultimately learn to fashion their views of the world. They come out of the activities feeling more empowered. Rosenblatt (1978) says, "literary texts provide us with a widely broadened 'other' through which to define ourselves and our world" (p. 145). When students respond to a text and use their voice to present their ideas and views about the text to others, they appropriate themselves with the text. In a responsive approach, students are also empowered by the fact that in responding to literature, they have the control. They are responsible for making meaning. In a way they take the information - the text - analyse it and find meaning for themselves. Thus, by responding to the text, by using their voice, the students make the knowledge their own. It is when you are pushed to think about new concepts, find links with yourself, your experience, your situation, and are given the opportunity to express your thoughts, that learning becomes real, meaningful and fruitful.

As a teacher I have found myself in a constant struggle to find ways of fostering my students' learning, especially when it came to language. From the beginning of my teaching career I searched for ways of enriching my students' experiences with the French language. It was a constant challenge to teach the students in a language which is not their own. With every passing year, I came up with different ideas, tried many methods. Through my courses, readings and experiences I discovered that students can be motivated to learn the French language, "through meaningful interaction and active participation in communicative events" (Johnson

1985, p. 5). In addition I learned that when teaching language to children, especially when this is a second language, it is important to make the language functional. Indeed, "language develops from real life settings in which [it is] used to accomplish goals" (Teale & Sulzby 1989, p. 3).

Johnson (1985) says,

> young children seem to learn language best in situations that center around their interests and that allow for their personal "hands-on" involvement, with the adults acting as partners in these child-centered activities. (p. 27)

These ideas made me realize that in order to teach the French language I had to create in my classroom a community of active learners, a real and meaningful environment, which fosters motivation for learning, and finally, empower my students by helping them find their voice and use it. As Cox (1996) writes,

> students learn to talk by talking, to read by reading, and to write by writing. The teacher's role is to help them gain control over their own ideas and language through active engagement with learning experiences that are focused on the construction of meaning. Student- and response-centered language and literacy experiences can be defined as those that originate with the ideas, interests, and language of children. (p. 16)

Response-centred activities have indeed helped me create an environment where students actively participate in language learning experiences which are centred around their interests and encourage them to express their thoughts and ideas in a real and meaningful setting. In the

Appendix I present an overview of activities, which I have incorporated into my teaching over the years and that have helped me create the engaged, student-centred classroom that I have had.

REFLECTIONS

We use the term 'pedagogy of reinvention' to describe the process of making both the immediate and distant pasts usable. It is a process of going back over something in different ways and with new perspectives, of studying one's own experience with the insight and awareness of the present for the purpose of acting on the future. (Mitchel & Weber 1999, p. 8)

Memory

It was a cold winter morning in 2001. I walked into class to find a note that had been scribbled on a small piece of paper. "Moa J TouX E J PEEa aLE D Hor MardEi MERCREDI Mira" (Moi je tousse et je peux pas aller dehors Mardi Mercredi Mira). At first I could not understand what this was all about. After reading over the message a couple of times, I was able to decipher it. It was a note from Mira telling me that she was coughing and could not go outside on Tuesday and Wednesday. The previous day, I had told the children that no one would be allowed to stay indoors during recess, unless they had a note from their parents explaining why they should be staying inside and for how long. I was both amused and taken aback by Mira's writing. She had presented me with exactly what I had asked for, except that it had not been written by her parents. As soon as I went to pick up my students from the cafeteria, I approached Mira and told her that I had received her note. She turned around and explained that her mother had not had time to write it in the morning and that given her situation, she had decided to write it herself. I smiled. I explained to her that it was important that it be her parents that write these kinds of notes. I told her that she could stay inside for that day, but that she would really need to get a note from her mom for the next day.

Instances like this one have been many in my classroom: students appropriating the literacy tools explored in the classroom and using them to their own ends; students having the confidence that their voice has value and that through it they can act upon their world to change it. Through their literacy development, my students have also acquired a sense of agency.

The responses that I observed over the years in my own students coupled with the exploration of my experiences as a person, as a student and as a teacher have fused together to substantiate the ideas that there is a strong interconnectivity between student and teacher empowerment. They go hand in hand and have a reciprocal influence on each other.

Over the past five years I have recognized and cultivated my own sense of agency. I have learned to take charge of my experiences of the past. Turning the pain upon itself, I have been able to transform it to make it a positive force in my life. This has made me re-evaluate my stance about myself both as a person and as a teacher. Furthermore, my own experience of empowerment has made me perceptive of my students' needs to be empowered and sensitive to the ways that I can help them achieve that empowerment.

Through this work I have sought to provide some insight to the many teachers in terms of how the theories of critical pedagogy and student-centered approaches to education play out in the actual classroom. I have shown my own understanding of how empowerment is one of the central foundations of education. Finally, I believe that I have established that in order to be able to empower students, teachers have to place themselves in the role of the learner and constantly go through the process of

reflection and action. Only then will they be able to fuse the pedagogical ideologies and actions, and be able to carry out the educational reforms in their classrooms.

Over the few years I have been teaching, I have observed unwillingness from many teachers to even attempt to introduce new ideas or methods of teaching, let alone to engage in self-critical work. I have often encountered a good deal of cynicism and defensiveness towards any kind of reform. This makes it difficult to initiate constructive dialog within the teaching community about the concepts of teachers' and students' empowerment. Indeed, in many ways teachers themselves might feel powerless with respect to their own work environment and have probably developed instincts of resistance in order to cope. This however has the potential to create a vicious loop as the students often pick up on this sense of cynicism and resistance and adopt it for their own, creating thus an unhealthy school atmosphere where both sides of the teaching equation, students and teachers, impose a level of powerlessness on one another.

Education as defined by the process of self-empowerment is extremely demanding. The self-critical aspect of this approach can certainly be frightening for many. In light of this, it seems to me that we must focus our efforts on finding ways to assist teachers to engage on the difficult yet ultimately rewarding path of empowerment.

My hope is that through this thesis, I have contributed to this objective and inspired my readers to engage in the kind of reflexive work which, I believe is crucial in becoming an empowering educator.

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APPENDIX
A PEEK INTO MY CLASSROOM

SETTING THE STAGE

Every year, my first goal has been to get the classroom ready for the students. I believe that the environment of the classroom has a major role to play in the students' developing literacies. Throughout the years I have tried many different kinds of settings. Being limited in terms of space and often materials, I have had to come up with creative ways of incorporating all the learning centres and special materials that I believe must be easily accessible to my kindergarten students. Literacy development relies on a supportive environment, which is user friendly (inviting and safe) and rich in literacy events. I have included a flat diagram representing the set-up of my classroom, as it was during my last year of teaching. (See Figure 1)

ART WORK

Teacher's

Reading Corner

Block and lego corner

students' desks and working area

Writing Centre

Computer Centre

House corner

Art Centre

Class Dictionary

Art supply cupboards

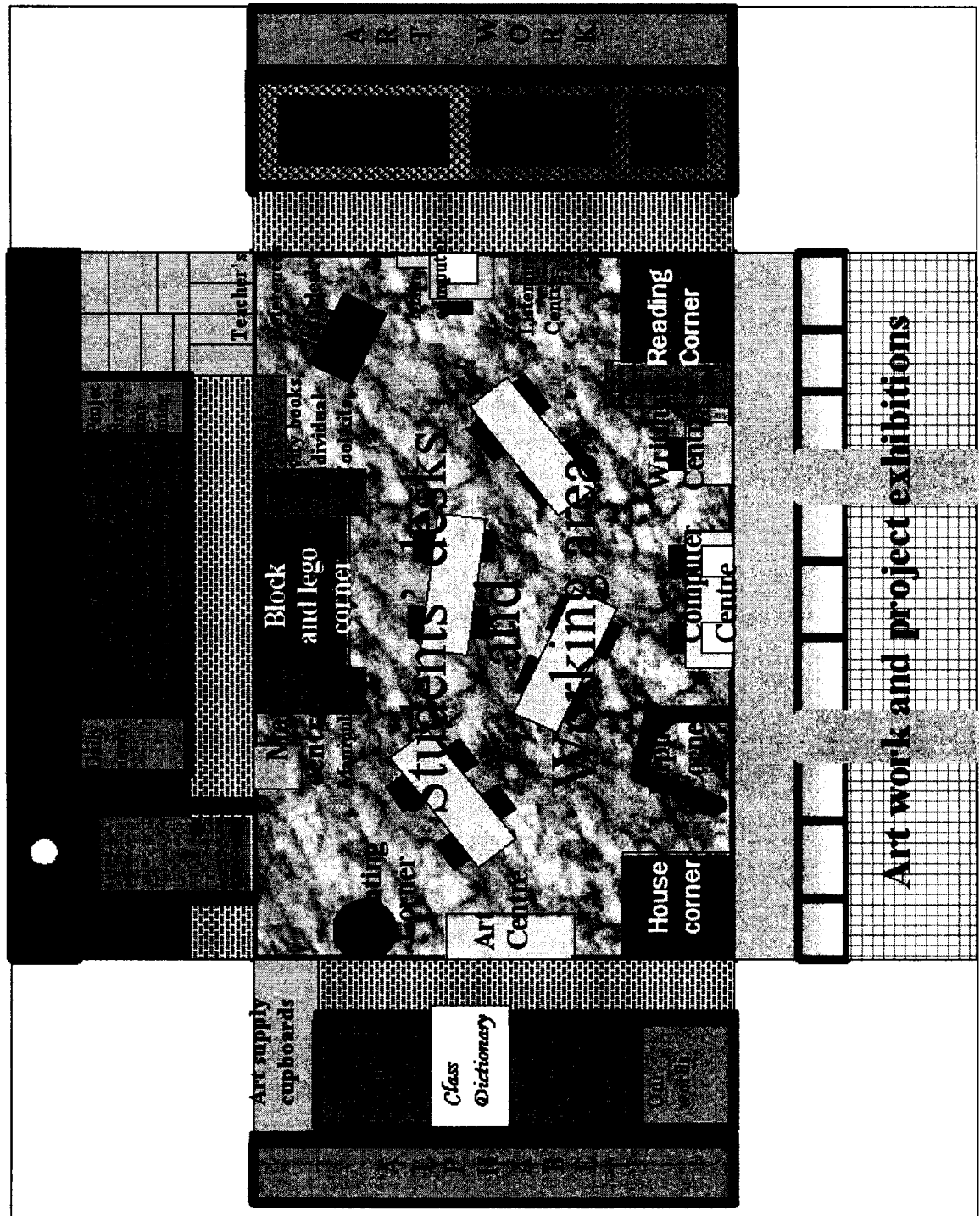Art work and project exhibitions

FIGURE 1: CLASSROOM FLOOR PLAN

The children can freely come in and out of the open-ended learning and experiment centres, which are supplied with literacy supporting materials.

- Listening centre: Tape recorder, microphone, story tapes, blank tapes, games...

- Reading corner: Pillows, rug, reading tree, variety of fiction and non-fiction books ranging from picture books, predictable books, easy readers, to story books and novels, poetry anthologies...

- Writing centre: fully loaded with various writing materials, paper of variety of colours, textures and shapes, envelopes, pencils, markers, crayons...

- Two Computer centres: software including references, educational games and talking books...

- Puppet corner: mini-stage, puppets, chalk board, chalk...

- House corner: (Housekeeping and dress up) loaded with literacy related materials such as phone books, cookbooks, note pads, pencils, pens...

- Art centre: art material, art books and craft books, clipboards, index cards...

- Painting corner: paper, paint, paint brushes...

- Math centre and manipulatives: paper, newsprint sheets, maps, books related to numbers, colours, math, machines, travel...

- Block and lego corner: index cards, clipboards, newsprint paper for blue prints, books on architecture, magazines...

Once these centres are set up, the number of literacy driven activities is endless. Here I present a general overview of the kinds of activities, which I instigate in the classroom. They are all child-centred, cross-curricular activities that are embedded with literacy events, where students actively participate in discovering language and making sense of their worlds, and where play and imagination have a central role.

READING ACTIVITIES AND THOSE THAT FOLLOW

The main aim of these activities is to familiarize the students with the written word, show them how reading is an enjoyable activity, which can make them discover new horizons. Furthermore, the process also helps the students in recognizing and decoding words and eventually becoming readers.

Secret message

Every day, as the students come into the classroom and start settling down, they are invited to uncover the secret message that I have written on the board. For example, the message could be: "Bonjour les amis! Aujourd'hui nous allons lire l'histoire de Pipo." (Good morning friends! Today we are going to read the story of Pipo). Students are usually very eager to decode the message since it gives them clues on the special activities of the day. As the students engage in this activity, they start getting insights on the different techniques of deciphering words. They recognize different letters or combinations of letters and their sounds, as well as spot some words globally, especially if they are often present in

the messages. The children also learn about punctuation (period, coma, exclamation point, question mark, etc.) and the role it plays in a text.

Reading corner

Children can go to this library corner to thumb through books in an intimate surrounding, sitting on a rug or big pillows. Different types of books are displayed on the shelves: story books, informational books, visual dictionaries, encyclopaedias, science books and any other kind that might be of interest to the students, are put at their disposition. They can also find there the books that they borrowed from the school library for that week.

Sustained silent reading

The children pick a book from the library corner and engage in silent (or almost silent) reading. While the students explore their books, I also model the reading behaviour by taking part in the activity. This activity gives the children the chance to discover and examine different books or get a better look at the one read during story time. They also get the opportunity to engage in "pretend reading." The aim here is not necessarily to have the children read, but to make books an important part of their routine and to show them that reading books is not an activity reserved only to people who have learned to decode words on the paper. The children look at the pictures, invent or retell stories, show interesting parts to their peers and basically learn to love books.

Story time

By looking and listening to story books read by me, children not only discover the world of the imaginary but also learn a great deal of new vocabulary since it is presented in the context of the story. A "reading

tree" is posted in the reading corner. For each book read in class, I write the title, the name of the author and the illustrator on a leaf, which is then put on the "reading tree." The latter becomes a visual representation of all the books read in class. The children keep track of the readings and eventually do the writing themselves.

After reading a story, my students and I engage in group discussions, where we share our thoughts about the experience we just had. The students will initially comment about their favourite part of the story or character, their favourite lines or illustrations. I usually try to push them further by asking questions, such as, which character would you want to be? What would you change in the story? What would you have done if you were one of the characters? What does the story make you think of? Has anything like this happened to you? and so on. This discussion about the story not only gives the students the opportunity to express their thoughts about the work but also helps them understand it better. As Almasi & Gambrell write, "Engaging in discussion about text results in deeper understanding, higher level thinking, and improved communication skills" (1996, 29). They also note that,

> in a discussion, the thoughts, ideas, feelings, and responses of all
> participants who have read a given text contribute to the event
> and that event has an influence on a participant's eventual
> interpretation (Ibid, 5).

Different types of activities, which encourage the students to use their voice and present their ideas through various media, then follow our discussion:

- Drawing: The children draw their response in their drawing book. After a short one on one conference, they dictate a sentence or a paragraph explaining their drawing. The children enjoy this activity because it gives them the opportunity to represent the story in a way, which is meaningful to them. Some simply draw their favourite part or character; others go further by placing themselves in the story or inventing a new part to the story.

- Play: Using blocks, legos, play dough or any other type of toys, the children recreate the setting of the story and its characters and play with the story line. The students either enact the story or change it completely by creating a new one, using the same setting and characters.

- Drama: Students take on the role of the different characters and act it out as I reread or retell the story. As the students gain confidence, they start to enact the story without the support of the text. They actually become actors presenting the story to an audience. Research supports,

  > the use of various forms of drama to create a more complex context for reading and responding to literature for students who may, otherwise, take very limited interest in or ownership of their own involvement in the world of a story (Enciso & Edmiston 1997, 72).

- Our own books: After exploring a story in many ways, the students can listen to the story and draw their own illustrations for each page. Through such an activity, the students not only show their understanding of the story, but also create their own versions of the story.

- Book cover: I once came across a book, which had been ripped out of its cover. I wanted to put it in our library corner but not in the state it was in. That's when I came up with the book cover designing activity. After reading the story to the children and discussing it, I explained to the children that I wanted to make a cover for the book. We went back to other storybooks to analyse what was on their covers: title, author, drawings from the story. We found the title and the author's name on the title page, but needed to create a new illustration. Based on our discussions, we made a list of things we would want to see on the illustration of the cover page and together we created a new one.

- Music and stories: Using the class instruments and the ones created by the students, we create sound effects or soundtracks to stories. We discuss the characters and the setting of the stories and decide what sounds might represent them. We then read or tell the story incorporating the sounds to the text. I always make an audio recording of the event in order to listen to it afterwards.

Poetry

I read poems to the students daily. The children listen to poems, discuss them with the group and draw their response just as they do for stories. The students love listening to poems and have me read them over and over again. They enjoy the rhyming patterns and love joining me in my reading by reciting the words or lines they have memorized. Most of them often ended up learning them entirely by heart and go back to the poetry books to "read" the texts to their peers. The exploration of poems is also enhanced by the use of physical representations. After reading a poem a couple of times, I re-read the poem verse by verse and ask the children to show an image of a word or idea using their bodies. We then put all the

pieces together and present our physical interpretation of the poem, to an audience of peers.

WRITING ACTIVITIES AND THOSE THAT FOLLOW

The aim of these activities is to encourage students to explore the various facets of writing in a meaningful and exciting setting.

Sign-in booklet

Everyday I write the date and my name on a page of the sign-in booklet. As they walk into the classroom, the students sign-in their name every morning. This activity encourages them to write their names, especially at the beginning of the school year. It is also a good way of documenting the development of their writing on a daily basis. As the children become more proficient in their writing skills, I encourage them to write the date when it is their turn to be the "teacher's assistant."

Calendar and weather chart

The calendar helps children to learn the names of the days of the week, and of the months, as well as how to count up to 31. After writing the date on the blackboard, the "teacher's assistant" of the day looks out the window to determine, using the appropriate vocabulary, where the arrow should be pointing on the weather chart (sun, clouds, rain, snow). Once the children learn this vocabulary, it is possible to introduce them to a wider range of words to describe the weather (sunny, partly sunny, cloudy, partly cloudy, precipitation....)

Every day, the "teacher's assistant" has the responsibility of writing the date, his/her name on a small piece of paper and making a drawing that

shows the weather on that day. His/her work then goes on the calendar bulletin board and stays there until the end of the week. This is a motivating activity for the students. As part of a collective work, it is not only purposeful but also encourages the students to use their best penmanship since their work is displayed in the classroom.

The alphabet

These activities are designed to make the letter of the alphabet their own, by playing around with them. Every week or so, a new letter is introduced in our classroom. After a first contact with the letter, the children respond to the shape of the letters by making up and sharing different physical representations of the letter. The children bring in words that they collect at home with their parents and we post them on the "our words" bulletin board. We then compile a list of words starting with the letter we are studying, which are then illustrated by the students. The lists are all made on big sheets of paper, which are all put together in our "Class dictionary". Next, the children go into their personal dictionaries. On one page they write the capital letter, which they then transform into something else. The drawing is accompanied by an explanatory sentence dictated or written by the student. For example, " Mon O est comme une balle de tennis" (My O is like a tennis ball) or "Mon D est comme un chapeau de pirate, le ventre de maman quand elle est enceinte, un parapluie, un bol, le couvercle d'un boite de trésor de pirate" (My D is like a pirate's hat, mommy's tummy when she is pregnant, an umbrella, a bowl, the lid of a pirate's treasure chest) and so on. On the next page, the students write and illustrate one or more words starting with that letter, which were most meaningful to them. Finally, during my last year of teaching, I had various students going to the computer centre

throughout the week, to write and illustrate a word from our class list. .(I was planning on making an online dictionary for our class, but never got to do it, mostly due to a lack of availability of technical support.) Through all these activities, the children play around with the different letters and make them their own.

Computer centres

Computers in the classroom are an excellent support for children, especially for the ones who have difficulty with their penmanship. The simple idea of using the computer to write is also very motivating in itself. Students can write their friends' names, words they find around the classroom or in books, messages and stories. I often print their work so it can be exhibited or sent home to show their parents. Using the keyboard and the alphabet charts, they learn about the correspondence of small and capital letters. Students sometimes work in pairs, particularly when they experience difficulty in finding letters on the keyboard. In this sense, the computer also plays an important role in developing their cooperation skills.

Creative writing

There are endless activities that I have used in my classroom to encourage the students to engage in creative writing. Here I present only a few.

Initiated through art (pictures of art works found in books, or drawings, paintings, sculptures created in the classroom) the students engage in creative writing. This can be descriptive (what they see in the piece of art) or expressive (the story the art work represents). They write their stories on loose sheets of paper, using any preferred style of writing (drawings, scribbles, random letters or invented spelling). Next, the students read

their text to me, and I write it down (editing it to a minimum) on a second sheet of paper. Finally, the students type their piece of writing on the computer. All their work is kept in a portfolio. The final product is then presented to their peers and exhibited along the artwork related to it.

The students also have a notebook where they collect ideas for stories. Sometimes, when we have writing time, I have them draw or write their stories. Once they are done, they get together in small groups and read their stories to each other. This way, they are not only provided with an audience, but also get feedback from their peers.

We also write collective stories. We sometimes start with a funny character that we have created or use ideas that might have stemmed from a discussion. Each student has a turn to continue the story that has been started by another. After a student finishes telling his/her part, the entire group tries to come up with the best way of writing that part down. When each sentence is formulated, they dictate it back to me as I type it on the computer. We continue this way until we feel that the story is finished. Later, after we have read the story over a couple of times and edited it, the students illustrate different parts of the story printed out on paper. We then bind the whole thing into a published book.

Pen pals

With two groups of students from different classes participating, pen pals are selected through a lottery. In each class, the teacher prepares a big mail box where students will put their letters to be sent. In addition, each child designs his/her personal mailbox, which is then placed in the classroom. Next, charts are prepared and posted in the classroom. These charts include the names of the pen pals as well as a list of phrases and

words dictated by the children, which they use when writing to their pals. New writing is added to these lists whenever the students feel the need. Little "explanatory" drawings can be done on the side to help them recognize the writing.

This activity motivates the students to write because it is real, functional, and interactive. Once a week, they draw and write a letter to their pen pal and receive a response to which they answer the following week and so forth. Through this activity, the students learn about the process of correspondence (envelopes, stamps, writing of the address, mailing system...) in addition to the structure of letters (date, opening statements, signatures...). Furthermore, once the activity is launched, the students, as independent writers, also begin composing personalized thank you notes or greeting cards for their parents.

Journal writing

With blank sheets of paper folded in half, a construction paper and two staples, I prepare little booklets that become the students' journals. For each month, the students get a new booklet. They personalize the covers and write the name of the month. The children keep a record of each day by writing the date and making a drawing of one or more things that were meaningful or important to them during that particular day. Some limit their responses to what they enjoyed during the day; others go further by sharing their feelings and thoughts. To cite some examples, children will write things like, "aujourd'hui j'étais malade" (today I was sick), "j'avais froid quand je suis sorti dehors" (I was cold when I went outside), "j'étais triste aujourd'hui parce que mes amis n'ont pas joué avec moi" (I was sad today because my friends didn't play with me), "j'ai aimé t'écouté lire une

histoire et faire des voies" (I liked listening to you reading a story and making voices), and so on.

On the bottom part of their page, separated by a line, an explanatory sentence or text is written. Some children dictate their text to me, and I write it directly in the journal, without any editing. Others write on their own, using random combinations of letters or invented spelling, then read their text to me. When the written text is very difficult to decipher, I write it in "book language" on self-stick removable notes and stick it on the page. At the end of the year, I put all the booklets together to create a logbook for each student. Sometimes, we have circle time after working in our journals. The students show their work to each other and talk about what they have written down. Then, their peers ask them questions to elicit details and further explanations, or they make comments.

LITERACY THROUGHOUT THE CURRICULUM

Arts

I display various art books and arts and crafts books in the arts corner, along with a great amount of art materials (paint, construction paper, markers, Styrofoam cups, paper rolls, empty tissue boxes, cloth, etc.) The children go to this corner to open the door of their imagination. Consulting the books to get ideas, and using the materials put at their disposition, they create all sorts of art works. In addition to using this activity to show the children the functional purpose of books, I also take the opportunity to guide them into meaningful writing activities. After creating a paper puppet for example, I ask the students to give the instructions for making it and write them down on a piece of paper. The students then type the text on the computer, add drawings and put their

work into a specially created folder. All these sheets are later on, put together to create a book, which is added to the book collection in the art centre.

- Paintings: After completing their paintings, the students present their work to their peers and give it a title. I mount their paintings on frames, write their titles and post their work in the classroom.

- Abstract paintings: The students engage in an art activity where they create a set of five collective abstract paintings. Separated into groups, they go around the classroom, and paint on five big sheets of paper. Their job is to cover the entire sheet with all sorts of colours. The result is quite interesting, as it presents a rich collection of possible compositions. Once the paintings are dried, they are posted in the classroom. The students then have to look at them and try to find an image, which speaks to them. As they find their painting on the big sheets, they show it to me, describe it and give me directions as to where its borders are. We then cut out that part and frame it. Next, during a one on one conference, I encourage the children to create a story about the painting. The children brainstorm their ideas as I write them on a sheet of paper. After a couple of days, when all the brainstorming sessions are completed, I return to each child, re-read their ideas, discuss the painting with them and then encourage them to tell me the story of the painting which I write down. After some minor editing of language, the students set themselves in front of the computer and type their story, which is then printed and posted next to their painting in the classroom.

Play

Children's love of play provides an informal setting during class times when they easily let their imagination go and give way to their creativity. Whenever the students are engaged in play with blocks, legos, play dough or whatever else, I try to initiate conversations with them about what they have created. In some instances, I encourage them to respond to the materials and they start telling me a story, which is based on their play.

- House corner: Transformed into a restaurant, post-office, hospital, bank, office, library, etc., the housekeeping centre becomes an ideal place to promote writing in meaningful real life settings. Provided with the relevant writing materials, the children prepare menus, take orders, make shopping lists, write checks, prepare files, write prescriptions and so on. In this corner, children engage in activities where they act out different scenarios for which they take on the role of diverse characters. When the teacher participates in these games, the children are driven to communicate in French. These types of activities create a meaningful environment in which they can actively participate and reinvest all their learned vocabulary.

- Puppet corner: Children prepare puppet shows during playtime and present them to their peers at the end of the period. Puppets are a good support for the children. Since it is the puppet talking and not them, students are less intimidated and let go of their fears of speaking in French. Presenting a show is also very motivating for the children, because they get an attentive audience who watches their performance. Outside the actual puppet corner, puppets can be used to initiate discourse with reserved children.

Drama

Activities in this category develop oral and physical communication through play. Because they are presented as risk free games and call on the students' creativity the children are always very eager to participate. This is very advantageous, especially when teaching a second language. After a few warm up games, where the children explore feelings, different characters and situations, I start inventing and telling a story that the children act out simultaneously. The students respond to the story by presenting whatever is meaningful to them. They take on the role of any character they want. They can choose to switch characters and become something else. The children act out the story individually but also come together in many instances to create a scene where two or more characters come in contact and separate again at their will. This activity is very interesting because it gives me, the teacher, the opportunity to see how much they understand what I am saying, and see how they are responding to what I am saying. At times, the students also participate in the creation of the story as I give them an opportunity to add on a twist to the story line.

Mathematics

When learning about shapes, the children are encouraged to respond by saying what a circle, a square, a triangle and a rectangle are. After brainstorming in small groups and recording their responses by drawing them, they share their ideas with the whole class and I record them on a bristle board, which is then posted in the classroom. The responses are as diverse as one can imagine. To cite a few examples, they say that a circle is the sun, the ears of a mouse, a face, the number zero; a triangle is the letter A, the ears of a cat, the eyes of a pumpkin; a rectangle is a book, a

piano, a box, a building and so on. When discussing numbers, the students and I make a chart of different representations of each number. One is the earth, a person, a nose; two is friends, eyes, ears, a chicken's feet; three is a triangle, a tricycle; and so on. Again, by engaging in these activities, by creating and sharing their personal representations, the children are given the opportunity to play around with these concepts and make them their own.

Sciences

When discussing the functions of the five senses in a science class, the children are encouraged to share their ideas about what they perceive to be a meaningful use of each of the senses. The responses are then listed on a chart. What is fascinating about this process is how they elaborate their answers by making very personal responses. "Les yeux sont pour regarder maman" (Eyes are for looking at mom), "les oreilles sont pour entendre la sirène des voitures de police" (ears are for hearing police car sirens), "les mains sont pour cueillir des fleurs" (hands are for picking flowers), "un nez c'est pour sentir le feu" (a nose is to smell fire). Later the students draw their response for each sense in their science notebook.