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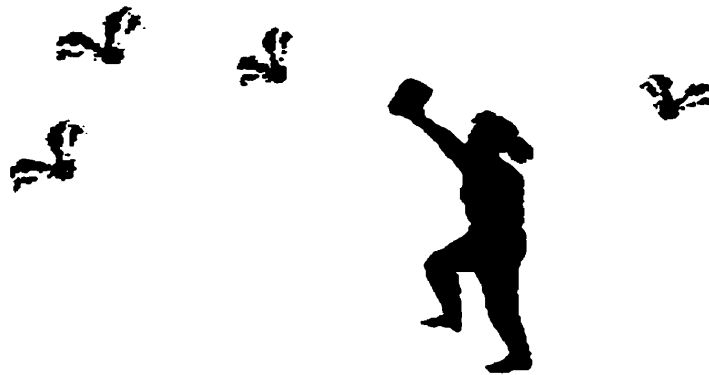
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Chasing Fireflies: Understanding Struggling Readers

Myrna Hynes

**Department of Educational Studies
McGill University, Montréal**

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments / ii	
Table of Contents / iii	
List of Figures / vii	
Abstract / ix	
Résumé / x	
Prologue: Giving Credit: Recognising the Strengths of Struggling Readers / xii	
Reading Readers / xii	
My Educational and Teaching Background / xv	
School: Cure or Cause of Learning Problems? / xviii	
A Metaphor for Teaching Struggling Readers / xx	
Changing Practice Means Changing Thinking / xxi	
What Lies Ahead / xxii	
Chapter One: Teaching Reading is Losing Control / 1	
Reading About Reading / 1	
What is Reader-Response? / 3	
The Transactional Theory of Literature / 3	
Transactional Theory in My Classroom / 5	
The Stance of the Reader / 9	
Support from Other Classrooms / 11	
Theoretical and Practical Concerns About the Transactional Theory / 12	
The Validity of Personal Responses / 13	
The Influence of the Text / 14	
The Development of Critical Reading / 15	
Being more Explicit about Explicit Instruction / 17	
Moving Beyond Reader-Response Approaches / 17	
The Sociocultural Perspective / 17	
Building Scaffolds in Reading / 20	
The Psycholinguistic Perspective / 22	
The "Great Debate" / 28	
Holistic Recuperation / 31	
Avoiding the Deficit View of Struggling Readers / 33	
Chapter Two: Finding the Gate: Inviting Outsiders to Become Readers / 35	

Dealing With the Deficit / 36	
Feeling "Special" / 36	
Setting the Scene for Reading / 39	
The Teaching Part of Teacher-Research / 40	
No Reading Aloud! / 40	
Capturing Reading / 41	
Speaking of Reading / 43	
Evaluating Reading / 44	
The Researching Part of Teacher-Research / 46	
Case Studies / 46	
Observation Log / 48	
Oral and Written Samples / 51	
Respond-Aloud-Protocols (RAPS) / 51	
Reading Attitude Survey / 52	
Interviews / 52	
Standardized Tests / 53	
Writing as a Research Procedure / 53	
Evaluating Teacher-Research / 53	
The Gap Between Theory and Practice / 54	
Bridging the Gap with Teacher-Research / 57	
Chapter Three: Jeffrey: Changing Identity / 59	
Reading as a Way of Being / 59	
A History of Failure / 59	
Connecting to Jeffrey to Reading / 60	
Connecting to Jeffrey to Writing / 64	
Discovering Jeffrey's Perceptions of Himself / 66	
Taking Risks With Reading and Writing / 68	
Becoming a Reader and a Writer / 72	
A Closer Look at his Reading / 75	
Signs of a Reader: A Test Score, a Haircut, and a Poem / 78	
What Did I Learn from Jeffrey / 80	
Chapter Four: Fiona: Insisting on Choice / 82	
Is it Enough to be a Reader? / 82	

Clues from Fiona's Past / 83	
A Portrait of a Reader / 84	
Her reading Shapes Her Writing / 86	
Her Past as a Non-reader / 90	
Choosing Her Own Books / 91	
Ingrained Resistance / 92	
Transferring Her Enthusiasm / 97	
Limits to Fiona's Reading / 98	
Making Inferences from Inferences / 100	
Reading and Academic Success / 104	
What Did I Learn from Fiona? / 104	
Chapter Five: Jon: Breaking the Code / 107	
Sitting on the Sidelines / 107	
Breaking the Code / 109	
Signs of a Reader / 112	
Was Jon a Reader? / 115	
Beyond Decoding / 117	
Getting the Picture / 119	
Seeing His Reading / 122	
The Writing Connection / 126	
What Did I Learn from Jon? / 130	
Chapter Six: Matt: Following his Passions / 132	
A Reader Judged by His Writing / 132	
Early Battles and Battle Scars / 136	
The Reading-Writing Connection / 139	
Deciding What's Interesting / 143	
Getting the Picture / 149	
Comparing Fact and Fiction / 152	
Owning His Reading / 155	
What Did I Learn from Matt? / 157	
Chapter Seven: Chasing Fireflies: Where to Look / 159	
Capturing and Defining Reading / 159	
Teachers and Students as Curriculum / 160	

The Teacher as Curriculum: Who Should I Be? / 161
Understanding Reading / 162
The Teacher as Curriculum: Content and Context / 166
Rejecting the Deficit View / 168
Living With Uncertainty / 170
Who Are the Students I Want to Help? / 171
A Final Word to Teachers / 175
Epilogue: Where Are They Now? / 179
References / 181
Appendix A - Letter Requesting Parents' Permission / A1
Appendix B - Letter of Permission / B1
Appendix C - Poem - <i>The Warrior of Winter</i> / C1
Appendix D - "The Marlap" / D1
Appendix E - Self-evaluation Questions for my Students / E1
Appendix F - Evaluation Criteria for Responding to Texts / F1
Appendix G / G1

List of Figures

- Chapter Three:** Figure 1 - Response to *Five Days of the Ghost* / 59
 Figure 2 - Response to *Incident at Hawk's Hill* / 60
 Figure 3 - Response to *Never Cry Wolf* / 61
 Figure 4 - Farley Mowat's Tent / 61
 Figure 5 - Neptune / 62
 Figure 6 - Mercury / 63
 Figure 7 - Cooling System / 66
 Figure 8 - My Favourite Place / 67
 Figure 9 - The Wolf With A Cold / 69
 Figure 10 - The Dragon Reborn / 71
 Figure 11 - Arind's Castle / 72
 Figure 12 - Lonely life / 76
 Figure 13 - Lonely Life (revised) / 77
- Chapter Four:** Figure 14 - Imagination / 83
 Figure 15 - Valley of the Unicorns / 83
 Figure 16 - Response to "Field of Vision" / 84
 Figure 17 - The Burning / 85
 Figure 18 - The Occult / 86
 Figure 19 - Response to *Five Days of the Ghost* (1) / 92
 Figure 20 - Response to *Five Days of the Ghost* (2) / 92
 Figure 21 - Response to *Five Days of the Ghost* (3) / 93
 Figure 22 - Response to *Never Cry Wolf* / 94
 Figure 23 - Response to *The Great Gilly Hopkins* / 94
 Figure 24 - Gilly's Life / 95
 Figure 25 - Mountains / 97
 Figure 26 - Math Journal / 98
- Chapter Five:** Figure 27 - Response to *The Great Gilly Hopkins* / 110
 Figure 28 - Response to *Never Cry Wolf* / 111
 Figure 29 - Explorer / 111
 Figure 30 - Explorer (2) / 112
 Figure 31 - Response to *The Cay* / 116
 Figure 32 - Response to *A Day No Pigs Would Die* / 117
 Figure 33 - The Leaving / 118
 Figure 34 - Drawing in response to *Five Days of the Ghost* / 121
 Figure 35 - Drawing in response to "A View from my Window" / 122
 Figure 36 - Response to "A View from my Window" / 122
 Figure 37 - Drawing in response to "The Selling of my Country" / 123
 Figure 38 - Response to "The Selling of my Country" / 124
 Figure 39 - Fashion Show / 126
 Figure 40 - The Dragon Slayers / 127
 Figure 41 - The Tattooed Man / 127

Chapter Six:	Figure 42 - Response to a Christmas Story / 121
	Figure 43 - My Response to Matt / 131
	Figure 44 - The Shores of Hell / 139
	Figure 45 a - Santa's New Sleigh (original) / 140
	Figure 45 b - Santa's New Sleigh (transcription) / 141
	Figure 46 - Response to <i>Five Days of the Ghost</i> / 142
	Figure 47 - Response to <i>Daniel's Story</i> / 143
	Figure 48 - Age / 145
	Figure 49 - When the Children are Gone / 145
	Figure 50 - Drawing in response to <i>Never Cry Wolf</i> / 146
	Figure 51 - Contour Maps / 148
	Figure 52 - What I Remember / 148
	Figure 53 - Mountain Making / 149

Abstract

There is a wide gap between current understandings of how readers read and how reading is taught in school, particularly to “at-risk” readers. Contemporary reading research and reader-response theories suggest that struggling readers should not be subjected to remedial programs involving “drills and skills,” simplified “decodable” reading material, and most of all, low expectations of their teachers. Reading problems are not solved by filling gaps in a child’s knowledge or skills. Instead, reluctant readers must be treated as readers, encouraged to develop their personal interests and enthusiasms through reading, and, most importantly, to make their own sense of their reading. By helping my students to read and respond to texts rich in content and appropriate to their interests and ages, I observed significant improvement in their confidence and competence as readers.

This teacher-research study describes the growth of four readers in grade-seven with long histories of failure in school. Their stories are told in case studies that contain descriptions of the classroom activities and events that influenced their progress, observations of their interactions with their peers and with me, their teacher, and finally, analyses of their work samples. This work is also about my role in my students’ development and, thus, includes my reflections on how I transformed both reading and reader-response theory into practice and on relevant features of my classroom management. In the case study of each student, I have tried to capture their different learning styles and problems and also my thinking processes that arose from the beliefs, questions, observations, reflections, hunches, and flashes of insight that I, like most teachers, used daily and that formed the substance of my reader-based pedagogy. In addition, I discuss in detail the ideas in the research literature, such as reader-response theory and the whole language/phonics debate, that help to explain my students’ progress.

As a teacher-researcher, I describe my teaching, as well as its effects on my students. Through understanding struggling readers, I came to understand reading. This is an account of my learning that delineates the nature of the interactions between teacher and students which is, in fact, the real curriculum of any classroom. An essential part of teaching is evaluating its effectiveness; this dissertation is a sustained evaluation of my reading program through four of my students’ responses to it during one and, in two cases, two school years.

Résumé

Dans le monde de l'éducation actuel, on dénote encore un écart entre la façon dont les enfants apprennent à lire et la didactique de la lecture à l'école. Et malheureusement, ce fossé s'élargit chez les apprenants dits «à risque». Les recherches modernes sur la lecture et les théories ayant trait au journal de réponses personnelles en lecture nous amènent à prendre conscience que les lecteurs à difficulté ne devraient pas être contraints à des programmes de récupération qui prennent des exercices et des habiletés, de l'usage de matériel de lecture à décodage et qui amènent principalement l'enseignant à limiter ses attentes face aux possibilités d'apprentissage de ses élèves.

Or, on ne solutionne pas les problèmes en lecture en palliant aux manques de connaissances ou d'habiletés chez l'enfant. Au contraire, il faut apprendre à considérer les lecteurs hésitants tels des lecteurs actifs, à les encourager à développer leurs sources d'intérêt et ainsi infuser à ces lecteurs un engouement pour la lecture. Il faut notamment les amener à prendre conscience de leur niveau de compréhension en lecture. Ainsi, en aidant mes élèves à mieux lire et à réagir face à des textes d'une grande richesse, textes adaptés à leur groupe d'âge et qui répondaient à leurs intérêts, j'ai observé une nette amélioration des compétences chez ces lecteurs ainsi qu'une augmentation de leur estime de soi.

La présente étude réalisée en salle de classe dépeint l'enrichissement des compétences en lecture de quatre jeunes lecteurs à difficulté dont le profil scolaire était pavé d'échecs. Leur vécu est expliqué par le biais d'études de cas qui renferment une description des interventions et activités faites en classe et qui précisent les événements qui ont influencé le progrès de ces jeunes lecteurs. De plus, l'étude relate les observations notées lors des interactions entre ces jeunes et leurs pairs ou moi comme enseignante. De plus, cette étude renferme une analyse des échantillons des travaux produits par ces lecteurs. Il y est également question de mon rôle d'enseignante dans le cheminement de ces jeunes et fait donc état de notes réflexives. Mes réflexions touchent principalement la façon dont j'ai réussi à mettre en pratique les théories de lecture et du journal de réponses personnelles qui représentent, en fait, les pierres angulaires de ma gestion de classe et du processus de prise de décisions qui sont également à la base de mon curriculum en lecture.

Par ailleurs, l'étude fournit une description détaillée d'idéologies pertinentes

issues de divers ouvrages de référence ayant trait, entre autres, à la théorie du journal de réponses personnelles en lecture et au débat sur la méthode par phonèmes dans l'apprentissage d'une langue.

Enfin, l'étude précise mes méthodes d'enseignement - à titre d'enseignante/chercheuse - et les répercussions de ces méthodes sur le processus d'apprentissage de mes élèves. En tentant de comprendre mes élèves en difficulté de lecture, j'ai également appris à cerner la lecture en soi.

Cette étude se veut donc un compte rendu de mes apprentissages qui tracent le portrait de la relation qui existe entre un enseignant et ses élèves, source même de tout curriculum de salle de classe. À l'aide des études de cas de quatre élèves ayant des profils d'apprentissage et des difficultés variés, j'ai tenté de saisir l'essence même de mon processus de pensée et ce, en puisant à même des convictions, questionnements, observations, réflexions, intuitions et idées qui constituent l'essence même de ma pédagogie basée sur le lecteur. Alors qu'une partie essentielle de l'enseignement repose sur l'efficacité, cette dissertation peut se traduire par une évaluation soutenue de mon programme de lecture, programme mis à l'essai grâce à la collaboration et à l'apport de quatre de mes élèves au cours d'une, voire de deux années d'enseignement.

Prologue: Giving Credit: Recognizing The Strengths Of Struggling Readers

Before I began this project, I *knew* that “drilling and skilling” my small class of troubled readers would not work. I knew it intuitively and instinctively, which is why I could not even imagine myself planning activities around reading strategies instead of reading. I could not contemplate for a moment using flash cards or cloze passages or any other means of isolating the parts of reading from the whole. I knew I could never force myself to teach that way. But, I also knew that I was expected to construct a “remedial” program for my struggling readers. Fortunately, no one said so directly, but the implicit message in conversations with colleagues, in the materials I was given, and even in the attitudes of my students themselves was clear: they *can’t* read so give them tasks that they *can* do.

I did know how to work with struggling readers without giving them a “special” program, but what I did *not* know was how to get rid of my nagging doubts that I might not be providing these students with everything they needed. I found some support in the research literature for my approach, but there were also arguments for working on skills “in context.” I was not sure what that meant. I had to find my own way by following my instincts and by observing my students until I *knew in my bones* that struggling readers also learn to read by reading.

In the course of this study, I realized that it was not enough to work on solving their problems only within the context of my classroom. Many of the contexts in which my students had to work in the rest of the school seriously undermined their growth in reading, and I came to see how certain school tasks and practices contributed to their problems. I was able to recognize how literate my supposed non-readers were, once I learned how to look at them as readers and as people. Knowing them helped me to understand reading. Another important aspect of my learning was to develop further this practical, real-life knowledge by finding inspiration, support, and questions in the research literature and by situating my own experiences in the context of the views of others. This study can be considered a part of my personal intellectual journey to a new destination among old ideas.

Reading Readers

When I began this study nearly five years ago, the influence of reader-response theories was being felt in many classrooms, and I envisaged a project that would

demonstrate their efficacy with struggling readers. Instead, my focus became much wider, as I documented my students' growth as readers (and writers) and attempted to isolate and describe those conditions I feel contributed to my learning and theirs. It is not possible simply to say, "this is what I did and this is the effect it had." This study became more and more of a challenge, because the harder I looked, the more I realized that everything I saw was organic. By "organic" I mean that it was difficult to perceive "parts" and to separate them from the whole. Reading is an organic process; the social relationships and interactions of my classroom were organic; and above all, my students were organic -- complex combinations of personalities, experiences, and backgrounds. Although I began this undertaking by looking at the impact of reader-response approaches, as I complete it, I detect that I have shifted to the nature of reading itself and, finally, to readers as individuals. As Frank Smith says, "one cannot understand reading without understanding readers" (1994, p.2.) This project is part of my personal intellectual journey from concerns about what and how to teach, to concerns about whom I am teaching in particular contexts.

Reader-response theory changed my teaching practice and my views of my students. When I stopped telling my students what the texts we read together in class were about and asked them to tell me how they interpreted their reading, I started to learn, really to learn, about reading and about teaching. At the same time, my students began to grow as readers. Reading ceased to be something I taught; it became something I helped students to do by creating the conditions for reading and by making reading the basis for many of our interactions. I became aware of how much my students already knew how to do, how much personal experience, interest, empathy, reflection, and analysis they brought to their reading. Hearing and reading their responses was like listening to them think aloud and gave me a window on their reading processes, their thinking processes, and their personalities.

Although reading is now viewed by many as an active, individual process of constructing meaning, the influence of previous models persists in the classroom among teachers who are not comfortable with the messiness of reader-response, which includes, for example, the need to evaluate a myriad of response patterns that emerge when students take charge of their reading. There are common features in a text that most readers perceive, for example, who did what and to whom, or, the colour of the main character's hair, and it is easier to assess "comprehension" with literal

recall of these features than with individual interpretations. It is also easier to "teach" one version of the text and to test to see who has absorbed it than to promote and evaluate individual responses.

Reader-response approaches alone did not explain my students' growth as readers and my changing perspective on teaching. During the past thirty years, the theory underlying reading and the teaching of reading (Goodman, 1965, 1996; Smith, 1994) has been radically revised. Although the impact of these changes is beginning to be felt in the classroom, I feel that these "new" views of reading are not widely understood by teachers, possibly because they have not been translated into a concrete and comprehensive teaching model, as process-writing was (e.g. Graves, 1983). However, understanding my struggling readers certainly increased my understanding of reading, by making many of the ephemeral elements of and influences on reading more concrete. The four cueing systems described by Goodman (1965, 1996) helped me better see all of the elements of the reading process and their recursive and overlapping features. By emphasizing meaning, rather than skills, I provided my students with the kind of reading experiences I perceived they needed. Teachers who take into account all of the factors that influence reading comprehension -- the background, experience, tastes, and interest of the reader; the nature of the text; and the context in which reading takes place -- are better able to help struggling readers than teachers who concentrate on one element of reading, like phonics, key vocabulary, or particular linguistic forms.

Most children, regardless of the approaches they are exposed to, become readers in elementary school -- yes, by osmosis!. In fairness, whole language advocates would argue that this is because children teach themselves to read in a language-rich, print-rich environment and require little explicit instruction of reading "skills." However, for those students who do not learn to read in elementary school, current understandings of reading are particularly important. Unfortunately, these students are usually perceived as deficient, both in much of the research literature and in the classroom, and their reading problems become centred on specific aspects of reading, such as word-recognition or sound-symbol correspondence. These perceived gaps in their learning are too often filled with phonics and flash card drills that, at best, deal only with a very small part of their reading problems and, at worst, deal with them outside a meaningful reading context, authentic engagement, and

experience with texts.

New understandings of the nature of thought and language in the research literature suggest that there are alternate ways of looking at literacy learning. Students come to school with a great deal of knowledge (Britton, 1970; Barnes, 1975), and if students are not given an opportunity to connect what goes on in school to what they already know and to what is happening in their lives outside school, then learning that is useful and important will not take place. Knowledge must be reinterpreted by learners in order to belong to them. Learning then is an individual process, and since not everyone learns in the same way, teachers must always consider students' personalities, experiences, backgrounds and interests and, of course, the context in which learning takes place. With so many influences complicating learning, especially literacy learning which is both the object and the medium of cognition, many teachers despair of finding their way through such a dense web of relationships to the best teaching approaches for the greatest number of their students. It is little wonder that many teachers still believe in the less complex notion that students learn what teachers teach; the origins of this common belief are grounded in positivism, which stresses the external, objective, verifiable nature of knowledge. Its opposite, naturalism, describes knowledge as internally constructed, subjective, and difficult to verify. But the paradox is that by coping with this kind of ambiguity -- by working with their individual subjectivities -- teachers will reach more of their students.

At the heart of this study is the thorough knowledge of my students that I painstakingly acquired in order to help them become more proficient readers. Understanding concepts in the research literature and trying new approaches in my classroom definitely contributed to this knowledge; the interaction of these two activities led me to change the kind of question I was asking myself about my teaching. I moved quite easily from asking myself **what** I should I teach, to **how can I help** this student to learn? But, I needed to go further and ask, **who is this student** I want to help? There is a big difference between the second and third questions, and as the case studies (Chapters Three to Six) demonstrate, in order to discover **who** I was teaching I had to focus on the real curriculum of my classroom, which was on social interactions and relationships.

My Educational and Teaching Background

My initial encounter with reader-response theory was in the first course I took in

the Masters of Education Program at McGill University. The course was given by Patrick Dias, and not only did he introduce me to Rosenblatt's (1938, 1978) transactional theory of literature but, also, to a way of taking the theory into practice through undirected small-group discussions. The need to produce a classroom-based project for the course forced me to overcome my uncertainty and reservations about the messiness of such an approach, especially since I was teaching a very lively and unpredictable grade-two class at the time. My early experiences were a mixture of frustration and elation, as I learned how to cope with the initial chaos of organizing and helping children to work cooperatively in small groups and how to appreciate the varied and often tangential responses of seven and eight year-olds. But, it was the start of my endless fascination with the different ways children make sense of texts.

I enrolled in the Masters program shortly after I returned to teaching from spending many years at home to raise my own children. In my absence, whole language had arrived in the schools of Québec, and I did not fully understand the pedagogical changes that were taking place around me. Although I had read the books that enthusiastic teachers I knew urged me to read (Graves, 1983; Atwell, 1987), my reading raised more questions than it answered; I hoped to find the answers by returning to university and I began a learning process which continues to this day. When my Masters was completed, I began this doctoral project, and as it nears completion, I am confident that the habits of mind that I have formed will keep me questioning my teaching, trying new approaches, and reading the professional literature for ideas.

Although my teaching jobs changed, my teaching approaches did not, whether I was teaching grade two, elementary resource classes, grade-seven special education classes, or "regular" English to grades eight and ten. I became aware that I was teaching reading and writing, and the same process, with adjustments to features such as the kind of text and level of performance, was appropriate in all of these situations. The year after I began using reader-response approaches in my grade-two class, I was transferred to another school where I became a resource teacher and worked with children who were having difficulty with reading and writing. In spite of their reading problems, I found that the children I worked with were able to respond to literature we read together. The following year, I was offered a job at a high school as a special education teacher to work with a small grade-seven class of thirteen students with

learning problems who were not considered ready for high school.

Nearly all of my students had repeated a year in elementary school and then, in accordance with the regulations of the Québec Ministry of Education, were "promoted" to high school. They were adolescents who, according to their school records, suffered from various degrees of dyslexia, attention deficit disorder, some physical problems, and, most of all, low self-esteem caused by failure in school. (Interestingly, the latter characteristic is never mentioned in students' files.) All of them had been tested by the school board's psychologist and most were found to be two or more years below grade level in reading and usually further behind in writing, according to the criteria that such testing is based upon. (Fiona, as you will see in Chapter Four, was an exception, as she entered my class already a reader.) With their parents' permission, they were placed in my small class (maximum 17 students) to receive more individual attention, particularly in reading and writing.

My intentions, however, were not to "drill and skill" my students, but to use the best of contemporary language theory to create a user-friendly context for engaging my students in reading and writing. As a former elementary teacher with no training in special education, that was, in fact, the only way I knew how to teach. I set aside the workbooks, flash cards, and simplified reading material and replaced them with response logs, writing portfolios, and "real" books – unabridged novels, short stories, and poems.

While I may sound as if I was totally sure of my students' needs and their abilities, my first lesson in my new job was to learn to live with uncertainty. There were numerous occasions when I was overcome with doubt about the approach I was taking and whether I was preparing them for life in general and for life in the rest of the high school in particular. The messages I received indirectly were that I was supposed to fix them up, to repair the holes in my students' knowledge, to help them fit into their future teachers' classes. At the same time, there was an implicit understanding that I would do only what I could do, since these students were unlikely "to make it" in high school. I feared I was expected to "drill and skill" them, instead of run a "holistic" classroom that was radically different from any other in the school. There was also the potential problem that even if my students could function in the safe haven I created for them in my classroom, the time inevitably would come when they would have to move on to different environments where they might not be given credit for the progress they

had made and where many of them would resume their identities as non-readers and non-writers. Nevertheless, I decided to trust my decision that the only “special” treatment they needed was to be recognized for what they could do and to be treated like everyone else -- like readers and writers.

School: Cure or Cause of Learning Problems?

As things turned out, both my fears and my faith were justified. If school is a complex matrix of socio-cultural and political relationships and interactions, then these, in effect, form its structures and much of its curriculum. Furthermore, school is a social construction with its own routines, rules, and values that most students accept, but which can cause some students to have difficulty learning and others to fail. Researchers (Taylor, 1991; Rhodes and Dudley-Marling, 1996) have documented how particular school contexts can create and reinforce learning disabilities. At the root of most learning problems is a profound mismatch between the child and the institution of school. Identifying the source and true nature of the incompatibility is not easy because each mismatch is unique.

One universal feature of school is the “deficit” view of students and of learning. The transmit-test-evaluate model of instruction is based on determining what students do not know instead of what they do know. Teachers whose vision is clouded by poor spelling, non-fluent oral reading, and students’ views of texts that are inconsistent with theirs are unable to see how much their students are doing. This “red-pencil” mentality is a product of deficit thinking and a hindrance to the spread of current understandings of reading and writing and, more importantly, has a profoundly detrimental influence on students. Labelling and “drill-and-skill” remediation are harmful deficit practices. The four students in this study are living proof of the damage to their self-esteem and to their motivation that such practices caused throughout their unsuccessful elementary school careers. All of them to varying degrees were haunted by their pasts and carried a deficit view of themselves into high school and may continue to do so.

In order to help my reluctant readers, I had to reverse my own deficit view of them. This was more than a matter of overcoming my initial shock at their poor spelling and penmanship, their genuine terror of being asked to read aloud, and their constant assurances that they “sucked” at reading and writing. Indeed, eventually I became so adept at recognising their strengths that I found it quite jolting to realise that other teachers, including a sympathetic special-education consultant, could not see

them as I did. Increasingly, I became their advocate and dealt with their other teachers, discussing their needs, their quirks, and their accomplishments; sometimes, I even resorted to showing their other teachers samples of their work done in my class and negotiated assignments and deadlines in other subjects. I had to urge these teachers to judge my students' work on the content, not the spelling. It was also hard work to convince these teachers that the inability to read aloud fluently had little to do with reading comprehension. Almost always, I had to resist the temptation to adopt a deficit view of some of my colleagues.

It might seem ridiculously obvious that building on students' achievements is a sound basis for any subject in the curriculum and one that should not require such a concentrated effort. But, alas, there are many ideas prevalent among teachers specifically (and throughout society generally) that subtly undermine and actively work against emphasizing students' strengths. These "common sense notions" about teaching are described by Mayher (1990) as "the unanalysed (and often unconscious) mental explanation of the way things work in the world" (p.3). These include many persistent unexamined assumptions about the nature of teaching that continue to support the deficit view of teaching and learning; for example, 1) knowledge consists of external truths that teachers must transmit to students; 2) knowledge is a set of sequential skills; 3) students are empty vessels that must be filled by the teacher; 4) students learn what teachers teach; and 5) all children learn in the same way. Mayher (1990) points out that such ideas are difficult to resist because they are "socially sanctioned," part of our culture's "reality," and "internalised" by most of us. Teachers who are guided by these precepts are unlikely to see how much struggling readers can do and even more unlikely to build on their strengths, and both are crucial factors in helping them. Only by defining and examining the "common sense" beliefs that shape our thinking and thus influence our actions can we become aware of the impact they have on our students.

By adopting a pedagogical stance that is "credit" rather than "deficit" oriented, I found it easier to recognise and to build upon what my students could do in order to help them grow as readers. With this principle as a general framework for teaching, specific details and short-term goals of my teaching evolved. I do not wish to imply that growth in reading is all about a feel-good factor and a build-self-esteem classroom; these factors are necessary, but not sufficient conditions for growth in reading.

Working out the details of how to approach my struggling readers and setting short-term teaching-goals, for me, involved integrating ideas from the research literature and making them personally meaningful, observing and talking to my students, and also, telling their stories.

It is through interpreting and reinterpreting my interactions with them and their interactions with each other that the fabric of this narrative was woven. My students' stories track the sense they made of the curriculum we created together and enabled me to to understand and explain their growth as readers. Although it was not my original goal, this account can be considered a hard test of both reading and reader-response theories; Jeff's, Fiona's, Jon's, and Matt's successes are documented and were made possible by using these theoretical foundations for my reader-based pedagogy. If these struggling readers could make progress with these approaches, then the ramifications for mainstream literacy practice are evident; all students can benefit from a reader-centred curriculum.

A Metaphor for Teaching Struggling Readers

It seems appropriate to compare teaching struggling readers to chasing fireflies. Suddenly, without warning, a bright glow appears in the darkness, but tracking its path and knowing exactly where the next spark will appear is almost impossible. Likewise, a close look is hard to achieve. I remember as a child and later, as an adult with my own children, trying, but never succeeding, to catch a firefly to see where the light came from. In fact, we never saw the firefly itself, only its glow. But, when conditions were right on warm summer evenings in the woods, we knew that we would see the fireflies; we had to know where to look for the glimmer, concentrate on the effect the light creates, and have faith that it would reappear.

Like chasing fireflies, analyzing reading is elusive and sometimes frustrating since it mostly takes place in the dark. It is impossible to observe completely and can be apprehended only partially and indirectly through its artifacts – what readers say and write about their reading. Reactions to reading are always slightly removed from the act of reading and influenced by the situation and context in which reading occurs. Even reading aloud provides little indication of how a reader makes sense of a text. The complexity of the act of reading cannot be stressed enough; it involves the simultaneous activation and coordination of many separate elements; it is difficult to isolate them from the dynamic to which they contribute, and to do so risks losing some

of the vital features of a student's reading process. In other words, the sum of reading is much greater than its parts. This kind of "thinking" about reading led me to more effective and authentic "doing" in my classroom.

Changing Practice Means Changing Thinking

To transform my teaching, I had to transform my thinking about struggling readers and about reading. This process of change required that I define my own problems, seek new ideas from other sources, analyse and select from that new information, try new approaches in my classroom, and ultimately create my own knowledge to fit my particular circumstances. Allowing my students to own their reading first became a problem for me when I took a course in responding to literature. It was there that I encountered the reading theories of Louise Rosenblatt (1938; 1978) and the teaching model of Patrick Dias (1996) through which many of her ideas can become practice. Taking a course was the ideal situation in which to consider new teaching approaches. As part of a group of professionals struggling with new ideas, I had the time, incentive, and opportunity to read, reflect, discuss, experiment, share, and most importantly, to give and receive support.

It was not a matter simply of following someone else's guidelines or of implementing a set of prescribed activities, but rather of adopting and adapting those ideas most relevant to my situation. It is not my intention here to describe the gradual, messy, introspective process of creating my own curriculum by making new ideas my own. I wish to argue for the need to base teaching on theory that is personally meaningful as well as, on classroom successes and observations. Unfortunately, practice does not have to include consciousness of theory, but I have found that understanding and thinking about what I do enables me to evaluate my effectiveness and to break free of the restrictions of unsuitable paradigms. This is an opportune moment to speak briefly from my soap box. An essential part of all professionalism is to keep abreast of current thinking in a field. Professionals are free to accept or reject ideas, but it is vital that they make their own informed choices, or others will do it for them. In my experience, teachers have difficulty thinking of themselves as professionals and have to swim against a strong current to do so. In fact, they do not realise how much power they do have because ultimately, they are the ones who decide what is going to happen in their classrooms. A knowledge of theoretical developments in education will result in better decisions and contribute to teachers'

self-images as intellectuals and professionals.

In my case, the ideas on which I have chosen to base my teaching have become so completely blended with what I do in the classroom that it is impossible to discuss them out of that context. Separating theory from practice is like cutting a plant from its roots; the plant wilts and becomes lifeless. For me, theory and practice are mutually dependent. While my pedagogy gives vitality to textbook ideas, I am also sustained and nourished by my reading, particularly on those inevitable occasions when things go badly in class or when stalked by self-doubt or by the doubts of others. I must explain that self-doubt and I are regular companions; I feel it is important to challenge my theoretical position by asking myself constantly if my students are continuing to develop as readers and writers. Doctrinaire adherence to any idea, theoretical or practical, is unwise and can be prevented by assessing regularly its effects on students' learning. There is, thus, a built-in system of checks and balances that keeps the blend of theory and practice in a state of flux. In the next chapter, whenever possible, I have placed the theoretical discussion in the context of my classroom, for example, by providing a transcribed excerpt of my students' small-group discussions and references to specific case studies.

What Lies Ahead

Chapter One is a selective review of current research on reading; I have tried to make clear and direct connections between my experiences and my reading of the research literature. For example, when I define and describe what is meant by reader-response theory, I show its impact on my students through an excerpt of their small-group discussions. I deliberately move back and forth between my classroom and discussions of the relevant research literature.

Because reader-response theory presupposes the ability to read and because my students all had difficulty with reading, I discuss broader descriptions of the nature of reading. Such a discussion inevitably leads to consideration of the phonics - whole language debate, especially since the issue of decoding print is relevant to my students' problems. Also, I include how my reading influenced the way I see Jon, Jeff, Fiona, and Matt, and point out parallels between my experience and those of other researchers. Finally, I argue that an understanding of reading and readers is the most important pedagogical approach. Specifically, avoiding a deficit view of teaching and learning is a good starting point.

Chapter Two is a description of the context in which this study took place -- the curriculum, the classroom, the school, the community, and the time frame. I discuss the ways in which I collected and analysed information, observations, and work-samples of my students and the sometimes synchronised and sometimes conflicting roles of teacher-researcher.

The next four chapters are devoted to the case studies; each reveals a different aspect of what it is to be a reader. Chapter Three is devoted to Jeffrey, for whom progress in reading was a matter of identity; until he felt that he was part of the reading community of the classroom, he did not become a reader. Fiona is the subject of Chapter Four; although she was a literary reader, she was unable to extend her reading to other contexts, particularly in content subjects like math and geography. Chapter Five tells the story of Jon's struggle with decoding text and his inability to see himself as a reader. In Chapter Six, Matt demonstrates the important role of interest in overcoming learning problems and becoming a passionate reader. These four students displayed four distinct learning styles and strengths which underline the individual positioning of readers; however, they also shared many common features. While these accounts do not include pedagogical recipes for helping other students, their stories do offer insights into the nature of reading and the conditions which foster its development.

Chapter Seven is a summary of how this study fits into the conversation about reading and how each case study influenced my conception of reading. I have tried to make invisible ideas and influences visible. I have included an epilogue that describes what happened to the four students in this study and to me after they left my class. As for what is of significance to others, I can only express my own views and then, in accordance with reader-response theory, release control of my text. The readers of this work will evoke their own poems and carry away what they find of value, no matter what my intentions.

Chapter One

Teaching Reading Is Losing Control

I believe that this study is an account of my personal intellectual journey in understanding reading; therefore, I assume that it is fair that a review of the research literature must be one of the ports-of-call at which I linger most. This metaphor also implies a linear quality to my professional growth, and over the long term there has been (and will continue to be) a gradual but steady movement forward; but the truth is that I did not take the most direct route from where I was to where I am. There was lots of to-and-froing and lots of resting in the same place. In fact, I see the research literature as a place where I made a series of stops, at different times and for different reasons. Most importantly, rather than temporary destinations, I see my sojourns with the ideas of others as airports at which I took connecting flights, sometimes to new and, sometimes, to familiar places. My choice of material from the research literature is personal -- books and articles that were (and still are) relevant to my needs. Frequently, one source led me to a new one or even back to an idea I had missed in a book I thought I knew. Often, I reread those whose work I have found to be most meaningful in order to -- at the risk of mixing metaphors -- recharge my battery, and it is the books of those whose company I like to keep that I find the most difficult to lend! My journey through the research literature is best described as a focussed meandering.

Reading About Reading

My interest in reading and writing has been life-long and passionate, but I didn't read extensively about literacy until I realized that I had fallen behind and did not understand the whole-language philosophy I encountered when I returned to teaching after a ten-year break. This habit of reading professional books became more deeply entrenched when I worked on my Masters degree, and I think it is safe to say that it is now a permanent part of me. I am always on the look-out for new ideas, practical and theoretical, and new slants on familiar problems and issues. It is in this context -- the kind of reader that I am -- that I read the research literature.

The effect that my reading has on me is more difficult to describe. There are particular books that have made me drop what I was doing and change my program. Others have helped me fine-tune what I was doing, while still others have provided me with reassurance, with those mental "uh-huh's" that tell me I am on the right track and

not travelling alone. From time to time, I find challenges to what I am doing in the professional literature that make me stop and reevaluate everything – all my past reading and all my classroom approaches. This kind of questioning keeps my thinking strong, fresh, and (I hope) adaptable. I want to be specific not only about what ideas in the research literature have influenced me, but also what effect they have had on what I do as a teacher. Therefore, I have laced my review of the research literature with specific examples of my students' efforts and my classroom practice. In doing so, my aim is to bring theory and practice together so that one can illuminate the other, rather than to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between the two. I hope that this personal view of the research literature juxtaposed with the events of my classroom will be more meaningful to other teachers, particularly to those who doubt the relevance of ideas developed outside the classroom. This blend of theory and practice is an essential element of the professionalism of teachers.

In this chapter, I shall begin at my beginning with a discussion of the transactional theory of literature, as described by Louise Rosenblatt, which helped me to reshape profoundly my approach to reading. A brief account follows of the ideas of Vygotsky and Bakhtin about the influence of social and cultural contexts on language and on learning language; their work overlaps considerably with reader-response theory and also inspired some specific strategies in my classroom. Since I was working with students who struggled to read, and reader-response theory presupposes the ability to read, I looked at reading theory, specifically the work of Kenneth Goodman and Frank Smith, in an effort to explain the success of reader-response approaches with weak readers. The work of Goodman and Smith inevitably led me to consider the arguments on both sides of the "phonics-whole language debate," a task I approached with some apprehension, since I had avoided the use of a systematic phonics program with my weak readers, including those with severe decoding problems. Since the present is always rooted in the past, a brief overview of the phonics-whole language debate provides some insights as to how we got where we are in reading and shows the difficulty of accommodating theoretical change. Another concern that developed from my reading of the phonics debate was the implicit argument for the need for special-instruction models for struggling readers. Fortunately, I found myself in good company in the research literature with others who dispute the notion of "special" programs. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how

many "learning problems" are caused by the structure of school. Since school is a culture with its own practices and values, and teaching is a social activity, finding guidelines for understanding and negotiating this dense matrix of human relationships is a challenge. My reading provided me with support for a useful idea -- avoidance of a deficit view of students and teaching -- which helped me get to the heart of my students' problems in my school.

What is Reader-Response?

The impact of reader-response theory on teaching has been described as "democratising," and "innovative" (McCormick, 1994, p. 38) and also as the "most fruitful idea available" (Mayher, 1990, p.153) to English teachers. To these, I would add "liberating," liberating for both my students and me. No longer am I required to dispense to my students one correct interpretation of a text and, in effect, to do their reading for them. It is exhilarating and satisfying to watch them scour texts for meaning, notice features that I had not, and construct and justify endlessly varied opinions. Certainly, my students' enthusiasm for making their own sense of texts and their growth as readers have carried me forward and inspired me to find ways to encourage truly personal responses to their reading.

The Transactional Theory of Literature

The transactional theory of literature is described in two books by Louise Rosenblatt -- *Literature as Exploration* (1938) and *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (1978) -- and is one of the truest descriptions of reading that I have encountered. Her books have guided me profoundly and have enabled me to alter my beliefs about reading and to place the reader at the centre of my teaching. I return to them again and again, always finding some "new" detail to rekindle my enthusiasm.

The transactional theory privileges the role of the reader over those of the text and of the author. Instead of passive recipients of the information stored in a text, readers are seen as active meaning-makers, interpreting the words on the page in unique ways. The text does not carry a universally recognized meaning that is imprinted on the mind of the reader; instead, a combination of the author's text and the reader's personality, experiences, background, and interests produces an interpretation that is unique. The response is, therefore, representative of both the reader and the text. This process is described by Karolides (1999).

Expectations of the text are projected; later features -- words, events, or

information -- may solidify these impressions or may bring about a revision. Clues of context are perceived and integrated. The reader constructs a constantly adjusted scaffold of understandings attempting to account for the text's many features. A second reading, if there is one, can reveal additional or revised nuances. Depending on the reader's involvement and reading maturity, as well as the text itself, the reading process is reflective and demanding. The reading is not linear; comparable to the writing process, it is recursive, a backward and forward exploration of what is being evoked in relation to the text. (p. 7)

Individual readers do not read the same text in exactly the same way; their interpretations are moving pictures that shift back and forth like waves on a beach, as their own perspectives wash up against the features of the text.

Although interpretations are personal and vary from one reader to another, the text is the framework that guides and restrains the activities of the reader. Rosenblatt compares it to a blueprint that provides only general specifications and leaves the choice of the specific details to the reader; thus, the text has both "openness" and "constraint" (Rosenblatt, 1978.) Another researcher's description of the role of the text in reading is apt at this point; Wertsch (1998, p.115) calls the text a "thinking device" that is both "univocal" and "dialogic." While reading is context-dependent and a text can stimulate individually-created, new meanings, it is possible for many people to construct the same or similar meaning from a text because there are both "public" and "private" aspects of language (Rosenblatt, 1999, p.165). The attention of readers, according to Rosenblatt, is selective and shifts between the public (shared) and private (personal associations) meanings of language. Recognition of the dual nature of the text is a strength of the transactional theory of literature and, in fact, makes the individual and universal aspects of reading possible. The multiple interpretations of a text that necessarily result from this view of reading should be celebrated and valued as a stimulus for personal engagement with texts, lively discussions, and critical thinking.

Recognizing and validating individual responses in classrooms is a challenge as teachers must encourage responses that are truly personal and at the same time discourage the idea that "anything goes." The stance of the teacher is crucial to developing reader-oriented interpretations of a text. Students need opportunities to

explore and reflect on the text, to revise responses, and to share, to appreciate, and to be influenced by multiple views of the text. Most importantly, teachers need to abandon the notion that one correct reading of any text exists, even in the mind of the author, who as Rosenblatt (1978) points out, loses control of the text as soon as a reader begins to read it. The intended meaning of the author, a major preoccupation of literary critics and high-school teachers, is of secondary importance to the activities of the reader. Rosenblatt (1978, p. ix) describes the text as "simply paper and ink, once it has left the author's hands, until a reader evokes from it a literary work."

Although the crucial role of talk in learning has been well-documented in the research literature (Britton, 1970; Barnes, 1975) for some time, it remains much neglected in school, perhaps because it is difficult to control both its noise levels and its content. I struggled with these problems, and eventually, learned to overcome my fears of being perceived as a "loosey-goosey" teacher who runs a noisy classroom. The observable benefits of giving my students more opportunities to talk in class, particularly about their reading, encouraged me to find ways to tolerate the din and messiness of small-group discussions.

As Dias (1996) demonstrates, undirected small-group discussions are an effective way to develop independent responses to literature. Discussion allows students to explore and to reflect on their own ideas by checking them against the text and the views of their peers; they are then in a position to modify their thoughts and to support the responding process of others. Small groups also provide a shelter for more reserved students. Above all, small-group work permits students to solve their own problems instead of looking to the teacher for an interpretation, and enables students to trust their own ability to make sense of a text through reflection on their own reading. In addition, discussions of reading provide teachers with valuable opportunities to observe their students construct identities and profiles as readers.

Transactional Theory in My Classroom

It is more meaningful to show as well as tell what reader-response is, and the following excerpt from an audio-taped discussion of the poem, "The Warrior of Winter," by Ted Hughes (see Appendix C) allows my students to speak for themselves. It is representative of what can happen when students are in charge of their learning and helps to explain why I have made this approach to reading an integral part of my teaching. This discussion took place among members of my grade-seven class, and

Jeffrey and Matt, two of the participants in this group, are also subjects of the case studies presented in Chapters Three and Six, respectively.

- Jeffrey: I think this poem's about -- like, uh -- it's winter. No! It's fall and the winter warrior is going over -- like rocks and fields, covering up the sacks and the wind's blowing so hard against the houses, crushing into it.
- Pierre: I think something like you. It's like the war against Russia, 'cause Russia's got lots of plains and ditches -- it's like more open air. It might be colder. They have a lot of winter.
- Jeffrey: Russia is winter!
- Matt: More northern parts.
- Monique: I think it's about winter and he doesn't like winter and he thinks it's his enemy. That's why he's sad about it.
- Matt: I think it's about World War One because there's trenches and quagmire and stuff --
- Jeffrey: And all the rotten cloth bags!
- Matt: Yeah, and he talks about being thrown up against houses and ditches and rotten sacks -- like bodies and ripped clothes.
- Jeffrey: And quag!
- Matt: Yeah! That's what I already said. And enemies and leafless trees because they got blown off. Trampled fields with bomb holes in them and stuff like that. And there's water in the ditches and he's drowning because he's been shot. And the star's, like, looking at him, and he's looking back and saying, "Oh God, help me!"
- Jeffrey: I think the author wrote this 'cause it's like just turning fall and he looked out his window and the ground's just covered in frost and -- uh -- trampled grass 'cause it's just been cut. And it looks like bombs all over the land.
- Pierre: I'm kind of with you now, Jeffrey. Uh, I'm not so sure the author went to Russia. He might have seen the stars -- I don't think he likes winter.
- Monique: I think he wrote this 'cause he likes fall -- the geese and all that. I think he likes winter. I see a warrior -- that word has strength, and uh -- courage -- positive energy.

Matt: I think he's miserable and grumpy because of the way the poem is written. You know, he doesn't have a lot of happy thoughts, and so I guess he could've written it 'cause his father was in the war and injured, and he's not very happy and stuff...and stuff! (laughing).

I want to interrupt here to point out several features of the discussion so far. Clearly, this is a dynamic, reflective, individual, and collective process of making sense of reading. These students have taken responsibility for interpreting the poem both as individuals and as members of the group. Jeffrey and Monique think it is about winter while Matt and Pierre think it is about war. These differences force them to examine their responses and try to understand and explain how they formed their opinions, and during this process they become aware of specific words and images in the poem that stimulated their reactions; for example, Matt lists the words, "trenches," "quagmire," "leafless trees," and "ditches," that suggested the theme of war to him. Actually, as the case study in Chapter Seven shows, war was a major preoccupation of Matt's, and his choice of theme is entirely consistent with his personal background, experience, and interests. At the same time, they are prepared to consider and even support contrary views from other members of the group; for example, Jeffrey adds the word "quag" to Matt's list as if to say he understands how he formed his opinion. Earlier, Jeffrey and Matt add supporting statements to Pierre's view that this poem is about the war with Russia. The atmosphere of respect and tolerance in the group draws Monique, an extremely shy and reserved student, back into the discussion to ask a question.

After listening to the others, Pierre reconsiders his interpretation and says he is beginning to agree with Jeffrey, while Matt modifies his position by shifting his focus to the negative atmosphere he detects in the poem but retains a connection to his theme of war. Clearly, they are all prepared to take risks and to explore this poem. As they continue their discussion, they become aware of the important contribution that separate elements of the poem make to the whole interpretation when they reread the poem and focus on one troublesome line that did not quite fit their views.

Pierre: Is it tear (*tier*) like in tear gas?

Matt: Yeah! There's a weird thing here. Is it tear (*tier*)? We don't know what it is. Is it tear (*tier*) or is it tear (*tare*)? It's spelled the same

way. We don't know what he means. Is he crying or is it a torn sun? Look, it says "he rejoiced a tear (*tier*) in the sun." Or is it "He rejoiced a tear (*tare*) in the sun?"

Jeffrey: I think it's tear (*tare*). He's saying --

Matt: I ripped the sun.

Jeffrey: Yeah! I mean, it's like the -- what's the sun doing? He's following him. And what's the sun do to winter?

Matt: It melts him.

Jeffrey: Yeah! So, he's his enemy. He wants to tear (*tare*) him.

Matt: Yeah...

Jeffrey: That's why he says the star is his enemy.

Pierre: He wants it to snow -- to stay -- the snow to stay.

Jeffrey: What do you think, Monique? What's your opinion of this tear/tear thing?

Monique: Why would he tear (*tier*) the sun?

Matt: A tear (*tier*) for the sun.

Jeffrey: Why would you tear (*tier*) the sun? Right!

Pierre: Tear (*tare*)!

Matt: No -- here -- read this! "But he rejoiced a tear (*tier*) In the sun, not for the sun.

Pierre: Maybe that's why it snows! The snow falling are the tears (*tiers*).

Matt: This is complicated!

Unable to solve this problem, they presented it to the whole class when all the groups shared the highlights of their discussions and asked for suggestions as illustrated in the following excerpt. Wrestling with their different impressions of the theme of the poem forced all four readers to go more deeply into the poem. While trying to resolve their differences, they showed an awareness of language, how it works and how it affected their interpretations. As a result, they knew how they were reading the poem and why it was possible to read it in different ways.

Could I have engineered such a discussion by posing questions or setting tasks for them? I do not think so. Even if I were lucky enough to devise questions and comments that raised these same issues with them, they would not have the same significance to them because they would be my questions, not theirs. Such

passionate involvement with reading can only take place when students are free to set and pursue their own agendas. Making sense of a text is an individual process of discovery, but also a collective process of making meaning. The opportunity to talk among themselves was essential to my students' experience of the poem; the dynamic of the group allowed its members to test their own ideas, find reasons in the text for their views, revise misconceptions, adjust or confirm their own ideas in the light of those of the others -- in other words, to go on an interpretive journey.

It is not enough, however, to let them talk; in order to experience deep pleasure in reading and in literature, students must be allowed to trust their own instincts and ideas. I have mentioned the vital role the stance of the teacher plays in students' responding processes. In addition to giving up both the notion of a "correct" interpretation and the need to direct, rather than encourage, the responding process, teachers must also be able to see value in the varied and sometimes idiosyncratic reactions students have to texts.

I once showed this transcript to another teacher whose reactions were very different from mine. "But, they missed the metaphor completely!" she said. When I pointed out that Jeffrey and Monique had noticed it, she still wasn't satisfied because they had not stated it explicitly. She felt that they should use the term in order to prove that they knew that winter was being compared to a warrior. I disagreed. Understanding the concept is a necessary prerequisite to acquiring new vocabulary. During the class discussion when ideas and problems that arose in the small-groups were shared, the term metaphor was explained. But, the reaction of my colleague was all too familiar. Her focus on what my students *didn't* do prevented her from seeing how much they *did* do. It also prevented her from seeing their discussion as part of the valuable and vital process of developing competence and confidence in reading. Focussing on "knowing" rather than "knowledge" (Wells, 1998), enables teachers to avoid this kind of deficit thinking that can lead to deficit pedagogy, which inevitably contributes to students' deficit views of themselves.

The Stance of the Reader

Readers move along a continuum between public and private meanings of language while constructing individual interpretations of texts. According to Rosenblatt, the reader also moves along another continuum between two stances (Rosenblatt, 1978). The "aesthetic" stance is the reader's "lived-through experience of

the text" in which s/he concentrates on the emotions aroused and observations made while reading. The "efferent" stance, on the other hand, is adopted when the reader wishes to acquire some information from the text and to carry it away. The aesthetic stance is associated mainly with literary texts, while the efferent stance is associated primarily with information-texts.

These types of reading, however, are not so easily separated; readers slip from one to the other according to their purposes for reading. It is possible to read either kind of text from either perspective; for example, a scientist reading a scientific journal efferently, or for information, may also be struck by the beauty of an argument and read it aesthetically. Similarly, a literary text can be read efferently if the reader takes note of a particular approach a character in a novel uses to solve a problem that seems relevant to his/her own life.

According to Rosenblatt, teaching based on the close textual analysis of New Criticism caused literary texts to be read in the same manner as information-texts. She points out that in school, students rarely read literature "aesthetically." Instead, students were, and still are, required to search a literary text for information, and thus read "efferently," to satisfy the demands of comprehension exercises. By distinguishing these two kinds of reading, she introduced the notion that students should be allowed to experience a text on their own terms, rather than be guided toward the teacher's understanding of a text. When teachers promote their students' unique experiences of a text, instead of a specific agenda of their own, they create an opportunity not only for multiple ways of responding, but also for reading experiences that are genuinely aesthetic.

Reading is a dynamic, non-linear activity influenced by the context in which the reading occurs. What is the context of reading? *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* offers one definition of context as "the parts that precede or follow a passage and fix its meaning." Although this definition is certainly an indication that in *(the context of !)* reader-response theory, a slightly different meaning has evolved, and with some substitution, it does provide guidance. What are those "parts that precede or follow" reading that "fix its meaning?" They are all the conditions of reading, most residing in the reader, some in the text, and some in the other people present at the reading event. Readers bring aspects of their total selves -- background, experience, interests, culture, personality, prior knowledge, purposes, and intentions -- to bear on every

reading event in their lives. The text stimulates the reader's quest for meaning, evoking in him/her personal events and associations, as well as attention to general connotations and significance. As for the reading situation, an easily understood sense of this aspect of context is the difference between reading a novel in a hammock in the backyard for pleasure and reading the same the same novel in class for assessment.

Support From Other Classrooms

To return, for a moment, to my students' discussion of "The Warrior of Winter." Rosenblatt's (1978) description of the relationship between the reader and the text was amply illustrated by all four readers who took part in the previous discussion; they formed their own ideas and then checked them against each others' interpretations and then against this text. These and many other benefits of reader-response pedagogy are also reported in other studies in the research literature; for example, other researchers, too, have noted that although their students' reactions are personal and individual, they are all rooted in the text (Purves, 1985; Probst, 1981). Response-centred activities give students ownership of their reading and their responses (Anzul, 1993; Freedman, 1993).

Small-group discussion, such as the one in the preceding transcript, is becoming a widely recognised way to encourage students to form and explore their own interpretations of a text. When the onus for constructing their own meaning is on students, they must consider and shape their thoughts, find the words to express them, and explain their views clearly to others who have different opinions. Small groups make different demands of students than individual assignments or whole-class discussions (Barnes, 1976; Daniels, 1994; Dias, 1996). Students grow to expect and support multiple interpretations of a text through response-based discussions (Dias, 1996; Samway, Whang, Gade, Gamil, Lubandina, and Phommachanh, 1991; Yocum, 1993), and are more likely to revise their own first impressions in the light of others' interpretations. The depth and thoughtfulness of students' responses improves with experience (Anzul, 1993; Borders and Naylor, 1993; Galda, 1993; Raphael and McMahon, 1994; Yocum, 1993) resulting in richer and more critical understanding. Much of this development is attributed to the active role readers must play in response-based activities.

Students' self-images and confidence also improve as many readers,

particularly reluctant readers, learn to trust their ability to make sense of a text (Anzul, 1993; Gilles, 1993; Samway *et al*, 1991). Students become accustomed to forming, expressing, valuing, and justifying their own opinions and, thus, become aware of their development as readers (Daniels, 1994; Samway *et al*, 1991). Furthermore, students are able to analyze aspects of their own reading processes (Anzul, 1993; Gilles, 1993; Yocum, 1993). Because they learn to listen to others, to explain their points of view, and to reread the text when in doubt, students become more conscious of the reading strategies they employ (Raphael and McMahon, 1994; Gilles, 1993.)

Reader-response based activities can also promote an understanding of the features of literary texts without explicit instruction (Borders and Naylor, 1993; Short, 1993). Gilles (1993) and Galda (1993) noticed that students in reader-response-based programs discovered that separate elements (such as, words, images, character development) of a text interacted to produce a larger effect, and students also made a connection between their reactions to the text and the way it was written. For example, during the discussion of "The Warrior of Winter," all four readers found that the meaning of the poem seemed to be determined by the interpretation of one particular line.

This brief and selective survey of studies on the impact of reader-response-based pedagogy indicates that the benefits of such approaches are many and varied and are equally relevant to learning-disabled and mainstream students (Anzul, 1993; Raphael and McMahon, 1994). Certainly, my experience confirms that reluctant readers make considerable progress in a reader-centred program, but other researchers are even more specific and report quantitative progress. Students in reader-response programs improved their reading scores on standardised tests (Nystrand and Gamoran, 1991; Swift, 1993) and did as well as students who received more explicit instruction about reading (Raphael and McMahon, 1994). Like one of Nancie Atwell's (1987) students who moved eighteen percentiles on a standardised test after a year in a reader-based program, Jeffrey, a student of mine (see Chapter Four), increased his reading age from grade two to grade six on a similar test after two years in my class. However, like Atwell, I consider that kind of indicator less important than my students' gains as readers measured by the way they talk, draw and write about their reading. It is through their words and their work samples that I describe them as readers in the case studies (Chapters Three to Six).

Theoretical and Practical Concerns About the Transactional Theory

No theoretical position is without its critics; these are necessary to maintain the vigour of any idea. Certainly it was good for my intellectual health to reflect on these challenges to my theoretical positions. In spite of the many positive reports on the impact of reader-response theory in classrooms described above, some researchers have concerns about aspects of the transactional theory of literature. Specifically, these are problems about the validity of the personal response, the influence of the text, and the development of critical reading. I believe that solutions to these problems can be found in both the research literature and the classroom.

The Validity of Personal Responses

The validity of individual interpretations of reading, which is the heart of the transactional theory of literature, is reinforced by the impossibility of there being a single, correct version of a text, even one based on the personal, cultural, and historical meanings of the author. Insistence on the total removal of the author from the interpretation of a text is another criticism of this approach to reading; however, that is based on a misunderstanding of the transactional theory of literature. In the classroom, it is more a matter of **how** and **when** details of an author's life are introduced than whether they are introduced at all; for example, such information can be included at appropriate opportunities during discussions, rather than before students start to read a text. I learned this lesson myself the hard way; whenever I inadvertently mentioned some biographical details about the author, **before** my students' discussion instead of **during** or **after**, almost without exception, they built their responses on those ideas. I needed reminders like that of the powerful role a teacher can play; clearly, my students were ready to accept any clue to a text from me.

To return to the supremacy of the author's meaning: it is unlikely that unless an author is living and states clearly how his/her works should be interpreted, even the most expert interpretations are likely to be, at best, an approximation of the author's meaning. One researcher points out that, according to writing theory, a writer's intentions shift and develop as a text is composed and new meanings are constantly evolving with and without the awareness of the author (Karolides, 1999.) With no right answers or appeals to the author's intentions, does this mean that all personal responses, no matter how superficial, are acceptable? As Rosenblatt (1999) points out, "either/or" thinking clouds this issue.

Although there isn't a single correct interpretation of any text, that doesn't necessarily rule out responsible reading. We can consider some readings better or poorer than others . . . The interpretation that takes into account more of the text would have more weight than one that ignores parts of the text -- such as an interpretation of a sentence that ignored an important word . . . I would not accept an interpretation or parts of an interpretation for which no basis can be found in the text. (p. 163)

The Influence of the Text

At first glance, Rosenblatt's statement seems to suggest that the the influence of the text is more important than the activities of the reader. This, of course, would remove the reader from the centre of the transactional theory of literature. Maintaining the reader's privileged position becomes a matter of classroom practice. While encouraging and respecting individual responses, it is possible to nudge readers towards deeper interpretations by examining the reasons for their views, by searching the text for the word or phrase that stimulated their response, by considering the interpretations of their peers, and by trying to relate to the ideas, characters, and situations in their reading. Most importantly, students should see their responses as works-in-progress and be open to revising their ideas in the light of rereading, further reading, and/or class discussions. But, this is only possible if teachers consider making sense of a text an on-going, unfinished activity and create a classroom that supports this kind of tentativeness and self-clarification.

The role of the text is considered problematical in another aspect of the transactional theory of literature, specifically, the distinction between aesthetic and efferent reading. If the reader's stances are determined by the text, which in part they are, then the transactional theory appears to be applicable only to literature: indeed, Rosenblatt calls it the transactional theory of *literature*. One researcher (McCormick, 1994) suggests that Rosenblatt implies that content texts have an objective quality that is not adequately accommodated in her theory, which stresses the subjectivity of the reader and raises the question, does the transactional theory only describes literary reading? If so, should teachers only support personal responses to literary texts? This criticism sees the aesthetic and efferent stances as embedded more in the text rather than in the reader. Certainly, the text influences the transaction with the reader, but the activities of the reader are more important. It is possible to read any kind of text both

aesthetically and efferently, and, in fact, one of my students, Fiona (see Chapter Four), demonstrates this clearly. Again, this problem can be addressed in the classroom by making students aware of these two stances and how they relate to their purposes for reading. By letting them in on the “secret” of their shifting perspectives, I have found that some readers become more aware of how they are making sense of a text and how texts are structured to stimulate different kinds of interpretations, an important aspect of becoming a critical reader.

The Development of Critical Reading

Nudging readers toward deeper and more critical interpretations, however, is potentially problematic for advocates of reader-response theories because the desire to improve the quality of responses will lead teachers to abandon their neutral positions and impose their agendas, however well-intentioned, on their students. Advocates of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1988; Shannon, 1990; Edelsky, 1999) argue that encouraging only personal responses will not create critical readers. Students need to be asked about examples of stereotype, bias, exclusion, and the moral and political values portrayed directly or indirectly in a text, as well as missing voices and points of view. Furthermore, critical pedagogues would argue that there is no such thing as a neutral stance, that all aspects of literacy are situated in social and cultural contexts that are value-laden and rarely equitable to all participants. Teachers, they feel, have a responsibility to point out these inequities to students, as well as the political implications of literacy itself. Carol Edelsky is one researcher who describes these opposing views and calls upon teachers to bridge the gap between critical pedagogy and holistic practice, of which reader-response is a part.

For whole language educators, that vision would be of holistic classrooms where students negotiate curricular issues and make significant choices about their learning, and also where the teacher's side of the negotiations and the teacher's choices foreground systems of privilege and struggles for justice . . . For critical pedagogues, the vision would be of classrooms where equity is on the front burner and also where curriculum is broadly open to students' choices; where the political meanings of language in use are examined and also where the teacher has socio-psycholinguistic based theoretical reasons for making sure that literacy is developed through use rather than being objectified as something to be taught. (1999, p. 1)

In my classroom, I admit to erring on the side of limited, careful, and gentle intervention – a nudge rather than a push toward critical interpretations of texts. The power of a teacher should never be underestimated. If my students over-reacted to a little biographical information about a poet and saw everything in a poem through such tiny lenses, then it is safe to assume that they would view all of their reading through the even more powerful telescope of social and economic justice, were I to place such issues front and centre. In my experience students are attracted to literature with themes about racism, sexism, class-ism, and social problems such as physical abuse and dysfunctional families. Opportunities to discuss these problems usually arise spontaneously during discussions, but open-ended questions that begin with “what do you think about . . .” also help to elicit individual reactions to examples of injustice in a text. My motto is, ask, don’t tell, and be sure to ask in a way that does not reveal my own views.

Critical pedagogues feel that while a reader-centred curriculum fosters a spirit of empowerment through making choices, through genuine inquiry, through weighing alternatives, and through respect for multiple perspectives within the classroom, these values are not applied to events outside the classroom. It is possible, however, that the approaches students use to make sense of their reading will also be used to make sense of their world. Students will notice when their choices are eroded or limited; they will be experienced in checking their initial impressions against those of others as well as the available evidence; and, one hopes, they will acknowledge and cope with different viewpoints, as well as the ambiguity of most situations and challenges in life. A reader-oriented pedagogy may, in effect, develop an awareness of and the life skills required to deal with social injustice. This is why students need to be aware of the strategies they are using when they read and form opinions about their reading; I often pointed out to my students the mental habits they were forming during discussions and in their response logs. No doubt, advocates of critical pedagogy would consider this “solution” too indirect, but I am unwilling to risk undermining my students’ confidence in their own abilities to decide what is important in a text by adopting a more direct approach to developing critical readers.

The preceding criticisms of interpretations and applications of the transactional theory of literature in particular and reader-response approaches in general focus mainly on peripheral issues; they do not challenge the central and active role of the

reader. As a description of reading, of what happens when a reader becomes engaged with a text, the transactional view is theoretically strong and pedagogically useful. These features may account for the current interest in and prominence of reader-response approaches at all levels of education.

Being More Explicit About Explicit Instruction

At this point I want to discuss an aspect of direct, or explicit, instruction that I was prepared to practice that can be considered a form of critical pedagogy. Delpit's (1988) much-cited argument in favour of the explicit teaching of the dominant culture's literary conventions and practices to non-mainstream groups, by extension, seemed relevant to my students, whom I saw as excluded from much of the culture of school because of their lack of academic success. Delpit claims that students, black and poor students in particular, who are not familiar with literacy genres of standard English are disadvantaged by process-oriented pedagogy that does not specifically teach them the "rules of power" connected with the usage of such writing forms.

Similarly, my students were outsiders in the culture of school in many respects. In the hope that some direct teaching would help my students see that there were things they could do to improve their situations, I often talked to them about how to play the academic -- and behaviour -- game. I pointed out, for example, that my struggling writers should try to use cursive writing because "printing" prejudices other readers (especially other teachers) against them in high school. I explained that poorly constructed and presented writing had the same impact. It seemed to help my students to see that a test or an exam was simply a convenient way of measuring learning, based on a (sometimes arbitrarily) selected body of information on a topic. Once they understood the subjective nature of testing and the role that chance played in that type of evaluation, my students seemed to feel better about exams; they realized that their marks were not indications of their worth as human beings and took them less personally. To help them play the exam game, we also devised strategies for dealing with multiple choice tests. Students need an understanding of how the system in which they must function works and an awareness of the role that literacy plays in that system.

Moving Beyond Reader-response Approaches

Earlier, I summarized studies from widespread sources that supported reader-response pedagogy, including reports that struggling readers (see pp. 10-12)

benefited from such approaches. My own classroom experiences were similarly successful, but I wanted to know more about why weak readers, even those with severe decoding problems, reacted so positively to pedagogy that assumes students can read. Certainly, reader-response gave my students confidence and independence, but I wanted to account for their progress more precisely.

The Sociocultural Perspective

While studying in the Masters program, I became familiar with the work of Vygotsky, the Soviet psychologist (1962, 1978), and I knew that he had emphasized the intertwined roles of social and cultural contexts in learning, especially learning in literacy. Vygotsky first drew attention to the distinction made by psychologists between learning -- in fact, between thinking and reasoning in general -- and emotions. Until he made this observation, intellectual activities were considered to be entirely unaffected by an individual's emotional state. Furthermore, he believed that an individual's every thought carries traces of the emotions that the individual connects to the ideas and situations that that thought describes. In other words, it is not possible to describe thinking processes without explaining the emotional and contextual factors involved.

Vygotsky (1962, 1978) describes three sociocultural contexts that influence literacy: the individual (including knowledge, experience, background, taste), the social (including home, school, size of group), and the historical-cultural (including nationality and culture). To these, Raphael (1986) adds the psychological (including perception and motivation) and the academic (including subject and task). The context may include such things as purpose, location, and the presence of other people. Reading is strongly affected by all of these factors, sometimes separately, sometimes simultaneously and, like all forms of language development, is the result of particular types of social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). An example of the impact of contextual factors on learning is Wells' (1986) ten-year study of children who were read to at home and the positive impact that that activity had on their performance in school; conversely, he found that children whose prior experience did not include being read to at home did poorly in school.

Sociocultural research also sees all learning, particularly becoming literate, and language itself as both social activities and methods of preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge. Learning to read is achieved through language;

therefore, language is both substance and process and is, in fact, acting on itself. Britton (1970) believes that learning language is a paradigm for learning in general and that school activities should reflect this. Children, not only learn to speak by speaking and to read by reading, but also acquire information about the cultures in which they live while becoming literate.

Vygotsky has made a connection between affective experiences of the individual and language; words are embedded in a dense matrix of emotions and events and, thus, become partially endowed with an individual's personal meanings. Bakhtin (1986) developed this notion further by theorizing that language carries multiple traces of previous users and is tainted by prior functions and contexts, and children must learn these aspects of language while learning to use it. In this way, cultural groups develop their own speech and literary genres, with characteristic "content, style, and structure" (1986).

Speech and literary genres are explicit representations of a culture (Wertsch, 1985) and failure to use them can signify non-membership in the culture, particularly in school where the genres of dominant cultures are promoted and where the genres of school are created and imposed. Heath's study (1983) of three culturally different Appalachian communities explains this relationship between language and literacy. The speech of each group contained different recurring features, such as topic of conversation, vocabulary, use of words, and sentence patterns. The children Heath studied acquired the genres of their community through learning to talk, but when they went to school, these children discovered that the speech genres they used at home did not fit the dominant genres of the classroom. Other researchers have made similar observations (Wertsch, 1985; Dyson, 1989) and their findings underline the importance of seeing non-mainstream speech genres as products of certain social and cultural environments, rather than as errors.

Thus, both language and reading are deeply entrenched in social contexts and vary according to the nature of those situations. The sociocultural perspective reveals a more complex view of learning through social interaction. Social influences are more obvious than cultural influences. Moffett points out that cultural biases and assumptions are difficult for individuals to recognise because "they are taken for granted" and because people are "subjective collectively, sharing a mental set with . . . people in the same group" (1992, p. 19).

What does all this mean to students learning to read and to teachers of reading? Coles (1998) points out that after Vygotsky cognitive science became a narrower and separate field of psychology concerned with isolating and analyzing specific aspects of thinking, while the study of emotions became the province of clinical psychologists. He goes on to say that many literacy researchers studying reading from a cognitive perspective continue to neglect the impact of emotions and of the context on learning. Ignoring a sociocultural perspective makes learning to read less complicated, but is not helpful to students, especially those who struggle to read. In the four case studies in this study (see Chapters Three to Six), I tried to capture moving pictures of what took place between the emotional and the cognitive lives of my students. The emotional components of their experiences were the keys to their success, or lack of success, as learners.

Building Scaffolds in Reading

I wish to return to my earlier question of how the sociocultural view of reading suggests reasons for the success of the reader-response approaches I used. This perspective on reading acknowledges the central role of the reader, the individual interpretations of a text, the organic nature of reading, and the importance of contexts which are all features of reader-response pedagogy. Implicitly, this view of reading supports the idea that knowledge is not an external commodity transmitted to learners, but actively constructed by them; thus, learning itself is a paradigm for reading. At the same time, the relationship between knowledge and reading is reciprocal and recursive because reading is a way of creating knowledge. Finally, the overlap between reader-response theory and sociocultural theory is clear, but how should this common ground influence teaching practice?

Teachers and researchers have come to recognize that interactions among people are the essence of learning, even when no conscious effort to learn is being made. The transcript of my students' discussion of the poem (see pp. 5-8) is an example of this. By observing, talking, copying, and reflecting, learners come to know through their interactions with others. In addition, I wish to point out that "others" can also include books and the electronic media.

According to Vygotsky (1978) a specific type of social interaction will definitely improve learning. People best help others, particularly children, to learn in what he called "the zone of proximal development," or the zone between what a person is

actually able to do and what s/he is potentially able to do. The notion of “scaffolding” a task (Bruner, 1981) is associated with it; that is, teachers help (build a scaffold) learners to do what is slightly too difficult for them, and gradually withdraw their assistance until learners can function independently. Cazden reminds teachers that their role should decrease, while that of the learner increases.

The adult so structures the game that the child can be a successful participant from the beginning; then, as the child's competence grows, the game changes so that there is always something new to be learned and tried out, including taking on what was previously the adult's role. Bruner's term scaffold has become a common caption for the adult's role in these games, and it is a good name if we remember that this is a very special kind of scaffold -- one that self-destructs gradually as the need lessens and the child's competence grows (1988, p.104).

Ideally, scaffolding should be the essence of explicit instruction, and it is used most effectively when teachers sense a congruence between their perceptions of their students' needs and their students' purposes. Although one of the contributions of holistic teaching is the alertness of teachers to those “teachable moments,” it is not at all practical to wait until students show individual readiness to learn. Teachers must try to create teachable moments. The challenge is to nudge or steer students to the centre of situations in which explicit instruction is appropriate.

Wells (1998) offers some guidance when he speaks of the importance of “knowing” over “knowledge.” Teachers can be “mediators of knowing” instead of “transmitters of knowledge” if they look at teaching as having a “macro” organisation and a “micro” organisation. The “macro” level involves constructing a challenge or problem for students, for example responding to literature. The “micro” level is the explicit assistance the teacher gives to help students achieve the larger goal, and this takes place in the zone of proximal development. Specific help required in forming a literary response might involve activities such as: 1) asking open-ended questions that focus students' attention on the specific elements of the work that is puzzling them; 2) sharing students' problems with the group or class and asking for help; 3) asking students to talk about how they constructed their interpretations as well as the interpretation itself. I have deliberately used responding to literature as an example because it is harder to devise explicit teaching strategies for that aspect of reading

than for phonics-in-context lesson. This kind of explicit instruction is built on what students have declared their needs to be, on a clarification of their purposes, and on ways to achieve their goals.

In my own classroom, there was a wide gap between the type of books most of my students could read and books that had sufficient content to interest them in trying to read. I decided to help them through good reading material by reading it to them in class until most of them could function independently. The "self-destructing scaffold" that I constructed for my students was to begin by reading to the whole group, and then to transfer the task to those readers who were capable and who volunteered to do the reading in small groups. In this way, all of my students increased their experience of reading and enlarged their repertoires of texts that they had read. Gradually, many students reported to me that they were able to read silently to themselves.

Perhaps the fact that I treated my students like readers right from the start had more of an impact on them than I realized at the time. It was not without misgivings and my constant companion, doubt, that I asked them to respond to poems, stories, and novels but, looking back on our time together I see that I was sending them the powerful message that they **could** do it. Eventually, many of them began to act like readers. However, I felt that, in addition to features of the classroom context, there must be other ways to account for their growth, and I wanted to be able to explain it from another perspective. I began to read more widely and found that contemporary reading theory, in particular the work of Goodman (1965; 1996) and of Smith (1994, 1999) helped me to understand my students' growth as readers more fully.

The Psycholinguistic Perspective

Current understandings of reading suggest that reader-response approaches are effective simply because they emphasize meaning and insist that the construction of meaning is the essence of reading. Goodman's (1965, 1996) and Smith's (1994, 1999) descriptions of reading and learning are more specific about how readers construct meaning than reader-response theory. Both researchers argue that reading is not something learned in order to be used but learned through use. If children learn to read and write in similar ways that they learn to talk, then the most important aspects of learning to read are their purposes for doing so, a favourable social context, and their exposure to print. Both Goodman and Smith made contributions to this way of thinking about reading, and they moved the spotlight from the external, directly

observable aspects of reading to the internal, indirectly observable features. I will begin with Goodman's ideas.

Traditionally, children have been (and unfortunately continue to be) judged in school on their ability to read aloud fluently. Goodman (1965) studied the errors that children made when reading aloud and pointed out that their mistakes, which he calls "miscues," were actually indications of the sense they were making of the text, rather than errors. Teachers, therefore, need to consider all possible reasons for students' miscues. For example, readers often substitute a synonym for a word in the text, thus demonstrating their comprehension of certain meaning cues (semantic) in the text. Similarly, if readers lack sufficient background knowledge of a particular topic, they may be unable to use the semantic cues in order to read texts on that subject. If readers are substituting words that look like the word but make no sense, such as "went" for "want," they are using graphophonic cues and need to be directed toward semantic cues. Contrary to widespread belief, readers' predictions are not always helped by their knowledge of sound-symbol relationships (graphophonic). Readers may also use the word or sentence order (syntactic) as a way of predicting an unknown word. Readers may also be influenced by structures of the text (pragmatic), such as features of specific genres (e.g. "once upon a time"), in their interpretations of the text. In the "psycholinguistic guessing-game," the name Goodman gave to reading, all four cueing systems -- semantic, syntactic, pragmatic, and graphophonic -- are used simultaneously and interactively and form a seamless garment that proficient readers rarely realize they are wearing.

The way the four cueing systems works is more easily understood within the context of a reading event. When I, a proficient adult reader, read a text about a subject of which I have no prior knowledge, I become aware of the cueing systems because I am actively seeking strategies to help me make sense of my reading. Since I know next to nothing about structural geology, the following passage presents many challenges for me as a reader.

Structural geologists and geophysicists model convergent margins as viscoelastic or brittle domains, and seismologists model them as largely elastic. Both are probably correct for the domains and at the scales at which they conceptualise margins. The classical accretionary prism is at best imaged across 10-40 km, and it is commonly assumed that structure is similar across the

rest of the continental slope despite poor seismic imaging. The seismologist generally depicts structure at the scales of refraction seismic velocity crustal models. The trend to merge these conceptual frameworks is assisted by locating the separation of the two rheologies. (Von Huene and Kaeschen, 1999, p. 248)

My initial impression of this passage is formed by pragmatic cues. It is clearly a scientific report that presents an argument supported by various facts and interpretations. It appears to be about reconciling two different "conceptual frameworks" for understanding "margins," but I am unclear about how they differ and how they are compatible because there are too many unfamiliar words. Because I have no background knowledge of this topic, I am unable to use any semantic cues. Many of the words I don't know force me to use the graphophonic cueing system; for example, I do not know what "convergent margins," "classical accretion prism," "refraction seismic velocity crustal models," or "rheologies" are. A definition for "viscoelastic" is provided but I am not sure exactly what a "brittle domain" is. Most of these words are not recognised by the spell check on my computer, and the first time I read them I paid careful attention to syllables and letters in each one. Certainly, I typed them letter by letter. I also tried to use my scant knowledge of Greek roots to identify "rheologies" to no avail. But, after consulting my husband, who is a geologist, I learned that "logos" means "laws" and "rheos" means "flow;" therefore, "rheologies" are the laws governing the flow. I then realized that the passage was discussing two kinds of "flow," but this discovery had only a small impact on my ability to understand this passage. Eventually, I noticed that I was able to use a semantic cue. Since "viscoelastic" is defined as "brittle" in the text, the difference between the two geophysical models is due to the perceived properties of the "convergent margins." Each time I reread the passage, I looked at the syntax, the word order and how the parts of sentences were connected and realized that it was not the sentence structure that was inhibiting my ability to make sense of the passage; however, one striking exception is the string of five nouns in one sentence -- "refraction seismic velocity crustal models" -- which I had to check several times.

My analysis of the cueing systems was more organized than my actual use of them. I present them in a systematic way, but I moved from one to the other as I searched for meaning, and I am not completely sure of the exact order in which I used

each cueing system. After all this effort, I still do not know exactly what this passage is about, because I lack the necessary prior knowledge (semantic) that would enable me to read the text. Although I used the other cues, without the semantic, they did not help me. If a hierarchy among the four cueing systems were established, the most important would have to be the semantic, and yet it is the graphophonic that is considered most important and transferable from one context to another.

Most readers only become aware of the strategies they use to read when they get into difficulty. Students need to know that there are multiple strategies that they can use when reading and to see themselves using them **while** they are reading. If one of these cueing systems does not help them, they should move on to another. However, isolating and stressing one cueing system for teaching purposes is usually done at the expense of the others. Phonics drills give the graphophonic cueing system more than its share of attention and tell children that reading is primarily an exercise in decoding, rather than meaning-making. Similarly, comprehension questions, focussed on the literal recall of the text, stress the syntactic cueing system, and Goodman has demonstrated that children can answer such questions without any understanding of the text. By using graphophonic and syntactic cues only, or matching words in the questions to sections of the text, readers can come up with the correct answer (see Appendix D). Taking the cueing systems out of context in the form of phonics drills, vocabulary lists, and comprehension questions does not help readers to construct meaning. Readers having difficulty with a text should be encouraged to look more carefully at these features of reading, provided the emphasis is on self-awareness as a reader and meaning, rather than word identification. They should know that reading to the end of a sentence or paragraph can help them to understand; what has gone before and what comes after a troublesome passage can also provide contextual clues to meaning; and making predictions and inferences while reading help in the search for meaning. Graphophonic cues are only one of many that readers use, and are most useful when used in conjunction with the other cueing systems. In addition, they should know that lack of background knowledge can prevent a student from reading.

Goodman's description of reading did provide me with the more specific help I needed to understand better why my students were able to make progress. Until I had read his book, *On Reading* (1996) again, I experienced nagging doubts that I should

have been stressing phonics more with my students who had severe problems with decoding. (In the next chapter I describe my program in greater detail.) I now believe that I restored the graphophonic cueing system to its rightful place in my students' reading. It is only one of four strategies to be used. In addition to emphasizing meaning through reader-response approaches, a key element in the success of my students was the significant increase in successful encounters with text. Because so many of them were non-readers, they had few opportunities to use and develop an awareness of their semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic cues. In fact, I wasn't neglecting any of these aspects of reading; I was increasing my students' experience of the cueing systems.

I gave my students explicit help with sound-letter correspondence in the context of their writing. My instincts told me that reading was not an appropriate context because my students seemed much more vulnerable as readers and in need of more support. I was mainly concerned with giving them as much reading experience as possible and to make that experience as pleasant as possible. The more books my students read, the more books they thought about, talked about, wrote about, made comparisons with, and understood. Books were not part of most of their lives, and my goal was to help them gain entry into the world of reading. Comments about phonics patterns would have interrupted the flow of the reading we did together and prevented us from getting lost in the book, one of the chief pleasures of reading. Often, when my students wrote about their reading, opportunities arose spontaneously in which to develop their knowledge of phonics, but mostly in the context of writing rather than reading.

Frank Smith (1994) both supports and extends Goodman's view of reading. He describes reading not as a skill or set of skills, but as a "whole life process" in which the reader's background, experience, tastes are brought to bear on interpreting the text. This idea is shared by reader-response theorists, as is Smith's criticism of reading programs that do not allow students to own their reading.

All programs fractionate experience. Because learners cannot be left free to wander at will through (and out) of the program -- which would then not be a program -- tasks have to be broken down into small steps without evident relationships between each other or to reading (1994, p.110).

According to one researcher, Smith has "theorized out of existence what is at the heart

of the teaching day, the reading lesson" (Willinsky, 1990).

Smith contributed radically new ideas that considerably broadened the psycholinguistic perspective on reading in his book, *Understanding Reading* (1972); his ideas have clearly had a lasting impact, since this book is now in its fourth edition (1994). Smith describes reading as a natural activity that children do without any special instruction. Through experimenting and experience they make sense of the features of print in their environment in the same way that they make sense of other aspects of their world. In addition, he feels that the visual aspect of reading is overly emphasized and plays a less significant part in reading than a reader's prior-knowledge and use of meaning cues. Finally, Smith describes the role of prediction in reading, which also involves the risk of being wrong. Most good readers, he observed, take many risks and use cueing systems described by Goodman to limit their risks.

The strategies of predicting, confirming, and integrating are important activities readers use to interpret texts (Smith, 1994; Rhodes and Dudley-Marling, 1996). Readers use their experience of language, print, and the world to make predictions as they read, and as Rhodes and Dudley-Marling point out, readers only notice that they are doing this when their predictions are not confirmed. Recall that my students who discussed the poem at the beginning of this chapter were trying to confirm their predictions of the text when they realized that there was some disagreement about the theme. Most of the time, integrating new information to prior knowledge is not only how we read, but also how we learn. Understanding these elements of reading helps teachers to understand readers and should form the basis of pedagogical decisions; for example, drawing students' attention to predicting, confirming, or integrating by asking them to think about what will happen next or how a book will end, or to think about how their ideas of a text have changed as they read it. It is, however, important to point out that these strategies are not used in any particular order or in any specific situation, or even in the same circumstances by the same reader. The nature of the reader's transaction with the text is what determines how a text will be read.

The work of Goodman and Smith influenced teaching in many ways. They encouraged teachers to provide their students with reading experiences that emphasized the construction of meaning. Both Goodman and Smith are credited with significant contributions toward the demise of basal readers with their unnatural language patterns ("See-Spot-run") and the movement to the use of trade books, with

more natural language, in the classroom.

The "Great Debate"

While reader-response theories have stimulated debate among teachers and researchers, that discussion has produced only mild ripples on the sea of reading research. Not so with the work of Goodman and Smith! The tidal waves keep rolling in as the storm produced by their ideas -- the phonics-whole language debate -- continues to rage. There are two reasons why I am devoting space to the debate about the need to teach phonics explicitly. First, phonics is always a central issue with students who have problems with decoding, and as I have said many times, many of my students had such difficulties. In spite of this, I did not explicitly teach phonics skills in the context of reading, and many of my reasons for not doing so are confirmed in the "phonics debate" in the research literature. Also, phonics is one of those unexamined topics that has permeated the thinking of teachers for nearly thirty years. Many teachers I know believe that they are "not supposed" to teach spelling and phonics any more, but few, I suspect, know exactly why or where that idea came from. At the same time, among those teachers who do have a general sense of the theoretical arguments, it is widely assumed that research favours the phonics advocates because it is easier to test for that kind of knowledge and to quantify the results. Understanding the major features of the debate will help to clarify this murky issue and enable teachers to make their own decisions.

But first, the term phonics needs a clear definition; it has two parts: 1) phonological awareness or the ability to hear units of sound such as syllables, and 2) phonemic awareness or the ability to hear individual sounds in words. Contemporary reading theorists assign a more limited role to the graphophonic part of reading than previously. This may be the origin of the notion that whole language teachers do not teach phonics or spelling, which is based on a misunderstanding of whole language theory.

The graphophonic component of reading (and writing) is recognised at a theoretical level. At the practical level, whole language supporters believe that most children develop their knowledge of phonics in the process of learning to read and that those who do not should receive direct instruction briefly in meaningful reading contexts. It is also generally agreed in the research literature (for example, Adams, 1990; Rhodes and Dudley-Marling, 1996) that strong readers have a knowledge of

sound-symbol relationships. The question is, how did they acquire it?

The heart of the conflict -- phonics versus whole language -- is about how children learn phonics and how to teach the separate components of an organic process. One group of researchers (for example, Stanovich, 1980; Chall, 1992) advocates explicit instruction of letter-sound connections, while the psycholinguistic and sociocultural researchers (for example, Goodman, 1965; Smith, 1994) believe that phonics is learned through reading. Smith (1994) provides a detailed account of the arguments from both camps, while Weaver (1998) surveys and analyzes the comparative research on holistic and phonics-based approaches to reading, as well as research on phonological awareness. Both Smith and Weaver feel that it is not possible to resolve the debate conclusively through research, because the validity of the studies that each side produces is questioned by the other; in addition, both groups are too deeply entrenched in their viewpoints. Interestingly, Smith points out that no new ideas have been added to the debate in nearly thirty years, only increasingly firm restatements of old positions (1994, p.302).

Weaver's (1998) survey of research that compares students in whole language programs with in-context phonics instruction with students who received explicit instruction in phonics in isolation supports her call for "a balanced approach to reading." It is important to distinguish a "balanced" approach from an "eclectic" approach condemned by Smith (1994) and Rhodes and Dudley-Marling (1996). An "eclectic" approach is a conglomeration of various approaches and could include out-of-context phonics lessons; whereas, a "balanced" approach, as the following definition by Weaver shows, is one that is consistent with whole language practice.

Students in classrooms where skills are taught in the context of reading and writing whole texts have typically made substantially greater advances in a variety of literacy-related skills, strategies, behaviors, and attitudes. Thus, such teaching may be superior overall to skills-intensive and phonics-intensive teaching, at least for a majority of our children. (1998, p.39)

Specifically, the benefits of in-context, holistic instruction over skills-intensive instruction are: 1) the capacity to use knowledge of phonics in context; 2) better use of spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, and grammar; 3) ability to read for meaning; 4) development of more problem-solving strategies for reading; 5) more fluency in writing; 6) stronger identities as readers and writers; and 7) more independence as

readers and writers (1998, pp.35-36). These benefits are derived from a whole-to-parts teaching, which means that teachers read stories to children who are encouraged to make personal response to the text. When children are able to read texts independently, then the teacher can indicate interesting phonic patterns.

Weaver also notes that the differences between the two sides of the phonics debate are diminishing; for example, some whole language advocates have suggested ways of teaching phonics in context, while explicit instruction advocates have recommend in-context approaches for teaching phonics that greatly resemble those of whole language; for example, both groups approve of using rhymes and tongue-twisters, and they also believe that lots of reading and lots of being read to are vital. Another significant feature of Weaver's review of the literature is that it was published in 1998, proof that the influence of this debate is still being felt because it remains unresolved in the research literature. So, what is all the fuss about? In spite of a long standing academic feud, it's all right to teach phonics -- in context!

Smith (1999), however, remains on the extreme end of this debate. The title of his recent article is "Why Systematic Phonics and Phonemic Awareness Instruction Constitute an Educational Hazard," and in it he argues against legislation presently before the American Congress that will make phonics instruction compulsory in American schools. In his view, phonics is not a system that helps anyone to read, but one that can actually interfere with learning to read.

No child or adult learner needs to be subjected to anything more than the benign provision of specific information about phonics when it helps them personally with a specific problem, and only to the extent that it helps them at the time, giving them assistance, not instruction . . . Children learn to read when the conditions are right. These conditions include their relationships with books and other reading materials, and their relationships with people who will help them to read. These conditions also include their own unique personalities, their self-image, mood, interest, expectations, and comprehension. (1999, p. 155)

Clearly, Smith's idea of "in context" is quite different from Weaver's, described above. While Smith has consistently rejected a "balanced" approach to phonics as a logical impossibility because it attempts to fragment the organic nature of reading, he is also protesting against legislation that is not based soundly on research and that tells

teachers how to do their jobs.

Reducing the complexity of reading by dividing it into a set of discrete skills that must be mastered in order from the “bottom up” (Mayher, 1990) is based on the assumption that the parts will somehow equal the whole. In addition, it is assumed that the parts will make sense when decontextualized and will be seen as contributing to the whole. In the classroom, these ideas are often used as a justification for “drills and skills” directed at those students who are thought to be missing specific skills. Thus, for reluctant readers, failure to progress through these kinds of strategies can result in an increased dose of them.

The phonics-whole language debate remains unresolved in the research literature, and I remain dissatisfied with the descriptions of phonics-in context that I have read. My experience with my struggling readers in grade-seven tells me that it is not possible to include phonics in the context of reading. It would have meant breaking into my students' engagement with a text to discuss sound and letter patterns; that would have changed their relationship to reading by reinforcing the notion that reading is primarily decoding -- a notion that I was trying to change. It may be that with young children, beginning readers, there are more natural opportunities to discuss phonic patterns in the context of reading, but with my older, struggling readers I needed to stress meaning. I decided that the context of writing is a much more authentic context for phonics.

Holistic Recuperation

Although my students took some of their subjects, such as music, art, physical education, and moral and religious education, in “regular” classes, most of them did not feel that they were part of the “regular” program. They were in my homeroom class, and I was their teacher for three of their subjects -- English, geography, and math. The class was small, with only fourteen students, and their schedule provided extra periods in English and math. It had the structure of a “special class,” but not the pedagogy.

I took a risk, followed my instincts, and pursued an holistic reading and writing program. There were no phonics drills, comprehension questions, grammar exercises, vocabulary worksheets, simplified reading material, or slowed-down-broken-down bits of teaching. We read real literature, kept reading-response logs, and created writing portfolios. Fortunately, I had some success with this approach,

some of which is contained in this study and, happily, I have also found support in the research literature for using holistic teaching with struggling readers and writers, in spite of traditional biases against such an approach. Rhodes and Dudley-Marling (1996, p. 25) argue strenuously against the need for "unique instruction models." They point out that reading theory describes the reading of all readers; it is not valid only for some readers. Special instruction implies a common approach to a variety of problems, of which the only common feature is under-achievement in school, while whole language is more likely to accommodate individual differences and problems.

Several studies on children who learned to read with great difficulty (for example, Chomsky, 1976; Smith, 1994; Moustafa, 1998) concluded that their difficulties were based on their lack of experience and exposure to print. In addition to increasing their time spent reading, these children benefited from listening to tapes or oral readings of their texts. Gradually, these children became more independent readers, able to recognise more words and to use phonics skills to identify unfamiliar words. These findings echoed many of my conclusions about my students.

A study of successful dyslexics (Fink, 1998) was even more encouraging. Twelve educated professionals, including a Nobel laureate, diagnosed as dyslexic in childhood described the reading strategies they developed to work around their problem. They all described their struggle and disaffection with school and their late development as readers. Most reported that they only learned to read around the age of twelve, and one did not learn until she was fifteen. As adults they continued to cope with the features of dyslexia -- slow rate of reading, difficulty in decoding unfamiliar words, poor spelling, and letter and word reversals. In spite of these problems, they were all in careers that required a lot of reading and writing. They attributed their learning to read to the pursuit of a passionate interest in a specific field, not necessarily the ones they chose to follow later. Their passions caused them to read extensively in one subject area, and it may be that their growth in reading can be attributed to repeated exposure to a familiar vocabulary and the development of an extensive background knowledge in their topics which made each successive text they read easier to decode. The entire time I was reading this article, I pictured Matt, whose reading development I describe in Chapter Six. I wondered if his obsession with war, particularly World War II, may have played an essential role in his growth as a reader.

The late-blooming dyslexic readers in Fink's study were a great comfort to me.

So often there is an unstated belief that it is too late for students in grade-seven to reverse their unsuccessful school careers. Another case for successful late intervention was made in a survey of research specifically on this issue (Krashen and McQuillan, 1990). The "late intervention" that was most often recommended was very easy and natural for me to provide, that of exposing students to lots of reading material, lots of free choice about reading, and lots of time to read. To these I would add lots of opportunities to make sense of their reading themselves.

Avoiding the Deficit View of Struggling Readers

A common element to all the research on holistic approaches with struggling readers is the underlying assumption that they can learn to read. There is no deficit view of students or of teaching. Rhodes and Dudley-Marling suggest a way to develop a positive view of students having difficulty.

When we look at struggling readers and writers we don't see deficits or deviance. We see students who may not always learn what their teachers want them to or who may not always learn as quickly as their parents and teachers expect, but who are capable learners nonetheless. (1996, p. 17)

It ought to be a simple thing to do but, as I have already pointed out in the previous chapter, there are many visible and invisible influences working against the "credit" view of learning and learners, especially those with "special" problems. It is worth repeating the many persistent notions about the nature of teaching continue to undermine these kinds of change; for example, 1) knowledge consists of external truths that teachers must transmit to students; 2) knowledge is a set of sequential skills; 3) students are empty vessels that must be filled by the teacher; 4) students learn what teachers teach; and 5) all children learn in the same way (Mayher, 1990).

Attributing learning problems to biological defects is another problem for struggling readers that will not go away, and it is a particularly difficult one for teachers, most of whom are unable to evaluate the research behind this view. Coles (1998) reviews the current state of medically-oriented investigations of learning disabilities and finds that the evidence is inconclusive. From the perspective of the literacy educator, the relevance of whether or not reading problems are caused by brain lesions is questionable. Even if students have physical defects, they must still be helped to become literate, and as the study of successful dyslexics (Fink, 1998) and the students in this study show, these problems -- whatever their origin -- can be

overcome. Focussing on biological causes may prevent teachers from seeing what students can do and, as Coles (1998) points out, may instil feelings of hopelessness in the students.

I knew I had succeeded in establishing an **un-special** program whenever a student felt the need to inform me that "this is supposed to be a resource class, you know." I always knew that it was important to create that kind of atmosphere, but I now know that it is vital. It is almost the only thing that matters because it sends such a powerful signal to my students that I believe they can learn. Only in that kind of atmosphere could I work on changing their deficit images of themselves.

I have described what reading theory says readers do and what research says about these descriptions of reading. In addition, I have made general references to the most appropriate teaching strategies that can be inferred from my reading of the research literature. Now that I have positioned myself theoretically and pedagogically, in the next chapter I will describe in more detail the program, class, school, and community in which I worked with the students in this study as well as the way I constructed portraits of them as readers.

Chapter Two

Finding the Gate: Inviting Outsiders to Become Readers

"See, even though school was failure after failure, inside I knew that I was better than that . . . and I knew I wasn't stupid. But most of the time I felt lonely. I felt like I was standin' on the outside of a high chain-link fence, and I could see all the other kids, all the other adults, playin', workin', gettin' along with a normal life, but I couldn't get in. I still can't. It isn't like the gate's locked. It's like there isn't a gate at all." (Bell, 1992, p. 178)

The character speaking above is an illiterate adult in *No Signature*, a novel by William Bell (1992), and he is telling his son, who has just discovered his father's problem, about the pain he experienced in school. The parallels between him and my students are clear and also demonstrate how powerfully even a short narrative excerpt describes the impact of living outside the "literacy club" (Smith, 1994). The fictional character's account of his past, like all narratives, is a highly interpreted version rather than a detached statement of events and experiences, and it is his individual perspective, his subjectivity, that makes us understand how terrible school was for him.

Narrative now has a place in qualitative research as a way of making meaning. Ayers (1989), Bateson (1989), Taylor (1991), and Goodson (1992) are all researchers who have written narrative accounts of individuals' lives, while Van Manen (1990) and Seidman (1991) have included story-telling in their books on research methods. Since teaching is primarily social interaction, an interconnected sequence of events, narrative accounts are particularly appropriate ways to capture the essential elements of pedagogy.

Social interaction therefore immediately involves us in various plots and subplots, many of which we are only passively entangled in . . . But although narration is a secondary process, it is an essential one with respect to human understanding because it places acts in relation to each other and discloses those continuities without which understanding would prove infertile. (Kerby, 1991, pp.52-53)

Kerby goes on to explain that we try to understand our "experiencing self" through our "narrating self," and life is largely a struggle to bring the two together. Bateson (1989, p.34) also says "story-telling is fundamental to an individual's search for meaning."

This is because narration makes abstract ideas concrete by embedding them in experience, makes them more complex by connecting them implicitly and explicitly to other ideas and contexts, and also makes them more accessible to others who can make comparisons with their own experiences. The above researchers argue that the validity of narration is usually determined by its internal consistency.

Essentially, what I have done in this work is to tell the stories of four of my students (Chapters 3-6) and how they grew as readers in my class. These four case studies form part of the larger story of my teaching by providing an account of my interactions with my students. By telling anecdotes about them, by using their own words, writing samples, and drawings, my intention is to bring them to life and enable readers to experience their triumphs, their disappointments, and their own views of their situations.

These case studies of Fiona and Matt were composed gradually over one year, and those of Jeff and Jon over two years, and this chapter explains the process of capturing the individuality of each student. Besides giving the physical co-ordinates of the setting of this narrative, I will discuss the social and emotional co-ordinates of the and their impact on me and on what I did as a teacher. Then, I will describe the features of the landscape in which this study occurred -- the program and the class and how they fit into the school. In the previous chapter, I declared my theoretical position and now I will locate myself more specifically and show how I moved from theory into practice by outlining the classroom program I devised based on current understandings of how readers interpret texts. My theoretical allegiances determined the pedagogical choices I made, and the need to collect information about my students for this study determined my methodological choices. I was concerned to use procedures that blended most easily into my teaching program. Finally, I conclude with some personal reflections on the unique features of teacher-research and the need for wider use of this form of professional development.

Dealing With The Deficit

Feeling "Special"

When I began teaching reluctant readers in grade seven, their first year of high school, I had a lot of apprehension and a lot of questions, chief of which was, what was I going to do with them? What sort of program would help these students? The traces of my predecessors that I found in the almost-empty classroom I moved into

were not too promising -- phonics worksheets, grammar workbooks, and a large selection of simplified "novels." The inch-thick files containing test scores, reading ages, and confidential reports on each member of my class were also intimidating. Did they really need "drills and skills"? Probably not in isolation, I decided, and pushed the "special" materials aside. I knew I wouldn't be able to make myself use them.

Instead, I followed my instincts and unpacked fifteen boxes of my own "un-special" books -- all the fiction, poetry, and non-fiction I have collected over the years. I set up the class library, interspersing the school's "baby" books among my "real" books. The program had to be one I believed in, one that was guided by new understandings of how language is acquired and used. We would do lots of "real" reading and "real" writing, in spite of my students' clearly labelled problems and in spite of the remedies used previously in my classroom. After all, reading and writing are social processes, influenced by the contexts in which they occur, for students who struggle to read, too (Rhodes and Dudley-Marling, 1996). Basically, I would do what I had done as an elementary-school teacher.

And, yet, I soon became aware that there might be some risk in this approach. I had never worked in a high school before and I learned quickly that things were different there. The staff room was full of loud complaints about students in the "regular" program who couldn't read or write and who had little general knowledge of the world. Obviously, the elementary schools were not doing their job, and, of course, "whole language" was thought to be the source of the problem. It was in this atmosphere that I embarked on my holistic program.

There were unspoken messages, too, about my new position that seemed to point to a need for something separate, something different, something "special." The classrooms for the students with learning problems were located on one floor of a separate wing of the school, and students from those classes in their second and third years of high school returned to that wing for math and English in groups of fifteen. There were lists of "coded" students -- students whose learning and behaviour problems were turned into a numerical code (e.g. "02" refers to academically two years below grade level) distributed to the teachers of the regular program that identified the ones with academic and behaviour problems. Special arrangements were made for the students on this list to write exams; they were allowed to have extra time, to have

the questions read to them, and, in extreme cases, to dictate their answers to a teacher who transcribed them.

Certainly, the special education department, known euphemistically as "Student Services," functioned as a separate unit of the school. It provided another kind of "support" to these students. Not surprisingly, students with learning problems often found themselves on the wrong side of the law in school, and usually they were sent to student services for discipline, instead of to the vice-principals. The punishment they received there was meant to take account of their problems. Interestingly, psychological counselling services were available in the special education department, while academic counselling was done in the guidance department, upstairs where the "regular" courses were taught. For parent-teacher interviews, the teachers of the regular program gathered in the gym, while the special education teachers remained in their classrooms. Unlike the teachers of regular subjects, they had their own classrooms because they did all their teaching in one room. There were many special features about the special education department!

I also learned that as a cross-over teacher -- one who taught in both "special" and "regular" programs -- there were things I shouldn't do. In addition to my grade seven group with whom I spent most of the day, I also taught English to one grade-ten class and worked on a computer writing-project with senior students. The need often arose to meet with members of the latter group, who were scattered among a lot of different home room classes, and rather than contact them individually through their home-room teachers, I usually prepared announcements of our meetings and had them read over the PA system. I did this against the advice of one of the senior English teachers who said the "regular" students would be mortified to have to attend meetings in my classroom in the "special" corridor of the school. Actually, I found that the "un-special" students seemed to enjoy meeting in my room where they could stretch out on the carpet and cushions in the book corner. On another occasion, I wanted to read a novel with my class that was also being read by the TAG (talented and gifted) class and was told that I couldn't use that particular book. I was asked, "What would the parents say if they heard that the 'special' students were reading the same books as the TAG students?" I made a fuss and the decision was reversed; however, any satisfaction I might have experienced was lost in my new awareness of the view the rest of the school, including the staff, had of my students. At times like

that, my job was overwhelmingly depressing.

Setting the Scene for Reading

The secondary school in which I taught was just outside of Montreal. It had about 1100 students and served a suburban and rural district that included a wide range of economic groups. The school was unusual in that it had both an English and a French program with considerable overlap between the two, as many students took courses in both and many teachers taught in both. Interestingly, nearly every one of my students, with all their learning problems, could function verbally in French.

The students in my small class were described as "at-risk" because they had been tested by the school board's psychologist and found to be at least two years below grade level in academic achievement. Mine was the only class in the school for students with learning problems, and my goal was to prepare them for the regular program, the only place for them to go. The maximum size of the class was seventeen, but in the four years that I taught at the school, the largest group I had was fourteen. Ideally, they spent one year in my class, but sometimes a student needed two years, the maximum time they could spend there. Obviously, a class such as this had a stigma attached to it. Their parents had to give permission for them to be placed in my class and many were reluctant to do so. My class provided my students with a gradual entry into high school. Not only did they receive more individual attention in my class, but also extra time in English and math. They had twice as many periods in English and one and a half times as many periods in math as grade-seven students in the regular program. By not taking ecology and keyboarding, they were able to have these extra classes. I taught three of their subjects, mathematics, English, and geography, and they took the rest of their courses, moral and religious education, art, music, physical education, and French in the regular program, where they received more individual attention. This arrangement also provided them with a base from which they could adapt to the demands of high school. They had fewer changes of teacher, classroom, or approach to cope with.

In terms of curriculum, I was supposed to follow the grade-seven courses in math and geography, but at a slower rate. In English, I was told that I could do what I wanted. I was pleased to have the freedom to choose my own reading material, but wondered whether I was meant to provide my students with a remedial program because they were considered unable to read the books the other grade-seven

students read. Although I was tucked away in the "special" wing of the school where things were different, I decided to treat my students like readers and writers, just like everyone else.

The Teaching Part of Teacher-Research

During my first year, my instincts proved correct, and I noticed significant progress in many of my students. For example, at the beginning of the year, only one girl in my small class considered herself a reader. By the end of that year, there was only one boy who did not think of himself as a reader. Although I did not document this improvement systematically, I believed that a particular classroom context and certain teaching approaches contributed greatly to this change in my students. Specifically, by avoiding a deficit view of them and assuming that my students would read, by using genuine texts, by encouraging individual reactions and opinions to reading, and by making reading a social enterprise in which ideas were shared and discussed, I was able to promote my students' pleasure and confidence in reading.

My main goals were to document the growth of reluctant readers and also, in doing so, to make the reader-based program of my classroom an object of study. A larger goal, however, was to observe the impact of the reader-response and reading theories described in the previous chapter on struggling readers or, to use scientific terminology, to test these theories in the lab of my classroom. It is difficult to separate my students' reading behaviour from the program, and extracting reading activities from the contexts of the case studies and the context of my philosophical position is risky and rather like taking phonics out of reading. Decontextualised strategies are not recipes for success; in other words, my classroom activities were effective because they were guided by a commitment to privileging the role of the reader in reading. The strategies need to be accompanied by the theory. In spite of a slight discomfort about providing one without the other, I believe that an uncluttered description of what I did with my students will help to make both the case studies and the context of my classroom clearer.

No Reading Aloud!

I aimed to help my weak readers to read as many poems, novels, short stories, and plays as we had time for during the year, sometimes in one large group, sometimes in small groups, sometimes in pairs, and sometimes individually. It is important to point out that in my class, the "large" group had fourteen members.

Everything was read in school, as I could never count on assigned reading being done at home. When we all read together, I or a student-volunteer read aloud while the others followed with their own copies of the book. It was important for each student to have a copy of the book, because, as many researchers (Chomsky, 1976; Moustafa, 1998; Krashen and McQuillan, 1998) have found, weak readers need lots of exposure to print, and I made a point of asking them to follow. Class reading was more than a listening exercise. Again, in small groups, **volunteers only** read aloud while the others followed. Sometimes, for a change, students read in pairs or, less often, individually. I noticed that in small groups or in pairs, those who never read in the large group would occasionally offer to read. Whatever size group they read the same text in, reading was always followed by a discussion.

At this point, I want to address the issue of never -- and I mean **never** -- asking my students to read aloud or share their writing unless they volunteered to do so. Recent research has confirmed my belief that fluent oral reading has little to do with comprehension. One particularly interesting study (Martens, 1997) demonstrated that although fluency did improve slightly with well-spaced, repeated readings of the same text, a miscue analysis showed that the increase in fluency had no impact whatsoever on the reader's understanding of the text. The transcripts of my students reading aloud in the following chapters also show no correlation between lack of fluency and poor comprehension. Since my students had a pathological terror of being forced to read aloud, and since I believed they would gain nothing from it, I avoided it. Often, though, I would have to explain my position to their other teachers who insisted that they take a turn reading in class.

Capturing Reading

Later in the year, when my students had more reading under their belts, they chose their own books to read individually in class, and I asked them to record their reactions to their reading in personal response logs. They kept these logs on all the reading we did together in class, except for poetry. I then wrote back to them, responding to their ideas. I never corrected the form of their writing in these logs because I wanted to focus on their thoughts about their reading. This meant that their response logs were a source of raw, unedited writing which I could check for signs of progress. However, I did not hesitate to correct any errors of fact, rather than interpretation, that they made about the text; for example, if they had the wrong

character doing or saying something, I pointed that out. Whenever time permitted, I urged my students to share their written responses with the rest of the class, and we did this in a variety of ways. Those who were willing to read them aloud did so. Sometimes, I collected them and read them anonymously to the class, who commented on them. Occasionally, I asked them to exchange their logs with a partner and either to discuss them or to respond to them in writing.

Discussion of the book, **before** writing, in small or large groups was a vital part of the responding process. Even when they were reading different, individually-selected books, I called the class together once or twice a week to share their reading briefly.

Since having to write about it could remove much of the pleasure of reading in school, particularly for struggling readers who were usually struggling writers too, I felt it was important for there to be some regular reading activities that did not involve responding in writing. Usually, the two exceptions were poetry and "home reading." Most of the time, we read and discussed poems in small groups (Dias, 1996), an activity my students came to enjoy, partly because they liked forming an interpretation with their peers and partly because they knew there would be no homework. Throughout the year, I had one period a week of "home" reading. I expected all my students to read some material of their choice at home and to bring it to class, usually during the last English period of the week, a psychologically appropriate time to relax and enjoy reading. My students usually stretched out on the carpet with a cushion for this activity, which was sometimes accompanied by a mug of hot chocolate. I read with the class at this time, and during the last fifteen or twenty minutes of the period, we all shared the highlights of our reading and recommended books to each other.

I also asked my students to keep reflective journals on their content reading in math and geography. These often took the form of how they viewed a topic before and after reading about it and were used to bring their attention to the new information they were reading. Sometimes they explained or recalled what they had read about a topic, or in math, looked for the source of their difficulties with specific topics or problems.

An added bonus to the small-group work they did in reading was that most of my students gradually became more confident about speaking informally in front of the class, something that initially terrified many of them. Once I saw an improvement in

their confidence, I started to assign projects, particularly in geography, that involved an oral presentation. For most of them, the fear of speaking to a group seemed to disappear when they had something specific to talk about. Asking them to form their own opinions on their reading gave my students lots of practice in organising their thoughts into a coherent pattern and making it clear to others; gradually, the urge to communicate overtook their nervousness and they were able to concentrate on what they were saying.

The creative writing they did was closely linked to their reading. I urged my students to write the kind of story that they liked to read, although most of them did this spontaneously. They learned to use writing strategies such as brainstorming and free writing as steps to creating a rough draft. They used peer editing as part of the process of revision, and most often, they prepared their final drafts during our computer periods. For those who were interested, I had their final drafts published and bound at the school board's resource centre. But, most importantly, as the case studies make clear, my students' writing became a window on their reading and how they were feeling about themselves as readers.

Speaking of Reading

Activities that become a regular part of a classroom eventually lose their freshness and their stimulating qualities. There is some comfort in routine, but the most serious enemy of reading, after lack of confidence, is boredom. Since the affective involvement of the reader is an essential part of the responding process, I found it necessary to vary both the kind of material we read and the way we read and discussed it. Most of the time my students worked in small groups, but sometimes they discussed their reading in pairs. What remained constant, however, was my commitment to having a discussion **before** they did any writing. A good discussion of reading is the rooting system for good writing about reading. The other things that didn't change were my assumptions that reading is primarily a transaction between a reader and a text, not a reader and a teacher; that readers construct individual, subjective meanings; that a truly personal response is undirected by the teacher; and that multiple, even contradictory, interpretations should be encouraged and supported. I always kept these ideas in the front of my mind, in case I was ever tempted to direct their responding process, and in fact, I consider these guiding principles more important than any specific strategies I used. With these guidelines in place, I can be

more certain of finding a suitable way to nurture reading.

At this point, I wish to make a comment on explicit instruction in reading. When I wrote with my students, I did not hesitate to share my writing with them, particularly the strategies I used, the how and why of the decisions I made, and the quantity of material that I scrapped when I revised. I did not want them to imitate my process, but to understand it. I found this much more difficult to do in reading, partly because the process is more ephemeral, but the product, an interpretation, is less robust than a piece of writing. My approach to reading was a hands-off one. But gradually, I came to realize that my students needed more insight into the reading processes of others. I was able to do this informally in conversations when we shared our "home reading" and more deliberately when I kept a response log when we read individually-selected novels. I was able to point out strategies I used to help me make sense of the text I was reading. Once I modelled this process, my students felt encouraged to talk about these aspects of their reading too. I wish to stress that this was the extent of my "strategies lessons" in literary reading, which I do not use to sweeten skills instruction. I believe that content reading is a more appropriate context for discussing reading strategies in "mini-lessons" (Atwell, 1987.) Since information-based texts are read mostly (although not entirely) from the "efferent" stance (Rosenblatt, 1978), reading the geography text provided us with many opportunities to consider strategies such as rereading, questioning, predicting, confirming, using text-types, structures, and features, and making connections to the reader's prior knowledge. The primary purpose of literary reading is pleasure, but unfortunately, that purpose has become eroded by school practices. Concentration on the pleasure and meaning of literature was my "strategy" for encouraging the development of readers for life.

Evaluating Reading

A reader-based program was a challenge for me to organize and even more of one to evaluate. Translating reader-response theories into practice was not a simple one-step process. In order to alter my pedagogy, I had to understand the theories of others, do my own theorizing, experiment with practical strategies, and, as the case studies that follow show, experience some failure, as well as success. Since reading and responding are individual, subjective processes, initially encouraging multiple interpretations was messy and overwhelming, and the fear that not much was happening was always present. It took time and experience to find new ways of

organising my classroom and of looking at my students' responses. Then, I found it necessary to devise new criteria for assessing reading in my classroom, which I used to analyse their responses in the case studies. In Appendix E, I enclose the criteria I use and constantly revise to evaluate reading. Although it may look like a checklist, I do not use it that way; these criteria are reminders to me of specific elements of reading that I should look for to compose a complete picture of a reader. It is more difficult to recognise individual reading styles than individual writing styles because reading is a more ephemeral process. Dias (1994) described the "organic" nature of reading and the impossibility of observing the entire activity of a reading event. I found I had to look at my students' different strategies, tastes, and patterns of development to appreciate fully their unique reading identities. In addition, I also asked my students to reflect regularly, once or twice each term, on their progress in reading and writing. An example of the sort of questions I gave them to answer is in Appendix F.

I had no difficulty in devising my own evaluation criteria; I knew what I valued in my students -- growth in their learning and reflection on how they learned. Determining growth was a process that took place over time and was never based on specific assignments or a single occasion. Instead, I composed a collage, rather than a picture of my students by looking at what they said and did, as well as what they put on paper. This is reflected in the composition of the case studies. To see a particular aspect of a student's growth, it was often necessary to juxtapose a response-log entry with a piece of creative writing. Sometimes, their comments or behaviour in class shed light on their reading and writing. In other words, it was not merely a matter of looking for linear development in separate activities such as their response logs or their writing folders; the response process, like writing, is not strictly linear; they are both dependent on the context, engagement, and purposes of the student. I had to look at everything my students said and did that pertained to their literacy over time to detect movement in reading and writing.

Unfortunately, I, like most teachers, had to transform my qualitative criteria into numbers. I had the "right" not to give my students marks and could have given them anecdotal report cards. I asked them what they wanted me to do and discovered that they wanted to receive marks in my subjects, I assumed, because they wanted to be treated like students in the "regular" program. The school administration gave me different course numbers for my subjects, so that I could give my students marks that

would encourage them and reflect their effort and growth. This was a compromise for me and an unsatisfactory one at that; but I understood that it was important to make my students feel that they were part of the system in which we were living and that there was some hope of them moving on in it.

This description of my reading program is an essential part of the context of this study; it is both the milieu in which my students functioned as readers and a reflection of my beliefs about teaching reading. These pedagogical strategies and philosophical positions shaped the environment in which my students and I learned. At the same time, they were altered and shaped by what was happening in the classroom. I tried to blend as many of the methods I used for collecting information about my students into regular classroom activities, although most of these strategies were not part of my daily routine; I hoped that they would become a habit. Certainly, the pressures of conducting this study forced me to be systematic about timing, frequency, and detail, and what follows is a description of the procedures I used to tell my students' stories.

The Researching Part of Teacher-Research

While researching my own classroom, I followed many traditional procedures for collecting qualitative data. These included the following techniques: observing, collecting writing samples and samples of taped discussions of literature, collecting respond-aloud-protocols (Dias, 1996, pp.24-26), surveying my students' attitudes to reading, interviewing my students, creating case studies, and writing about my project. Some of these procedures were part of what I normally did as a teacher, but most were not. While the two roles did not always conflict, researching was something that was added to teaching for me because of the need to be more systematic than I usually was. However, I would argue that the effort required was worth it for the insights gained, insights that later became incorporated into my teaching. My descriptions of the methods I used include how those procedures fit into the daily routines of my classroom.

Case Studies

The case study is a method both of collecting and presenting information. While this project was in progress, I began selecting "information-rich" case studies which contained "a great deal about issues of central importance to the study" (Patton, 1990, p.52). As I collected samples, interviews, and RAPs, I began organizing the information into collages, rather than pictures, of each student and looking for themes

within each case study and between case studies. Initially, I collected information on the entire class and then narrowed my focus to six students; finally, I selected the four students in this study. These case studies were ways of capturing the essence of the large unit in small parts of the unit and, at the same time, of going more deeply into that large unit. In other words, the case study allows me to present the important features of my beliefs about reading and my reading program by describing its impact on individual students. This was also a concise way to present the elements of this research project, a way to compress diverse elements so that the common threads became visible. Since teaching is about interactions with people, it is a more meaningful and appropriate way to represent my students. Also, by telling their stories within case studies, the flow of energy in human interactions and the characters of the individuals are more likely to be preserved.

Each case study was selected to display a different kind of reader. Jeff preferred reading non-fiction and, because his school experience stressed literary reading, he did not consider himself a reader. Fiona was the opposite; she was a literary reader who had no motivation and displayed an active resistance to reading information-based texts. Jon had enormous problems with decoding and understanding a text, but by using his preference for creating visual texts was able to overcome his difficulties and become a reader. Matt had overcome his decoding problems well enough to become a reader and a writer, but still had difficulty in school because he was judged by his poor spelling and his refusal to read aloud. All of them could read more than they thought they could; by looking at them through the lens of a reader-based program, both they and I became aware of how much they could do. Through constructing these case studies, I gained a deep understanding of how these students viewed their development as readers, their particular problems with literacy, and how they responded to my program.

The case studies forced me to extend the time frame of this project, since those four students were in my class for different but overlapping periods. All four spent one entire year together, but Jeff was in my class the year before and Jon was in my class the year after, because both of them spent two years in my class. In fact, the project spanned three consecutive years of my grade-seven program, enabling me to construct more detailed pictures of my students. As a teacher-researcher working in my own classroom, I had the flexibility to do this.

Observation Log

In order to record the behaviour of my students that was relevant to their reading processes, I kept an observation log which had two sections, one for description and one for reflection. Using the guidelines of Bogdan and Biklen (1992, p.120-122), the log included descriptions of the students themselves, their behaviour and significant conversations, the setting, events and activities of the classroom and, also, my actions and interactions with the students. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), it is important that interpretation and analysis be part of the data collection process, which is why reflection is an essential element of field notes. The following excerpt from my observation log is lengthy to provide a more complete sense of my observations. I have highlighted the observation sections and written "comment" in front of the reflections which immediately follow the observations. At the end of each entry, I wrote a "memo" to myself which usually took the form of questions.

from Home Reading, Period 6, Thursday, October 5, 1995

They came in from lunch and went straight to the carpet. They got settled quite quickly.

Comment: They talked less about having home reading this week. They seem to expect it now. Is the novelty wearing off?

Bobby once again stays away from the group at the table in the corner, reading a *Discover* magazine from the geography table.

Jon starts off reading at his desk. Matt sits at the table closest to the carpet and Frank and Brendon stay at their desks this week. I am sitting at a desk across the room from them. It is harder to see them, but less obvious that I am taking notes.

After they have arranged themselves, I notice that Danny has brought a book from home, a thick paperback, but I can't see the title. Jesse asked Bobby where the book about the haunted beach was and Bobby went through his R.L. Stine books on the shelf to find it for him. They locate it and Ben stretches out on the carpet and Bobby returns to his seat at the table. Susan asked for the book about sign language. "What's clam chowder?" In sign language, Jeff wants to know. She laughs and starts leafing through the book.

Paul doesn't have a book from home either and he selects a collection of folk tales about trolls, witches, and ogres from the class library and starts reading it. Jon joins the group on the carpet and he and Kim confer over his "Magic Eye" picture book.

Comment: I am still asking myself what reading is. Is this reading, what they are doing? There is more talking this week. Most of it is about their books. Is school providing what the home used to provide, before everyone got so busy, - interaction over books? Am I feeling guilty about this activity, because it doesn't look like "school?"

The restlessness spreads. Matt asks to go to his locker to change his book. Jesse and Jeff become fidgety and decide to get up and change their books. They "surf" the class library, but don't find books that catch their interest. Ben has rejected the R.L. Stine book. I give them a frown after fifteen minutes and Jeff grabs a book off the shelf and sits down to read it. Jesse selects a *National Geographic* and stretches out with that.

Comment: Perhaps a significant step in the development of a reader is the ability to stick with a book for a sustained period. Also, it would have to be considered real progress if some of these kids actually show up at school with a book from home. There is a lot of "surfing" the library. Maybe they're transferring their computer skills and approaches to reading.

It turned out that Jeff had pulled *The Invisible Man* by H.G.Wells off the shelf when I had signalled to him that it was time to choose a book and sit down. I was impressed with his selection, but he hastily said that he had only chosen it arbitrarily because he "had to read something." He didn't understand it and did not intend to read it.

Comment: Well, so much for home reading at school. They have managed to thwart me. How can I insist that they get interested in a book? I provide the opportunity to do so, but this week so many of them didn't bring books and spent most of the period scanning the bookshelves for a book. Only a few of them seemed interested in the books they had chosen. I seem to have led the horses to water and they are refusing to drink. I guess I'll have to be patient.

But, their attitudes have made me edgy and irritable. I am having trouble maintaining an enthusiastic tone of voice.

The bell rings. They go off to gym and I go to my grade ten English class, feeling defeated and frustrated.

Comment: I didn't leave enough time for everyone to talk about their books. I wonder whether those who didn't are feeling neglected. Also, it annoys me to be cut off by the bell. It signals bad planning or something, and makes me feel incompetent.

Memo

I have different questions about the nature of reading this week. Is sustained interest in a book essential? I saw little of that this week. What about the ability to choose a book? Does the inability to do so suggest a reluctance to read or that the reader is unsure of his/her interests or abilities?

And what about the reading material? Do picture books count? What about their preoccupation with popular culture?

Is the social aspect of this group's reading overpowering, rather than stimulating or complementing the solitary element of reading? How can a balance be struck? It seems I have set up a social context but am really wishing that the kids would isolate themselves from it. I need to watch them more and look more closely at the kind of social interaction that is taking place.

Obviously, there are few teachers who are prepared to keep a reflective journal in this detail. Now, that this project is finished, I do keep a sporadic journal, but it is less organised and less detailed. It was only possible for me to observe my students during those activities that did not require me to interact extensively with them. The observations in the above excerpt took place during home reading, when I often had time to take notes: however, I also wanted to read my book and be part of the group. I found it very easy to take notes during small-group discussions of literature, a practice I have continued because I can only listen to one group at a time and I like to remind certain students to contribute their comments made in small groups when they report to the class. But, whenever it was possible to stand and look at what was going on in the classroom, I did so. Also, I kept a sheet of paper with a large grid and spaces for each student on my desk on which I could jot brief comments to jog my memory at the end of the day when I wrote up my notes.

Oral and Written Samples

I collected samples of my students' oral and written responses to texts. Often, they responded to texts in small-group discussions, and I audio-taped these sessions on a regular basis and transcribed those parts which were most significant; sometimes I simply added brief comments from them to my observation log. This form of data collecting had a surprising impact on my students and is something I have continued to use. As a way of encouraging students to reflect on their responses, I asked them to listen to these taped discussions from time to time. Responses to responses were different and another source of information. Also, I found that the presence of the tape recorder inspired them to stay focussed on their discussion, and my students were always eager to hear themselves talk afterward. It also permitted me to hear conversations that I had missed.

I have also maintained the habit of photocopying writing samples and keeping them in my students' files. When I was doing this project, I selected a larger than usual number of samples. At first, I did this randomly, but after I had selected the case studies, I concentrated on the work of those four students. Both of these procedures provided an interesting contrast in students' ways of responding to their reading. Oral responses were shaped by the social interaction of small or large group-discussions, but their written accounts captured only a small part of their impressions. Both, however, complemented the other and gave me a fuller picture of how they read.

Respond-aloud-protocols (RAPS)

During a respond-aloud-session individual students were asked to describe what went through their minds as they read a short text, and I taped their responses and later transcribed them. This method of observing reading processes was designed and used by Dias (1996, pp.24-26), and is a procedure that focusses on an individual's "lived-through experience of a text" and provides insights into the different ways students made sense of their reading. It enabled me to compare the reading styles of different students, as well as their approaches to different kinds of reading. For example, I asked them to read the first chapter of a novel, a poem, and a passage from a non-fiction text. Interestingly, the RAP was the only occasion on which I heard Jon, Jeff, and Matt read aloud, because of their intense nervousness about that activity. This was a time-consuming and logistically difficult activity since it had to be done one-to-one in an empty classroom, which usually meant taking the student out of

another class when I had a free period. Nevertheless, it is something I have found worth repeating with certain students I am concerned about because of how much it tells me about how they read, as the case studies demonstrated.

Reading Attitude Survey

At the beginning of the school year, I normally asked my students to fill out a questionnaire (see Appendix G) about their reading habits. This included questions on how they felt about reading, what they thought readers did, how much time they spent reading, and what kind of books they liked to read. At the end of the year, I asked them to answer the same questions again so that they would appreciate that they had changed as readers. This document was of great value to me as a researcher because it provided a framework for discussing my students' reading in greater depth in an interview.

Interviews

I interviewed each student in my class about their attitudes and background in reading and audio-taped all of these discussions, but transcribed only the ones I used in the case studies. In effect, these interviews were more like conversations that provided an opportunity for my students to elaborate and reflect on their reading. I then compared their perceptions of themselves as readers with my perceptions of their reading processes and with their related behaviour in the classroom. I interviewed each student twice, once during the first year they were in my class and again about a year later to check my interpretations with them. Interestingly, they all confirmed my impressions and usually told the same anecdotes in response to the same questions a year later.

It was from the interviews that the major themes of the case studies emerged. This procedure was also of great value to me as a teacher. My students were much more forthcoming when I talked to them alone and they revealed much about themselves as readers. In some cases, I was able to act on what they had told me immediately and to influence their reading development; for example, when Jeff (see Chapter Four) told me about his trucking magazines, I persuaded him to bring them to school to share with his peers, a crucial event in his realisation that he was a reader. The interviews seemed to have another important impact on my students; they were pleased that I was so interested in them personally and in their views on reading and school. While this activity was not a normal part of my classroom routine, I felt that the

effect an interview had on my relationships with my students made it worth doing as a method of communication, as well as a method of research. Unfortunately, like the RAPS, interviews required a lot of time as well as permission to take students out of another class.

Standardized Tests

As I have mentioned previously, my students' files were full of standardized test scores and assessments. In addition, it was customary for the students in my class to be given a test to determine their reading age by the special-education consultant at some time during the academic year. This test was administered on a one-to-one basis and included attitudes and approaches to learning, as well as word recognition skills. While I did not collect this data myself, it was certainly available to me. I found, in general, that these tests told me simply that the student had a problem, but offered little help with how to solve it. Furthermore, broader labels such as dyslexia masked the individual ways in which that learning disability can manifest itself. For, example, of the four case studies in this project, Jon was the only dyslexic student and while he had many of the problems common to those with that disability, he required individual recognition and help.

Writing as a Research Procedure

Writing this project was more than sharing or reporting my thoughts on and experiences with teaching reading; it was another method of gathering information and learning about my project. Since writing is an active process involving selecting and organising ideas, it became a way to find new insights through examining and rearranging the information I had collected. The final form of the project is a selection, or a representation of the events of my classroom and I can make no claim of absolute truth for it. It is the truth as I know it, and writing was an essential part of coming to know it.

Evaluating Teacher-research

Teacher-research has many forms and is something that most teachers do spontaneously, almost daily, when they try new approaches, evaluate what is happening in their classrooms, or just stand back to watch and listen to the children they teach. When I began this project, my intention was to make more concrete the global observations and gut feelings that changes in my reading program were having a positive effect on my reluctant readers. While I wanted to look at my classroom, my

decision to go public with my ideas placed greater demands on me. Presenting my ideas to a wider audience meant taking extra time to collect more information in a more organised way in order to demonstrate that my students had improved and to raise my project above the merely anecdotal.

Being more organized meant finding the time and opportunities to use procedures that were not a normal part of my classroom routine, such as keeping a detailed observation log, collecting RAPs, interviewing, and, of course, writing this account of my project. While my belief that readers must own their reading has not changed, I was surprised by how much more I learned about my students and their different learning styles. I think that I have become a better listener and observer for having done this project. My confidence in and commitment to my reading program have increased as a result of this close scrutiny of my classroom. This does not mean that I will stop searching for ways to improve it; each group of students has different needs to be accommodated.

The Gap Between Theory and Practice

As my study progressed and as I continued to work with students with reading problems, I became more and more convinced of the benefits of building my reading program around the activities of the reader. Once I decided to ask my students what they thought a text was about instead of telling them, they made more progress, and I made more progress as a teacher. The paradox was that a personal response led to broader, richer reading; when they cared about their reading, they noticed more.

Although I had resolved many of my personal issues about using reader-response theory with struggling readers, I recognised the need to share my success. As I listened to English teachers disparage the personal response and extol the virtues of using literature to teach comprehension and literary devices and to write essays, I realised how poorly understood reader-based pedagogy was. In my own school, for example, there was considerable frustration with the Ministry of Education's procedures for English examinations which were based on the reading process described in reader-response theories. Although students were asked to read and respond to selected short works of literature during several daily "exam" sessions, many teachers included guidelines to structure the so-called "personal" responses on the exam and, at some grade levels, comprehension questions were used as well.

The research literature at one time indicated a wide gap between how readers

interpreted texts and how reading was taught in school. According to Beach in his comprehensive survey of reader-response theories, "there has been little systematic attempt to translate theory into practice" (1993, p.3). Applebee (1989) surveyed the pedagogical practices of English teachers in American schools and found that their central concerns were the text as the source of meaning and the importance of formal features and literary conventions. Dias and Hayhoe (1987) concluded their book on adolescent responses to poetry with reports of how poetry is taught in Canada, Britain, Australia, and the United States. Although some changes in pedagogy were described, on the whole "reluctance to surrender full powers to readers" persisted (Dias and Hayhoe, 1987, p.109).

I believe that this gap has been narrowed in the last ten years. In the previous chapter, I referred to a number of classroom studies (pp.12-13) that demonstrate the benefits of reader-response approaches. Initially, the gap was filled primarily by university researchers. For example, Dias (1994), Dias and Hayhoe (1988), Probst (1987), and Purves (1990) have devised practical ways to take these ideas into the classroom. Teachers are beginning to contribute to the conversation about reading and contributing from different perspectives.

Studies conducted by university researchers are different from those of teachers. Although the approaches are based on strong theoretical foundations, and the programs classroom-tested, university-based projects are not usually done for extended periods or within the normal routine of a classroom context. The words of one university-based researcher describes the difference.

I rediscovered that there is a difference between dropping in to a classroom and having a little fun with the children, and engaging in activities that require wrestling with the on-going, daily complications that characterize a living classroom community. (Garan, 1998, p. 38)

It is not always possible for teachers to honour their philosophical convictions about the nature of genuine learning and at the same time keep order, obtain completed assignments, and hand in marks. This is why teachers must find their own, varied ways to incorporate theory into their practice amidst the sometimes conflicting stances they must assume.

I sought to translate theory into practice and evaluate its effectiveness and I believe I was able to do this differently than an outside researcher. One university-

based researcher has even said that "what the teacher does not achieve in the classroom cannot be achieved by anybody else" (Britton, 1987, p.15). My knowledge of individual students and group dynamics enabled me to make connections between past and present experiences of my students and events of the classroom. I was able to observe my students closely over longer periods of time. Furthermore, because outside researchers spend less time in a classroom and seldom experience, I suspect, the resistance that can occur over time to any school task, no matter how student-centred, teachers are better able to devise long-term pedagogical strategies and adapt them to keep them fresh. In addition, the presence of a researcher in a classroom, either as a participant or an observer, changes the workings of a classroom, however positive that effect might be. My inquiry took place in a natural context amidst the clatter and clutter of everyday classroom existence.

I prefer to see knowledge generated by teacher-researchers as complementary to the knowledge of university researchers, rather than an "either-or" proposition. While I may have used many of the same methods of outside researchers and added other tasks to my teaching, I feel that I used those procedures differently, for my own purposes, and to generate a different kind of knowledge. Adding research onto teaching meant that the two roles often fused, just as the knowledge of researchers and the knowledge of teacher-researchers ideally becomes integrated.

Just as the implementation of process-writing programs required a focus on classroom management (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1986; Atwell, 1987), the creation of reader-based programs needs a similar approach. Process writing caught on more quickly in the classroom partly because it had the advantage of a classroom-tested model developed by Graves (1983), which imitated the process of professional writers. At a conference, I once heard Donald Graves jokingly over-simplify his model as "write on Monday, conference on Tuesday, edit on Wednesday, revise on Thursday, and publish on Friday." While this approach has been adapted and extended by others, initially it offered teachers a way to get started on changing their pedagogy without the necessity of understanding its theoretical foundations. There has been no comparable model for reading, partly because a greater understanding of reader-response theory and the invisible forces that work against it are required to make classroom strategies work. For example, personal response logs and small-group discussions are messy, and teachers need a certain way of looking at reading to appreciate what is happening

in them. Remember what my colleague said about the transcript in the previous chapter (p. 5). Even enshrining the personal response in a process-English exam is no guarantee that teachers will accommodate that in their teaching; they need to know why the personal response is valuable.

In addition, I believe that a comprehensive teaching model for reader-based pedagogy is probably not possible. It is more likely that a variety of strategies is necessary, but all guided by one philosophical stance on the part of the teacher -- that readers should "own" their reading. Pedagogy informed by reader-response theory will be diverse and, at times, messy; however, teaching that is not theory-based is unlikely to provide for the different ways readers make sense of texts. Through the best of intentions, teachers can underestimate how seriously they undermine students' faith in their abilities to interpret a text, and even, in some cases, to read when they interpret texts for their students. Certainly, the crucial issue for me was simply to look at reading differently, to see it as an active, meaning-making process that varied from one individual to another. It then became a matter of finding ways to encourage, support, and react to those multiple interpretations of a text. In other words, once the theory was in place, the pedagogy gradually fell into place. Also, I needed to be aware of the invisible hindrances to learning, such as the deficit view of students.

Bridging the Gap with Teacher-research

The term teacher-research implies two tasks, and my experience has been that they are dual roles that often merge. Essentially, I combined many traditional approaches of qualitative research with classroom strategies that I normally used and found that sometimes they blended completely, sometimes they were complementary, and sometimes they were totally separate. Interestingly, my method of inquiry imitated the problem I was investigating -- the problem of aligning reading theory with teaching practice, or integrating the knowledge of researchers with the knowledge of teachers.

Teacher-research is a singularly effective way to change practice. As one of the earliest supporters of teacher-research, Lawrence Stenhouse (1985, p. 93), said, "It is not enough that teachers' work should be studied, they need to study it themselves." In spite of curriculum requirements and restraints, in the real world of the classroom, teachers have a surprising amount of autonomy in planning how and what they will teach. A well-informed teacher is therefore desirable.

I have already described the need in the research literature for classroom

studies that delineate the nature of interactions between teacher and students and the features of classroom management that support a reader-based pedagogy. In the four case studies that follow, I have tried to capture the decision-making processes based on beliefs, questions, observations, reflections, hunches, and flashes of insight that I, like most teachers, used daily and that formed much of the substance of my pedagogy. An essential part of my teaching is evaluating its effectiveness, something that most teachers do spontaneously, often during the course of a lesson. This project can be considered a sustained evaluation of my reading program through an elaboration of four of my students' responses to it during one and, in two cases, two school years.

The qualitative research literature is full of attempts to redefine terms like "objective," "generalisability," "validity," and "replicable." These are issues that need to be considered; however, it is the subjectivity of qualitative research that is its strength, and teacher-researchers, studying their own problems in their own classrooms to find their own solutions, are the most subjective of research instruments. Teacher-research is based on the notion that knowledge is subjective, complex, value-bound, interactive, and composed of multiple meanings. It is not even a matter of seeing "the world in a grain of sand" because it is possible to have a thorough knowledge of a particular situation without the certainty that it applies to all situations; it is still knowing. More importantly, knowing how, rather than what, to know is another kind of knowledge and one that is especially valuable to teaching which, after all, is a constant process of adaptation, of altering ideas to make them fit individual contexts and individual students.

Once again, this is the kind of insight that exists in narratives. My research is about telling the stories of four students; I am the narrator and they are the characters. The "evidence" which forms the story line is infused with my interpretations, my biases, my beliefs, my construction of events, and my ability to recall my time with these students. This is a certain kind of truth -- the truth as seen from one particular point of view -- but is it any different than the every-day truth we base our lives on? We interpret and reinterpret everything that happens to us. In fact, we live the way we read, each of us evoking our own poems on the text of life.

What follows is my selective, reflective descriptions of my students' growth in reading. This version of their biographies as readers is as true as I can make it to my knowledge of them as individuals.

Chapter Three

Jeffrey: Changing Identity

Reading as a Way of Being

The first time Jeffrey told me, "I read for facts," I didn't realise how much of himself was contained in that brief statement. As most teachers know, it is not unusual for adolescent boys to prefer content reading to literary reading. In Jeffrey's case, however, this preference was much more than a matter of taste; because of it, he considered himself a non-reader and, therefore, an outsider in school where literary reading was stressed. He viewed school as a place where he was not completely accepted, and his reactions to most reading and writing tasks were guarded and minimal. I began working with him through his preferences and succeeded in getting him to do some reading and writing. Initially, Jeffrey wrote brief detached responses to the stories and poems we read in class and carefully avoided creative or expressive writing in which he would have to reveal more of himself. Instead, he wrote only transactional pieces that were essentially collections of facts. Eventually, I realized that I had to do more. As will become clear as his story unfolds, I had to find ways to go beyond **doing** to **being**, to find ways for him to **be** a reader,

Of course, doing and being are connected, but Jeffrey showed me the importance of the latter. I hadn't appreciated how intensely personal reading was to him; it was a form of language use as intimately connected to his identity as speech and writing. While helping Jeffrey to read and write interesting texts was a worthy pedagogical goal, I also needed to recognize that identity and self-esteem were the essential issues in Jeffrey's development as a reader. Until he saw himself as a reader and developed the voice of a reader, he made no meaningful progress in school. By meaningful, I mean that he had no lasting awareness of becoming a more proficient user of language. It is impossible to exaggerate how excluded from the life of the classroom he felt when he saw himself as neither a reader nor a writer. What follows is the story of his changing perspective on himself and of my changing perspective on his needs.

A History of Failure

Jeffrey had two very good reasons not to be a reader or a writer. First, he had one eye that was badly crossed, in spite of surgical attempts to correct it, and he was only able to read for short periods because the printed page became blurry until he

rested his eyes. Secondly, he had severe problems with reading and had to cope with his slow rate of decoding and his inability to commit spelling patterns to his long-term memory. Like many children with this kind of learning problem, he struggled through elementary school and, in his own words, "was put in every special program that you could think of."

His lack of success caused him much unhappiness and frustration and, not surprisingly, he became a behaviour problem who, by his own admission, often "got in fights." He cheerfully told me that he had often sworn at the principal of his elementary school, and these descriptions of himself were confirmed by other children from his school. In fact, one parent who knew him refused to put her child in my class because he was in it. Jeffrey correctly believed that his poor conduct in elementary school and his grades, that were "so low, you wouldn't believe it," were the reasons for his placement in my class of learning-disabled students in his first year of high school.

He had compounded his difficulties in elementary school by strongly resisting most attempts to encourage him to read and write. Although he said his teachers told him that he'd "gotta do it, gotta do it," he spent many remedial periods stalling and putting only a few inconsequential words on paper. He described these efforts as "half a page that went 'and' and 'the'" that he would "hand in and never do again." Certainly, he was a very weak reader and writer with a troubled past when he arrived in my class, a twelve-year old with a reading age of grade-two.

Connecting Jeffrey to Reading

Jeffrey described reading as "boring," "not interesting," and something he felt "not very good about." Early in the school year, like many members of the class, he found an opportunity to take me aside and nervously tell me, "Um, I can't read out loud. I can't understand the words when I read out loud." I quickly assured him and everyone else that they would never have to read aloud or share their writing unless they wanted to. Although the fear of having to read aloud was banished, he continued to demonstrate his reluctance and discomfort with reading with sighs, grimaces, and a slow trudge to the carpet where we read novels together in class.

Helping my students through as many novels as we had time to read together was an essential part of my language arts program. My students chose the books we read as a group from an available selection of multiple copies by voting; I or a volunteer-student read the book aloud while everyone followed with their own copies.

While Jeffrey did not decode every word of the text himself, he was able to live in those books and to participate in the ideas of the authors. In turn, those books lived in him and became part of his reading fabric, which was rather thin when I met him.

Acquiring knowledge of books was one way to help Jeffrey to feel like a reader and gave him ways to make connections to other books.

Jeffrey claimed that he had never read a book that was as engaging as a television program and, indeed, his subdued reactions to many novels confirmed that. Figure 1 is an entry from his response log on the novel, *Five Days of the Ghost* by William Bell, and is best described as a minimal compliance with a teacher's request. This was characteristic of Jeff's responses to works of fiction, a genre he did not care for. However, he knew that I wanted to read my students' opinions, feelings, and associations rather than plot summaries, and so he wrote a brief, guarded speculation. I must admit that I found such a limited reaction disappointing and, sometimes, even questioned the value of having my students keep response logs.

Figure 1- Response to *Five Days of the Ghost*

This is the best chapter yet.

I thought the ghost would
kill them, but he was friendly.

Chapter 6
This is the best
chapter yet. I thought
he was going to kill them
but he was friendly.

While this was a modest beginning, his positive response was qualified by the phrase "the best chapter yet" and he revealed some engagement with the text by commenting that the "friendly" ghost surprised him. I felt that asking for personal responses was an investment that would eventually pay off. It was a way to stimulate reflection, create an opportunity to find something appealing in a text, and to validate individual connections to reading. Jeffrey had to care about his reading before he could explore it.

It is interesting to compare this response to a response to a work of non-fiction, *Incident At Hawk's Hill* by E.C. Eckert, based on the true story of a six-year old boy who wandered away from his farm in Manitoba in 1870, got lost, and was looked after by a female badger who had lost her pups. Jeffrey liked that book for two reasons --

because it was a true story and because it was about a boy who was an outsider.

Figure 2 - Response to *incident at Hawk's Hill*

Ch. 1

This chapter had far more action than the prologue. Like when Ben took the mouse's head and put it in his pocket. At first people came from miles away to see the boy who talked to animals. The town's people, including the priest said that he was too strange to be near any of their kids. Ben's parents know that the people were not coming to see them, but to see their son.

Ch 1

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The child in the story, Ben, was socially awkward and got along better with animals than people and he was not someone with whom parents wanted their children to associate. Clearly, Jeffrey could relate to this character and this connection was reflected in his responses, which were more effusive than his reactions to other works of fiction. He was able to make interpretations and judgments, and to support his views with evidence from the text.

Jeffrey was even more enthusiastic about *Never Cry Wolf*, by Farley Mowat, another work of non-fiction. He began with two unqualified, positive statements and went on to make a tentative connection to the book through a movie he had seen which "sounds like the same name." This connection enabled him to anticipate events and motivate him to read the book to see if he was right. Further evidence of Jeffrey's enjoyment of the book is found in his drawings which appeared spontaneously in his response log (Figure 4).

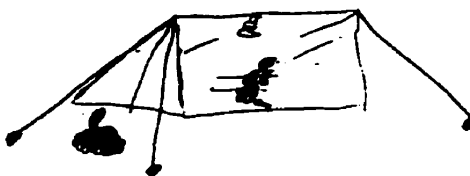
Figure 3 - Response to *Never Cry Wolf*

Never Cry Wolf

I like the book. It is a very good book. I have seen a movie similar. It sounds like the same name. If I'm right, in the end there is a white wolf.

~~Never Cry Wolf~~
I like the book.
it is a very good
book. I have seen
a movie similar
it sounds like the
same name. if its
right the end
there is a white
wolf.

Figure 4 - Farley Mowat's Tent



As I have already said, my students chose the novels we read in class, and although *Never Cry Wolf* proved to be a successful selection, it was not a book that I would have chosen for my struggling readers. The language was extremely difficult for them, because Mowat imitates the pompous, vacuous style of writing used in the memos he received from the bureaucrats in the government ministry that employed him. The satirical nature of the language escaped my students who found it puzzling and irritating. But, by reading the book aloud in class and by providing them with explanations of the most challenging passages, they were able to "read" the book. Also, the ecological theme, the humour, and the many compelling events of the book kept them interested. But, more importantly, because they wanted to read the book, they were prepared to struggle with the language.

Certainly, Jeffrey enjoyed reading these two "non-fiction" novels, and some of that engagement made it onto paper. Once he was able to connect reading in school

to his preferences and interests, he contributed more to class discussions and, to me, he appeared to be part of the group.

Connecting Jeffrey to Writing

Jeffrey's preference for non-fiction had brought him a measure of success in school, which helped his development as a reader and a writer. In his first year in my class, he passed geography, a subject he enjoyed; therefore, during his second year with me, he was not required to repeat the course, and together we worked out how he spent those free periods in his timetable. Jeff suggested that he continue a project on the planets he had begun the previous year. I readily agreed, but felt that he needed to renew his sense of purpose and audience for this task, which he would be working on independently. The beginning of the grade-seven geography course orients the

Figure 5 - Neptune

Neptune
Most of Neptune is
made up of gas.
The gas layer is
900 km thick.
The next layer is ice
and it is 7500 km thick.
and The core is made
up of ice and rock
and it is 8000 km thick.
Neptune is the windiest
planet in the solar system
the winds on the
planet are 325 km per
second.
Just like Jupiter
Neptune has a
great black spot on it

Neptune

Most of Neptune is made up of gas. The gas layer is 900 km. thick. The next layer is ice and it is 7500 km. thick and the core is made up of ice and rock and it is 8000 km. thick. Neptune is the windiest planet in the solar system and the winds on the planet are 325 km. per second. Just like Jupiter, Neptune has a great black spot on it.

earth in the solar system, and I have a collection of reading material on that topic in my classroom. Jeffrey was familiar with these resources and decided to write a project that would contain some new information about the planets that was not already in the class library.

Jeff's enthusiasm for this undertaking was evident in his attitude and conduct. He enjoyed working independently and appreciated that I had placed a great deal of trust in him. Although he worked in the school library during the senior lunch period when it was a busy place full of distractions, he was able to focus on his task. He found his own sources from which he harvested information on his topic. At the end of the period, he always returned with part of a piece on one of the planets for me to edit.

Figure 6 is a sample of his writing on the planet Neptune and is a collection of facts on the planet that he selected from material on a CD-ROM. He provided little context for this information; it was presented simply because it was new and interesting to him. This writing sample also illustrates Jeffrey's difficulty with transcription, a common problem for learning-disabled students. He was painfully aware that his writing was weak and difficult for other people to read, and usually the task of editing it overwhelmed him.

To aid this process, he decided to type his subsequent drafts on the computer so that he could use the spell check and make other changes more easily. I include one of those samples (Figure 6) to show that even on a computer, transcription was still a struggle for him; however, when motivated, he was prepared to face this challenge.

One of the most important aspects of this project for Jeffrey was that he finished it, a rare experience for him. Any piece of writing he did required a great deal of effort

Figure 6 - Mercury

Mercury

Mercury is the closest planet to the
sun. It has no moons. Mercury has a temperature of
5,500 ^{degrees Celsius} ~~degrees celsius~~. You may think it is the hottest
planet but it is not Venus is hotter ^{than} ~~thn~~ Mercury.
Mercury is ^{hot enough} ~~hot~~ to melt zinc.

and determination and was a constant struggle against the frustration that often thwarted his attempts to write. But, Jeffrey's motivation for this project was strong and he persevered with this writing task. Under certain circumstances which accommodated his taste for non-fiction, he could design, execute, and complete a

writing project with interest and enthusiasm.

By using Jeffrey's preference for non-fiction, I had found ways to get him to do some reading and writing. Although his interest in *Never Cry Wolf* and his planet project was genuine, I sensed that something was still missing. As long as reading and writing were merely school activities that fulfilled more of my purposes than his own, Jeffrey would not become a reader or writer. Real progress depended upon his feeling that he was a reader and a writer, and I knew that he did not consider himself either. I realised too that I had to go beyond finding pedagogical strategies to motivate him; I had to change his image of himself.

Discovering Jeffrey's Perceptions of Himself

Jeff's responses to the reading-attitude questionnaire I gave my students confirmed my impression that he still did not like to read. As I said earlier, he described reading as "boring," "not interesting," and something he felt "not very good" about. His dislike of reading puzzled me because I knew that he could read books on auto mechanics. The most lasting mental image I have of Jeff is of him striding into class with a mighty tome on car mechanics, borrowed from the school library, tucked under his arm. Indeed, on several occasions, he had shown me passages and diagrams in these books that had helped him and his uncle to solve specific problems on cars they were repairing. Jeffrey spent most week-ends working in his uncle's garage, repairing cars and rebuilding an old Corvette. In fact, his mechanical skills were much appreciated by the other students, who soon made him the class handyman; he ran the VCR and solved their computing and other technical problems. It was clear to me that his mechanical skills and his literacy skills were not entirely separate.

I decided to talk to him at length about his past and present reading experiences both in and out of school. During an hour-long conversation which touched on many of his reading habits and memories, I believe I found the answer. To reduce his complex history to a single sentence, Jeff was convinced he wasn't a reader because he didn't like literary reading which he equated with school reading. In other words, to him, his kind of reading -- non-fiction -- didn't really count as reading, since most of his school experiences had taught him that it was not valued as much as literary reading. Jeffrey did not feel like a reader because he did not read fiction. When I asked him why his favourite place to read was a garage, he explained,

Well, uh -- I don't read for fun. Like -- most of the people here, they have novels that they read for -- enjoyment! I read for facts. So, if I find what I was looking for, I will do it.

Certainly, this came as no surprise to me, but what I hadn't appreciated was the intensity of his feelings and how different and how separate he felt from the rest of the group. His sense of alienation, for the same reason -- his preference for non-fiction -- began in elementary school. When describing why he disliked reading in elementary school, he said,

My school library was boring. It did have some books on car mechanics, but you're not allowed taking them out -- They didn't want you to. You had to take out books on little old Mother Goose or something.

It's hard to believe that the rules of his elementary school library were so rigid, but whether or not he was allowed to take out the books he wanted is not as important as Jeff's perception of the situation. He felt that he was supposed to be reading stories or poems, not the books on car mechanics that he wanted to read; therefore, in his own mind, he was not a reader like his classmates and felt like an outsider to the group. It struck me when he talked about his past that I might have increased his sense of exclusion by using the very barrier -- non-literary reading and writing -- to get him to read and write in my classroom. He might even have unconsciously interpreted my efforts as yet another "special program" for him. I wondered how I could convince him that he could, in fact, read and how I could turn doing into being.

An opportunity arose during our conversation. Jeffrey described a magazine for truck drivers as his favourite reading material and the only "book" he had read more than once. With great enthusiasm, he related anecdotes about truckers who had been stalked by bears while stopping at the side of the highway and others who had had their tires shot and punctured by the police for traffic violations. I urged him to bring these wonderful stories into class and share them with his peers. Although he was sure initially that "they wouldn't like them," I persuaded him.

A few days later, I watched with pleasure from a distance as several boys gathered around his desk to look at his magazines. One of them asked to borrow one. Later that day, Jeff placed them on the shelf of the class library reserved for my students' own books that they were willing to lend to their classmates.

This was truly a turning point for Jeff. Once he saw that his kind of reading was

Shortly after we discussed his reading, Jeff finished his project on the planets and decided on his own to write a car repair manual that would help people troubleshoot problems with their cars (Figure 7). I am certain that this writing stemmed from the validation of his reading in the classroom and was proof that he felt secure enough to bring his life outside of school into school. This was another project that he initiated, approached with enthusiasm, struggled through a long editing process, and completed with satisfaction. More importantly, he established his own reasons and audience for his writing.

This was a topic he truly owned. Some of it he wrote with the help of the books he had read, but most of it he wrote from his own knowledge and experience. His manual contained an introduction to car mechanics and sections on rockers, the choke, compression, brakes, and the cooling system, as well as lots of plugs for his uncle's garage. Figure 7 is the first draft of the section on the cooling system and was

Part Three

Cooling System

It is what keeps your engine cool at all times, but if the radiator is shot, your engine can overheat.

The way to tell if your radiator is shot is by checking to see if the grill on the radiator is green.

Art Jhee

Cooling Sys Tem

in all cars there is
a radiator. It is
with the engne
cool at all times,
but if the Radiator-
is shot your engne
one over heat,
the way to
tell if your
Radiator is shot is
by checking to see
if the grill on
The Radiator is
green.

Radiator
Grill
Engine
Hose
Water Pump
Charging System

written with authority, coherence, and clarity. He drew the diagram himself from memory. Throughout the entire project I hear the voice of an expert, of someone with special knowledge to share with others, and that was a new experience for Jeffrey in writing. This change in tone is particularly obvious when his car repair project (Figure 7) is compared with his planet project (Figures 5 and 6).

My sense of Jeff's increased confidence was confirmed several weeks after our conversation when he took an even bigger risk in writing. Often, I began the writing period by asking my students to free write for ten or fifteen minutes. Jeffrey usually sat and stared around the room during this activity, or worked on his projects, and so I was surprised the day he handed me a very moving piece of free writing (Figure 8) he had done and asked me to read it to the class. I still have difficulty reading "My Favourite Place" without tears in my eyes. He took us all to the place he liked most to be and told us exactly why he enjoyed being there. Jeff created a very powerful picture for us,

Figure 8 - My Favourite Place

My Favourite Place

I would like to be in a garage where I like to do what I like to do, -- where if I want silence I get it, where I can get up and walk around when I want, not when a bell goes off. I like the smells of a garage. I like to have grease under my finger nails. I like to have a tool in my hand. I like to hear the radio while the air gun leaks air. I like the feeling of fixing a car or truck. I'd like to design a piece of machinery that will really work.

My Favorit Place
I ... would like to be in
a ... garage where I like
to ... do what I like
to do ... where if
I want silence I
get it, where I
can get up
and walk a
round when I
want not when
a bell goes
off. I like the
smells of a
garage. I like
to have grease
under my finger
nails. I like to
have a tool in
my hand. I
like to have
the radio
while the air
gun leaks air.
I like the
feeling of
fixing a car
or truck. I
like to
design a
piece of machinery
that will
really work.

and we experienced his sense of freedom, heard the sounds of the garage, and felt the tools and the grease he used. More importantly, he included his personal satisfaction from repairing a car and his hopes for the future. I believe it was the first time he had revealed so much of himself in writing.

Jeffrey used his background and experience to create a different kind of text -- the expression of personal meaning. It is a reflective piece of writing in which descriptions of the sights, sounds, and smells of the garage mingle with personal feelings and aspirations. He realised that he had defined himself on paper and, also for the first time, liked what he had written well enough to share the first draft with the class, revise it, and submit it to the anthology of student writing from all the high schools in our school board. He was very excited when this piece of writing appeared in this publication and reached a wider audience. Writing was now a way for him to connect to other people.

Jeffrey's growth as a writer continued. Although he had remained firm in his resolve never to write "a story" throughout his first year in my class, he eventually overcame his inhibitions about this kind of writing in his second year when he wrote a fairy tale (Figure 9). It was this piece of writing that suggested to me that he really had left behind his past as a non-reader and non-writer. The inspiration for "The Wolf with a Cold" came from reading *Never Cry Wolf* and the class discussions of the book. Like Mowat, Jeff portrayed the wolf as a misunderstood victim. The class had talked about the poor image of the wolf in literature and found many examples in fairy tales and Aesop's fables. On the surface, the context in which Jeff's fairy tale was written was yet another commonplace demonstration of a writer drawing upon his knowledge of other texts. His reading was transformed into writing; however, in Jeff's case, the relationship between reading and writing was more complex. He had to feel like a reader before he could write like a reader.

According to Jeff, he had never written a fairy tale before and yet, in this piece of writing, he showed that he was familiar with many elements of the genre. He used animals as characters and the repetitive format of consulting a series of animals for a solution to his fictional wolf's problem. In addition, he satirised the expected behaviour of a wolf when his wolf unintentionally blew down the chicken's house by sneezing. His story, however, went beyond copying a pattern. For example, he subtly removed his wolf's threatening qualities by making him sick with a cold. All he wanted was a

can of chicken soup to make him feel better, but the other animals were too frightened of him to help him. His humorous touches also helped to make the story his own when the wolf naively asked the chicken for some chicken soup and when the wolf returned home with the soup to watch a football game.

Figure 9 - The Wolf with a Cold

The Wolf With a Cold

One day a wolf was chopping wood for his fireplace. He sat down on a log and dozed off. He woke four hours later coughing and sneezing. He went into his house to make some chicken soup. He looked in the cupboard for a can, but there was none. So he decided to ask his neighbour. You see, he lived in the country and his neighbour is miles down the road. He got in his put-put car and went down the road -- put, put, put pow! He got to his neighbour and knocked on the door. The little chicken came to the door and saw the wolf and said, "What?" The wolf said, "Do you have any chicken soup?" The chicken slammed the door in his face. But before he turned around he went, "Ah-ah-choo!" and the chicken house was blown to the ground. This happened for the next four houses and his last hope was the weasel. He said he had some and went to get it. When he came back he said, "That's one sorry cold!" and closed the door. The wolf went back to his house and had some soup in bed watching football.

The Wolf With a cold

One day a wolf was chopping wood for his fireplace. He sat down on a log and dozed off. He woke four hours later coughing and sneezing. He went into his house to make some chicken soup. He looked in his cupboard for a can but there was none. So he decided to ask the neighbour. You see he lived in the country and his neighbour is miles down the road. He got in his put-put car and went down the road -- put, put, put pow! He got to his neighbour and knocked on the door. The little chicken came to the door and saw the wolf and said "What?" The wolf said "Do you have any chicken soup?" The chicken slammed the door in his face. But before he turned around he went, "Ah-ah-choo!" and the chicken house was blown to the ground. This happened for the next four houses and his last hope was the weasel. He said he had some and went to get it. When he came back he said, "That's one sorry cold!" and closed the door. The wolf went back to his house and had some soup in bed watching football.

If he possessed many of the tools to create a fairy tale, why did he wait until his second year in grade seven to write one? It was a sure sign to me of his increased

comfort in school that he was willing to take the risk of exploring this kind of writing. He wrote other "stories" during the remainder of the year and also began to read works of fiction. While the reader-writer connection remains ephemeral, it is clearly highly integrated. Jeff had to become a reader before he could become a writer, and once he began to write fiction, he became interested in reading it.

Figure 10 - The Dragon Reborn



one of the men are sleeping out side
but his sleeping bag caught fire and
he died.
they were in the pub

The Dragon Reborn

One of the men are sleeping outside, but his sleeping bag caught on fire and he died.
No one saw this because they were in the pub.

Another interesting feature of the previous two writing samples (Figures 8 and 9) is that they were done in cursive writing. I have already described Jeff's difficulty with transcription, which is obvious in all of his writing samples, but as he became more interested in writing, that too improved. Although I had gently suggested to him that printing his work might prejudice his readers unfavourably, particularly his other teachers, he appeared unconcerned about it. Like Jon, Jeff switched to cursive writing after completing a first draft and the burden of composing was lifted from writing.

Becoming a Reader and a Writer

Jeffrey reminded me of a child who had learned to walk without crawling; he had omitted some of the steps in learning to read and write and was repeating the process and including the missing steps. Jeffrey's willingness to explore expressive

and creative writing were ways of filling in the gaps and, also, signs that he was beginning to feel like a writer; but, first, he had to become a reader. When Jeffrey found his voice as a reader through validating his tastes and purposes for reading, sharing his impressions with an interested audience, and, in fact, owning his reading, he joined the reading conversation of the classroom.

During Jeffrey's last term in my class, he declared himself a reader even more boldly by choosing to read a novel of seven hundred pages. In February, when cabin fever was at its peak, I tried to reduce the strain of being in school by providing my students with as much choice as possible. For a month, they each selected their own novel to read and wrote several responses to it per week. Jeffrey enjoyed the "Wows!" from his very impressed peers when they saw him reading such a thick book. He seemed to be saying, "Hey, look at me! I'm a reader!" After years of being an outsider, he could not conceal his pleasure in joining the club of readers. The length of his novel was not its only significant feature; it was fiction -- a fantasy novel, *The Dragon Reborn*, by Robert Jordan. Jeffrey kept an enthusiastic response log on this book, with lots of drawings with captions (Figure 10). He knew that I had not read the book and he was therefore careful to relate a coherent summary of the plot and kept urging me to read it. Jeffrey decided to write about this book for one of our e-mail projects in which we exchanged book reviews with students in schools throughout the province of Quebec. I had expected him to discuss a book on car mechanics because we had talked about the importance of recommending books that we really cared about. I noticed that he said he was reading the book because I required them to read a book for a month and wondered whether he was really as enthusiastic about the book as he appeared. Perhaps he was just carrying out a school task or sampling another genre in reading. After the end of February, he continued to read the book in class during reading periods; however, at the end of the year, he hadn't finished it, and I asked him if he wanted to borrow it for the summer. When he declined, I concluded that this book was part of school to him, although an important element of his improved attitude toward school.

Again, his new outlook had an impact on his writing. Jeffrey drew upon his experience of reading *The Dragon Reborn* and decided to write his own fantasy story (Figure 11). Obviously, he had absorbed many of the features of this particular genre, as well as many stylistic features of fiction in general. Jeff invented the name, Arind,

for his main character that had an appropriately Celtic ring. In the first draft of this piece, Jeffrey's choice of words revealed the influence of his reading. For example, "eighty-four years later..." revealed his familiarity with a device for showing the passage of time. "The door hit the wall with a bang" and "He shone the light from left to right" were elaborate ways of stating ordinary actions. These phrases also represented a departure from Jeffrey's usually unadorned style of writing, which is striking when compared with "The Wolf with a Cold" (Figure 9).

As Jeffrey's confidence and competence improved, he was willing to try other kinds of reading, and this led to similar gains in writing. Jeffrey's progress demonstrated the interdependence of reading and writing and how closely these forms of language use were linked to his identity. Jeffrey did not become a full participant in the social enterprise that reading and writing formed in my classroom until it included his kind of reading -- non-fiction. But, had he really changed his self-image and had he really become a reader of fiction? Perhaps, I was observing merely surface changes, a willingness to experiment. In a different situation, would he continue to read fiction or return to his shelter of reading and writing "facts?"

Figure 11- Arind's Castle

Arind's Castle

Arind's castle is in England.

Arind was a king who had servants and was very, very greedy. Arind was in his garden when an arrow hit him in the heart. He died instantly.

Eighty-four years later...

Arind was a ghost who scared everyone out of the castle. A 5 year old named Andrew opened the front gate. "Eeeeeee!" The door hit the wall with a bang. Andrew jumped. He took his flashlight. Andrew shone the light from left to right.

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A Closer Look at his Reading

Jeff's interest in the expressive and poetic modes of reading and writing were signs that he had changed his view of himself as a reader and writer. But it was not enough to look at the artifacts of his literacy -- his paper trail and his changed behaviour; more specifically, these artifacts were his response logs, his writing folder, and his increased confidence and participation in school. I wondered whether Jeffrey read non-fiction differently than fiction and wanted to get inside his head and know exactly how he interpreted a text. Of course, this was not possible, but I hoped that a "RAP," a respond-aloud-protocol, a method of observing an individual's reading process, would provide more clues about how Jeff read. I asked Jeffrey to describe what he was thinking as he read a passage from a novel and then a passage from a geography text about the polar regions of the earth. I stressed that there was no correct way to read the texts and that I was interested in his reactions to his reading to discourage him from anticipating and fulfilling his perceptions of my desired responses.

Jeffrey's RAP was one of the rare occasions during which I heard him read aloud, and it told me several things about his reading. His lack of fluency did not result in a lack of comprehension; although he had stated many times that he did not understand the words when he read aloud, he appeared to make sense of the passage, in spite of his halting manner of decoding and his failure to recognise some words. Also, he read aesthetically, or used his own experiences and associations to interpret the text. Unlike Fiona, however, the literary reader in the next chapter who made many personal connections to her reading, Jeffrey behaved like a detective looking for clues on which to base his response. In addition, he read carefully and self-consciously, using the text to check and revise his impressions as he read. The following passage is from *The River*, by Gary Paulsen, and the words that Jeffrey did not recognise are underlined.

Brian opened the door and stood back. There were three men, all in dark suits, standing on the front porch. They were large but not fat, well built, with bodies in decent shape. One of them was slightly thinner than the other two.

This is what he said about the above passage:

There's people standing on his porch. They're "Feds?" (long pause) That's usually how they dress. (pause) The suits. (very long pause)

I asked him why the "Feds" would be there.

'Cause he's a criminal. Brian is a criminal. And the men are wearing dark suits. He continued to read:

"Brian Robeson?"

Brian nodded. "Yes."

The thin man smiled and stepped forward and held out his hand. "I'm Derek Holtzer. These other two are Bill Mannerly and Erik Ballard. Can we come in?"

This is what he said about the above passage:

He did something wrong 'cause they want to see him, but they're being kind to him. They tell him their names. They don't pull out their I.D. and say 'Come with us.' They're talking politely. But, he's a kid. He probably did something wrong.

In this short excerpt, Jeff began by simply stating the bare facts of the first paragraph, but then went on to show that he was able to analyse his interpretations as he formed them. He made judgments about the three visitors and supported all of them, including his speculation that Brian had probably done something wrong "because he was a kid." The slow, expressionless tone of voice in which he read, suggested that he was preoccupied with the effort of decoding the passage, and I was surprised that his response was so rich.

Jeffrey found the geography text even more demanding and had more difficulty decoding it. This is what he read:

Few areas in the world are as harsh and desolate as the North and South Poles and few are as beautiful. For much of the year both areas are freezing cold, with fierce winds and thick snow and ice on the ground. As it grows colder even the seas freeze. Not many animals live here. Some species, however, are hardy enough to live, breed and find food in the open wastes. Their bodies have specially adapted to the constant cold.

He misread nine words and also ran several sentences together because he missed the punctuation. This is what he said about the above passage:

This tells you that one pole -- the South Pole -- is cold and the other Pole has plants on it, but it's still freezing cold. (long pause) It's still freezing cold.

(pause) Even when the plants are there? (long pause) I don't know -- It doesn't say -- but the pictures say that.

The two pictures he referred to were one of an iceberg in the summer sea off

Antarctica and another of the Arctic tundra in bloom. Interestingly, his first reaction was to interpret the photographs, but he quickly realised that they did not correspond to the paragraphs he had just read. Although he did not reinterpret the passage, he checked his response against the text and recognised that he had made an error. Catching him in the act of correcting himself revealed an important element of his reading; he was not a skimmer, but a careful reader of "facts." Jeffrey reasserted his preference for non-fiction after reading both kinds of text saying:

One is fact and one is false. Non-fiction is fact. I like non-fiction better because it's true.

Perhaps this preference led him to approach both fiction and non-fiction similarly, but not identically. Jeffrey built his interpretations of both texts carefully, one step at a time; he looked for information, weighed it and altered his perspective accordingly. His "aesthetic" process was logical, clear, and almost "efferent."

The surface features of his reading -- the number of errors, the stumbling monotone -- completely concealed his painstaking process and sound comprehension. His inability to read aloud fluently may also have contributed to his view of himself as a non-reader. In fact, I had to encourage him from time to time to keep reading during the RAP. Listening to him dramatically illustrated the reasons why reluctant readers like Jeffrey live in terror of having to read aloud in class. Although it is common knowledge that reading aloud and reading silently are separate skills, lack of competence in the former too easily creates negative impressions of a reader's capabilities that become labels in school. The activities that took place beneath Jeffrey's halting and miscues, however, showed that he was making sense of both the fiction and non-fiction texts. The formal features of his reading paralleled those of his writing -- poor spelling and layout -- and masked his ideas. But, how often do teachers see beyond these aspects of reading and writing when dealing with this kind of student? Weak oral reading and badly transcribed writing can be mistaken for the sum of this kind of student's knowledge, instead of the vehicles for their knowledge. Teachers have to look beyond these surface characteristics of reading and writing to evaluate this kind of student, particularly in secondary school where teachers often focus on the content of their subject in brief fifty-minute periods, and a "one size fits all" mentality can too easily develop.

Signs of a Reader: A Test Score, a Haircut, and a Poem

Of course, I was looking for indications that Jeffrey had made some lasting changes in his awareness of himself as a reader, and there were several -- his reading age, his haircut, and his writing. Every year, my students were tested by the same special education consultant to determine their reading age. The first year that Jeffrey was in my class, his reading level was grade two; the second year, it was grade six. While such "measurements" do not tell teachers how to help reluctant readers, only that they need help, I interpreted this change in his score as proof that he had been helped. A more interesting development was his change of hairstyle. When I first met Jeffrey, he had very long bangs that I assumed he used to cover his crossed eye.

In his last term in my class, he suddenly appeared one fine spring day with a brush cut and, presumably, a clearer view of the world. More importantly, the world had a clearer view of his eye -- a sure sign that he was feeling better about himself. And there were others; he had become an active participant in class discussions, asked questions, did his homework, and started passing in math.

Figure 12 - Lonely Life

3
9
1

lonly life

I mening me am a hobo. I am consiterd trach. I slither
around. finding work. I hape on the train and get a ride. I
mening me a hobo do not easpt chruoty. I mening me a
hobo use to be like you. I had a home, I had a famoly. I
lost it all. I mening me a hobo the last of them , a dieing
cind. I mening me a hobo hope to one day i have what i
once had be for. I mening me usto have a person to say i
love you. All that is gone lost in the sower like the rest of
the my sad and lonly life. I mening me am a hobo i am not
respeted I am spit on and ridiculd.

During the first term after he left my class, he submitted a poem to the school's literary magazine for which I am the staff advisor. The first draft of "Lonely Life" (Figure

Figure 13 - Lonely Life, revised

Lonely Life

I – meaning me – am a hobo.
 I am considered trash.
 I slither around finding work.
 I hop on the train and get a ride.

I – meaning me – a hobo –
 Used to be like you.
 I had a home, I had a family.
 I lost it all.

I – meaning me – a hobo –
 The last of them, a dying kind.
 I do not accept charity.

I – meaning me – a hobo –
 Hope to one day have
 What I once had before.

I – meaning me – a hobo –
 Used to have a person to say I love you to.
 All that is gone, lost in the sewer
 Like the rest of my sad lonely life.

I – meaning me – am a hobo.
 I am not respected,
 I am spit on and ridiculed.

12) is barely recognisable as a poem because his poor spelling and organisation

obscured his powerful and moving ideas. After two lunchtime editing sessions with him, he produced the revised version (Figure 13). Placing the two drafts side by side dramatises the amount of effort required to interpret his writing. How easy it would be to ignore the content because of the form! This sensitive description of an outsider was written by someone who had clearly been one, but went far beyond Jeffrey's personal experiences; he drew on his imagination for many of the images he created. I was overjoyed that Jeff had chosen writing as the means of expressing those feeling

What Did I Learn from Jeffrey?

Jeffrey shows the importance of having a passion for a subject, which in his case was car mechanics. It is likely that his personal drive for information combined with his personal practical knowledge contributed to his ability to read extensively on that topic. Since reading is a cumulative activity in which success breeds more success, Jeffrey became a reader partly by reading trucking magazines for pleasure outside of school. But school was, in fact, his problem, and his experience underlines the role of context in literacy.

In spite of being able to solve car-mechanics problems with a book, the demands school made of him made Jeffrey feel like a non-reader. He was a non-fiction reader in a fiction world. I was aware of tastes and tried to work with them, but I nearly missed the crucial feature of his preference -- identity. Although he said he preferred non-fiction because "you can't see yourself in non-fiction," it was through non-fiction that he gradually saw himself as a reader.

Success in content reading led him to try other types of reading and writing, through which he discovered and reinforced his sense of himself and considerably overcame his outsider status. Jeffrey dramatically illustrated the connection between reading and writing; once he felt like a reader he became a writer. These experiences made him realise that he was literate and, when he chose to be, literary, and this change had a positive impact on his performance in school.

Jeffrey's story offers some insights into the relationship between aesthetic and efferent reading. I suggested in Chapter One that when embedded in the context of the text they are more separate than when they are embedded in the context of a reader. Yet, as a reader, Jeffrey kept them firmly separated and in doing so raises the question of how this difference actually resides in both readers and texts. I do not believe that they are as separate as they appeared to be in Jeffrey. Because of Jeff's

negative previous experiences in elementary school, they formed an unbalanced part of his reading context as he became resistant to reading fiction.

Jeffrey's growth in reading is based on many of the same factors as those of the case studies that follow; however, unlike Jon (see Chapter Five), decoding and spelling were not major issues in Jeffrey's mind, although he was weak in both, spelling in particular. In spite of this, he was able to concentrate on making meaning and satisfying his own purposes in both reading and writing. When he cared about a piece of writing, he would work on improving the conventions. Like Jon, he liked to express his thoughts in drawings. Although he did not talk about it as much as Jon, it seemed to form an important part of the way he made meaning, and Jeffrey's detailed pictures often transcended the need for words. He sometimes asked to respond to his reading in art rather than writing, an often neglected form of expression in school. Before I knew Jon and Jeffrey I used to permit my students to draw, provided they also wrote about their drawing. I now realise how redundant this is, rather like writing about writing.

Certainly, Jeffrey needed to receive credit for what he was able to do before he would take the risks involved in trying to do more. Finding his strengths and, most importantly, making him aware of them, meant listening carefully and watching closely. Pursuing pedagogical strategies simply set the scene for the drama of discovering what his needs were.

The next chapter is devoted to Fiona, whom I consider a foil to Jeffrey. She was a literary, but not a content reader. When I first met her she seemed to have all the interest and enthusiasm for reading and writing that was missing in Jeffrey. And yet, the key to Jeff's success would not unlock the door to Fiona's problems, and I did not succeed in helping her to extend her taste for poetry, fiction, and creative writing to reading and writing non-fiction. In spite of her love of English, she remained a very weak student in other subjects, which made me question the relationship between the ability to read and academic success.

Chapter Four

Fiona: Insisting on Choice

Is it Enough to be a Reader?

When I was an elementary-school teacher, I had a lot of faith in the power of reading, especially literary reading. Children who got a joke in print, turned pages anxiously to find out what happened next -- in fact, became engrossed in a book -- appeared to be launched. I felt sure that once they had tasted enough of the pleasures of reading, they could pursue it on their own, and that they would be able to handle most of the challenges they would face in school. This naive belief was reinforced by the obvious correlation between reading and competence in elementary school, where the focus is on growth in reading and writing. I assumed that children would develop the ability to transfer their reading competence from one context to another, and in fact, if reading were simply decoding, that would have been true. When I moved to a high school and was teaching my small grade-seven class of students with learning problems, I noticed immediately that weak reading was at the heart of most of their difficulties and I, therefore, concentrated on turning my struggling students into readers.

Fiona was one of my students whose needs were different. She arrived in my class with a reading age of grade-seven and a very obvious love of books, but nevertheless, her performance in other subjects remained lacklustre. Fiona was the opposite of Jeffrey -- a literary reader but not a content reader. Knowing her made me look harder at the relationship between literary and content reading while trying to answer the question that dogged me most all year. Why couldn't this reader do well in school?

Since I considered reading an integral part of academic success, at the beginning of the year I was confident that Fiona would be one of the few students in my class who would be able to catch up and go to grade-eight the following year. But, as time passed, my initial impressions were gradually eroded, and I watched her slip further and further from that goal. Sadly, in the end, I had to recommend that Fiona repeat grade-seven in the regular program, and I tried to overcome my sense of failure by learning more from her about what it means to be a reader.

Fiona showed me how poorly I had understood the concept of transferring reading from one context to another. If reading were merely decoding, it would

happen automatically. But, reading is a more complex way of making meaning that varies among individuals according to their unique combinations of background and experience. As I had done with Jeff, I had to look closely at Fiona's world and at how reading fit into it.

Clues from Fiona's Past

Although she was a reader, Fiona's history in school was not untroubled; she had learned to read later than her peers and still carried the scars from that delay. Besides difficulty with spelling, she seemed to live in a mirror image of the world. Fiona stapled papers together at the wrong corner, punched three holes along the wrong side of the page, replaced books on a bookshelf with the spine-end first, and always reversed the ">" and "<" signs in math. On tests and exams, she answered questions with those signs orally. All these things told me that she had overcome a lot to become a reader.

When I talked to her about her development as a reader, Fiona described how she had struggled to learn to read in grades one and two and provided me with considerable insight into her early difficulties in school. At this point, I shall risk oversimplifying her problems by summarising what she told me, to provide a sense of direction through the details of Fiona's reading history that follow. Briefly, because she "didn't like it at all" and "didn't want to do it at all," her parents "forced" her to read "every night for an hour," which made her "mad." While her parents deserve much credit for their efforts and concern, clearly, these experiences stayed with her and the passion in her voice when she spoke of them revealed the strength of her objections. Fiona also recalled having to read "baby books" both at home and at school that she didn't choose herself and found boring. Although she came to love reading, she enjoyed it only when she could do it on her own terms. Choice was the missing element of Fiona's first encounters with reading; her fierce resentment of being told **when** and **what** to read remained with her years later.

In grade seven, Fiona chose to read only poems and novels, and it seemed that she was used to inhabiting the imaginative space reading provided and luxuriated in the pleasures of getting lost in the fictional landscape. To her, non-fiction texts had a much narrower focus and were usually selected by someone else for her to read. Content reading was something she was "forced" to do, usually in school, and it is impossible to exaggerate how strongly she resisted any suggestion of obligation

where reading was concerned. Ultimately, I realised that this selective approach to reading was at the root of her problems.

What follows is an account of Fiona's reading habits and of her own and my perceptions of what shaped them. We worked together to construct the best version of events that we could. As with all four case studies, the description of her reading is composed of selections from her interviews, her respond-aloud-protocols, her writing samples, and my classroom observations. These have been woven together to tell her story, unlike Jeffrey's, in an episodic, rather than a chronological way. Whenever possible, I used her own words to let Fiona speak for herself and I checked my final interpretations with her.

A Portrait of a Reader

At the start of the school year when I was getting to know my new class, I quickly realised that I could count on the tiny girl with the long red hair and freckles for interesting comments on whatever we were reading that would go far below the surface of the text. She soon became a reliable catalyst for class discussion, and I often found myself waiting for that flash of engagement in Fiona's green eyes that signalled her penetrating contributions. It was obvious that she enjoyed talking about literature, and she was good at stimulating reactions from her peers and responding to their views. Initially, I even wondered why she had been placed in my class and checked her file for a behaviour code, but didn't find one.

One of her favourite activities was responding to poems in small discussion-groups. Her enthusiasm was infectious and she was usually instrumental in organising a dramatic reading of the poem being considered in her group. Often, she seemed totally immersed in and excited by what she found in the poetry. This made her stand out in that group of students, most of whom groaned whenever I told them we were "doing" a poem -- until they realised that it was strictly an oral activity, with no writing and, even better, no homework.

Early in the year, Fiona shared her poem, "Imagination" (Figure 14), which she had written the previous year in grade-six. It was a very good way to introduce herself to the class and it told me that she was not only a reader, but a writer of poetry, a unique attribute in that group. While this poem is not overtly about reading, it could only have been written by a reader. Her knowledge of the form and conventions of poetry was obvious, and her subject suggested that Fiona had certainly experienced

Figure 14 - Imagination

Imagination
 When I'm sad
 and all alone,
 I use my imagination.
 I close my door
 to the outside world
 leaving my worries behind.
 I close my eyes
 and tell the world
 behind the door to go,
 as I dream a world
 that has castles
 built out of snow.
 I dream snow is falling
 all around
 as I dance on the ice cold
 and peaceful white ground.

the soothing refuge readers seek in literature, which was a powerful reason to read. Also, the picture she created of herself dancing carefree in the snow surrounded by ice castles had the unmistakable features of a literary landscape. When Fiona discovered the small collection of books in the class library on unicorns, she began to devour them. After she finished them, she found others in the school library, her local library, and her friends' bookshelves to satisfy her craving. The subject of unicorns revealed another interesting feature of her reading. She was definitely a "binge" reader, a pattern that had begun in elementary school. For many years, she had been obsessed with penguins and had read *Mr. Popper's Penguins* over and over. Even in grade-seven, she still considered it "the best

book [she had] ever read" and read it once again that year. Although she had moved on to unicorns, Fiona maintained some loyalty to penguins. As with Jon and Jeff, a

Figure 15 - The Valley of the Unicorns

The valley of the unicorns
 There is a place in nature's grace
 where unicorns run wild
 they are as free as life can be
 in the valley of the unicorns
 where life is sweet as it can be
 as they lay under an apple tree
 to sleep and to lay in a maiden's
 lap as soft and sweet as a baby
 or a small child.

The Valley of the Unicorns
 There is a place in nature's grace
 Where unicorns run wild.
 They are as free as life can be
 in the valley of the unicorns,
 where life is sweet as it can be,
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passionate enthusiasm for one subject probably helped her to learn to read. Fiona's writing folder had many poems in it; for most of one term, it was the only genre in which she chose to write. "The Valley of the Unicorns" (Figure 15) is one example, and as

her reference to the maiden's lap in the unicorn legend shows, it was shaped by her reading.

Her Reading Shapes Her Writing

Fiona was able to enter the world of a poem she liked and to connect it to her own experience; her enjoyment of poetry thus stimulated her to write expressively. She was unusual in this and demonstrated her capacity to be moved by poetry in a piece of free writing that was done after discussing "Field of Vision," a poem about old age by Seamus Heaney. I rarely asked my students to write their responses to poems and, if I did, it was usually an open-ended request to react to what they noticed most about the poem. Fiona's response is entirely personal; she saw her grandmother in the poem and wrote fluently about a moving experience she had shared with her. I have included her original writing sample (Figure 16) to illustrate other important features of her writing. Her spelling problems were not as severe as those of other members of the class; aside from minor errors, only the most difficult words, such as graduation, were misspelled.

Figure 16 - Response to "Field of Vision"

Well this poem makes me think of my only grandmother. When I was a baby, she promised my sister that was only at the age of four that she would be there at her graduation from high school. The time passed fast and my sister was graduating from high school, so our family went to see her graduate and when my grandma saw my sister up there, she cried, a smile on her face. I looked at her and began to cry too, for I was very proud of my sister and I was glad my grandma was there to share it, for I don't know what I'd do without her. I love her so much.

~~Will this poem reminds me of my grandmother when I was a baby. She promised my sister that was only at the age of four that she would be there at her graduation from high school. The time passed fast and my sister was graduating from high school, so our family went to see her graduate and when my grandma saw my sister up there, she cried, a smile on her face. I looked at her and began to cry too, for I was very proud of my sister and I was glad my grandma was there to share it, for I don't know what I'd do without her. I love her so much.~~

Although it was a piece of free writing, she edited her writing in four places to make her meaning clearer. She changed "reminds me" to the more colloquial, "makes me think of"; added "only" in front of grandmother to stress her importance in Fiona's life; replaced her sister's name with "my sister" for those in her audience who didn't know

her sister; and improved the verb tense by substituting "was graduating" for "would soon be graduating." In this and other situations, Fiona appeared to be a fluent writer with a growing critical stance, since she was clearly rereading her work and listening to her own language.

As with Jeffrey, Fiona's reading and writing were tightly intertwined; each activity influenced the other. But, unlike Jeffrey, Fiona was able to articulate how she read and how her reading affected her writing.

Figure 17 - The Burning

The Burning is an excellent book. I like it because I like books about olden times and witches and other things and because I find it very interesting and very good. I read *The Betrayal*, *The Secret*, and the last book in the saga is *The Burning*, the book I'm reading now. Even if I have read it before, I still wonder what's going to happen. I think when you read the same book over you're not reading the same book because you get different thoughts and questions and it makes the book different in a way. I give *The Burning* so far, five stars. I can't wait to read more of the book and be inside the book.

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This writing sample (Figure 17) was an entry in her response log and it revealed how self-consciously she read. It contains the words of a passionate reader who, in her own words, read to "be inside the book" and realised that she had "different thoughts and questions," although she had read it before, that urged her to find out "what's going to happen." This representative sample of her reactions to her reading demonstrates that while Fiona was a reflective reader, her perceptions are concerned mainly with her own taste, satisfactions, and pleasures. Her entire log on this novel described how much she liked the book and the effects it was having on her. The text

is a springboard for her own thoughts, feelings, and memories.

R.L. Stine's books were another of Fiona's passions. As I explained in the previous chapter, when cabin-fever strikes most Canadians at the end of winter, one of my strategies to reduce the stress of being in school is to offer my students as much choice as possible in English. Fiona read several of this author's thrillers and recorded her reactions, opinions, and questions in a log. Elements of these books, while not expressed directly in her response log, had been internalised and came out in Fiona's writing. Reading R.L. Stine inspired her to write.

She wrote "The Occult" while she was reading *The Burning*. Her first draft began with the excerpt in Figure 18. Fiona drew upon elements of her reading to write this piece. She found her topic easily, introduced the genre, the setting, and the nature of the conflict economically, and added the character's curiosity and nervousness to create suspense. In the opening passage, Fiona used the language and imagery of the book when she wrote "shelves of dust covered books," and "she gasped for breath," and, also, when she included descriptive details such as "the dust blew around her as if a cloud of white light," and "the yellow pages of the old book." Again, the editing she did to the first draft of "The Occult" (Figure 18) indicated that she was listening to her own language as she wrote, presumably to see if she liked what she heard. Fiona was able to reflect on her reading, distil many elements of it, and reshape them into a new piece writing.

Figure 18 - The Occult

She crossed the room that led to the shelves of dust covered books. Where was she, she wondered. "Oh," she thought, as she looked around at thousands and thousands of books, "Why doesn't it look like anybody has been in here for a long time." She picked one up and blew the dust off. The dust blew around her, as if a big white cloud of light. She gasped for air. "Oh," she thought, "I didn't realise it was that old." She read the title out loud, "Spells of the Devil's Cults." It brought chills up her spine. Why would the library have such books? She thought she'd look through the yellow pages of the old book. Spells about possessions and potions...

The Occult

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Fiona later explained what it meant to her to write like a reader. A long time after she composed "The Occult," I asked her whether she thought reading influenced a person's writing. This is what she said:

If you read a lot, I think you have a stronger personality for writing. . . . Well, if you read and you pick up all the words and you like what you hear, then you can write something like that and you have a stronger sense of what to write and how the writer writes things. And a person who doesn't (read), well, they do fine, but I think they aren't as strong as a person who likes to read. You need to read to be able to write. . . . I think that what you read -- When you read something you like and it influences you and you write a whole different thing on it. You write like the author of the book. Well, you read it so much that you start writing like him or her.

Although she wasn't referring to a particular piece of writing when she said this, I think Fiona could have been analyzing her own writing process for "The Occult." She was trying to pin down the very abstract process of internalising aspects of reading and turning them into writing and she was careful not to describe this process categorically. Interestingly, Fiona felt that students who didn't read much could still "do fine" in writing but wouldn't be "as strong" in writing as readers. To her, reading made the difference between very capable and merely competent writers.

Unlike most members of my class, Fiona talked, behaved, read, and wrote like a reader, and, also, reflected on all of these activities; she was both literate and literary. However, her success in school was limited to English, and there appeared to be no transfer of her ability to read and write to other subjects, in particular, math, geography, and French. Certainly, there was no transfer of her enthusiasm for English. I wanted desperately to know why in order to help her.

Since Fiona was definitely a reader with very particular tastes and satisfactions, I began to wonder whether the intense, private pleasures she enjoyed as a reader set a high standard of response that prevented her from becoming equally engaged with other kinds of text. Lack of interest and motivation in content subjects seemed too obvious and too simplistic an explanation; there also appeared to be some active resistance. Clearly, her present attitudes were rooted in her past, and while her reading history confirmed my initial impressions and contributed to my understanding of her problems, unfortunately, it did not provide me with the solutions I sought.

Her Past As a Non-reader

It came as no surprise to me, to learn that Fiona had struggled to learn to read. What did surprise me, after I got to know her, was how much she had disliked reading initially. In two interviews during the year in which she was in my class, and in another a year later in which I checked my interpretations with her, she described how negatively she felt about the way she had learned to read.

I didn't like it at all. In grade one, I wouldn't read a book at all. They made me read. . . .

On another occasion she said:

In grade one or two -- I didn't like it. I just really hated it. I had to read every single night for an hour. My parents made me read. I got mad. I didn't want to do it. I got mad and I argued with them -- Yeah, I just didn't want to do it back then. They would sit there and make me read to them for an hour and I just didn't want to do it.

And on another occasion she said:

I just wish I could have did it by myself instead of being forced to do it. Let me have my own time to do it, do it myself instead of them pushing me to do it. I could have did it by myself.

Being forced to read was a recurring theme of Fiona's, and her tone of voice on the tape conveyed the depth of her negative feelings about it. Whether or not her parents really were unduly zealous in their attempts to get her to read is less important than her perceptions of the situation. In fact, when I asked her whether she would have learned to read on her own, she admitted that forcing her had helped her to learn and that she was a reader today because of her parents' efforts. However, she had disliked that process very much, and her personality was such that her negative feelings were intense and long-lasting.

Interestingly, Fiona did not attribute her difficulties in reading to a learning problem. She never referred directly to one in any interview. In her view, she "wouldn't" rather than "couldn't" read, and her more positive self-image was a strong contrast to those of most of her peers. Only once did she say "couldn't" when she described how she pretended to be able to read a book, *The Little Mermaid*, to impress her peers.

I ordered it -- for reading week, and everybody's like , "Oh wow! You're reading

that? And you're only like in grade two!" And I was like all proud. I didn't even read it -- I couldn't.

She briefly alluded to having a "low reading age" on one occasion and to being "weak in reading" on another occasion, and both of these statements were, in fact, comments written on her elementary school report card. Another aspect of her early struggle with reading that she made only the slightest allusion to was the isolation she experienced in her family. She was the only child with reading difficulties; her siblings, who were close in age, "liked to read." Avoiding specific references to her learning disability may have been more than self-protection. After all, Fiona saw her past through the spectacles of her present, when she had become a reader. Knowing that things had turned out well for her may explain this omission in her description of her past, as well as her belief that all the fussing and forcing had been unnecessary.

Choosing Her Own Books

Fiona's most potent and enduring impression of learning to read is that she was compelled to do it, and that she would eventually have done it on her own. Fiona had a very clear idea of what her first reading experiences could have been like. Her favourite reading experience from elementary school was reading to children in grade one when she was in grade six, and she described how she worked with a boy, named Michael, who didn't like to read.

I said, well you pick a book you like -- well, he didn't want to read the book I picked and I said to him, well, you pick a book that you like and I'll read it to you. And then, if you want to read, tell me and he read -- Well, in a way we picked baby books, but books we liked. I liked them too. I let him pick any one he wanted and then I would read it to him and see if he would read it after -- Well, he got to do what he wanted to do. He got to choose a book instead of being told to read this one. And he didn't have to read unless he wanted to. I didn't force him to do anything.

This was a gentler, more holistic approach than the one taken with her, and she saw this as an improvement on her own experiences.

Well, it was kind of nice -- not letting them make the mistake I made -- not making them read. You would read to them and they would read to you.

According to Fiona, Michael came to like reading because of the way she had dealt with him and also, because he was "not as stubborn as [she] was." Besides not forcing

him to read, Fiona avoided the other negative aspect of her learning to read, by letting Michael choose the books they read. To Fiona, reading a book of her own choice was equally important and closely linked to being forced to read. One of the reasons Fiona believed that had she been "left alone," she would have "picked it up by [her]self," is that eventually she found herself in a grade level where "they had good books." Her first reading material was another source of her resistance.

I just didn't like them. I didn't want to have anything to do with them. They would make me come home with books like Mr. Mugs or something. There was really nothing to those books. . . . Just very stupid I found them and it was like -- it was like too easy to read and then the second grade you would go to and everybody else was reading something good and you were stuck with that. I got to choose a book once in a while, but we didn't have much to choose from. The rest of the time it was Mr. Mugs. They only had two books of it. You had to read the same books over and over again.

An eloquent plea for good and varied reading material of your own choosing, right from the start! Again, it is hard to believe that she actually read the same two basal readers over and over; rather, it is her lasting impressions of her early years in school that matter most. She extracted the essence from this part of her past and applied it to other readers. Fiona also believed that choosing their own books was important to students at all grade levels, and that students who didn't read probably didn't like the books they were offered.

I wondered if these two issues -- being forced to read and not choosing the text -- were influencing her approach to content subjects and so I asked her if reading geography books reminded her of her early reading experiences. She replied:

Yeah, I am being forced to read it because you know you have to read it anyways. Well, you have to pass it. It's the only reason. If I had my way, I wouldn't do it.

It is not surprising that passing a test was inadequate motivation to read for someone who had experienced the joys of real reading. But she indirectly raised the question, did reading always have to be fun? I risked espousing a "hold your nose and do it" philosophy and asked her if she thought being forced to do something was always a bad thing. When she admitted that sometimes it could be "good for you," I pressed my advantage and reminded her that she had been forced to read and now she was a

reader. How did she explain that? She replied:

Well, I don't think it can be explained. I don't know. It's just weird. Some people who are forced, like to read. Some who read first, don't like to read. Some who aren't forced like to read too. It just depends what kind of person you are. . . . You can't force somebody to do something if they're not ready to do it.

These wise reflections were the rebuke, though unintentional on her part, I needed. In my determination to help her, I was looking for neat answers, and what Fiona seemed to be saying was that life was too messy for that. There had to be other factors. As for "what kind of person" she was, Fiona had often described herself as "stubborn," as did two of the teachers she had after leaving my class. The issues of choosing both to read and what to read were at the heart of her problems in school, and I couldn't help seeing her more clearly through these lenses; however, I had to be careful not to eliminate all of the blur caused by other influences.

Ingrained Resistance

Knowing Fiona convinced me that often we see only what we are looking for. I was looking for readers and in Fiona I recognized someone who defined and understood herself through reading. Of course, I had noticed her resistance to math and geography, but it wasn't until after we had talked about her past that I also saw some resistance to literary reading, particularly to the novels we read together in class. Although the class had selected these books by voting, Fiona considered that they had been imposed on her.

There was a pattern to her reactions to each novel, a progression from complete rejection, to gradual engagement, to complete approval and enthusiasm. Her entries in her response log on *Five Days of the Ghost* by William Bell illustrated these features. As a matter of course, she began her responses by saying how much she disliked the book. This book was dismissed with little explanation. Its main shortcoming seemed to be that it was not written by her favourite authors, whose work she preferred. But, gradually, almost in spite of herself, she started to make predictions, to become curious about what would happen next, and to examine her own ideas. It was clear that the story had started to have an impact on her when it made her think about whether she believed in ghosts.

Figure 19 - Response to
Five Days of the Ghost (1)

I don't like the book at all. It doesn't get my attention and is really boring. Maybe if we read into it more it will be better than the last two chapters we read. I like better books like Fear Street by R.L. Stine and Christopher Pike books and some other books.

five days of the ghost sept 7:
I don't like the book at all. It doesn't get my attention and really boring. Maybe if we read into it more it will be better than the last two chapters we read. I like better books like Fear Street by R.L. Stine and Christopher Pike books and some other books.

As we read on, many of her hunches were confirmed, and her own life fused with that of the main character. Also, Fiona was never too stubborn to reverse her judgment of a book and, in this case, was so enthusiastic that she looked forward to the next class novel.

Figure - Response to *Five Days of the Ghost* (2)

I think the Indian in the cemetery was a ghost. I was glad Karen took the bag. I wonder what's in it. I don't know if I believe in ghosts. Maybe I do and maybe I don't. I think I like the book a bit. I wonder if John will go back to the cemetery or if he gets caught for trespassing on the island trying to get to the cemetery.

five days of the ghost sept 7:
I think the Indian in the cemetery was a ghost. I was glad Karen took the bag. I wonder what's in it. I don't know if I believe in ghosts maybe I do and maybe I don't. I think I like the book a bit. I wonder if John will go back to the cemetery or if he gets caught for trespassing on the island trying to get to the cemetery.

Fortunately, Fiona was unable to withstand the lure of a good story for long.

Figure 21 - Response to *Five Days of the Ghost* (3)

I was right. The ghost was Kenny. The clinking sound and the thumping was Kenny playing with his toys. Karen was the first to figure it out and when she told John to hold up the picture to the mirror, it said "Kenny" on it. I thought Karen was going to cry. I felt bad for her and I would go crazy if one of my brothers died, because I'd miss him and nobody could replace him and plus, I love them even if I don't show it. But they know it. I wonder if Chief Copegog will go to the other side. I hope so. It's a great story. At the beginning of the book I thought it was boring and stupid, but now it's one of my favourite books. I wonder what we will be reading next. I hope something as good as this book.

Sept 22/75 *five days of the ghost*
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 the clinking sound and the thumping was
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 first to figure it out. And when
 she told John to hold up the
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 boring and stupid but now it's
 one of my favorite books. I wonder what
 we will be reading next. I hope
 something as good as this book.

This pattern was repeated with other novels. Her first impressions were negative; for example, *Never Cry Wolf* was "the worst book by Farley Mowat" that she'd read, and *The Great Gilly Hopkins* by Katherine Paterson was "boring" because the main character was "a brat" who "really wants attention."

By the end of Mowat's novel, Fiona was able to appreciate the book as a whole,

in spite of elements that disappointed her (Figure 22). She was highly involved with the text and, therefore, able to reconcile her ambiguous reactions and make a positive

Figure 22 - Response to

Never Cry Wolf

I really liked the book.
It's interesting, but I
didn't really like the
ending as much. I don't
know why. It's just not
what I thought it would
end like. I thought he
would live with Mike and
Otea because the plane
never shows up and he
lives with the wolves.

Never Cry Wolf

I really liked the book it was interesting
but I didn't really like the ending as
much. I don't know why it just
not what I thought it would end
like. But I thought that he would
live with Mike and Otea because the plane
never shows up and that he lived with
the wolves. I really liked the part when
he first met Mike and got really close
even that he knew wolves weren't dangerous
to people and dogs and bigger animals
or when angles these fairly mammals
some grilling it was really funny
because I thought it wouldn't be
that hard to describe wolf's nose
because wolves have very good hearing.

judgment of the book. After finishing *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, she was so morally outraged by Gilly's uncaring mother and so sympathetic to Gilly that she wrote a passionate denunciation of Gilly's mother and then apologised for disliking the book at first (Figure 23). Fiona's feelings about the book were so strong that she started to write another, happier version of the story in her writing folder.

Figure 23 - Response to *The Great Gilly Hopkins*

Poor Gilly! How could her mother not care for her. I hate Courtney! If I was Gilly I'd tell Courtney what I thought of her. . . . The pain of her mother hating Gilly! I would rip the picture of Courtney and burn it. I think Courtney is a -- well, I won't say what I think of her, but she's a mean, no-hearted -- Well, I really liked the book. I'm sorry I gave you a hard time. You picked a great book! Thank you!

The Great Gilly Hopkins

poor Gilly how could her mother not care for her I hate Courtney. I wish Gilly I tell every what I think of her and her grandmother how Gilly had grandmother I do that to Gilly its like saying a knife thought her mom and dreamt it would be better if Gilly stayed with brother and William and me. I remember the pain of her mother hating Gilly I would rip the picture of Courtney and burn it I think Courtney is a well I won't say what I think of her but she's mean no hearted. Well I liked the book I'm sorry for giving you a hard time you picked a great book thank you!!

Figure 11 is the beginning of this story which was composed while the heat of her anger at a character in a book, Gilly's mother still burned. Although she never finished it, Fiona's urge to write it showed how personally involved in the book she became. Her reading was transformed into writing for different reasons. She wanted to create a story that would satisfy her needs as a reader. This sketch of Gilly and her mother was further evidence of Fiona's need to be affectively engaged with reading and writing and, more importantly, of the crucial role such engagement played in her learning.

Figure 24 - Gilly's Life

Gilly's Life

It was 1985. A woman and a small child about the age of three were walking down the street. People stopped and stared at the beautiful child, for she looked as pretty as her mother, with her mother's blond hair and blue eyes. Her mother loved her child with all her heart. She loved her so much, she had to give her up for a better life. She was very sad about this and worried for her daughter, but she hoped it would bring her daughter a better life in some way.

Gilly's life
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 about the age of three were walking down the
 street. People stopped and stared at the beautiful
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 she loved her so much she had to give her up for a better life
 for her daughter. She was very sad about this and
 worried for her daughter but she hoped it
 would bring her daughter a better life
 in some way.

Fiona seemed able to know only what she could connect to. On one occasion, for example, her personal involvement in a topic overcame even her resistance to a content subject.

Transferring Her Enthusiasm

Although Fiona had no interest in reading geography books, she prepared a project in that subject with surprising energy and enthusiasm. When I grew tired of watching my students try to locate Brazil in Asia and China in Africa, I looked for an interesting way to increase their knowledge of the map of the world. I asked the class to select any country in the world that they wanted to know more about, had always wanted to visit, or had a connection with through family or friends and to assemble a

"kit" on that country in a shoe box. For their collections, they made a set of cards, rather like baseball cards, with pictures on one side and explanations on the other, as well as maps, charts, and lists of facts about the location, culture, climate, resources, landmarks, and main geographical features of their chosen country. They also found artifacts from the country, such as money, stamps, flags, and products. The idea was to capture the flavour of the country in a box and to present it to the class, explaining why they had included each item. This project had the advantages of requiring some reading, but little writing, and also some informal public speaking. Accounting for their information and artifacts made them select them with care, and the oral presentation put pressure on them to understand their choices and be ready to answer questions.

Most of my students appreciated the flexibility they had to choose their country and to investigate those features of it that interested them, and they approached the project positively. Few of them, however, matched Fiona's ardour for this assignment. Her father's family had come from Ireland and she collected an abundance of material on that country. She explained to us the significance of the colours in the Irish flag, the coat of arms on coins, the pictures on stamps, certain Celtic designs and symbols, the Book of Kells, the Blarney Stone, and the meanings in English of a list of Gaelic words. When she talked about the importance of potatoes to the Irish, Fiona passed around a bag of potato chips for her peers to share. There was also a musical component to her presentation; she played a short tune on an Irish tin whistle, and a tape of a folk song and the Irish national anthem. It was an outstanding effort on her part and proof that in the right circumstances her enthusiasm for a content subject was unbounded.

Reading the geography book and passing tests based on it were another matter for Fiona. She was unable to make any connections to that text, which can be described as "user friendly," with headings, highlighted words, diagrams, charts, and maps, and which was greatly enjoyed by Jeff and other members of the class. Fiona, however, remained committed to her position that it was "boring" and something she wouldn't read "if [she] had [her] way." Since she had demonstrated that she was willing to change her mind about a novel and that she was not opposed to geography projects in principle, I decided that Fiona was not simply being intransigent. It seemed that without a personal connection, reading meant nothing to her.

Limits to Fiona's Reading

A project was only one of the ways I encouraged individual responses to

content reading. From time to time, I asked my students to free write about their existing knowledge of a topic before we read the text and then to free write about the new knowledge they had acquired after reading the text. However, Fiona's reflective journal in geography was merely a record of her attitude, rather than an agent for changing it. What follows (Figure 25) is a representative sample in which she eloquently developed her own theory of mountain building before reading the text; however, after reading the text, she drew a line at the end of her first impressions and briefly summarised what she had learned in a vague statement.

Figure 25 - Mountains

I think some ways mountains are made is a long time ago in the ice age when the ice melted, there was so much water that it would put all the mud or dirt into a mountain. Then after 100 and 1000 of years the mountains get solid and rich and plants and animals start to live there on a base of the rock.

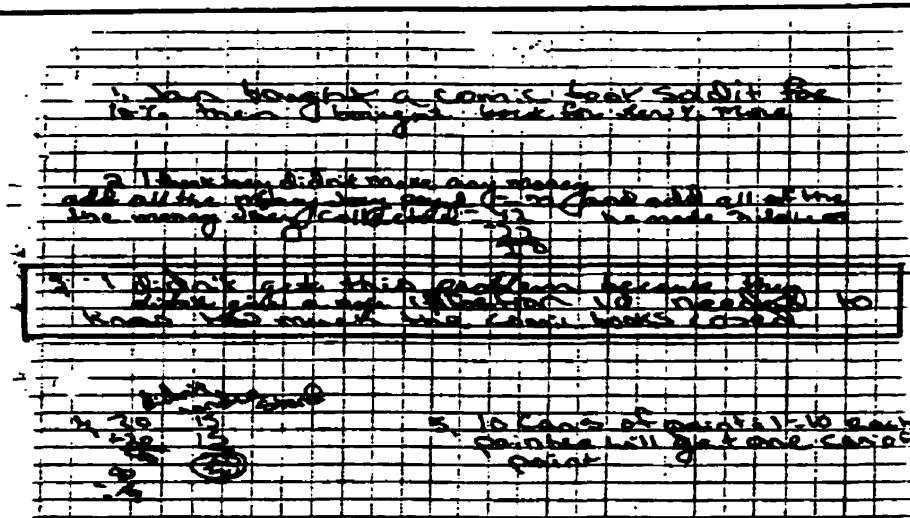
I was right but there are a lot more ways than I thought there would be.

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I was right but there are a lot more ways than I thought there would be

When I questioned her about the difference in her "before and after" responses, separated by the line, she had difficulty explaining what she had learned from the text. Those ideas were not clear to her and she was unable to be more specific verbally. Entries in her math journal were similar, as demonstrated in the following example.

Figure 26 is a page of explanations from her math journal of how she had solved a set of problems. I had asked my students to pay special attention to where they had gone wrong. Again, Fiona's comments were brief and revealed a lack of clarity in her thinking.

Figure 26 -
Math Journal



For example, she said in her third comment, in the box, that she "didn't get this problem because they didn't give [her] enough information. [She] needed to know how much the comic books cost." In fact, she was asked to find the price of the comic books. She had missed the point of that problem, as well as others on that page, and I wondered whether she was reading the math text inattentively or incorrectly. Were there other issues relevant to her content reading besides freedom of choice and personal connections? Was there something different about the way she read in content subjects? I needed to know more about how Fiona interpreted both content and literary texts.

Making Inferences from Inferences

Fiona's written responses to her reading suggested what was going through her head after she had read; I also wanted to know what was going through her head while she was reading. As with Jeffrey, I asked her to follow a respond-aloud-protocol (RAP), a process designed and used by Dias (1996, pp. 24-26), to observe her reading process. Fiona described what she was thinking as she read a passage from a novel and then a passage from a geography text about the polar regions of the earth. I emphasized that I was looking for her own ways of reading, rather than a "right" way of reading the texts, to reduce her urge to anticipate my desired responses. In the samples (Figures 24 and 25), there was no noticeable difference in the way she read the two kinds of text. While reading the following passage from "The Leaving," a short story by Budge Wilson, Fiona read fluently, without error, and made rich inferences.

We spent an hour in the public library looking at the shelves and shelves of books, surrounded by wonderful smells and idly turning the pages. Dully, she picked up a copy of *The Feminine Mystique*. She who had not to my knowledge read a single book since I was born. She said, "I read this book." I was astonished. "You?" I said. "I can read," she retorted. "If you leave school in grade five, you can read. " "Where'd you get it?" I demanded, amazed. "You remember that day a Salvation Army lady brought us a big box of clothes?" she asked. "Pa was mad and said we didn't need no charity. After a time he forgot about it. Well, there was one other thing in there too."

This is what Fiona said about her reading.

Well, she's telling her that she could read and that -- well, there's a charity box and full of clothes and that but there's a book. -- Uh, the uh, *The Feminine Mystique* (She has trouble pronouncing the word "mystique.") I don't know that word. -- Well, uh -- she read it. Well, that's about feminists? Feminism? -- Well, it doesn't seem as if they have the rights. They don't have any rights. They don't have the rights to do anything. In their family -- it's -- uh -- I think this is an old fashioned story and -- well uh, they need, -- the mother needs that book -- uh, to help her daughter.

Although she said she didn't understand the word "mystique," and was unfamiliar with the book, *The Feminine Mystique*, she was able to interpret the passage. She related the book to the life of the mother in the story and implicitly to the daughter's life. Fiona realised that reading that book had been a turning point for the mother and that it had inspired her to break the pattern of her own existence so that her daughter's life would be better than hers. These interpretations went beyond what was in the passage she read. They were partially accumulated from what preceded it, but Fiona made her own inferences that exceeded a literal reading of the text and demonstrated her competence as a literary reader.

She approached a geography text about polar climates similarly when she read the following passage:

Few areas in the world are as harsh and desolate as the North and South Poles and few are as beautiful. For much of the year both areas are freezing cold with fierce winds and thick snow and ice on the ground.

She began by making a more overtly personal connection with the content reading

than she had with the literary text. This is what she said about her reading:

I was thinking of penguins -- how they adapted to the cold 'cause they're used to the cold, 'cause they are used to it by now -- And I find since -- uh -- they -- uh -- have hardly any food to live -- well, in a way they do and in a way they don't -- well, they could get some fish, but most of them go further away.

Fiona was immediately reminded of her past obsession with penguins. This connection to the subject matter was important to Fiona even though it was not present in the text. It engaged her interest and evoked some prior knowledge of the topic, which set her up for a positive reading experience. Fiona continued to read:

The Poles were not always such cold places. Fossils of trees, plants and animals found in Antarctica show that it once had a much warmer climate. Movements of the plates that make up the Earth's surface, together with the warming and cooling of our planet over many centuries have finally brought about chilly conditions we know at the Poles today.

This passage reminded Fiona of a topic we had discussed in geography and she was able to link her impressions to her existing knowledge of the topic.

It's weird. I wouldn't think that Antarctica would have a much warmer climate. It's continental drifts? Like what we read there -- It used to be somewhere else and then it moved there -- to the bottom of the earth...Well, I just see the -- like, uh -- the middle of the earth? The plates and I just see the earth's crust, uh -- the picture in the geography book -- our green book there -- and then it moved to where it is now.

Her response to this passage contained many references to previous reading and discussions in geography which helped her to make sense of the information about the change in climate that she found surprising. Fiona knew about continental drift, but had never considered the climatic consequences of it and was able to merge this new information with her prior knowledge; interestingly, she did this self-consciously.

In the following passage, however, she was unable to do that because there was too much new information that she could not relate to her previous experiences.

The most northerly point where trees will grow is about 2300 km (1429 miles) from the North Pole. In between the tree line and the icecap, lie regions of tundra, which is rough terrain covered with rugged vegetation. The layer beneath the tundra is always frozen, even in summer.

The general inference that she made from this passage was that it is very cold in the Arctic because it is so far away.

Well, that's far. It's far away from anywhere else. It's at the bottom of the world - the top of the world, so I guess it would be colder than anywhere else.

The tree line and tundra were new concepts for her and she did not ask questions about them; she ignored them. I am reminded of my reading of the structural geology passage in Chapter One; for example, I still don't know what "rheologies" are, a concept that is not personally meaningful to me and I tried to make general sense of a passage without pursuing many of the specific details. Fiona was satisfied with her overall interpretation.

When I asked her what words in the text had caused her to interpret it that way, she said that the numbers that referred to the tree line accounted for the permafrost and were an indication of how far away the poles were which explained their cold climates. Fiona's reasons made partial sense, but skimming of this kind in content reading can cause the reader to miss specific information that can change the sense of the passage. It is not as crucial in literary reading, where the general atmosphere can be inferred from a number of details. Initially, Fiona was able to establish personal and affective connections to the text and to make some inferences, but that diminished as her personal prior knowledge of the topic diminished. In addition, she had no purposes of her own to fulfil by reading this passage.

On another occasion she told me she thought reading played a different role in other subjects than it played in English.

Well, it depends -- If you don't read, it doesn't matter to math -- In some subjects it doesn't matter as much.

Certainly, her approach to math gave the impression that she did not consider reading an important part of math; often, she simply skimmed the text, looked at the numbers, and got on with making calculations without checking to see what operations were required. If there were no personal connections to the text, she did not appear to read it. Without that critical element, there was no involvement on Fiona's part.

Fiona dramatically illustrates the impact of context on reading. This impact is more obvious in her case because she was so clearly able to read. Decoding was not an issue for her and neither was fluency in oral reading. Conversely, the lack of these problems did not guarantee comprehension.

Reading and Academic Success

I have described Fiona as a reflective, literary reader and writer with no taste for content reading and writing. Unlike Jeffrey, I was unable to use the spark from her literary pleasures to ignite her interest in other subjects. The reasons for this seemed to be rooted in her first reading experiences when she was force-fed a diet of low-vocabulary, low-interest basal readers. Memories of the social consequences of being a non-reader at home and at school were still painful to Fiona in grade seven, and with her fiery personality she appeared to continue to resist elements of her past with great stubbornness.

With profound regret, I was unable to recommend that Fiona be placed in grade-eight because of her lack of interest and low performance in content subjects. The misery that this decision caused her was terribly apparent in the first months of her second year in grade-seven. An old wound had been opened, and Fiona had many tearful counselling sessions with the support staff of the Student Services Department, and it was hard for me to watch her stomping past my doorway, her tiny body rigid with rage and frustration. On several occasions, I tried to interest her in writing for the literary magazine I had started in the school, but she always refused. She said that her writing had "dried up" and that she was suffering from "some kind of writers' block or something." And worse, as the year after she left my class went on, Fiona became a discipline problem.

What Did I Learn From Fiona?

Like all four students in this study, Fiona had a late start as a reader. She also developed a passion for certain topics, penguins and, later, unicorns, and since many of her elementary teachers recall her "penguin fetish," I assume that it played a similar role in helping her learn to read. Also, she said she read *Mr. Popper's Penguins* over and over again throughout elementary school, which would have played a role in developing a reading vocabulary, as well as comfort and confidence in reading. Interestingly, she did not mind repeated readings of a book as long as it was an interesting book and as long as she chose to read.

So many aspects of reading were in place for Fiona. For example, she drew inspiration and techniques for her writing from her reading. I have already mentioned that she read fluently, often offering to read aloud in class. She was a natural leader of small-group discussions, and her peers were always interested and influenced by her

contributions. But alas, a reader is not always a reader; context and content make all the difference.

Like Jeff, it might appear at first glance that reader-response theories tell us only about Fiona as a literary reader. In content reading, however, Fiona used appropriate strategies in trying to relate what she was reading to what she already knew. Fiona could have read the text more carefully but was not interested in the information. Her personal interests, tastes, purposes were not satisfied by this kind of reading and her background, and experience did not provide a basis for interpreting the text. Being able to read was not enough. Working with Fiona made me aware of the two-fold nature of reading; the first has to do with being able to interpret texts and the second has to do with being inspired to form a careful response.

In a less-structured context in which she could develop and pursue her own interests, as her geography project on Ireland demonstrated, she would read in a content subject. It was the only exception she made to her pattern of rejecting content reading. I believe her enthusiasm for that assignment was due to her genuine interest in the topic, to her personal connection through her relatives, and to the creative space she had in which to explore it. I began to wonder whether the program in an "alternate" school that was free from the constraints of fifty-minute periods and from the pressures of large-group routines might suit her more. Fiona needed to be able to set her own goals in learning, to have some say in her assignments and, possibly, to follow a project approach.

Clearly, such a literate student had the potential to succeed academically that was not realised in her school situation. Although my program was more flexible and less structured than the regular program, I still had to prepare my students for life in the rest of the school and had to measure them against those standards. By that I mean that they had to pass tests and examinations -- essentially, to perform on paper. My classroom was totally free of the deficit model of teaching -- the read, test, correct mistakes and misinterpretations model. Fiona needed a different context entirely, one that would support her enthusiasm, rather than wear it away. This kind of disaffection with school is common among students I have taught in "regular" programs, and Fiona was by no means unique in this regard. Knowing these students has forced me to conclude that high school as it is presently structured is toxic to too many students.

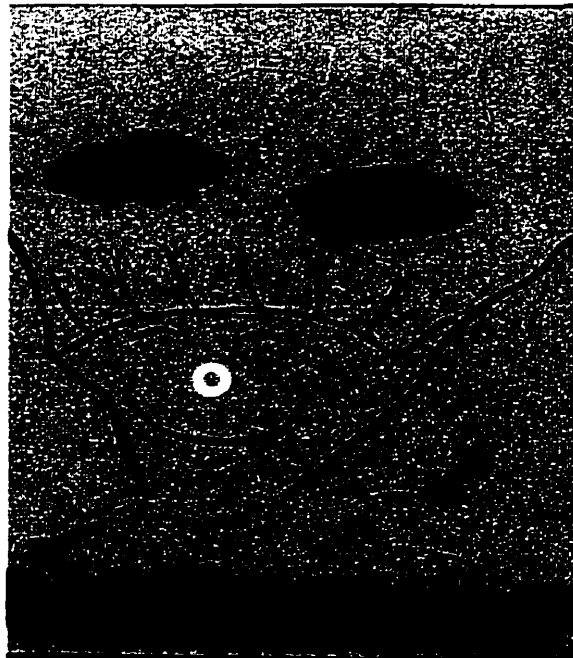
Of all the students in my class, Fiona had the literacy skills she needed to

succeed in the "regular" program, but she seemed unwilling to adapt to the structures of high school. Advocates of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1998; Shannon, 1990; Myers, 1992) would argue that Fiona should not have to make the personal sacrifice of subordinating self-fulfillment and self-exploration through reading and writing in order to achieve success in the kind of literacy practices that school promotes. She was unwilling to hold her nose and just do it. For reasons that made sense, when viewed from the perspective of her reading history, Fiona decided not to use her literacy skills to succeed in school. But her past was only a partial explanation of the complex interactions of personality, experience, and background and may be an oversimplification of her situation. Unfortunately, she may have been right when she said that the link between reading and academic success cannot "be explained."

It just depends what kind of person you are....You can't force somebody to do something if they're not ready to do it.

While she might have been suggesting that the solution to her problems lay beyond the scope of pedagogy, Fiona's advice was very difficult for most teachers, and certainly for this teacher, to accept. But I cannot help feeling that a more user-friendly learning context would make a difference to Fiona and other students like her.

Fiona's Drawing of her poem,
"The Valley of the Unicorns"



Chapter Five
Jon: Breaking the Code

Sitting on the Sidelines

When I arrived at school early one November morning, I found Jon, one of my students, and his mother waiting outside my classroom door. I could tell from Jon's taut face and nervous pacing that he had a problem. His mother made it plain that she had come along for moral support and let Jon do most of the talking. Apparently, he was having trouble in one of his other subjects.

"I just can't do that class."

"Why not?" I asked. I had never seen Jon so eager to talk.

"The teacher makes us read out loud and I can't do that. I can't read it. We also have to read our writing out loud to the class. I can't do that. I told her I can't do that. I told her I can't read out loud." He paused to gasp for breath.

"And what did she say?"

"She said, 'Just do your best. You'll get used to it.' But, I can't. I get too nervous. And we have to do more projects -- like orals -- in front of the class and I can't do that. I can't remember what I'm supposed to say. I just can't do it. I don't want to take that class any more! It's not like your class! You don't make us read out loud!"

His panic and frustration were genuine and pushing him to the brink of tears.

His mother intervened. "He's been up at night -- unable to sleep because of that class. I told him that he should talk to you about it."

Fortunately, I was able to defer to my department head who passed my doorway at just that moment. She decided on the spot that Jon could be excused from that subject for the rest of the year. He would get help with his other subjects from the teachers' aids during those periods in his timetable. Relief flooded across the faces of both mother and son, and Jon was visibly breathing more easily.

"But, we can't make a habit of this," she warned. "We'll do it just this time." My department head was clearly mindful of the concerns I had previously shared with her about Jon.

While I was sympathetic to Jon's plight, I was slightly uneasy about allowing him to opt out of a situation he found overwhelming. My worries were based on his tendency to give up on himself, a trait that had become obvious in the short time that I had known him. "I can't" summed up his attitude in school.

Jon's assessment of his abilities was understandably negative, as he was a severe dyslexic. It required a great effort on both our parts to avoid a deficit view and find some strengths to build on. He arrived in my class with a reading age of grade two, and his difficulty with reading was characterized by a severe decoding problem that he claimed prevented him from reading or even following most of the material that we read in class. His writing was also extremely weak, almost unreadable, with invented spellings that rarely came close to correct spellings. Jon's long history of failure in school had taught him to emphasize his weaknesses in order to lower the expectations and demands made of him by his teachers. He was a great contrast with Jeffrey, Fiona, and Matt (see Chapters 4, 5, and 6 respectively), all of whom insisted that they could read, but only under the right circumstances. Mostly, Jon wanted to be left alone, to be an observer rather than a participant in the classroom. Not only did he fear that he would be forced to read aloud, but, also, that he would be called upon to contribute to the discussion in both small and large groups. His extreme nervousness, I felt, contributed to his frequent absenteeism during his first year in my class.

Socially, too, Jon was an on-looker. Although his affability made his peers like him, he preferred to watch the interactions of others from the sidelines, especially if a fight or argument broke out. In the two years he spent in my class, I never saw him lose his temper once.

His good nature, however, was paradoxically the vehicle for his extreme negativity, that was entirely directed at himself. While he was not a behaviour problem, his resistance was manifested in a continuous stream of negative remarks about himself, particularly during English periods, which was his way of letting me and his peers know that he was neither a reader nor a writer. As an early first step toward drawing him into the life of the classroom, I took him aside and asked him not to put himself down publicly. I pointed out that the more he told himself he couldn't do it, the more he reinforced that belief and I compared his verbal behaviour to sticking pins in himself. Since I didn't share his opinion of himself, I didn't consider it a valid reason not to try to learn. Jon's response to this good, old-fashioned "pep talk" was to stop berating himself aloud at school and to put more effort into his written work, while remaining on the sidelines of class discussions. Whenever he slipped into his old ways of running himself down, he'd catch himself, laugh, and mime the action of sticking pins in himself.

Jon severely tested my holistic philosophy. In my classroom, reading and writing were social enterprises, and student participation was essential. Writing was shared, and comments given and received. Reading was discussed so that students could construct their own interpretations of texts, rather than recycle the teacher's views. At first, Jon was determined to remain anxiously aloof from these activities, and there were moments when my faith faltered and I wondered whether some comprehension questions might elicit more from him than the very limited personal responses he made to his reading. I was asking him to form opinions on texts that he could barely read and to record his thoughts in writing that others could barely read. I wondered too whether isolating word and phonic patterns might help him to decode. Certainly, it seemed that he could not read the "real" books we were reading in class and that I would have to compromise and offer him some simplified reading material. Luckily, I had not thrown out the school's "baby books" which were mixed in with mine in the class library. Mostly, I wondered whether my expectations for Jon were too high. In contrast with the other students in this study, there appeared to be much less to build on with Jon, who was too nervous and too negative to learn.

Gradually, however, during the two years that Jon spent in my class, he began to participate more and to acquire more self-confidence. The story of Jon's growth as a reader affirmed my belief that the demands of owning their reading must be made of even the weakest of students. By exploring his reading in a variety of social contexts at school, Jon's skills improved and, more importantly, so did his perception of himself.

Breaking the Code

When I first spoke to Jon about his reading, he was very forthcoming and direct about his inability to read. Unlike Jeff and Fiona, who claimed they wouldn't rather than couldn't read, Jon firmly described himself as a non-reader.

I have trouble reading the words -- for one thing, a reader can understand what he's reading. I can't -- Like I read it and if I don't understand the word, like I sound it out and stuff. I understand it a bit. I don't know what it means once in a while -- but if I really don't know what it says -- If I can't sound it out, I just skip it.

But, I don't understand what it's about, even if I skip words -- I lose the story. Reading for him was a painstaking process of breaking through a barrier of letters and sounds, a process that obliterated the meaning. His decoding problems were so severe that his main criterion for determining his preference in reading material was

being able to read it.

No, I don't have any (favourite) types. It's like I said -- I don't really like -- know many books. Like I don't read a lot -- If I can read it -- Yes, if I can really understand it.

He approached books with caution, as a non-participant. He never asked himself, will I enjoy this book? Will I find out what I want to know from it? His only question was, will I be able to decode it? Those vital pleasures and purposes of reading, such as Fiona's escapism and Jeff's quest for facts, were not part of Jon's experience.

His decoding problems were such a source of stress to him that Jon was emphatic about never attempting to read "thicker books." He openly chose to read the "baby" books that Jeff and Fiona scorned.

I just like to stick to, like, easy books -- Yeah, 'cause every time I read like a thick book, like words I can't understand, I don't get the story. Like, I don't understand about the story -- the story -- what's happening -- So, that's why also -- No, I can't, I can't. No. If it was a thick book, I wouldn't read it really. It would take me -- I think it would take me about three months just to get into it. I read so slow -- I tried it once -- a few pages -- but got rid of it. Too hard.

His memories of the first book that he read independently in grade four was "a tiny little book" with "pictures with words."

And words -- and then, like saying, "I am eating an apple" and you see this picture of this boy eating an apple. Mostly that.

And, unlike Jeff and Fiona, he enjoyed reading this kind of book. He considered it "fun" and said he "liked it." There was no mention of feeling ashamed of such reading material, only the relief at being able to read it.

Clearly, the inability to decode the printed page was the major reason Jon was not a reader, and this blockage even extended beyond his own reading. When I asked him if having someone read a book to him helped, he said:

I don't know -- Not much of a difference -- Well, I understand it, but it's like words that -- also -- like, I wouldn't mind what the words mean, like say, like uh, -- I don't know -- a big word -- like, uh -- I don't know -- Like it's a word I'd know, but uh -- I don't know what it means. Like, I would like to learn that. Words that I know, but I don't know what they mean.

Even when someone else read it to him, he still expected to have difficulty

understanding the text. He was very much aware of gaps in his comprehension, which seemed to be what he focussed on. This problem caused him to lose interest.

I would listen once in a while, but sometimes it would be boring and I wouldn't understand what they'd be reading and stuff -- And uh, that's all. I would be fooling around, writing little stuff and something like that -- Thinking, what should I be doing on Saturday? -- or -- Tuned right out! I would listen, but I would just get out of it. I would listen, but uh -- Twiddling my thumbs.

I wondered whether he had become so used to thinking of himself as a non-reader that he couldn't participate even when someone else did the decoding. Or, perhaps, since he had never been truly engaged with the ideas of a text, he could not experience that engagement secondhand. Reading was something he simply didn't do. His previous experiences with print had convinced him that he could not read. In addition to decoding problems, he had no interest or enthusiasm for reading and, certainly, no purposes to be satisfied by reading. His decoding problems had compounded and grown into other problems.

So, where was I to begin with Jon? Of course, his decoding barrier seemed to point toward some "drill and skill." But Jon himself described his lack of success in elementary school with that strategy which he called "set words."

Like grade three? I had a teacher that would do set words -- and sounds -- like read -- Each week I would have cards of words and that would be easy -- But -- we didn't do much books.

Jon was able to decode words in isolation, but unable to transfer this skill to the context of books. When I asked him what he thought might have helped him to read, he had a much more holistic approach in mind. Jon felt that his problem was with books, not flash cards.

Maybe -- like, uh -- maybe I would be in a class -- there would be a person or something and I would be in a class -- a class that would be just of reading -- like read a book and each time I had trouble, this person would help me -- and just talking about it -- Something like that -- Yeah, like reading books. Like go to the library and look for books that I like. That kind of stuff -- a person that would help me!

Although he was talking about his past, these words gave me hope. He wanted to be helped through some books and, also, he referred to the possibility that some books

existed that he would be interested in reading. He said he was relieved that he would not be forced to read aloud and that he found the way we read books together in class "fun." Perhaps there was more to build on than he thought there was.

Signs of a Reader

Although Jon, Jeff, and several other students in my class had a reading age in grade-seven or grade-two, that did not mean that they had the same level of literacy as a child in grade two. Studies (Harste *et al*, 1984) have documented the reading acquired by preschoolers, before they have received formal instruction, through commercial logos and other common signs in their environments. Twelve-year-olds have even more reading experiences to draw on than preschoolers, as well as a greater understanding of the world; thus, a low reading age for this age group is misleading. While I believe a low reading age is evidence of a reading problem, I am convinced that students who bear such a label can, in fact, read more than this marker suggests.

Jon's response log was a window on his reading and indicated that he was able to read more than he thought. Although written responses can only represent the a small part of the tip of the iceberg, in his case they were more revealing since he rarely contributed to class discussions. Figures 27 and 28 are representative samples of his reactions to the books we read.

Figure 27 - Response to	
<i>The Great Gilly Hopkins</i>	
The ending was bad because	The ending was bad because I thought
I thought Gilly was going home	Gilly was going home with her mother.
with her mother. I am glad the	I am glad the book is over now we
book is over. Now we can	can start a new book. The last chapter
start a new book. The last	was OK.
chapter was okay.	

His writing was brief and difficult to read, but nevertheless, contained a degree of engagement with the novel, *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, (1978) by Katherine Paterson. Clearly, he had expectations that were not fulfilled by the ending of the book and he was disappointed. However, he noted that the last chapter was "okay," that is to say, better than the rest of the book which he had not liked at all until the end. Jon also

seemed to be looking forward to starting another book, a modest gain, but nevertheless a positive sign.

Never Cry Wolf by Farley Mowat was a book he enjoyed, describing it as "interesting" and "cool" in his response log. He particularly liked "the part when he was eating mice" and the fact that he was "alone in the wooden house."

Figure 28 - Response to *Never Cry Wolf*

He discovered that wolves are not vicious. Like, if an animal is not worried, it will not attack. But, if it is worried, it will attack.

*He discovered that wolves are not
vicious. Like, if an animal
is not worried, it will not attack.
But, if it is worried, it will attack.*

Jon became very involved with the ideas of the book and drew his own conclusions from what he read, as the excerpt in Figure 28 showed. During class discussions, he remained a spectator, but interestingly, his response log gave him an opportunity to participate in the reading of the book. It required him to react, to dig down inside himself and find the elements he needed to form his own opinion. It pulled him into the book and made him realise that he was part of a reading experience. He remained cautious at the end of the response in Figure 30.

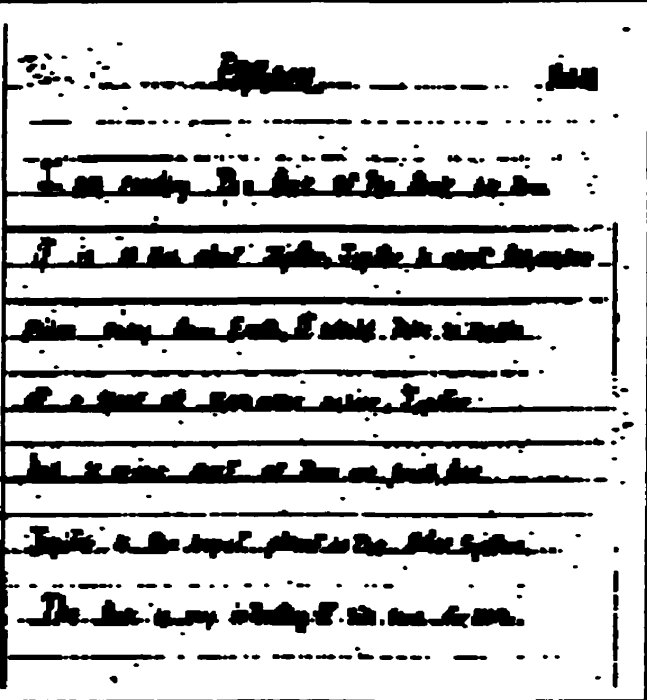
Figure 29 - Explorer

This time the doctor is learning how to fly the ship. T.O.D., the robot is helping him. As soon as they are finished learning to fly the ship, they are going to the first planet. But, I do not know which one. So far the book is good. I can't wait to read some more. I will have more next time.

Explorer Feb 25
This Time The Doctor is Learning
how To Fly The Ship. T.O.D. The robot
is helping him. As soon as they are finished
learning to fly the ship they are going to the first
planet. But I do not know which one.
So far the book is good. I can't
wait to read some more. I will have
some more next time.

By the time February came, when members of the class chose novels to read individually, we were able to find a book that Jon wanted to read. It was a science fiction book in a "choose your own adventure" format, and while this book did not require a sophisticated level of reading, it was not simplified reading material written especially for weak readers that he normally selected. The response log he kept on that book was positively enthusiastic. Jon had much more to say about this book than any other he had read in class, providing details of the plot and asking questions about information that seemed to him to be missing from his reading. Jon kept his word and wrote more. He extracted some information about Jupiter from his book for his response log.

These facts contributed to his enjoyment of the book and were hard evidence of his ability to decode, as well as to read. In other responses he discussed the "options," or choices, that he was given to control the direction of the story. These seemed to have the effect of involving him more in his reading. It is interesting that he still

Figure 30 - Explorer (2) I am reading the back of the book this time. It has facts about Jupiter. Jupiter is 500 000 000 miles away from Earth. It would take 23 months at a speed of 31 000 miles an hour. Jupiter has 16 moons. Most of them are small. And Jupiter is the largest planet in the Solar System. The book is very interesting. It still is good for now.	
--	---

remained cautious at the end of the response in Figure 30. His statement that the book was still "good for now" suggested that he was afraid that his enjoyment would not continue and would deteriorate at any time. Pleasure from reading seemed to be new experience to him.

Was Jon a Reader?

These glimmers of progress were not enough to convince Jon that he could read. His knee-jerk reaction to announcements that it was time to read was still a groaning, "Oh no, not that," and he continued to assure people, "I suck at reading." But I was beginning to feel confident that he was able to read better than he thought he could.

Although I wanted to ask him to do a respond-aloud-protocol, as Jeffrey, Fiona, and others had done, his extreme fear and nervousness about reading aloud made me hesitate. Eventually, he agreed to try to read a passage aloud, provided that no one else would be in the room while he did it.

I asked him to read the same passage that Jeff had read from *The River* by Gary Paulsen. While this is not a miscue analysis, the words he misread are underlined. He got off to a slow start:

Brian opened the door and stood back. There were three men, all in dark suits, standing on the front porch. They were large but not fat, well built, with bodies in decent shape. One of them was slightly thinner than the other two.

"Brian Robeson?"

Brian nodded. "Yes."

Like Jeff, Jon read in a halting monotone. He seemed very discouraged by the number of words he couldn't read, even though I pronounced them for him as quickly as I could to keep him going. This is what he said about that passage:

There's this guy who sees these three men on the porch. (Very long pause) --
Nothing -- (another long pause) I don't know.

In fact, not much else has occurred in this brief excerpt, but Jon was sure that he was missing something. I had to prod him to continue to read:

The thin man smiled and stepped forward and held out his hand. "I'm Derek Holtzer. These other two are Bill Mannerly and Erik Ballard. Can we come in?"

Brian held the door open to let them come in. "Mother isn't home right now..."

"It's you we've come to see." Derek stopped just in the entry-way and the other two did the same. "Of course, we'll wish to speak to your mother and father as well, but we came to see you. Didn't you get a call about us?"

Fortunately, he missed fewer words this time and was buoyed by his relative success. Jon was prepared to take a few risks in interpreting this passage:

It's just that -- uh -- these three guys want to see him and his father and mother. They're F.B.I. -- They're usually dressed in black suits. -- Maybe the kid did something wrong.

He assumed that the three men were "feds" or from the F.B.I. and that the boy in the story had done something wrong. His judgment was based on the men's dark suits. Interestingly, Jon was able to make inferences and knew why he interpreted the passage the way he did, in spite of the effort he expended to read orally. He was able to continue to read:

"Maybe I'd better check on you first. Are you the Brian Robeson who survived alone in the Canadian woods for two months?"

"Fifty-four days," Brian said. "Not quite two months. Yes -- that's me."

"Good."

"Are you from the press?" For months after his return home, Brian had been followed by the press. Even after the television special -- a camera crew went back with him to the lake and he showed them how he'd lived -- they stayed after him. Newspapers, television, book publishers -- they called him at home, followed him to school. It was hard to get away from them. One man even offered him money to put his face on a T-shirt, and a jeans company wanted to come out with a line of Brian Robeson Survival Jeans.

Apparently, he felt that he had taken a long time to read the above excerpt, because as soon as he finished it, he blurted:

When I read I just don't get the story! I read so slow!

What I noticed was how little effect the words he could not read had on his overall interpretation. With a bit of prodding he did respond to the passage:

I think he was lost in the woods -- forty-three days ago -- or for forty-three days.

And these people were looking for him. These people from the press bothered him. -- Maybe he ran away 'cause his parents were divorced.

Jon's interpretation was not completely accurate. He decided at first that Brian Robeson had been lost forty-three days ago rather than for that length of time. He corrected himself, but was also mistaken about the number of days he had been lost, which was fifty-four, an error he did not correct. However, he was prepared to speculate about why Brian had been lost in the wilderness and used the information about Brian's parent's divorce he had read in a previous passage to make that

inference. Jon was obviously upset by his lack of fluency and thought that he had not understood the story; however, his decoding problems did not prevent him from absorbing many details, checking some of his impressions, and risking an interpretation.

Although Jon read slowly and without expression, and gave the impression that the burden of decoding absorbed all of his attention, he was able to make sense of what he had read. Jon's RAP also illustrated the wide gap between reading aloud and the genuine process of interpreting a text, and his inability to do the former persuaded him that he could not do the latter.

I am not dismissing Jon's decoding problems; they were real and did prevent him from learning to read, particularly during his early years at school. What I am suggesting is that as he matured and acquired more reading experience, however limited, he was, in fact, able to get through this barrier, without acknowledging or perhaps even realizing it. His ability to read had actually improved, but his image of his reading had not; however, it was understandable that he had never learned to trust his reading. While Jon remained convinced that he was not a reader, I knew that he was.

Beyond Decoding

During Jon's second year in my class, he began to make personal connections to many of the novels, poems, and stories we read in class. He seemed to be capable of responding to the content of the reading, rather than the mechanics of decoding. Of course, he was more comfortable in school and familiar with the routines and expectations of my classroom and the rest of the school, and he was visibly less nervous and withdrawn. Socially, he became more outgoing; his peers liked him, and his prowess as a snow boarder earned him their respect. Jon lost weight, grew his hair, started going to parties, and generally became more "cool." Underneath this transformation, his reticence and caution about his reading remained, but there were signs of academic progress as well.

His response log showed genuine involvement with the ideas of the texts. In the sample in Figure 5, Jon commented that the chapters were "good," in spite of their length, indicating that he was keeping an eye on how thick the book was and how hard it was likely to be for him. But, to his surprise, he was enjoying it.

Figure 31 - Response to *The Cay**The Cay*

In these chapters, they were good -- long, but good. I do not think that they are getting bad luck just because they lost the mirror or just can't find the mirror. (It) does not mean that the cat or something like that gives bad luck. Maybe he just forgot where he put it. What I like was when they got the food, like fishing.

The Cay

in This chapters they were good long
 But good. I do NOT think That
 They are getting Bad Luck.
 Just Because They lost a mirror
 or Just can't find The mirror
 Does NOT mean That The cat
 or something like That gives Bad Luck
 maybe He just forgot where
 he put it. What I like
 was woud They got The food
 like The Frishing.
 (at the introduction how the

Jon then moved on to raise a problem he was having with the story line; he disagreed with one of the characters who was blaming the cat for their misfortunes and suggested another explanation. On a positive note, he referred to the chapter about fishing on a coral reef that had caught his interest. The confident tone of Jon's responses grew, and he began to function on another level of reading.

In the response in Figure 32, Jon made a strong personal connection to the main character, almost feeling his pain through the details of his accident. There was an implied empathy with someone whose afternoon of truant pleasure was interrupted by an encounter with a cow. In addition, Jon paid more attention to his own expectations and interpretations and noticed that the title of the book did not fit the events of the first chapter. These responses, in spite of the weak spelling, punctuation, and transcription, represented more than modest gains; at last, Jon was dealing with the ideas in books.

Occasionally, Jon expressed his views on reading in class discussions. Talking usually revealed much more of a students' thinking than writing and Jon provided many more insights into his reading development by speaking up in class.

Figure 32 - Response to
A Day No Pigs Would Die

A Day No Pigs Would Die

In this I felt sad for him because he got bit by the cow on the arm, so he had to get stitched and to get it sewn together. He has a big scar. But when I saw the book, I thought it was about a pig, but so far it is just about a cow. The book is good.

~~A Day No Pigs Would Die~~
In this I felt sad for him
because he got bit School
and he got bit by the
cow on the arm so he
had to get stitched and
to get it sewn together he
has a big scar BUT when I
saw the book I think
it was about a pig BUT so
far it is just about a cow.
The book is good.
Please make this fit in your future.
Please I like
I don't like the book.
The pig came into it in there a little
like your friend the pig and why?
I do not know the pig in chapter
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100 101 102 103 104 105 106 107 108 109 110 111 112 113 114 115 116 117 118 119 120 121 122 123 124 125 126 127 128 129 130 131 132 133 134 135 136 137 138 139 140 141 142 143 144 145 146 147 148 149 150 151 152 153 154 155 156 157 158 159 160 161 162 163 164 165 166 167 168 169 170 171 172 173 174 175 176 177 178 179 180 181 182 183 184 185 186 187 188 189 190 191 192 193 194 195 196 197 198 199 200 201 202 203 204 205 206 207 208 209 210 211 212 213 214 215 216 217 218 219 220 221 222 223 224 225 226 227 228 229 230 231 232 233 234 235 236 237 238 239 240 241 242 243 244 245 246 247 248 249 250 251 252 253 254 255 256 257 258 259 260 261 262 263 264 265 266 267 268 269 270 271 272 273 274 275 276 277 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2022 2023 2024 2025 2026 2027 2028 2029 2030 2031 2032 2033 2034 2035 2036 2037 2038 2039 2040 2041 2042 2043 2044 2045 2046 2047 2048 2049 2050 2051 2052 2053 2054 2055 2056 2057 2058 2059 2060 2061 2062 2063 2064 2065 2066 2067 2068 2069 2070 2071 2072 2073 2074 2075 2076 2077 2078 2079 2080 2081 2082 2083 2084 2085 2086 2087 2088 2089 2090 2091 2092 2093 2094 2095 2096 2097 2098 2099 2100 2101 2102 2103 2104 2105 2106 2107 2108 2109 2110 2111 2112 2113 2114 2115 2116 2117 2118 2119 2120 2121 2122 2123 2124 2125 2126 2127 2128 2129 2130 2131 2132 2133 2134 2135 2136 2137 2138 2139 2140 2141 2142 2143 2144 2145 2146 2147 2148 2149 2150 2151 2152 2153 2154 2155 2156 2157 2158 2159 2160 2161 2162 2163 2164 2165 2166 2167 2168 2169 2170 2171 2172 2173 2174 2175 2176 2177 2178 2179 2180 2181 2182 2183 2184 2185 2186 2187 2188 2189 2190 2191 2192 2193 2194 2195 2196 2197 2198 2199 2200 2201 2202 2203 2204 2205 2206 2207 2208 2209 2210 2211 2212 2213 2214 2215 2216 2217 2218 2219 2220 2221 2222 2223 2224 2225 2226 2227 2228 2229 2230 2231 2232 2233 2234 2235 2236 2237 2238 2239 2240 2241 2242 2243 2244 2245 2246 2247 2248 2249 2250 2251 2252 2253 2254 2255 2256 2257 2258 2259 2260 2261 2262 2263 2264 2265 2266 2267 2268 2269 2270 2271 2272 2273 2274 2275 2276 2277 2278 2279 2280 2281 2282 2283 2284 2285 2286 2287 2288 2289 2290 2291 2292 2293 2294 2295 2296 2297 2298 2299 2300 2301 2302 2303 2304 2305 2306 2307 2308 2309 2310 2311 2312 2313 2314 2315 2316 2317 2318 2319 2320 2321 2322 2323 2324 2325 2326 2327 2328 2329 2330 2331 2332 2333 2334 2335 2336 2337 2338 2339 2340 2341 2342 2343 2344 2345 2346 2347 2348 2349 2350 2351 2352 2353 2354 2355 2356 2357 2358 2359 2360 2361 2362 2363 2364 2365 2366 2367 2368 2369 2370 2371 2372 2373 2374 2375 2376 2377 2378 2379 2380 2381 2382 2383 2384 2385 2386 2387 2388 2389 2390 2391 2392 2393 2394 2395 2396 2397 2398 2399 2400 2401 2402 2403 2404 2405 2406 2407 2408 2409 2410 2411 2412 2413 2414 2415 2416 2417 2418 2419 2420 2421 2422 2423 2424 2425 2426 2427 2428 2429 2430 2431 2432 2433 2434 2435 2436 2437 2438 2439 2440 2441 2442 2443 2444 2445 2446 2447 2448 2449 2450 2451 2452 2453 2454 2455 2456 2457 2458 2459 2460 2461 2462 2463 2464 2465 2466 2467 2468 2469 2470 2471 2472 2473 2474 2475 2476 2477 2478 2479 2480 2481 2482 2483 2484 2485 2486 2487 2488 2489 2490 2491 2492 2493 2494 2495 2496 2497 2498 2499 2500 2501 2502 2503 2504 2505 2506 2507 2508 2509 2510 2511 2512 2513 2514 2515 2516 2517 2518 2519 2520 2521 2522 2523 2524 2525 2526 2527 2528 2529 2530 2531 2532 2533 2534 2535 2536 2537 2538 2539 2540 2541 2542 2543 2544 2545 2546 2547 2548 2549 2550 2551 2552 2553 2554 2555 2556 2557 2558 2559 2560 2561 2562 2563 2564 2565 2566 2567 2568 2569 2570 2571 2572 2573 2574 2575 2576 2577 2578 2579 2580 2581 2582 2583 2584 2585 2586 2587 2588 2589 2590 2591 2592 2593 2594 2595 2596 2597 2598 2599 2600 2601 2602 2603 2604 2605 2606 2607 2608 2609 2610 2611 2612 2613 2

Figure 33 - Response to
"The Leaving"

Well, it's a good book.
I think the father got
better to the wife in
not calling the mother
a woman. I think the
mother is nice and kind.
The brothers are just
lazy and Shelley or Kelly
is just a normal child,
nice and fun to be with.
So in all, (it) is a normal
family, except maybe the
father. But, it's just
another story about a
family.

The Living
well it's a good book
I think the father got
better to the wife in not
calling the mother a woman
I think the mother is
nice and kind
The brothers are just lazy
and Shelley or Kelly
is just a normal child
nice and fun to be with
So in all is a normal family
except maybe the father
But it's just another
story about a family.

His enthusiasm for the story did not come through in his writing, although he said it was a "good" story. In fact, I thought that he had found it rather dull when he said, "it's just another story about a family." Once Jon decided to participate more in class discussions, he created a richer context in which I could read his reading.

Getting the Picture

It is important to talk to a student who is as reserved as Jon. After he had settled in to his second year in my class and I noticed considerable improvement in his attitude and in his reading, I decided to ask him for his impressions of his work.

Oh -- I'm just getting used to reading and writing. I'm enjoying it a bit right now.

The reading, yeah. The writing is getting there slowly.

I was delighted to hear him say this, but asked him what "getting used" to reading and writing meant.

Like, I'm getting to know how to spell the words. Like reading, uh -- I know the

words now -- most of them. I still have trouble making -- Like, getting a picture in my mind of the story, but I'm getting the words.

Spelling and decoding again! (I interpreted spelling as word recognition.) These were still issues for him. He went on to say that turning letters into sounds was less of a problem than turning the sounds into meaning. That was holding him back.

It's mostly the story, how they put it. How they make it up. I'm having trouble following it....I'm somewhere else. I'm not really in the book. I'm thinking about what's gonna happen tomorrow and, uh, what I should do next, for next period or whatever. I just don't get a picture in my mind.

He still felt uninvolved in the text and went on to say that his habit of tuning out had been with him since grade three or four.

Oh, when I was little, I just never listened. Like from grade three or four, I just didn't bother really. Well, I would listen, like I would be pretending to listen. I was really not into the book. Really not listening. Maybe on some days -- yes, but most of the days -- no. No -- I don't know why. I don't get a picture. I don't know why.

I could see that an old habit might be holding him back and I asked him whether his involvement depended on how much he liked what he was reading. He replied:

I think it's -- I think it's mostly the book. If I like it or not -- maybe. But, most of the time I just don't get into it. I'm thinking of something else.

I then asked him to think of as many books or other reading material that he enjoyed reading. I had noticed, for example, that Jon was an avid reader of the local newspaper, for which I had a class subscription.

I can read the newspaper! That's easy! I don't know. Between that and a book, I can understand the words -- Yeah, plus, they show the pictures that go with the story line. Well, any book does. I don't know. I can understand it....And the headlines! Uh, all kinds of stuff. I just start reading and all of -- Like, the Canadiens won last night -- I read about movies, how good they are. And of the movies, what not to see. Like, one of the movies that came out -- "The Fifth Element" with Bruce Willis, they say that's good. They say it's got good reviews and that. Just stuff like that.

I was struck by how preoccupied he was with clues like headlines and pictures that helped him to understand and to get through his decoding barrier. No doubt, the

textual features of newspaper genres were now part of his repertoire of reading strategies. Prior knowledge also helped him to read about hockey and movies, both of which he often heard about on television before reading about them in the paper. He was also working with vocabulary specific to the contexts of sports and movies that was familiar to him.

Motivation, Jon agreed, was also a factor; he read the newspaper because he wanted to find out about things that interested him. He was also able to come up with a short list of books and stories that had kept him involved. They were: *Never Cry Wolf*, *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, *"The Leaving,"* and a novel about snow boarding I had ordered for him from my book club. Jon claimed to like them because they were about things "that happen in real life." His mother and I talked about the importance of fanning the flames of his enthusiasms, and she ordered him a subscription to a magazine about snow boarding, his great passion in life. She gave him full responsibility for updating a book they kept on movies they taped from television that had the title, a brief summary, and their personal ratings.

Interestingly, Jon said he found it easier to pay attention when reading in a small group, than with the whole class. He was more likely to follow it and "get a picture" of the text in his mind. I was thrilled that he could see his growth in reading when he talked to me, and when I transcribed the tapes of our discussions and compared his later ones (p.120 - 121) with his earlier ones (pp.110-111), I felt that he had also become more articulate and that there was real improvement in his speech as well. While Jon agreed that he had made a lot of progress and was feeling better about reading, clearly, problems remained. In a very revealing comment, he said that, for him, there was no difference between the reading he did at home and the reading he did at school. Other than the newspaper, he read little at home and sadly reading was mainly a school activity, or worse, a school task. He had not totally shed the fear of being unable to decode, although the focus of his difficulties had shifted to being able to see, or to "picture" the story mentally. I felt that his preoccupation with being able to visualize his reading was more than a need to understand the story; it was rather a way to understanding his approach to reading.

Seeing His Reading

I had noticed that Jon, like Jeff, included drawings in his response log that were usually far more detailed than his written reactions. Figure 34 was one of his

responses to *Five Days of the Ghost* by William Bell and demonstrated how much care he often took with a drawing. He had captured ideas that he didn't have language for, and the process of doing so may have improved his vision of the story. It was only after my conversation with him about "getting the picture" that I wondered whether drawing a response would help him to create that mental picture of his reading that was so often missing for him. His inability to see his reading might have been more than a lack of attention on his part. Drawing was another way of knowing, a non-linear, non-verbal way to make sense of the world that perhaps was more appropriate to Jon's style of learning. I suggested that drawing a picture might be a good way to get started on a response.

Figure 34 - Drawing in Response to *Five Days of the Ghost*



The caption that went with this drawing was:

I drew the house the kids lived in. I saw it on the cover. It's like a haunted house, but nice. It's big, has lots of rooms. I saw the story there.

Drawing responses did not work for everyone, as I have noticed that many students in grade seven are very critical of their drawings and at that age it is no longer a spontaneous activity that everyone enjoys. But, it seemed to help Jon. Figure 35 is the response he drew to a poem "*The View from my Window*" by Carolyn Zonailo. The drawing contains most of the objects and images in the poem and is a fairly literal

Figure 35 - Drawing in Response to
"The View From My Window"



description of them, as the only addition Jon made was the kite which was not mentioned in the poem. It is almost a visual list of the details of the poem. Interestingly, he wrote about the poem in exactly the same way, making few inferences or interpretations. Figure 36 is his written response to the same poem.

Figure 36 - Response to
"The View from my Window"

The View from my Window

What this poem is about I think is a person looking from their bedroom window and seeing a blossoming tree in the springtime. The colours of white and green, sunshine and a blue sky tells of a new spring day in the city looking out the window. In winter you see the tree with some broken branches but then the change of season brings a renewal or new life to the old plum tree again.

The View From My Window

What This poem is About I Think
is a person looking from Their Bedroom
window and seeing a Blossoming Tree in
The Spring Time. The colors of white and
green, sunshine and a blue sky tells of
a new Spring Day in The city. looking out
The window. In winter you see The Tree
with some Broken Branches BUT Then
The change of season Brings a
renewal or new life To The old
plum Tree again.

What is really remarkable about this writing sample is the improved spelling, punctuation, and handwriting. At the same time as stressing the importance of ideas in their writing, I did encourage my students to work on the mechanics so that other people would be able to read their work. It was like pushing and pulling at the same time with many of them, but with students like Jon, I suggested that they get their ideas down on paper first and then worry about "cleaning up" their writing later. I asked Jon about how he had written this response. He said that he had found many of the words he needed in the poem itself and that he had also used his hand-held spell check for some of them. Some of his peers had also helped him spell a few words. It was extremely unusual for Jon to take so much care with a first draft. I wondered whether drawing his response first had relieved him of the burden of thinking about what to

write so that he could concentrate on improving his writing.

Jon repeated this way of approaching a response several times again with similar results. Another example is the drawing in Figure 37 which is a response to the poem, *"The Selling of My Country,"* also by Carolyn Zonailo. This time he turned the ideas of the poem into a logo or a visual symbol. However, the response he wrote was a much more detailed interpretation of the poem. It seemed that once he captured the theme of the poem in a drawing, he could then write about it, but he had to see it first.

Figure 37 - Drawing in Response to
"The Selling of my Country"

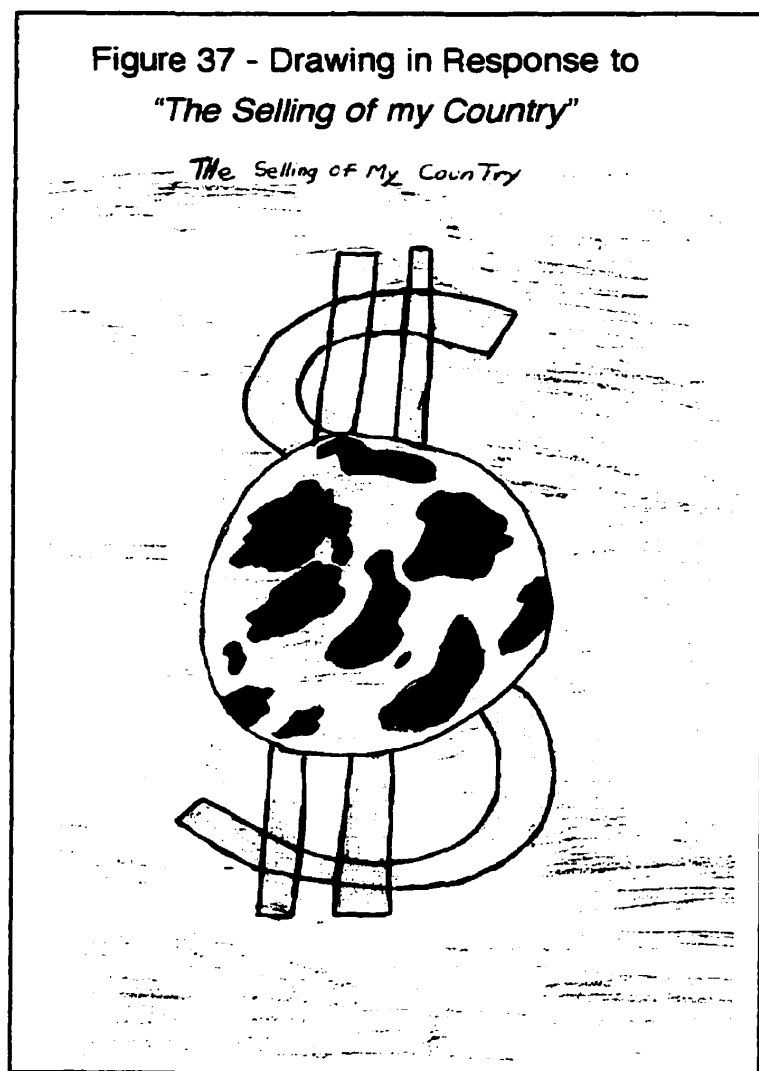


**Figure 38 - Response to "The Selling
of my Country"**

The Selling of my Country

I believe this poem is about men who can become politicians with power. This politician who does not care about his country, he wants to sell the shops, its banks, its boulevards. He destroys the environment by cutting down the trees and damming up the rivers. And he destroyed neighbourhood parks to have big cement buildings put up. He does all this for money for his own pockets.

The Selling of My Country
I Believe This poem is about
Men who can become politicians
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Does NOT care about his country. He
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neighbourhood Parks To have Big
cement Buildings put up. He Does
all This for money for his own pockets.

Again, the quality of the writing was much better in terms of both content and skills. It was evidence that Jon could work around his learning disabilities to produce writing that others could read and, more importantly, to communicate his ideas. Of course, he had to care about the poems he read in order to find something to respond to. But motivation was not all Jon needed; transferring his thoughts onto paper was a great challenge for him, and drawing his response first improved that process.

The Writing Connection

The relationship between reading and writing is an almost ephemeral one that researchers and educators find difficult to track and to define specifically. Clearly, they are interdependent, and it appears that writing depends more fundamentally on reading than reading does on writing. A reader could read without ever writing, but it is not possible for a writer to write without knowing how to read. In holistic pedagogy, reading and writing are taught simultaneously, and I am not suggesting that it should be otherwise. Response logs complement reading, and favourite stories and poems can inspire writing.

I would argue, however, that in order to feel like writers, and "own" their writing, students must first feel like readers and "own" their reading. Fiona owned both her literary reading and writing, and Jeff began to feel and act like a writer only after he felt like a reader. Jon was another example of this pattern but, in his case, he felt like neither a reader, nor a writer. Unfortunately, in spite of the considerable progress he

made, reading and writing remained school activities, just teacher-requests that he complied with. His writing was a barometer of his reading and showed that the vital spark of voice and ownership that was so clear in Fiona's and Jeff's writing was missing from his. I believe that this was due to his self-image as a non-reader.

As I said earlier, Jon was aware that he had made progress in reading and writing, but observed that while he was "enjoying" reading "a bit," his progress in writing was slower. Because he did not read for pleasure outside of school, he saw no difference between home and school reading, and that influenced the way he saw the relationship between reading and writing. When I asked if he thought you had to be a reader in order to be a writer, he replied:

A bit. You have to -- Well, actually, you have to know how to spell, how to write sentences -- when to know when to put a period and a capital.

He saw reading as a source of writing skills, which meant that he had transferred his problems with decoding to writing. Writing to him meant mastering skills. Jon claimed to find most of his inspiration for writing from his own experiences.

Like, you're thinking, like, you got to do, like, a story. Well, sometimes when I think, 'what shall I do this weekend?' Can't I write a story like what's coming up this weekend? What shall I do? Like a journal? Sometimes, something like that. Well, anything -- like last year, I was thinking a year or two back, I went to Marineland. I did a sort of -- like, a Marineland story. I really remember it -- I would rather do what really happens in life. Not like a fairly tale or non-fiction, what really happens in life. That kind of story.

Certainly, his writing folder contained many expressive pieces such as the one in Figure 39. They read like journal entries, but not very reflective journals. Jon simply recorded events and the only evaluation or significance he attached to them were whether or not he liked them. In Figure 39, there is little elaboration on anything that he liked; they were just listed. These pieces of Jon's writing always gave me the impression that he had done them to fulfil a class assignment. He remained detached from them, although he said he preferred this kind of writing. This sample was the result of several drafts, and Jon seemed only able to use cursive writing without the burden of composing.

Figure 39 - Fashion Show

Yesterday at 6th and 7th periods, half of the class went to the auditorium to see a fashion show. When I got there it was already started. Heidi is in my class. She was in it. When I got there, she went up already and a few other people. I liked the clothes they had. But I did like the rock band. They were good at making up the stage. But most of the singing was dull. It was long. But at least I got out of class. That I like. After 2 periods it was time to go home.

fashion show
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Although Jon said he did not enjoy writing "fairy tales" he chose to do so on one occasion (Figure 40). Certainly, Jon put considerable effort into this story and used his

Figure 40 - The Dragon Slayers

The Dragonslayers

One day in the forest in 1827, a bad witch called Holt wanted revenge on the king of London, because the king sent knights to kill Holt and her son at night time. The knights went in the forest to kill the witch and her son. They live in a little wooden house. The knights put the house on fire. Holt put a spell on one of the knights. She turned him into a pig. The other two knights killed her son. The whole house was on fire. Holt got out. She ran away in the forest. The knights went back to the kingdom. She found an old house. It looked like it's been there a long time. She put a spell on the house. It came brand new. It was all painted. Holt wanted revenge so she made a spell for the king. He would have to drink it with his tea. So, Holt went into his room. She put the spell in his tea. The king came into the room, had his tea, and (went) to bed. (In) a few minutes, he turned into a fly. Holt had her revenge.

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knowledge of the genre to make it work. There were, however, many details missing, such as why the witch was bad, why the king wanted to kill her, why she was able to cast a spell on only one of the knights, and how she got into the castle to take her revenge. Also, the title did not fit the story. Again, I had the impression that Jon had cobbled together a piece of writing that he did not particularly care about. What was missing from this piece were the voice and perspective of the author, especially when it is compared to Jeff's fairy tale, "The Wolf with a Cold," in Chapter Three. That story has many personal touches and shows the influence of the writer's sense of humour. Jon's story resembled his expressive piece; it was a list of events appropriate to a fairy tale.

When I first knew Jon, he was an observer rather than a participant in school. Certainly, that had changed, and he was taking part in class more, but I didn't feel that he was a true participant in his reading and writing.

Figure 41 - The Tattooed Man

The Tattooed Man

When I was a young sailor,
everywhere I sailed, I
discovered new things. I
would get a tattoo. One
time in my life I saw a mer-
maid and a lot of different
kinds of roses. It is a
tradition in my family to get
tattoos. The best tattoo I
have is of my mother. She
died in 1814. All of my
tattoos are from a piece of my
life. It's like pieces of my
memory. So when I die, my son,
when he grows up to be like me,
will have tattoos of his best memory.

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All of my tattoos are from
a piece of my life. It's like
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I die, my son when he grows
up to be a sailor like me
will have tattoos of his
best memory.

He was still aloof from his reading and writing, keeping both activities at a distance. There was one occasion, however, when I felt that that gap had been narrowed. After reading the poem "The Tattooed Man," by Carolyn Zonailo, a poem he had enjoyed, he wrote a much more vivid creative piece (Figure 41). Jon was able to take the imaginative leap of putting himself in the place of the character in the poem and inventing a life for him. The explanation for his tattoos was the vehicle for providing details about him. In general, he was inspired by poetry. Although he claimed the main virtue of poetry was its brevity, I believe that it was the strong visual imagery evoked by this genre that engaged him.

I had hoped that he would use this promising beginning for a longer story, but he didn't. Still, it was the flash of genuine engagement with writing that I was hoping for. Jon commented on how he had written this piece:

Sometimes, I'm in the mood for any kind of story, like just writing fiction or whatever. Just make up a story. Yeah. All kinds. Depends on the day, like. How I feel.

Interestingly, he did not attribute his inspiration to the poem. He really did not see a connection between reading and writing, even when the connection was that obvious. His "mood" was right, the "day" was right. I could only wish him more days like that!

What Did I Learn from Jon?

Knowing Jon reinforced certain pedagogical strategies I had been using. He assured me that he preferred reading in small groups because it was much easier for him to follow, and "to get a picture" of the text. Drawing a response first helped him to write about his reading. It was very important to talk to him regularly on a one-to-one basis, because of his nervousness in class and his tendency to sit on the sidelines. This practice was a happy coincidence of the demands of teaching and researching.

On a more philosophical level, I was able to work through my doubts about the merits of holistic pedagogy over "drilling and skilling" a student whose decoding problem was so obvious and whose concerns were so centred on the mechanics of reading and writing. My initial instincts were to try to take his mind off the skills by concentrating on the meaning of the texts we read, since he seemed to be bogged down and almost defeated by phonics and spelling. Fortunately, I trusted my gut-feelings and, as documented in this chapter, saw Jon grow as a reader and a writer. He, himself, felt that he had made progress, and in addition to his improvement in

English, on which I have concentrated here, he began passing in math and geography. Jon attributed his success in those subjects, which were "mostly reading and writing," to being able to read and write better. Although his use of phonics was very weak, sometimes using only the first letter of a word and often reproducing the shape of a word, he demonstrated the capacity to clean up his writing when motivated. (See Figure 36.) Jon knew only too well that he was dyslexic, which he often described as having "short-term memory problems," and knew also that he had to work around his disability. I believe that holistic practice showed him the way. He was able to find something to say and worry less about how to say it.

Certainly, Jon had improved in the two years we spent together, but I was not totally satisfied with his progress. Reminding myself that growth in language is slow and that Jon had further to go than most of my students was cold comfort to me. Even questioning the appropriateness of my expectations for him did not remove the trace of frustration I felt about his development. While he became a participant in school, Jon still did not feel like a reader or a writer and, therefore, did not become a true participant in his own learning.

Chapter Six
Matt: Following His Passions

A Reader Judged by His Writing

I did not like (it). I found it boring and it made me mad! It makes it look like these mean people go and chop down trees and the trees have feelings. Well, did you know that for every tree cut down, three are planted and they're grown on tree farms? The only thing I find they have in common (with people) is the tree wants to be pretty. What does not make sense is, why would they put the tree in the attic?

In the winter I sell trees for the Scouts. It reminds me of selling Christmas trees, and to me, looking at them does not bug me for I know (for) every tree cut, three are put in their place and the used trees get recycled and the ones we don't sell go to a farmer or recyclers.

I did not like the stories because I am not P. C. I don't think that a tree is going to write an autobiography about Christmas.

(see Figure 42 for original text)

It must be obvious, after reading this response to two Christmas stories, why I always looked forward to reading Matt's reactions to his reading. I heard his voice so clearly in his writing; he wrote the way he talked, expressing views that were spontaneous, interesting, witty, analytical, and often acidic, and he did so in almost any situation. This sample showed the confidence he had in his own opinions and in his ability to present his point of view on paper. It is also a nutshell containing the most important features of Matt's reading. Even when a text inspired a negative reaction, he made vivid personal connections to the stories that enabled him to draw upon his rich background knowledge to interpret it and, furthermore, to know why he had reacted the way he did. These features combined with his natural gift for invective and his inclination toward sarcasm produced an amusing response.

Besides reading Matt's responses, another source of pleasure for me was writing back to him. There was so much to talk about and it was possible to have satisfying discussions of the reading with him. Usually, I could nudge him toward looking at a text from another point of view, for example, when I replied to his response to the Christmas story (see Figure 43.)

Figure 42 - Response to a Christmas Story

I did not like (it). I found it boring and it made me mad! It makes it look like these mean people go and chop down trees and the trees have feelings. Well, did you know that for every tree cut down, three are planted and they're grown on tree farms? The only thing I find they have in common (with people) is the tree wants to be pretty. What does not make sense is, why would they put the tree in the attic? In the winter I sell trees for the Scouts. It reminds me of selling Christmas trees, and to me, looking at them does not bug me for I know (for) every tree cut, three are put in their place and the used trees get recycled and the ones we don't sell go to a farmer or recyclers. I did not like the stories because I am not P. C. I don't think that a tree is going to write an autobiography about Christmas.

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Dialogue response logs permitted me to respect and to work with individual reading styles and to encourage my students to extend their thinking about their reading. Matt

Figure 43 - My Response to Matt

As usual an interesting and thought-provoking response! I enjoy reading your vies on what we read. Your own knowledge and experience make you see things differently. Don't worry about being P.C. Do you think the only message of the stories is we should not cut Christmas trees? If the trees were people, how would you evaluate their behaviour?

I did not like it. I found it boring and it made me mad! It makes it look like these mean people go and chop down trees and the trees have feelings. Well, did you know that for every tree cut down, three are planted and they're grown on tree farms? The only thing I find they have in common (with people) is the tree wants to be pretty. What does not make sense is, why would they put the tree in the attic? In the winter I sell trees for the Scouts. It reminds me of selling Christmas trees, and to me, looking at them does not bug me for I know (for) every tree cut, three are put in their place and the used trees get recycled and the ones we don't sell go to a farmer or recyclers. I did not like the stories because I am not P. C. I don't think that a tree is going to write an autobiography about Christmas.

was a genuine reader who was actively engaged, either positively or negatively, with the texts we read and who was also quite sensitive to his own reading process. So, why was he in my class? The original sample (Figure 43) of his above response partially answered that question.

Matt's poor spelling and penmanship, as well as his tendency to omit words, all masked the quality of the ideas in his writing. The discrepancy between his verbal and written performance in school was a key factor in diagnosing his problems and made him a "classic" student with a learning disability. Matt had great difficulty putting his thoughts on paper in a way that others could easily read; however, he had no difficulty shaping those thoughts "at the point of utterance," as Britton put it, and deciding what to put on paper. But, unfortunately, the form of his writing prevented many teachers from seeing its substance.

There was an additional barrier to Matt's being able to function in the regular program of the high school. Not surprisingly, his acerbic wit was sometimes symptomatic of what is commonly called an "attitude," and that sometimes affected his behaviour and academic achievement in certain classes. Matt was capable of great stubbornness. If he took a dislike to a teacher or a subject, like Fiona, he tuned out and did very little work. Math, for example, was a great struggle for him, and it was necessary to provide a lot of encouragement and extra help for him to succeed in that subject. For Matt, succeeding meant just passing math. Interestingly, his strengths were in English and in content subjects, in spite of his difficulties with reading and writing. Certainly, he had overcome a lot to learn to read, and because the impulse to communicate his ideas was strong, he was willing and eager to write.

To place him within the context of the preceding case studies, Matt too had had great difficulty learning to read, but his scars were less visible than Jeffrey's, Fiona's, and Jon's. He described reading as "a question of interest"; however, his interest was not as narrow as Fiona's. He was prepared to consider a variety of genres and was thus able to transfer his ability to read to many different situations. Matt was a reader of both fiction and non-fiction, particularly of geography and history, both of which he adored. While for Fiona, interest was an all-or-nothing proposition, for Matt, the degree of interest made the difference between a positive or negative interpretation of a text. But, in either case, he would examine and explain his views. While he was deeply involved with whatever material he read, Matt was able to stand back and

examine his reading and his reactions to it. He displayed both an intensely personal and a detached analytical perspective. Although interest was a vital part of his reading, his interests were broader than Fiona's enthusiasm for poetry and fiction and broader even than Jeffrey's quest for facts. Jeff's motivation to read was mostly practical, while Matt had a genuine intellectual curiosity which he satisfied through reading. Interest determined **how** he read, rather than **whether** he read.

Matt was, understandably, a reliable catalyst for class discussions and made a positive contribution to the dynamics of the group. His peers respected his intelligence and often sought his help with and opinions on their work. Of all my students, he should have succeeded in the regular program. At the end of the year, I had no qualms about his ability to meet the academic demands of the grade-eight program, but wondered how the teachers he would meet there would respond to his written work and his personality quirks. For both of these reasons, my fears were well founded. The following year when he had left my class, one of his teachers told me, in front of Matt, that his contributions to class discussions were good, but that his written work needed improvement. His math teacher said to me, privately at least, that he should have repeated grade seven. Matt remained in grade-eight, but trudged along those all too familiar paths at the bottom of most of his classes. I have included him in this study to demonstrate the need for teachers to penetrate the haze of dyslexia that surrounds the work, particularly the written work, of learning-disabled students like Matt. It is far too easy to overlook their achievements in a high school classroom, where a one-size-fits-all mentality often prevails because of the pressures of limited time, class size, and a focus on subject matter. Mostly, it seemed to me that Matt's problems had more to do with whether the regular high school program could accommodate him, than whether he could cope with the program.

What follows is a description of a reader and a writer, whose work was of a consistently high quality, except, of course, for the mechanics of writing. Matt was a contradiction of confidence -- occasionally over-confidence -- and insecurity; this may have been rooted in the dual nature of his literacy. He knew he had ideas worth contributing, but doing so on paper was a challenge. His obvious ability to communicate verbally and to read concealed the impacts of his past struggle with reading and his present struggle with writing. A student like Matt had so many strengths for a teacher to build on that his case study is partly a recognition and

celebration of his learning.

Early Battles and Battle Scars

Matt's unhappy history of learning to read had many common features with those of Jeff, Fiona, and Jon. He, too, was a late-bloomer who didn't feel he could truly read until he was in grade-five. Matt joined Fiona in condemning the easy reading material they were exposed to for too long.

I found them babyish, actually -- "The Cat and the Mouse." That was one of them. They were these little books not even a centimetre thick. They had this gigantic picture and these two little sentences. And they changed the page -- No. I'd just flip through the pages and say "Here, miss. I'm finished."

As usual, his description was amusing and accurate. While all four of them dreaded reading periods in elementary school, they each found different ways of coping. Jeff simply refused to do it, Fiona pretended she could read difficult books, and Jon quietly tuned out. Matt, however, developed a repertoire of strategies to deal with school reading.

Like, uh, sometimes, if I had to read with a friend, I used to cheat by putting my thumb over the page number and taking two pages at a time and turning it -- I didn't like reading for a while -- I guess partially because it was hard -- yeah -- well, I found it hard.

Years later, he was able to openly admit that he had had a problem, but in elementary school, he took great pains to conceal it.

Well, most of the time we had a reading period -- I know I don't do that any more -- but I took up the book and I devised actually -- a system. I'd take the page, and if I couldn't -- like -- like there was this thing that my teacher said if you don't know what the fifth word is -- Like if you count five words that you don't know, then that book is too hard for you. And like, all books were like that for me. I would just sit there and look at every individual letter to make it look as if I was reading and then I would just flip the page.

His determination to survive is poignant. How miserable he must have been to know that all the books were too hard for him, except the baby books with big pictures and boring texts! When these plays let him down and he couldn't escape having to read aloud, even then, Matt resorted to a scheme for damage-control.

Let's say there was a line-up or anything? I would do fast math in my head to

see if I could come out an odd number. Let's say 1 - 2, 1 - 2. Let's say the 1's would have a longer paragraph or something? I would try to become a 2 so I wouldn't have as much to read.

No doubt, teachers would wish to spare the children in their classes experiences such as these, but as a former elementary teacher, I know that it is not always possible to design reading activities that include every member of the group. Matt's painful memories clearly illuminated this very difficult aspect of school from a child's perspective, and it is important to point out the long-term effects of these early experiences of failure and exclusion.

Jeff, Jon, and Matt, as well as many other members of my class, were all left with a deep-seated fear of having to read aloud. Matt described this activity as "embarrassing" and elaborated the effects it had on him.

Yeah, yeah, I would be petrified actually -- Because I was afraid to -- Well, I stutter sometimes and uh -- reading silently, I don't stutter in my head -- I find reading out loud -- the first thing that pops into my head is "Oh God, if I make a mistake, they're all going to laugh." That -- that's the thing that always happens. In high school, there were social consequences from peers, as well as the displeasure of a teacher to be faced when Matt refused to read.

I refuse every time -- I can read out loud. I can read math problems out loud. It just bothers me. I don't feel comfortable reading out loud -- No. Like, Mr. A. wanted me to read something, the textbook? I said, "Sir, no thank you." And he went on to the next person. And then he said, "Matt, read it now." And I just refused -- I think he minded. Like, everybody had their chance and everybody's like, come on Matt. Just read. And I was absolutely refusing -- He gets sort of mad.

Every year, I made a point of speaking to my students' other teachers about pressing them to read in class. I felt that inflicting this kind of anxiety on my students was unnecessary; however, in spite of assurances that they could follow a text silently, many teachers seemed to need more concrete evidence that they were able to read and to pay attention. It was interesting that Matt, who was able to read, felt just as strongly about reading aloud as Jon did, with his decoding problems.

The students in this study were unanimous that phonics had caused them great difficulty when learning to read. It was a tool they couldn't seem to use and sometimes

became a separate activity, something else to remember. Matt articulated this viewpoint.

Because you know, "i" and "e" and "e" and "i" -- that messes me up all the time -
 - So I would be writing something in English and I would say, uh -- like a spelling, and I would say uh, like uh -- say it was "enemy?" I would go "i-m-y" instead of "e-m-y." That was part of it and I guess uh -- Yeah, sounds! I had -- I still have a bit of trouble today -- With certain things like "o"? You just say "o" and it comes out "o," but certain things like "e" -- Like if I was to write like "e" like pronouncing it like a sound vibration? I wouldn't have a clue. I'd probably like put an "i." -- Uh, the teacher would ask, what sound does "e" make? I would just say "ee" -- Like I knew the sound but I just couldn't get my tongue to say it.

He went on to describe a deep frustration and valid confusion with sounds and letters that were part of his learning to read.

It seemed like just too much trouble to look at it. And for one thing, I wasn't doing that great in reading -- pronunciations. Things like, where periods are -- and spelling and things -- Yeah, like, when I was in like grade 1 and 3 and 4 there? They tried that. I don't find it works -- Yeah, phonics -- Yeah, I could recognise it, yeah. It's just sometimes -- I mean, they used to say, "Just look at the word and if you see a "CA" (pronounces the letter names) it's "caw" (pronounces combined sound). You know, "T" is "tuh." And, uh, "S" makes this "sss" sound. But, if you look at a word like kitten, well, not kitten, but cat. It sounds more like a "K," than a "C."

Phonics seemed like "too much trouble," an added burden for an already overwhelmed child. It was quite likely that he was not taught phonics in isolation, but his lasting impression was that sounds and letters were for him further complications, more skills that he couldn't master. All aspects of learning to read, including phonics, were difficult and defeating. When Matt's breakthrough in reading finally came in grade-five, it happened suddenly, almost mysteriously.

Well, when I picked up -- I guess *Jurassic Park* did it -- You see -- I wanted to see the movie at the theatre? So I said, why not read the book? -- Yeah. So, I picked it up. I borrowed it off a friend -- I'd had an idea that these -- I'd no idea how the dinosaurs got there. I thought it was these guys found an island full of dinosaurs and they made a park -- Technically -- in theory they should be able

to actually do that...Yeah, well, I read it. I liked the way the author wrote it. . .

Yeah, I guess (sounds surprised). I got right into it. I loved it -- it just came to me -- Well yeah, yeah -- It hit me 'cause after *Jurassic Park* I looked for another book.

Being able to read "just came" to him, just "hit" him, and he was launched. There can be no doubt that those years of struggling with phonics and decoding had made a contribution but, ultimately, the catalyst in his view was finding a book he wanted to read. Interestingly, most of Matt's description of his first genuine reading experience is devoted to the subject matter of the novel rather than how he felt about being able to read. He remembered more about the book than about reading it, possibly an indication of his total involvement in it. His interest enabled him to transcend his disability and became the essence of his motivation to read.

The Reading - Writing Connection

As with Jeff, Fiona, and Jon, Matt's reading influenced his writing and he was able to explain that relationship.

For me, if I don't read, like, writing comes less easy. Like words are less clear. I don't know, I find that if I don't read for a while, like, you become slow in writing. I have to check a lot of words out, but if I'm reading like a lot of like history stuff, like, factual stuff, like encyclopaedias? Words come more easily. Oh, I've seen that word before....Well, it gives me ideas. That's one thing it does.

Matt believed that reading helped him write but suggested that spelling was a problem for him when he said he had "to check a lot of words." When it came to selecting a topic in both reading and writing, Matt resembled Fiona in that he also had particular enthusiasms which he pursued almost exclusively. He was passionately interested in the subject of war. Matt was an avid participant in model-war games and enjoyed collecting figures and devising battle strategies for these. Often, for home reading he came to class with either histories of the two World Wars or novels set during those periods. Any fiction he read usually had something to do with one of these wars. When talking about a novel known primarily for its "action," it is interesting that Matt was concerned more with the role that history played in the book.

I read another Indiana Jones book at home. It had something to do with Egypt and the pyramids....This is like a novel. It's not based on the movies. It's like a different story. And what it was, he was doing this thing about the pyramids, and

they found this room that had all kinds of different things that might change, like, history forever. About the pyramids? And because Indiana Jones is written in the thirties, just slightly before World War II, the Nazis were there and they were trying to steal it all. Cause Hitler was interested in it. He goes on this big crusade to stop him.

It was quite striking how comfortable he appeared to be with the events and features of that period.

Matt's interest in war was not just historical. He was an avid reader of magazines about modern warfare -- weapons, equipment, and strategies used by police forces and armies around the world. Matt described his fascination with these publications.

What do I like about it? Oh, I don't know, I like, to look at the advertising and a lot of stories the cops write about. Different techniques. Different stories there.-- Oh, I also read, uh, "Soldier of Fortune?" (sounds sheepish) -- It's a military magazine. You know what the cover's like? It talks about all these, uh, like, guerrilla armies and all that. And what they're doing and what our government is doing to try to stop them. -- And, uh, it talks about that -- Like, um, Albania? It was in the last one -- Well, um, a while ago the government got thrown over by the people? And they raided all the armories. It's a state of anarchy. Everyone's running around with weapons and they're shooting cops and the cops are shooting back. And, I don't know if it's gotten better. This was a couple of months ago -- The reason why I found out it was still going on was because of this magazine. And, uh, the next one's going to be about Zaire probably. What's happening there. I also read, uh, *Military Technology* which talks about, like, different military inventions, new satellites or new tanks, something like that.

Again, his interest in history seemed paramount and was quite sophisticated for his age.

Not surprisingly, his writing folder was filled with war stories with titles such as, "772 Attack Sub," "The Eye of the Sun," "Run from the War," and "Flanders Story." Most of these were written in the first person, and proof that he was able to enter into his reading and recreate these literary and historical landscapes in his writing. The following sample (Figure 44) is an example of this. This, like Matt's other war stories,

Figure 44 - The Shores of Hell

was on the side of me
I kept the water splashing
I kept looking at my Canadian
my shirt and thinking of home
the boat was being
hit.

Sparks started flying but that was not
the sparks started I looked up

first of all the
it was hit it was
a fire on the water. I saw
one man jump out of the water
the boat stopped
I thought they were
they did so did I. I was sure
go out there I was standing in
the boat behind me. Now up
face in the water I was soaked
sounded me terrified. Bombs
going off. Cannons
like the world was ending
nothing to hide behind
I saw to my right I saw

lifeless face made me scared and angry
I could not move a German ran
he ordered me to follow him I did not
in shock so he shot me it went
through my chest. I picked up my rifle
before I fell over.

The next thing I remembered was
a white standing over me.
"Sir he's awake" she said.
checked me over. I figured I
was in the hospital.

For the 13 nights I had
of my friends of their bodies

I remember walking off the train
dad along with Lisa my girl friend
waiting for me I walked to them
then all.

To this day I still dream about

The Shores of Hell

I've never forgotten the war, the day of pure hell when we landed in Normandy. I was on the side of the landing craft. The water kept splashing me. I kept looking at my Canadian army signs on my shirt and thinking of home.

Sparks started to fly. The boat was being hit by machine guns. I ducked my head in fear, but that was not the worst. The sparks stopped. I looked up. Damn!

Cannons were firing at us too. The boat next to us was hit. It was like seeing a fire on the water. I saw one man jump out, and in the water he never came up. The boat stopped. The door opened. I thought no one would step out but they did. So did I. I was sure I would not go, but there I was, standing in the water. The boat behind me blew up, knocking me face (down) in the water. I was soaked.

The guns around me terrified me. Men yelling, bombs going off, cannons and planes all sounded like the world was ending. There was nothing to hide behind. I started to shoot. I saw one of my friends. I ran to them. I asked, "Are you okay?" Then it hit me. They were dead. Their lifeless faces made me scared and angry. I could not move. A German ran near me. He ordered me to follow him. I did not. I was still in shock, so, he shot me. It went through my chest. I picked up my rifle and shot him before I fell over.

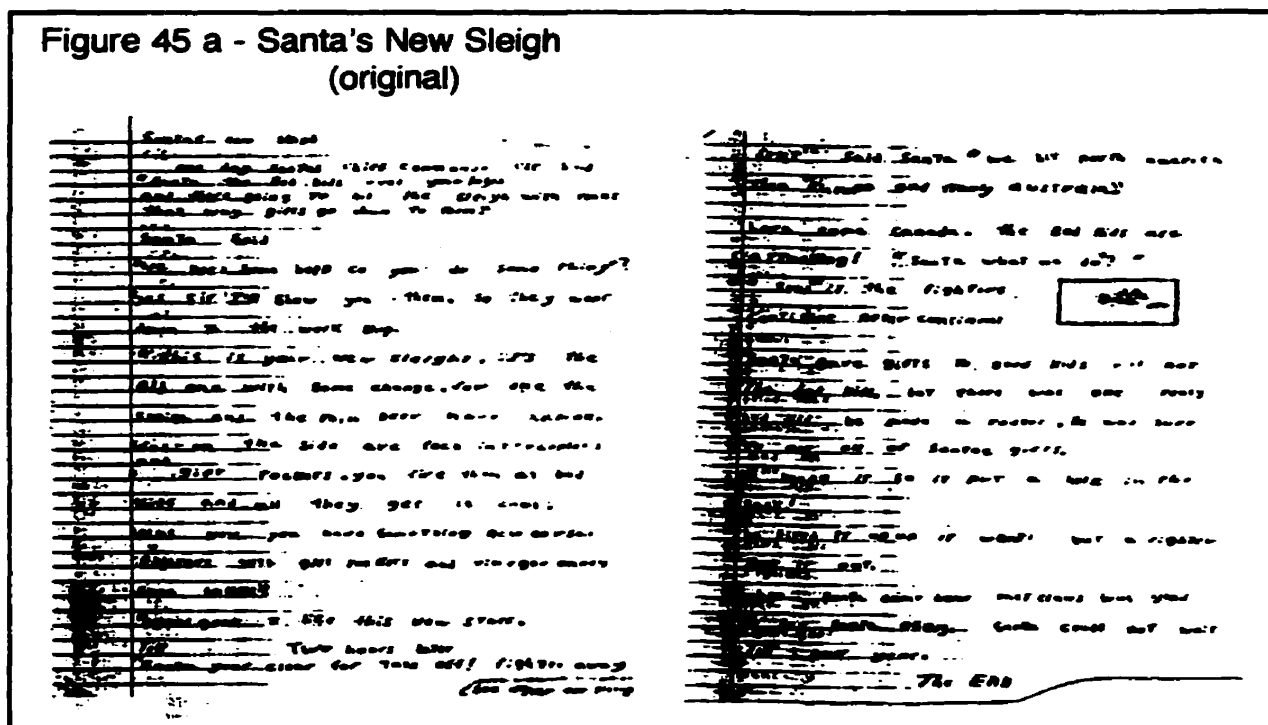
The next thing I remembered was a woman in white standing over me. "Sir, he's awake," she said. The doctor checked me over. I figured I'm in the hospital. For 13 nights, I had nightmares of my friends, of their bodies lying lifeless.

I remember walking off the train. My mom and dad, along with Lisa my girlfriend standing waiting for me. I walked to them, hugged and kissed them all. To this day I still dream about those days of long ago.

was a vivid, battle-front description. His short sentences imitated the sudden actions of combat and contributed to the sense of immediacy, as did his decision to tell the story in the first person. His style was simple and direct, like that of a soldier, and simply by listing events, he was able to create the confusion of the scene. His limited use of dialogue, too, showed great control; spoken words were added at just the right moments to intensify and extend the action. Not only was Matt able to imagine what it was like to be there, he was able to take his readers to war with him.

Matt's passion and success with writing war stories made him want to stay with this genre, and he was reluctant to try another. On the Christmas exam, however, there were different topics and he was obliged to write about something else. When he asked me if he could write about war, I regretfully told him that he had to use the topics he was given, thinking that it would be good for him to tackle another subject. However, Matt found a way to incorporate his favourite topic with the Christmas themes on the exam, and when I read his composition (Figures 45a and 45b), I laughed.

Figure 45 a - Santa's New Sleigh
(original)



Once again, Matt's personality appeared in his writing; his sense of humour and irreverence enabled him to make a topic, not of his choosing, his own. Clearly, he had a good time inventing this, and part of his pleasure probably came from thwarting the

Figure 45b - Santa's New Sleigh

Santa's New Sleigh

One day, Santa's chief commando elf said, "Santa, the bad kids want your toys and they're going to hit the sleigh with rocks. That way the gifts go down to them."

Santa said, "We need some help. Can you do something?"

"Yes, sir. I'll show you them." So they went down to the workshop.

"This is your new sleigh. It's the old one with some changes. For one, the sleigh and the reindeer have armour and on the side are rock interceptors and gift rockets. You fire them at bad kids and all they get is coal. Plus, now you have something new -- corsair fighters with gift rockets and vinegar candy cane bullets."

"Good, good. I like this new stuff."

Two Hours Later

"Santa, you're clear for take off! Fighter away!"

"First," said Santa, "We hit North America, then Europe, and finally Australia."

Here comes Canada. The bad kids are attacking!

"Santa, what (do) we do?"

"Send in the fighters!"

Continent after continent, Santa gave gifts to good kids but not to the bad kids. But there was one really bad kid. He made a rocket. He was sure to get all of Santa's gifts. He made it so it put a hole in the sack. He fired it. Up it went, but a rocket took it out.

When Santa came home, Mrs. Claus was glad to see Santa okay. Santa could not wait till next year!

instructions on the exam. His engagement with his topic was genuine and he even included a diagram of Santa's bomber-sleigh to help his readers visualise it. Matt's fixation with war was evident in both his creative writing and his reading but it was not as limiting as Fiona's interest. He was able to approach texts on subjects other than war with an open mind.

Deciding What's Interesting

Matt was a reflective reader who analysed both the text he read and the effect it had on him. When he said he liked the novel, *Five Days of the Ghost* by William Bell,

in his response log (Figure 46) he gave reasons: he liked the characters in the book and he anticipated an interesting plot. Similarly, when his interest flagged, he knew why: it wasn't as scary as he'd expected, and there wasn't enough action. Matt accounted for his renewed enthusiasm for the book with the appearance of the three ghosts, particularly, one of them, Kenny, whose gestures he considered appropriate.

Furthermore, he summarised the changing nature of his reaction as if trying to make sense of it. It was never enough for Matt simply to like or dislike a text. He was always able to explain his position, and this, I believe, made him a more successful

Figure 46 - Response to
Five Days of the Ghost

5 Days of the Ghost

Book-look

At first I kind of liked the book.

I felt something good would happen
and I also liked the people.

Midway in the book I did not like
(it). It might (be) talking to an
Indian. It's kind of not scary.

They did not do much. Now, I like
the book. Finally, the ghosts came
out -- 3 of them. It was just cool.
I found the book even moved faster.
What was cool was Kenny saying "hi"
in his own way. It's weird how any
book can make you not like it and
then make you love it. Can we read
some more? I give the book 10
stars.

P.S. Write back and can we read
some more ghost stories?

5 day of the ghost
book - look
at first I kind of liked the book I feel
that some thing good was happen
and I also like the people.
Midway in the book I did not like IT much
Talking to a Indian IS kind of not scary
they did not do much
Now I like the book, cause the ghost came
out 3 of them IT was better and I found
the book even moved faster what was
cool was kenny saying hi in his own
way IT was weird how any book can
make you not like it and then make you
love it can we read some more
so I give the book 10 stars.

reader than Jon, Jeff, or Fiona. While enthusiasm was often a part of his reaction, he could still make a well-considered response without it. Matt could go beyond his personal feelings and tastes by examining where they came from.

One of his responses (Figure 47) to *Daniel's Story* (1993) by Carol Matas, a book Matt did not enjoy in spite of its World War II setting, demonstrated his ability to judge each book he read on its individual characteristics. Matt analysed the text carefully to find the reasons for his lack of engagement. He explained that he found the method of narration difficult to follow, as the point of view of the main character shifted often.

Figure 47 - Response to
Daniel's Story

I find it very confusing when he flips back to a photo or memory most of the time the class fights over what is happening in Daniel's Story. I also don't like the way 3 years go by in the ghetto. We don't know if he's in the ghetto, his home town, prison camp, elsewhere. In Part Five (it) does not hit me hard because I know beforehand what goes on. They're some of the lucky ones. In some places there were much more sicker ways to get food. Jews weren't the only people to be treated that way.

I find it very confusing when he flips back to a photo or memory most of the time the class fights over what is happening in Daniel's Story. I also don't like the way 3 years go by in the ghetto.

We don't know much what happened there part like I don't know if he's in the ghetto, his home town, prison camp, else where.

In part Five it's not hit me hard because I know beforehand what goes on. There some of the lucky ones in some places there were much more sicker way to get food.

Jews weren't

the only people

to be treated that way.

Possibly because of his knowledge of war, he found the book lacked a clear sense of time in relation to the events of the war that he was familiar with. Matt was able to point to a specific section of the book, "Part Five", as the part that he could not connect to. Again, what took place in the book did not match his background knowledge of the period. In these ways, he weighed his reactions and knew why he had formed his opinion. Interestingly, his favourite theme, war, did not influence his enjoyment of a book. This is a sharp contrast with Fiona who read indiscriminately on her favourite topics, penguins and unicorns. He went beyond his personal taste and took other factors into consideration. Another example of this is contained in his views of a book he read in grade-eight about the plight of a Jewish family during the second World War.

Because it was -- Just the way the book was written. I mean the way these people were living. It's this family and every possible bad thing that could happen -- I mean, their mother died. They were sent to Auschwitz. And they had to live in the ghetto. Finding dead bodies every day and they finally didn't care about dead bodies. Sitting on dead bodies and looking at dead bodies. And they're watching all these storm troopers go through. They're like hiding for their lives. It's just the things that happened to them -- I mean, like, in part two -- if the families went through what they did, they would be dead. It means that they're like some super-hero family.

His knowledge of the period led him to conclude that it was unrealistic. But, more importantly, it was not enough for a book to deal with his favourite topic for him to like it. Matt examined it, as well as his own reactions to it, carefully before passing a favourable judgment, and he did not automatically include nor exclude reading material on the basis of his personal preferences.

Matt's response to the poem, "Field of Vision" by Seamus Heaney was proof of the satisfactions that his open-minded approach to reading often brought him. It is an intensely personal reaction (Figure 7), unusual for him, in which he said little about the poem itself, but focussed on his own thoughts and questions stimulated by his reading.

Every time I read this passage from his response log, it seemed to me that Matt had experienced and articulated one of the most important reasons for reading literature -- the illumination of and connection to some universal aspect of the human condition. While promoting this kind of experience for my students was my chief

Figure 48 - Age

Age

Sometimes when I think of old people, I think what's going on in their heads, like the future or the past or present and what knowledge they had to share, what they have done and seen, and if they're lonely, or need a hand, what they like to do and who they loved. I wonder myself what I will be like, if I will think of this answer and remember.

AGE

Some Times When I think of old people
I think where — going on in their head
like the future or the past or present
and what knowledge they have to share
what they have done and seen ———
and if they're lonely
or need a hand.
what they like to do and who they
loved.

I wonder my self what I will be like
if I will think of this answer
and remember.

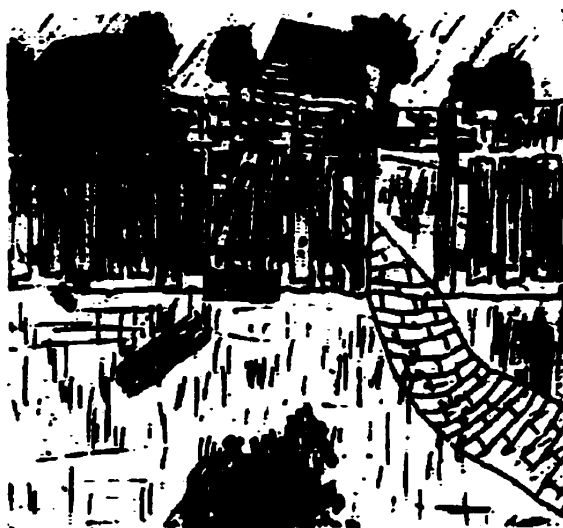
pedagogical goal, I did not see it realised among my students as often as I would have liked. But, on this occasion, the reader and the text came together with wonderful results.

Figure 49 - When the Children Are Gone

When the Children are Gone

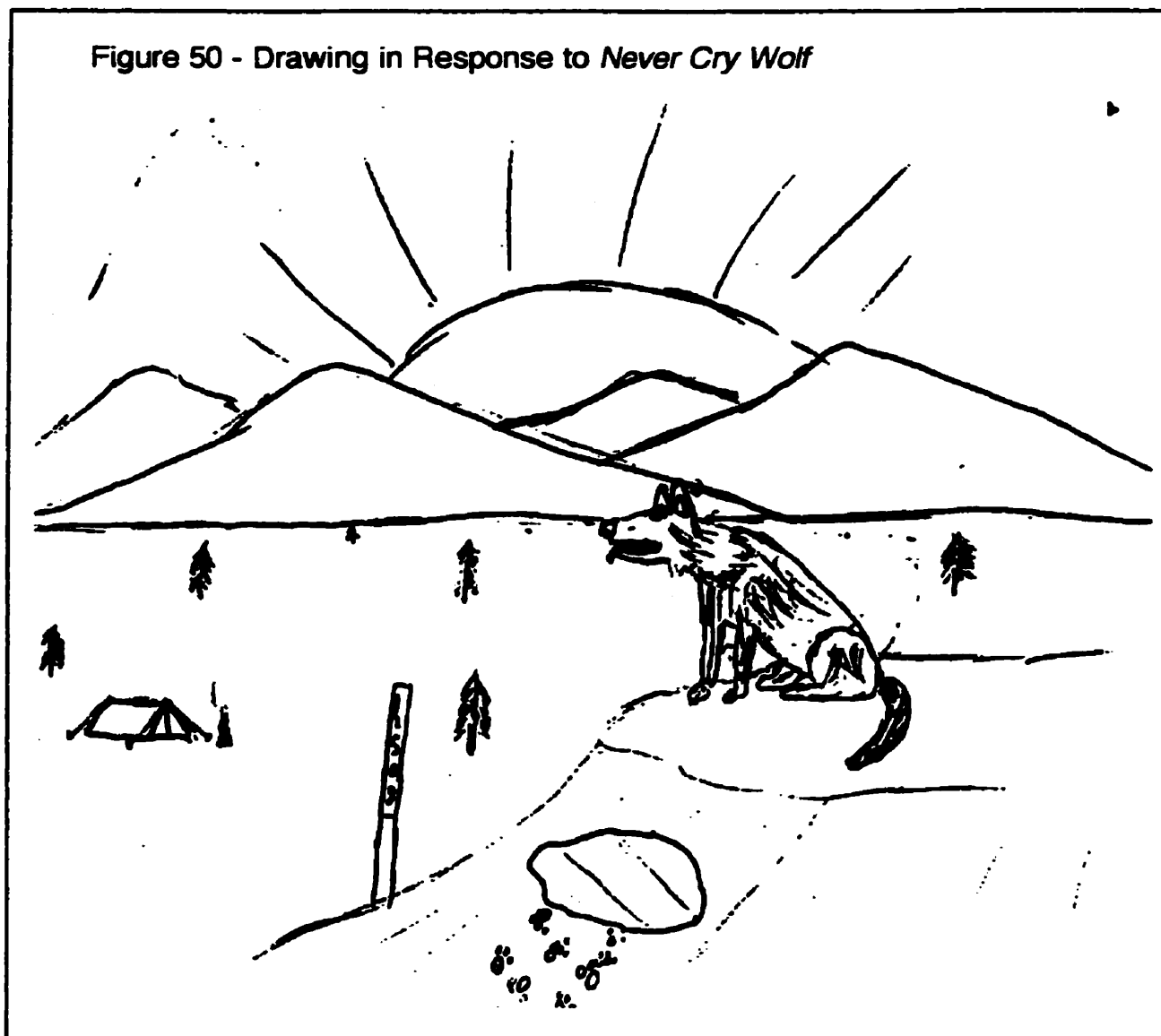
*The farm is old and tired,
Piles of junk lie around the farm,
The fence is falling apart,
the barn is old and the paint is all gone.
The house is old and grey, the grass
needs to be cut and the trees need a trim
and apples need picking, but they sit
there on the porch in two chairs.
When will the children come home?*

Anonymous - Sec. II



Eventually, Matt was moved to write about the same theme and to try another genre, poetry. Figure 49 is a poem and drawing that he submitted to the school's literary magazine. It was written the year after he left my class and was inspired by a short story his English class read. His drawing was just as detailed and interesting as his poem. Matt often drew pictures of scenes from his creative pieces (for example, Figure 49), a process which seemed to complement his writing. Unlike Jon, he did not draw instead of write, nor in order to write, but rather, in addition to writing. However, his intention appeared to be to make his writing clearer because the writing usually preceded the drawing, and his drawings often became creative pieces of equal weight and depth.

Figure 50 - Drawing in Response to *Never Cry Wolf*



Getting the Picture

Matt's response log, like those of Jeff, Fiona, and Jon, also contained many drawings. Interestingly, he was able to include nearly as much detail in those as in his written responses. In Figure 50, a response to *Never Cry Wolf*, by Farley Mowat, he saw the scene from the wolf's perspective. The wolf was observing Mowat as much as Mowat observed the wolves. There were footprints leading to a puddle of urine, Mowat's method of marking the boundaries of his territory that he imitated from the wolves. Matt reinforced this idea by including a concrete hint, a surveyor's stake next to it, the human way to claim territory. This drawing was another way to show what he considered important in the novel.

Matt, like Jon, felt that successful reading involved seeing a picture. He described his own reading as a process of translating words into images, and this may account for his spontaneous inclination to draw his reading and his writing.

When I read a book, it's like a TV screen. I see all the characters walking around -- Reading, it's like watching a TV show, but not watching a TV show. You can stop. You can do whatever you want. You're reading. You're mind's working, everything. Everything's going, instead of just sitting there looking like a goon. Well, like in *Five Days of the Ghost*, the first time they visited the island and they were going through the bush, I pictured myself as one of them -- walking along -- I could actually see feet moving along -- I don't know. If I don't connect -- I guess I don't get a picture.

If Matt wasn't interested in a text, like Jon, he didn't see a picture. Both Jon and Matt were able to use a drawing to connect to their reading, and gradually I became aware of how important it was to provide my students with the time and space to use this way of relating to reading and writing of all kinds, including content subjects.

An Interest in Fact

Matt's approach to content reading and writing was not different from his approach to fiction; he was highly motivated and highly analytical and successfully combined the stance of personal involvement with that of the detached observer. Thus, he made exceptional use of his geography journal; it was a record of his learning in that subject in which he used a variety of techniques to record and evaluate the information he read. His journal was written in a scientific format, which he adopted spontaneously, and included lists of facts, explanatory diagrams, and brief

Figure 51 - Contour Maps

Contour Map - Before

30 or 35 wide lines

physical

area

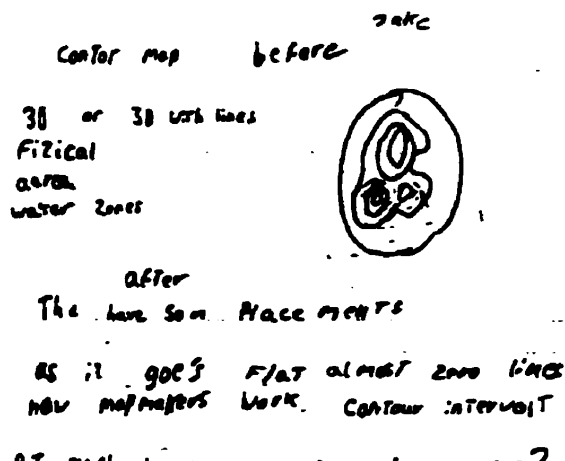
water zones

After

They have 50 metre placements.

As it goes flat, almost zero lines.

How mapmakers work. Contour intervals



comments that were usually summaries of his reflections, comparing what he had learned with what he already knew. In Figure 9, Matt listed what he thought were the important features of contour maps before reading about them in the geography text.

Figure 52 - What I Remember

What I remember

I remember all 3 types of rock igneous, volcanic types of rock metamorphic sedimentary, thousands of pounds compressing on it and how they're made from what they are most of this I know. Plus I have a large collection of samples of minerals.

What	I Remember
I remember	all 3 types of rock
igneous	volcanic lava and all
metamorphic	
sedimentary	Thousands of pounds compressing on it
and who have made	here there from
what they are	
most of this I know	
plus I have	so large collection of samples of minerals

He included a diagram in his "before" section to show what contour maps looked like beside his list of facts already known to him. Clearly, he had expanded his knowledge of this topic through his reading, as he listed four new pieces of information that he acquired after discussing the text in class.

Sometimes, I would begin the geography class by asking my students to write

down what they remembered from the reading we had done during the previous period. Figure 52 is an example of Matt's ability to recall what he learned and record it concisely. This excerpt from his journal was significant because it showed not only Matt's interest in and ability to retain this geological information, but also his personal connection to and prior knowledge of the subject. He was able to distinguish new information from old and blend the two. Again, he was reading analytically and with self-awareness.

Another "before" and "after" entry on mountain building (Figure 53) showed that his ideas were less influenced by his reading as there is only one new aspect of the topic that he learned.

Figure 53

Mountain making

Before

1. Tectonic plates moving together
2. Dead volcano, volcano dies
3. Old islands, water drained far around it
4. Lava pouring out

After

Nothing has changed. I learned this info over many years of my own work.

What I learned was how the tectonic plates work.

- 1

Mountain making Info

before

1. Tectonic plates moving together

2. Dead volcano, volcano dies

3. Old islands, water drained far around it

4. Lava pouring out

after

Nothing has changed. I learned this info over many years of my own work.

What I learned was how the tectonic plates work.

- 2

His approach to this kind of writing was concise and scientific; Matt seemed to be in a quantitative frame of mind when he numbered his facts to present them clearly. The use of the term "info" was another sign of his "scientific" shorthand he used to record his ideas. In addition, he adopted the voice of an experienced researcher when he referred to "many years of my own work." Matt was as truly engaged with this kind of writing as he was with his war stories.

All three passages from his geography journal showed that he had a very clear mental image of the material that he had read; however, his writing was much more than decontextualised facts. There were elements of Matt's self-image in the tone of authority and confidence with which he wrote. His approach to content reading was

not totally separate from his approach to fiction; he interpreted both through the lenses of his previous knowledge and experience and took pleasure in both kinds of reading and writing. Matt did not have to cross the great divide between fiction and non-fiction that Jeff and Fiona had had to cross.

Comparing Fact and Fiction

When I asked Matt to do a RAP -- respond-aloud-protocol -- it was, in fact, the only time that I had heard him read aloud. He didn't refuse to do it, but I made sure that no one else was around to listen to him when he read. Like Jeff and Jon, Matt read the following passage from *The River*, by Gary Paulsen and he read it slowly, but fluently.

Brian opened the door and stood back. There were three men, all in dark suits, standing on the front porch. They were large but not fat, well built, with bodies in decent shape. One of them was slightly thinner than the other two.

"Brian Robeson?"

Brian nodded. "Yes."

The only word he missed was "Brian" which he read as "brain;" however, he corrected that himself. Not only did he correct the word, but also the interpretation his miscue had caused. This is what he said:

I see, like, uh, mafia guys, sort of -- you know, in the trench coats and with suit cases. I'm wondering who Brain is. Oh! It's Brian. I thought this was sci-fi.

Now, I see what it's about. I'm wondering what these guys want.

Someone called "Brain" suggested a specific genre to him. His curiosity about the story was genuinely aroused because, without a prod from me, he continued to read the next section.

The thin man smiled and stepped forward and held out his hand. "I'm Derek Holtzer. These other two are Bill Mannerly and Erik Ballard. Can we come in?" Brian held the door open to let them come in. "Mother isn't home right now..." "It's you we've come to see." Derek stopped just in the entry-way and the other two did the same. "Of course, we'll wish to speak to your mother and father as well, but we came to see you. Didn't you get a call about us?"

Again, he read slowly, without much expression, but without any errors. This is how he responded to this passage:

Now, I'm starting to wonder really who they are. 'Cause they're like -- dressed

like mafia or something, and saying "we want to talk to you" and what do they want to talk to him about? And why, if they called him didn't he get a call from them? Are these police or did he do something wrong? Or at school? Or some other kids? Maybe he beat up three kids and they tattled on him? And these are their parents?

Matt's interpretation of the passage was rich; he made many of the same assumptions as Jon (p.114) and Jeff (p. 73), but he asked many more questions. The contrast in his expression when he spoke about the passage and when he read it was noticeable; although he read in a monotone, his questions were asked in an urgent tone of voice. Matt really wanted to know who these people were and what they wanted. He was hooked by the opening of the novel and wanted to read on. Matt's RAP confirmed the analytical and interested approach to reading he had consistently demonstrated.

Matt read a non-fiction text similarly. From the book, *Polar Lands*, he read the following passage in his slow monotone and with only two minor errors that did not alter the meaning of the words he misread. His substitutions of "freezing" for "freeze" and "constant" for "consistent" were almost synonyms.

Few areas in the world are as harsh and desolate as the North and South Poles and few are as beautiful. For much of the year both areas are freezing cold, with fierce winds and thick snow and ice on the ground. As it grows colder even the seas freeze. Not many animals live here. Some species, however, are hardy enough to live, breed and find food in the open wastes. Their bodies have specially adapted to the constant cold.

This is what he said about the passage:

I'm getting a picture of a polar bear. It is an excellent swimmer and can catch seals and fish. It has a winter and a summer coat. I see a picture of a polar bear and other animals that live there.

He filled in the few small gaps in the description he'd read by adding some specific details that were missing. He named one animal that had adapted to the climate, as well as its diet and physical feature that enabled it to live in the Arctic. He had drawn a more detailed mental picture of the text.

In another passage from the same book, Matt used his interpretive strategy of comparing new information with knowledge he already possessed, all the while,

tracking his own reaction to the text. This is what he read:

The most northerly point where trees will grow is about 2300 km (1429 miles) from the North Pole. In between the tree line and the icecap, lie regions of tundra, which is rough terrain covered with rugged vegetation. The layer beneath the tundra is always frozen, even in summer.

And this is what he said about the passage:

This is not really surprising. Some people can guess maybe that's what's going to happen. About the trees. I knew this except for the technical names, tundra and permafrost. I didn't know the tundra was permanently frozen. I don't know where I found out the rest of this before, but there's a lot of things. I thought it thawed in the summer. I didn't know it was always frozen even though there was vegetation.

His first reaction was to sort out what was familiar from what was new. After noting specific words that were new to him, tundra and permafrost, Matt pointed out what was interesting and surprising about what he learned from his reading; for example, plants can grow above the permafrost of the tundra. The ability to extract facts, or specific ideas from a text was an intrinsic part of the pleasure Matt derived from reading. It was, therefore, difficult to separate this process from his enjoyment. Matt seemed to read fiction and non-fiction texts only slightly differently, shifting easily between an aesthetic and an efferent stance.

When I asked him whether he thought fiction and non-fiction required different reading approaches, his reply was predictably interesting and thoughtful.

You learn things slower in fiction. Non-fiction is straight-forward. Like, in a murder, you find a little about the person, then the person gets murdered under certain circumstances, but at the end you find who did it. But, before they give you the background information on everyone. Fiction -- it just -- I don't know, flows to you. You go with the flow. But, maybe fiction makes you think more.

There's more you don't know. Reading non-fiction, you're trying to make points.

Reading this, you think, I must remember this.

In Matt's mind, the two kinds of reading were different and he was doing different things. Perhaps it was his enjoyment of both kinds of reading that made his approaches seem similar. He liked non-fiction, in fact, said he preferred it, and it may have been his pleasure and interest that bridged the gap. Certainly, he read with a

very special, expansive interest, with more self-awareness than Jeff and Jon, and with more curiosity than Fiona.

Owning his Reading

In spite of his accomplishments in reading and writing, school remained a challenge for Matt, particularly when he went to the regular program in grade-eight. Near the end of that year, he was in danger of failing math, and his performance in his other subjects was lacklustre. With the exception of history, his best subject, he was not enjoying school. I talked to Matt at length a few weeks before the final exams in June and asked him why he thought he was having trouble in English, a subject he had enjoyed in grade-seven. His replies were startlingly perceptive.

I dread those -- those assignments we get on books. Like, our English exam? Like this one story, it's comparing a hand gun to an atomic bomb. Well, that's what I get from it. I feel it has nothing to do with the future. And the guy in the story is a doctor and has a kid. He's fifteen, but mentally four. And a guy comes in and gives the kid a hand gun. And he comes in and asks who would do this. And he's complaining about this. And the question I have to answer is: how is this haunting the doctor in his past or his future, or whatever. Well, to me it's not. He's just ticked off about what happened with his kid -- They kind of contradict my feelings and if that happens I have a hard time answering the question.

Because it's against my beliefs, my opinion of the story.

It appeared that he was expected to respond to someone else's interpretation of a story instead of forming his own. Matt understood this clearly and objected to it. His choice of words was interesting; he claimed the high moral ground by saying that he had been asked to go against his beliefs. Inwardly, I agreed with him, but outwardly, I sympathised and asked him how he thought he should be tested on reading in school.

I don't know. Um -- maybe responses. That would work for me I guess -- Yeah. A lot better. I can understand maybe comprehension things, like what happened in Chapter 14. Just facts. That question -- you could reword it. Was the doctor mad that his son was given a hand gun? Yes or no? But the way they're written -- I can't answer them.

Matt's complaint made a clear distinction between the facts and the interpretation of a story. To him, comprehension questions were only valid if they dealt with the facts of a story only. Imposing an interpretation of a text on students, even through the dubious

medium of exam questions, was tantamount to doing their reading for them. But, the problem of not letting students do their own reading was not limited to exams.

Normally a teacher doesn't let us discuss a book. She tells us what she thinks, but we can't tell her -- but you let us, like, talk back. So, we had like this general discussion, but I think some teachers think that it's a waste of time. Children won't produce anything useful. They think they'll talk about skateboards or something like that.

The tone of voice in which he said this revealed how insulted he felt about being told what a story or book was about. Students were "children" who couldn't be trusted to behave responsibly and do their own thinking, or their own talking. When class discussions did take place, the role of the teacher was equally damaging.

In discussion groups you can talk to people about the thing you're working on and in a smaller group there's less argument. I find that in a discussion, when the teacher actually lets us talk, and there's like a conflict, different interpretations, like the teacher just rules on one. And then, basically, you're wrong. He's right -- Yeah, that's basically it. They say, "be quiet and sit down." They don't want to hear from us -- Yeah, there's different interpretations. Everybody has their own opinion. It's just that in school you're not allowed to say your opinion.

Matt had no problem with multiple interpretations of a text, but found school a hostile environment for that. Sadly, he perceived a very wide gap between how students read literature and how literature was taught in school. No doubt dispensing and arbitrating the correct version of a text inhibited and undermined the confidence of all students, but especially of struggling students like Matt, Jeff, Fiona, and Jon, who had had a long, slow, painful time learning to trust their own reading. I felt nearly as depressed as Matt was when we talked and worried that he was in danger of losing the gains of the previous year.

From time to time, during the year he spent in my class, Matt remarked he felt more like a reader than a writer. He was often discouraged by the heavy task of "cleaning up" his writing for final drafts. Interestingly, after a year in the regular program he described himself as better at writing than reading.

I like writing better. I think I'm a better writer -- With the writing, I can put what I want. But, if we read a book in school -- let's say about space or something. I

can take that idea and mould it the way I want to -- I don't do much at school, but at home. I write, like, science fiction.

Certainly, his spelling had not improved that much! What had changed was his view of himself as a writer, and that view depended on the concept of ownership. It was being in control of his writing that he liked. At school, Matt was not allowed to own his reading; however, writing was better in that respect because he was allowed "to put what (he) want(ed)." Nevertheless, in spite of this relative freedom, it was also significant that he did most of his writing at home, and I was somewhat comforted that his literacy was strong enough for him to write for himself. But, this change in Matt was a shocking measure of the impact of pedagogy that, at best, ignored and, at worst, did not respect the different ways that individuals make sense of a text. I felt so sad to see how discouraged and diminished Matt felt, and his unhappiness was clearly having an effect on his interest and, thus, his performance in school.

What Did I Learn From Matt?

Matt's story reinforces many of the features of Jon's, Jeff's and Fiona's learning. The psychological set-back of learning to read late in elementary school had also left permanent scars on Matt, and he shared the phobias of the others about reading aloud and about reading baby books. His reading was an essential part of his writing, and drawing was an effective tool for expressing his thoughts about both his reading and writing; like Jon and Jeff, he needed to "see" what he was reading and writing. Matt had struggled to become a successful reader and was helped by his passions for a subject as were the other three.

Both Matt and Jon talked about the drills they had received in elementary school. While Jon noticed that he could read words on cards but not in books and implied that reading words out of context is not reading. Matt gave an extremely detailed and thoughtful explanation of why phonics did not work for him. He found it frustrating and "too much trouble" to read individual sounds.

In view of what happened to him when he left my class, Matt showed me how important a teacher's perspective of a student's learning can be. Recognising how much he could do did not change his capabilities, but certainly, it changed his performance in school. Matt eloquently expressed how important it was to him to own his reading. Unless he was free to express his views on his reading, he did not feel valued and therefore did not value his reading experiences in school. I must also

point out that there is another reason for encouraging personal responses; it is by expressing their ideas that students become aware of what they are thinking, and this is a necessary condition for critical thinking. Recycling a teacher's opinion will never develop students' own abilities.

Interest was a key factor in Matt's reading, and I must clarify what I mean by interest. I do not mean "like" in a specific sense, but rather a more general appreciation of a text which could be positive or negative; it was the ability to take an interest in a variety of texts. Matt arrived in my class with this ability, while Jeff and Jon were gradually acquiring it, Jon more slowly than Jeff. Fiona, unfortunately, remained resistant to this kind of reading stance.

Paradoxically, encouraging a personal response to reading promoted this attitude and had the effect of broadening the focus of a reader, rather than narrowing it. As Matt demonstrated, there was a reciprocal relationship between pleasure and competence in reading that led to a more balanced perspective and more self-awareness. When his viewpoint was respected, he was able to see more in a text and more of how he read it. Simply, he was able to care about his reading, and, like most people, it was easier for Matt to care about something he owned.

While Jon, Jeff, Fiona, and Matt are obviously very different individuals, they shared many similar experiences and views of those experiences. I have pointed out where their reading histories overlapped in brief summaries at the end of each case study. In the next chapter, I will discuss the broader implications of the similarities in these students' reading, as well as the unresolved issues and unanswered questions that this look at their reading reveals.

Chapter Seven

Chasing Fireflies: Where to Look

Capturing and Defining Reading

Understanding readers is like chasing fireflies; I often feel as if I work in the dark only catching brief glimmers of what is actually taking place. It is also difficult to make a successful reading event happen; there are many factors beyond my control, and I can only create favourable conditions for reading and hope that the other requirements will be in place. I must have faith in my students, that those flashes will reappear, and have the patience to wait for them; if no glimmers appear, it may be that one or more critical features -- a sufficiently interesting text, a comfortable reading situation, or adequate motivation of the reader -- are missing. But, always, I must remain attentive to my students' needs and preferences and let my understanding of reading show me how and where to look for their successes.

One of the challenges of creating favourable learning conditions for Jon, Jeff, Fiona, and Matt was to find ways to change their outlook on reading and writing. They had to see that literacy was not only useful to them in school, but served many personal purposes in their lives outside of school as well. Certainly, all four students wanted to succeed in school, but truly believed that they could not. Even Fiona wanted to be successful and concealed her fear of failure behind a protective smokescreen of resistance. All of them had to stop thinking of themselves as "losers" who "sucked" at reading and to become aware of what they could do. A focus on meaning and ways to make meaning as readers was a vital part of this process of valuing themselves.

While the struggles of each of the four students in this study share common attributes, each reveals individual problems with reading. Jeff developed an identity as a reader of non-fiction and then became a reader and writer in literary genres. He had not realized that he could read until his tastes and preferences were validated in school; he believed that his reading outside school did not count as reading. Such is the impact of the context of school. Fiona was a foil for Jeffrey; she already had her own literary pleasures and goals which helped her grow stronger as a literary reader and make some gains in content reading. However, her entrenched opposition to particular kinds of school tasks, specifically, reading information-based texts to satisfy other people's purposes, prevented her from "doing" school. Clearly, reading for

Fiona was much more than decoding or mastering a set of skills.

When Jon recognized his needs as a visual learner, he started to participate in reading and writing activities. He had never thought of reading as a process of creating pictures and because of his severe decoding problems, he rarely got to that part of reading. Jon needed to break free of his own lock-step view of reading that made him think he had to master skills such as phonic patterns before he could participate in the ideas of a text. Matt pursued his own enthusiasms through reading and writing and grew stronger as a result; he knew who he was as a reader and was able to use reading and writing to construct part of his identity. For students who do not develop their own profiles as readers, as Matt did, reading remains at best, an external, school-based activity and at worst, something they do not do. Unfortunately, few of Matt's teachers saw him as a reader and judged him by the form of his writing, rather than the content. I do not believe that he should have been placed in my "un-special" special class; school ought to be a more accommodating context for students like Matt.

I must stress that these are not success stories; they are successful moments in largely unsuccessful school careers. It is my profound belief that there should have been more of such moments for these four students in school, before and after our time together. School, for the most part, worked against these students, and others; it is an alien culture for struggling readers and they live mainly outside of the curriculum.

Teachers and Students as Curriculum

I must clarify what I mean by curriculum; it is not a physical entity, a collection of documents advocating and describing a particular course of action. Curriculum, which is nearly as ephemeral as reading, is the transactions between students and teachers. Like the transaction between a reader and a text, teacher-student transactions are reciprocal, each one affecting and changing the other. Notions that teachers adopt and/or adapt ready-made curriculum -- programs or approaches from "out there" in research land or, worse, from the market place -- persist, even among teachers themselves. They are, however, incorrect and are influenced by aspects of positivist thinking. The substance of curriculum cannot be prepackaged and delivered to students; there is no set of sequential facts and skills to be mastered at predetermined rates for ages and stages and there is no step by step program to be followed. There are only individuals becoming readers and writers in their own time and their own

ways.

Teaching is a social activity that consists of the actions and interactions of students and teachers. Curriculum, then, is the product of social engagement and is continuous and reflexive; it resides within students as well, and teachers must try to draw it out and bring it to life. This relationship gives teachers tremendous power, but with that comes a heavy responsibility. We teachers must realize that we are the ones who can remove the barriers to learning, but we are also the ones who can construct them. Throughout this study, I have articulated the view of reading that stresses meaning over skills. Because of this perspective, I was able to raise the bar and allow more students into the club of reading (and writing.) Before I began this project I, like most teachers, did not see myself as the curriculum; I saw curriculum as important, but external. I now realize that it is how I think about reading, how I transform reading theory and strategies into interactions with my students that makes the difference.

The four case studies provide detailed descriptions of how I arrived at my present understanding of struggling readers and of reading itself. It is time to establish the precise coordinates of my present location on my personal intellectual journey. By returning to my changing questions (see p. xi) I can account for my shifting perspective. Specifically, I wish to explain how I moved from asking, what I should teach, to who I should be. Then I shifted from wondering how I could help students to learn, to asking, **who** are the students that I want to help? These two major changes in my thinking arose from particular ideas and events described in this study and I shall make those connections clearer.

The Teacher As Curriculum: Who Should I Be?

Just as reader-response has, at long last, privileged the role of the reader in reading, it is time to place the teacher in the spotlight and privilege the role of the teacher in curriculum. My awareness of this concept developed partly from my frustration in writing about the events of my classroom. Whenever I wanted to talk about what I did, I ended up discussing what happened between me and my students. It was the conversations my students and I had that mattered most. I kept feeling that it would be easier to capture the real curriculum of my classroom with a videotape than to write about it, since it is not possible to include every detail and every nuance of so many important events. In focussing on the teacher, my intention is not to diminish the role of students in curriculum; however, it is the role of the teacher that is within my

control.

If the teacher is such a large part of the curriculum, what sort of teacher should occupy such an important position? In other words, who should I be? My three personal answers to this question are: 1) a teacher who understands literacy; 2) a teacher who understands my role in the curriculum; and 3) a teacher who rejects the deficit view of learners and learning. I will elaborate these three answers in the sections that follow.

Understanding Reading

I describe this study as my personal intellectual journey to understanding reading. Coming to know individual readers is only part of that process. Another part is to include the experiences of others -- teachers and researchers -- in my view of my classroom. By situating my experiences and understanding in the research literature, I was able to grow as a teacher. The discussion of my reading is determined by more than a selection my personal favourites; it contains references that have had the most impact on my teaching and my students. Many of these ideas have been in the research literature for many years (e.g. Rosenblatt, 1938; Goodman, 1965), and some have not been widely understood or used by teachers (e.g. teaching phonics "in context"). In fact, it may be fair to say that reading research describes what can happen, but not how to make it happen.

As a teacher, I have found particular ideas that have enormous practical application, and as a teacher-researcher, I have tried to map those ideas onto my classroom and to intertwine them with the stories of my struggling readers. Unfortunately, the research literature does not contain many studies that make learning to "read-by-reading" clear to teachers. The descriptions of the benefits of such an approach are plentiful, but it is left to teachers to find ways to do it. I have tried to fill that gap with specific references to the ideas that influenced me, how they played out in my classroom, and how my students responded to them.

While reader-response theory provides a description of reading that privileges the reader, Rosenblatt (1938, 1978) avoids prescribing specific pedagogical approaches to achieve this. While she applauds the use of small-group discussions, response logs, and other ways of bringing her ideas into the classroom, Rosenblatt's goal is not to construct a methodology, but to influence teacher thinking because that is the real way to affect the curriculum (Karolides, 1999). Goodman's (1965, 1996)

and Smith's (1994, 1999) work is directed at teachers in a similar way. For example, the cueing systems -- semantic, syntactic, pragmatic, and graphophonic -- described by Goodman shed light on what readers do, but are not meant to be translated into discrete activities; they are interconnected and function together, almost simultaneously, in the production of meaning. It is hard to isolate and devise semantic, syntactic, or pragmatic activities that truly develop these aspects of reading, although phonics drills, comprehension questions, and cloze passages are good attempts to do so. Using any of these cueing systems in isolation sends readers the implicit message that reading is really about decoding, about literal recall of the text, about answering someone else's questions, about filling in blanks -- about anything except constructing meaning.

The cueing systems are lenses for teachers and students and are not meant to become classroom tasks or even evaluation criteria; however, they do play a role in assessing the kind of help students may need in reading. When readers have difficulty with a text, teachers can direct them towards the cueing system that corresponds to the type of miscue they have made; for example, students who make semantic and syntactic miscues need instructional support about how words and language work. Again, I want to argue against turning the cueing systems into isolated concrete tasks; a neat and tidy vocabulary exercise is not the solution. Instead, it is more natural and meaningful to develop certain habits of mind in readers by encouraging them to pay attention to unusual and interesting words, to notice the words, phrases, or sentences that have had certain effects on them, and to make predictions, confirmations, and inferences that are accounted for with specific references to the text. Reader-response approaches provide many opportunities for developing these kinds of "skills." Recall my students' discussion of Hughes' poem in Chapter One; they struggled with the ambiguity created by the homophone "tear" and realized the impact that changing one word could have on the meaning of the poem. Skills have not been banished from contemporary reading theory, but the way in which they are introduced to students has greatly changed.

The phonics/whole language debate is largely about the way skills are taught, not whether they are part of reading instruction. As Weaver (1998) has pointed out, the two positions are not that far apart as both seem to be advocating that phonics should be taught in context. The main problem with the debate is that the common

ground is invisible because of the "either/or" stance of many of its participants. There are also different notions of "context" being expressed; there are those who suggest phonics-for-everyone strategies, such as reading a text first and then underlining phonic patterns (Moustafa, 1998), and those who say phonics should be taught only as individual needs arise (Smith, 1999).

A positive aspect of the debate is that it keeps the issue lively and in people's minds, which may encourage thoughtful teachers to examine their own knowledge and experience of this issue and take a position. Certainly, a *laissez-faire* whole-language teacher is just as undesirable as a teacher who sacrifices reading-for-meaning for phonics-in-isolation. My own concern with "phonics-for-everyone" is that it is difficult to avoid decontextualizing phonics instruction and placing it along side reading. Discussing phonics in the context of reading often would have meant breaking into the collective concentration and mood of meaning-making that enveloped the class when we read together in class. For students who had difficulty getting lost in a book, it was vital to avoid this kind of disruption. I even considered putting a "do-not-disturb-sign" on our classroom door whenever we were reading. This is why I think writing is a better context for phonics, and I shall elaborate on this in a moment.

I have already mentioned that it is easier to remove the graphophonic cueing system from reading because it is more concrete than the other three cueing systems. I believe that this is the main reason that it receives so much more attention than the other cueing systems. The fact that the graphophonic cueing system is part of reading is used to justify phonics instruction of all kinds, in isolation and "in context." It is still seen as an all-purpose antibiotic to cure the ills of struggling readers, no matter what the nature of their struggle is. I have already mentioned that dearth of specific descriptions of read-by-reading approaches; an integral part of such an approach is the helping students who do have decoding problems through texts they cannot decode. I know many teachers who say they do not know how to do this, and I suspect this problem is based on a more fundamental belief about what counts as reading. Do students have to decode texts themselves in order to "read" them? Most teachers know students who can read fluently and yet are unable to form an interpretation of their reading, in fact, are unable to do anything with their ability to decode. This kind of reader may also be nearly as common as true dyslexic readers, now that dyslexia has

been redefined (Fink, 1998). Does this count as reading? Furthermore, there are no special drills, kits, flash cards, or activities for these students. Stressing meaning is a messier undertaking than a phonics drill, and it doesn't come in kits; it comes in books and it also comes in teachers who have a good knowledge of reading.

The four struggling readers in this study demonstrate the interdependence of reading and writing in literacy development, and certainly, a rich writing program is vital to the growth of all readers. But there is a very particular way in which writing can support reading. I wish to restate my position that writing is a more appropriate context in which to develop the graphophonic cueing system in reading. Writers need to pay attention to letter-sound relationships in order to write, but the same thing is not entirely true for readers. In reading, there is always the danger that "sounding out" words becomes an end in itself by disrupting the flow of meaning-making. It is important to remember that the graphophonic aspect of reading takes place at the word level only, and that meaning is composed of larger units. It is important for struggling readers to move beyond the barrier of single words and work on larger units of meaning. This can be accomplished by giving students strategies for dealing with unknown words, strategies such as reading to the end of the sentence, paragraph, or even the page to look for context clues, skimming a passage to look for the main idea, and rereading a passage. In addition, because struggling readers tend to read at a constant pace, word by word possibly because of their decoding difficulties; they must learn to vary the speed of their reading according to their needs and purposes and to realize that meaning is contained in groups of words rather than single words.

On the other hand, a focus on the word level is necessary in writing. Since struggling readers are usually struggling writers, there is a natural overlap that permits writing to support the development of the graphophonic cueing system in reading. Showing students strategies for proofreading their writing provides natural opportunities to work on the letter-sound relationships. Students know that they need this kind of knowledge about language in order to make their ideas understood in writing, but it also has an effect on them as readers as they acquire another type of reading, reading as a proofreader. Phonics, thus, is truly embedded in the context of writing; it is more likely to be added on to or placed beside reading, when done in that context.

Understanding reading means knowing that fluency in oral reading is a

separate skill and has no bearing on the way a student understands a text. The RAP's of all four students in this study demonstrate that quite clearly. Given the amount of stress reading aloud causes many struggling readers, not to mention the battering to their self-esteem, and given that there is no benefit from this practice, no student should ever be forced to read aloud in school. Volunteers only! I must add that it took me several years of working with struggling readers to become completely comfortable with this position. Initially, I was nervous about not hearing my students read aloud even once during an entire school year; but gradually, I learned to rely on what they said, wrote, and drew about their reading.

Perhaps the practice of insisting that students read aloud continues because it is the easiest way to make reading more visible; however, it reveals nothing about the most important aspect of reading, the creation of meaning. Since reading is mostly invisible, an awareness of the present state of knowledge of this mode of literacy is the best (and possibly, the only) way to make many of its elements visible.

Finally, I wish to return to the role that reader-response theory plays in successful reading, which I consider one of the most direct routes to a "read-by-reading" model. I cannot stress enough the importance of allowing all readers, especially struggling readers, to own their reading. It is the only way that they will learn to trust their ability to make sense of a text independently and to experience the pleasure of reading. Validating their personal perspectives on reading contributed to the creation of a safe learning environment by removing the fear of exposing their weaknesses as readers and the risk of having their interpretations judged as inadequate.

By helping my reluctant readers through real books -- books worth reading -- which meant reading to them during class, they gradually increased their repertoires of texts and came to see themselves as readers. Another part of the scaffolding I built for my students was to model reading behaviour and response strategies; I shared my questions and meaning-making processes about the texts we read in class. In order to validate my students' personal interpretations of their reading, I always asked them to explain their opinions in order to understand responses that at first seemed to be off-topic. Most of all, a reader-response approach enabled me to activate my students' background knowledge and experience and to develop their passions through reading. Knowledge of reading and reader-response theories has the same trickle-

down effect on teaching, only a positive one, that the deficit view of learning has. The **struggle to read does not equal failure to read**. Reader-response approaches stress reading as a meaning-making process and provide teachers with a window on the ways readers make sense of texts. When teachers are guided by this kind of perspective they will find appropriate ways to interact with their students, which is the real substance of curriculum.

The Teacher as Curriculum: Content and Context

Although so much of what happens in a classroom depends upon the teacher, my impression is that most teachers are unaware of the power they do have. While teachers feel pressure from the outside, usually from "above" to make changes in their classrooms, these changes do not come about until teachers believe in them and take ownership of them by making them part of their thinking. The curriculum, thus, resides in the teacher. At the same time, inadequate understanding of literacy theory on the part of teachers can lead to "eclectic" approaches that may have negative impacts on students. For example, if a teacher selects writing topics for the class and then goes through all the other steps of process writing, from first draft to published piece, the most important elements of writing -- establishing personally meaningful reasons to write by choosing a topic, audience, genre -- are missing. Writing then becomes an empty school task. Similarly, if students are asked for personal responses to their reading and then are given specific comprehension questions to keep the responding process on track, students learn to distrust their own abilities to make sense of texts when implicitly they understand that their reading is not valued. It is not possible to "have it both ways," to believe that students actively construct individual impressions of their reading and then limit their opportunities to do so. Reader-response is not just a way to make the teacher's view of a text more palatable to students.

The substance of the curriculum of my classroom was determined by my vision of literacy, which in turn determined my actions. Eventually, I learned that it is ineffective to impose even the most desirable of outcomes on students. Quite often, I had to trust my students and wait for them to understand and select from the possibilities I presented to them. For example, the connection between reading and writing is an important aspect of literacy, but there are few strategies that I know of to make it happen. In a classroom where work is shared, it can be modelled, but,

students' reading will not influence their writing until they are ready, as all four students in this study demonstrated. I suspect that more harm than good can be done by requiring students to use their reading as inspiration for their writing. When it happens "naturally" and a student decides to do it, all the features of a particular genre seem to bubble to the surface. Recall Jeff's fairy tale, "The Wolf With A Cold," and Fiona's thriller, "The Occult." These events were the result of a larger part of the curriculum, of immersing the students in a literature-rich environment, and of valuing their reading and writing.

All four of my students demonstrated too clearly that school can be a hostile environment for struggling readers. I have argued not only for a better understanding of the nature of reading, but a better understanding of students and the nature of their problems as readers. Teachers have choices about the kinds of task they ask their students to do, and these can be tailored to students' tastes and needs. Fiona's resistance was a great challenge. Although a capable student, she chose not to participate in subjects that had no interest for her; she was unwilling to do it for the sake of earning marks and passing. Her attitude was particularly noticeable in math and geography, but the most notable exception was the project she did on Ireland. Her effort and enthusiasm for her subject were unbounded; she pursued her cross-curricular project that involved graphs, maps, art, literature, and music. Fiona even made a graph of Irish populations in other countries to demonstrate a point she made in her presentation about her family's Irish heritage. This kind of task was personally meaningful and made more sense to her than studying for a test. It also made more sense to me, and I concluded that more projects of this kind ought to be possible in school. Certainly, more school tasks should be embedded in situations that are more relevant to students.

Another advantage of the geography project was that it involved a minimum of writing and was presented orally. This was easy for my normally shy students to do because they had made and collected artifacts that served as prompts and gave a structure to their talks. Even Jon, who hated to speak to the whole class, was eager to talk about his discoveries. Too often, in the culture of school, this informal kind of presentation is not valued as much as "the public speaking competition," and yet, it is a more natural form of speaking in public, and a skill that is more likely to be used outside of school. Also, this project demonstrates that students do not always have to

write to learn.

Rejecting The Deficit View

While working on this project, I became aware of many invisible ideas that have a significant impact on teaching, on students, and on reading. The deficit view of learning and learners is one example, which I have referred to throughout this work. There is another invisible feature of the classroom which needs to be made visible and that is the real way teachers function in the reading curriculum. I have argued repeatedly for the importance of stressing what struggling readers can do. Reader-response theory shows teachers the way to avoid a deficit view of their students by allowing them to demonstrate how much they have observed, interpreted, and applied their background knowledge in their reading. If the teacher is looking for personal construction of meaning, the activities of the reader become more visible. When first using reader-response approaches, teachers may have to learn what to look for and to work at seeing how much their students are doing. Initially, I had to overcome doubts about the value of my students' responses, and these doubts were due largely to a deficit view of learning. I was looking for features in their work that I thought should be there. Remember the way my colleague interpreted the transcript of the poetry discussion in Chapter One. I actually know a teacher who gave up asking for personal responses because her students missed too many literary devices in their reading; she was looking at what they did not do instead of what they did do. Teachers need to put aside their shopping lists of literary features and trust their students to find these elements themselves. I have found that attentiveness to their discussions and encouraging students to share their ideas will usually provide student-initiated discussions of literary features of text.

Another way to give students credit is to watch them closely to discover what their particular passions in life are. Like the successful dyslexics in another study (Fink, 1998), Jon, Jeff, Fiona, and Matt were all enthusiastic about a particular subject. Developing an interest through literacy is a reciprocal relationship; literacy is also developed by their passion. Not only do students find the motivation to read and write, but when they are on familiar turf, they develop skills and strategies needed for reading: a familiar vocabulary; a background knowledge; the ability to make predictions and inferences; and the integration of new knowledge to existing knowledge.

When I focussed on reading for meaning, my students showed me how much they could do. My struggling readers needed to be helped through as many texts and as many different genres as possible. Reading breeds reading, and the more experience with texts that students have, the more knowledge of reading they bring to the next book they read. I do not believe that reading material with controlled vocabulary can provide students with enough rich language and interesting content to stretch struggling readers. I prefer to help them through more challenging material than to limit their reading experiences to decodable texts. Use of simplified reading material also tells students that they are not capable of reading real books and therefore reinforces their negative self-images. Like "drills and skills," "baby" books are more likely to turn readers with problems into non-readers. Having said all this, I have not forgotten Jon, whose decoding problems were severe, and he really could not get into a book that he could not read. He had to begin with some "high-interest-low-vocabulary" books until he felt more confident. I should, however, point out that that kind of book was not the only material that he was reading. He was also reading the novels and poetry that we read together in class. In addition, I made great efforts to help him find books on topics of interest to him; decodability was not the only criteria for selecting a book. Jon taught me that doctrinaire adherence to a theoretical position -- that my students would read only real books -- is not necessary or advisable.

It is also important to avoid a deficit view of students outside the classroom. Most high schools have special education departments, and some also have "special" classes. Ideally, these groups should be physically integrated into the life of the school and should not be concentrated in one wing, but scattered around the building so that "special" education is not done in geographical, as well as pedagogical isolation. This was not the case in the school in which I worked, but some opportunities arose for me to break down some of the barriers between my "special" students and the rest of the school. For example, I took steps to eliminate some particular forms of isolation that existed in the school where I taught simply by asking to interview parents in the gym with the rest of the teachers. It helped to make me a visible part of the "regular" staff and didn't make parents feel that their children were segregated from the rest of the school. In addition, I asked to give progress awards to my struggling students at the awards ceremony as another way of including them in the life of the school and recognising their growth. I took every opportunity I could to

insist on “un-special” treatment for my struggling readers and writers throughout the school.

Most importantly, the foundation for all of the above ways to avoid deficit views of students is to see them and treat them as capable of reading and writing. Whether or not their problems stem from physiological differences, and there is some dispute about this in the research literature (Coles, 1998), even the most severe dyslexics can learn to read. It may be a matter of seeing struggling readers as on the same developmental pathway, but moving at a slower pace than proficient readers. All struggling readers and writers can create meaning through reading and writing, as Jeff, Fiona, Jon, and Matt so clearly demonstrate; they simply needed some scaffolds to support them, the most important of which was confidence in their abilities to succeed.

Living With Uncertainty

Finally, in this study I have tried to shed some light on how the present state of knowledge about reading can be translated into pedagogy. I have found my own solutions, and rather than suggest specific strategies to other teachers, I prefer to draw attention to the way I went about learning about reading. It is my hope that my reflections and observations on that process will be helpful. It is more important to develop particular habits of mind in students, than to expose them to reading strategies, and there is no comprehensive, concrete model for doing this. I believe that teachers will have to live with a certain amount of uncertainty where reading instruction is concerned because there is unlikely to be a single pedagogical model. Rather than strategies and programs, the best reading resource is a well-informed teacher who is the heart of the curriculum. Through interactions with their students, teachers who understand reading and readers will find opportunities to promote reading as the construction of meaning from texts.

I must conclude this section, however, on a cautionary note. I have often wondered whether a teacher can be too much a part of the context of the classroom. If students respond well and work well with a teacher, there is always the danger that they see their activities as part of the teacher’s goals rather than their own. Making students independent readers and writers is an admirable aspiration, but since both activities are highly context-dependent and since the teacher is so much of the context, students can perform less well when they are in other classes. For example, my

students were used to free writing and brainstorming ideas when they were stuck for an idea in writing. When I asked them if they ever used this approach in another subject, they looked surprised and said it was something they did only in English. Most of them were doubtful that it would help them unblock in another subject. Certainly, once Jeff, Jon, Fiona, and Matt left my class, they found themselves in different contexts, some difficult for them to function in.

Who are the Students I Want to Help?

Through the view of reading that I have elaborated, I began to see myself as a crucial part of the curriculum in my transactions with my students. As I searched for ways to help my students actively construct their own knowledge, I learned that I needed to do more than help them; I had to know them. Jeff, Fiona, Jon, and Matt helped me understand the difference between building on my knowledge of them to motivate them to participate in reading and writing and validating them as individuals to enable them to become readers and writers. Jeff, in particular, made this distinction very clear to me. When I used his preference for non-fiction to get him to read and write, I was helping him; but, when I became excited about his truckers' stories and encouraged him to share them with the class, he began to feel like a reader. Helping him made me focus on teaching strategies; whereas, knowing him made me focus on Jeff himself. When Jeff's individuality was acknowledged and respected, he was able to change his relationship to the class and to learning.

While my "helping" stance was a good starting point, I must admit that there was a strong element of luck in my discovery of Jeff's needs; however, it is possible to take steps to recreate this kind of luck with students. Teaching is a social activity, and the kind of relationships and interactions that foster learning can be developed through a deep and detailed knowledge of students. It is, in fact, difficult to avoid acquiring this kind of knowledge of students, but using some of the following questions and suggestions helped to increase my awareness of gaps in my knowledge of particular students.

- Make a list of all possible reasons to explain why a student is not a reader.
- Make a list of the same student's strengths and recent achievements.
- What interests and/or passions does this student have?
- What are this students' tastes and preferences in reading and writing?

- How does this student usually respond to a text? What sort of impressions and observations does s/he make? What references to the text does s/he make?
- What reading/writing strategies does this student prefer?
- What mode (writing, drawing, speaking) of response does h/she prefer?
- What do I know about this student's use of literacy outside of school? (See Appendix G for more detailed questions in this area.)
- What personal artifacts has this student brought to school? What do they reveal about him/her? How have they affected their purposes for reading and writing?
- In what situation have I noticed this student most engaged in reading?
- What was this student's most successful reading/writing experience that I know of? (It may be from a previous year in school.)
- What pieces of this student's writing would I use to construct a a portrait of him/her as a reader/writer?
- What does each piece reveal about this student?
- What have I learned about this student by listening to him/her talk in class? Who and/or what situations encouraged him/her to talk?
- What have I learned about this student by observing him/her? What situations is s/he most (un)comfortable?
- What opportunities in my classroom do I have to observe and listen to my students? How often am I able to do this?
- How am I in charge of my class? Am I approachable, enthusiastic, sincere? Do I model the literacy practices that I want them to develop?
- What is this student's view of him/herself as a reader/writer?
- How has his/her past experience in school influenced this self-image?
- What other questions do I have about this student? Can they be answered best with observation, interaction, and/or work samples?

These questions guided my inquiry and enabled me to construct narratives of Jeff's, Fiona's, Jon's, and Matt's experiences that moved from benchmark to benchmark to capture the significant moments in their growth in literacy. I have described the case studies as collages because they are composed of diverse elements, deliberately arranged to the qualities of the separate parts. Sometimes it was necessary to juxtapose response log entries with pieces of creative writing or with their comments made in interviews or discussions or with their respond-aloud-

protocols to see changes in their development. While their progress over time was linear, it was not always possible to detect linear trends in one type of work sample, for example, their response logs. In Fiona's case, there was a pattern of initial rejection of a book she did not choose herself that was later overcome by her engagement with the story, but that sort of trend in behaviour was rare. It was more revealing to place Jeff's satire of a fairy tale, in which elements of his reading were transformed into writing, next to one of his early responses to *Never Cry Wolf* to detect his growth as a reader.

I believe that this way of looking at students is the essence of holistic evaluation and what literacy teachers ought to be striving for. Developments in reading and writing are not strictly linear; the quality of a response or a piece of creative writing is related to the contexts in which they were written. The engagement of the reader/writer depends on many factors, and that is why no single assignment, or type of assignment, can ever tell the whole story of a student's literacy. Learning does not just take place on paper. Teachers need to look at everything students do, including what they say and what attitudes they display in order to understand them. Important aspects of their growth can be missed by fragmenting their learning and looking at the parts separately. Weaving diverse literacy activities into a tapestry is a more reliable assessment of a student's growth that takes into account multiple sources of information and the contexts surrounding those sources.

At this point I want to be very clear that I do not see teachers as simply facilitators of learning. I am not advocating that teachers become steeped in theory and knowledge of their students and then become nothing more than a guide-on-the-side. I am very much in charge of my class, setting the scene for learning and learning processes in motion. Through improving my knowledge of my students and my relationships with them, I make adjustments to the real curriculum of my classroom.

This kind of curriculum makes big demands of teachers (and students). I was fortunate to be working in a small class when I carried out this study. I freely admit that I found it much more difficult to get to know the students in my much larger "regular" classes. When I spent fifty minutes a day with thirty or more students, the kind of interactions I have described with Jeff, Fiona, Jon, and Matt were not possible. In addition, there were students with learning problems "integrated" into these groups whose needs I did not meet.

I have three suggestions to make to policy-makers which are supported by this study and my experience in other contexts: 1) limit class size; 2) limit class size; and 3) limit class size. Struggling students need lots of individual support and attention. While "inclusive" education is extremely fashionable at the moment, my observations have convinced me that it serves fiscal needs more than students' needs. Certainly, there is a stigma attached to being in a "special" class, but if that "special" class has a challenging, "un-special" program, students become comfortable and able to learn. Integration in many cases is synonymous with being ignored. Students who get ignored, quite logically, find ways not to be ignored. I wish to be quite categorical that the needs of struggling students in high school simply cannot be met when they are in classes of thirty or more students for fifty-minute periods. Certainly, had Jon, Jeff, Fiona, and Matt been in a regular English class, I would never have been able to get to know them the way I did, and I definitely would not have been able to conduct this study.

The model that was used by the school these four students attended was to integrate them partially into the regular program. They took English, math, geography with me in a small group, they took French in the same small group, and they took the rest of their subjects in regular classes. An alternative model that is often used is to put struggling students in regular classes but with an educational technician to help (usually several of) them. I recommend a different role for educational technicians. Instead of assigning the technicians as aids to the students, they could become teachers' assistants who work with everyone. Certainly, every class of thirty students should have one teacher and one technician. Reducing classes from thirty to twenty-five is unlikely to have a significant impact; however, one adult to fifteen students would improve the conditions for learning significantly. In addition to failure to meet the needs of struggling students, large classes compromise a teacher's ability to use holistic instruction. This is an issue that is almost never mentioned in the research literature, but is one that is uppermost in many teachers' minds. I was glad to see that Weaver (1998) included small class-size as an essential element of growth in reading.

A Final Word To Teachers

If we teachers are to remain in charge of our classrooms, we are the ones who must decide what elements foster learning. But, we must also take full responsibility, as professionals and as intellectuals, for the decisions we make and the kind of

classrooms we create. If we do not do our job, there are others willing to do it for us. As I write, for example, there is legislation before the American Congress that will make teaching phonics compulsory, and several states have already adopted similar measures (Coles 1998). The Canadian border is unlikely to be strong enough to keep out similar laws, especially as the governments of Ontario and Alberta seem poised to move "back-to-basics." Frank Smith's recent article in *Language Arts* is a protest against the pending American legislation.

None of the responsibilities for ensuring the appropriate conditions for learning to read can be met by experts or authorities outside the classroom. The conditions can't be prepackaged in commercialized kits of learning materials, electronic or otherwise. And the conditions for learning certainly can't be mandated by any kind of legislation. The only person authorized to make all these responsible decisions should be a competent teacher. (1999, p. 155)

We teachers must earn the faith that Smith has in us, not only by insisting on our right to make decisions, but also, by informing our judgment with knowledge of theory and knowledge of our students. None of us would think of seeking advice from a doctor who had not kept up with medical research or who took no interest in our individuality, and we should apply the same professional standards to ourselves.

This is not a straight-forward task, as there is so much resistance to change and innate conservatism within the field of education to overcome. The general public too puts pressure on educators to maintain their "good, old-fashioned values." There is a well-known analogy among teachers frustrated by the lack of change in education that describes the situation. If a doctor from the eighteenth or nineteenth century were transported to modern times, it is unlikely that s/he would recognize a contemporary hospital; however, a teacher from the same time periods, or even from ancient Greece, would recognize a school. One of my colleagues also pointed out that whenever schools of the future are portrayed in science-fiction films, they look remarkably familiar in spite of the clean plastic modules that serve as desks and chairs for students. Is this more-than-usual resistance to change possibly due to the fact that everyone has been to school and therefore feels qualified to form opinions on pedagogy based on their own experiences? Perhaps change in education is slow because so many teachers were successful themselves in school and, thus, believe in the system that they went through. Certainly, it seems that the informed voices of

professional educators are not being heard.

Another problem may be the self-images of teachers. I have observed that teachers have great difficulty in thinking of themselves as professionals and intellectuals. The structure of their "profession" tells them otherwise. In a system where there is seniority instead of merit, where compulsory transfers and blocked transfers can happen, where policies and programs come from "above" and not always from pedagogues, and where most educational research comes from outside classrooms, it is impossible for teachers to feel valued and in charge of what they do. In spite of these constraints, teachers have tremendous power to determine what will happen in their classrooms. That is why it is important for teachers to realize this and to develop identities as professionals by reading and understanding current research literature, attending conferences and workshops, joining professional organizations, applying for professional development grants, asking for release time to consult with colleagues, and by formulating and studying their own problems in their own classrooms. I am not suggesting that all teachers should write a thesis such as this; there are more modest forms of pedagogical inquiry of great value to teachers.

As I close, I am wondering whether this study is about understanding readers or about my coming to understand readers. Certainly, one goal of teacher-research is self-development to improve professional knowledge, judgment, and practice. Attached to that purpose is the curriculum that inevitably develops as part of the process. The difficulty of pinning down this kind of curriculum -- the transaction between teacher and students -- definitely motivated me to undertake this study. I wanted to know more about what I had done and what my students had done to make growth in reading happen. I wanted to turn my hunches into knowledge.

This is not, however, an entirely solipsistic exercise, because I am going public with my learning. Neilsen (1994) points out that the hierarchical structure of educational research is changing, that it has "come home" to the classroom. Teachers are now in a position to ask their own questions and find their own answers, a position that was previously occupied exclusively by university-based researchers. Although I believe that teacher-researchers and university-based researchers study problems in different ways and for different reasons, the results of their efforts are complementary. Teacher-researchers challenge theoretical ideas and practices to see whether they work in the clutter and clatter of their classrooms.

It may appear that teacher-researchers have a less creative role because they simply take a prescription for some new aspect of curriculum and follow it. Nothing could be further from the reality of classroom research. Testing new ideas and approaches is a gradual, messy, often frustrating process of understanding, adaptation, evaluation, and finally integration, and the results are often quite different from descriptions in the literature. In addition, new curriculum is only created when teachers decide to do it. Like any text, the research literature is only ink on paper until a teacher responds to it and acts on it. What ultimately encouraged me to pursue this project in the public domain is the knowledge that, when it comes to creating curriculum, teachers really only believe other teachers.

Since teacher-research is more than a process of internal reflection, there is the question of what general truths can emerge from teachers' studies of their own classrooms that are significant to others. The answer is no different than it is for any other form of qualitative research. Another kind of truth emerges from descriptive studies than from quantitative studies. While teacher-researchers must be wary of making claims for the universal significance of their studies, obviously writing an account implies that the work will have some relevance to other teachers. Van Manen (1992) says the reason for this is the "intersubjectivity" of teacher-researchers and their readers, which is an overlap of similar elements between the experiences of the two, rather than a precise one-to-one correspondence. This overlap is perceived through the detailed descriptions of the people and the contexts of their classrooms and is the only kind of external validation that teacher-researchers can expect.

Ideally, the impact of a teacher-research will be to inspire other teachers to conduct their own studies or at least test new ideas in their classrooms. Throughout this work, I have argued strenuously for the mutual dependence of theory and practice and that changes in teaching require changes in thinking. I hope most of all that the stories of Jon, Jeff, Fiona, and Matt will inspire new ways of thinking about struggling readers that begin with a recognition of their capabilities and that those new perspectives will lead to action. By developing their literacy, students can realize so much more of their potential as human beings.

Epilogue

Where Are They Now?

Three years have passed since Jeff, Fiona, Jon, and Matt and I worked together, and we have all moved on.

The year after Jeff left my class, he spent one year in another "special" class similar to mine, and the following year he went to the "regular" program because the size of the school declined drastically and it was not possible to create small groups for struggling students. The year in the regular program was his last year in school; he did not return to school the following September. I was told that his last year was not a success and that he spent a lot of time in the vice-principal's office, having returned to his old patterns of bad behaviour. I assume that he is now working full time in his uncle's garage. Had he stayed in school until the end of grade-ten, he would have been able to follow a professional course in car mechanics at a junior college and thus been able to work for the wage of a certified mechanic. Although he has many life skills that will serve him well, one of the consequences of his problems with literacy is that his earnings will be determined mostly by his employer. I feel that he could have finished high school with more support from home and from school. As I am typing this, I can see the framed drawing he gave me that he made in response to Ted Hughes' poem *"The Thought Fox."* I wonder if he still reads poetry. I wonder if he still likes to draw.

Jon, who is a year younger than Jeff, is still in school and hoping to complete grade-ten level courses in English, math, and French so that he will be able to go to a three-year professional program at a junior college. Jon's love of sports has inspired him to train as a recreational director's assistant. Like Jeff, he spent a year in the "special" class and then went to an adapted program. Unlike Jeff, he has a lot of support at home. I wonder if he still reads the Friday movie reviews. I wonder if he still likes to draw.

Fiona went through a "gothic" phase for the first two years after she left my class, which meant she dressed entirely in black and wore black nail polish and lipstick. She even dyed her hair black and refused to wear her winter coat because it wasn't black. I am told that she is "getting over that" now and is altogether less rebellious. She spent a year in the "special" class along with Jeff and Jon and then went to the regular program. Her teachers have become aware that she is potentially a very capable

student, and she is thinking about trying to go the the school board's alternate school. I am hopeful that she will graduate from high school and have no doubt that she is still writing poetry.

Matt has moved to another province, but had he remained at the school he would have gone into grade ten, but still worked on grade-nine math. He is the only one of the four students in this study who did not go to the "special" class the year after he left my class. He went directly to the regular program but, he struggled in school and was not popular with his teachers because of his caustic comments and his constant reminders to them that he is "gifted." I am told that he is largely judged by his spelling. Since he has lots of support at home, I feel confident that he will graduate from high school. I hope that he is still writing war stories for himself.

I left the school two years after these four students left my class. I asked for a transfer, not only to another school, but also to another teaching category. I no longer wanted to teach "special education" because I found it very discouraging to build up students' confidence and competence and then watch them fail when they went to the regular program. There were, of course, a few sympathetic teachers who taught them, but for the most part, I felt that I was fattening them up and then throwing them to the lions.

Jeff's Response to "The Thought Fox" by Ted Hughes



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Appendix A
Letter Requesting Parents' Permission

Appendix B

Letter of Permission from Parents

Appendix C

Poem - *The Warrior of Winter* by Ted Hughes

The Warrior of Winter

He met the star his enemy
They fought the woods leafless.
He gripped his enemy.
They trampled fields to quag.
His enemy was stronger.
A star fought against him.

He fought his losing fight
Up to the neck in the river.
Grimly he fought in gateways,
He struggled among stones.
He left his strength in puddles.
The star grew stronger.

Rising and falling
He blundered against houses.
He gurgled for life in ditches.
Clouds mopped his great wounds.
His shattered weapons glittered.
The star gazed down.

Wounded and prisoner
He slept on rotten sacking.
He gnawed bare stalks and turnip tops
In the goose's field.
The sick sheep froze beside him. The star was his guard.

With bones like frozen plumbing
He lay in the blue morning.
His teeth like the trap-frozen fox.
But he rejoiced a tear in the sun.
Like buds his dressings softened.

by Ted Hughes

Appendix D

The Marlap

The Marlup

A marlup was poving his kump. Parmily a narg horped some whev in his kump. "Why did vump horp whev in my frinkly kump?" the marlup jufed the narg. "Er'm muvvily trungy," the narg gruppued. "Er heshed vump horpled whev in your kump. Do vump pove your kump frinkle?

1. What did the narg horp in the marlup's kump?
2. What did the marlup juf the narg?
3. Was the narg trungy?
4. How does the marlup pove his kump?

(Goodman, 1965)

Appendix E

Self-evaluation Questions for my Students

Self-evaluation

1. What do you think you have accomplished as a writer and as a reader this year? Be specific and give examples.
2. How would you describe yourself as a learner? How do you go about writing a piece? How would you describe yourself as a reader?
3. In what areas of writing and reading did you make the most improvement? What are you able to do now that you couldn't do before?
4. What do you think you need to continue to work on? Set some goals for your future learning.

Appendix F

Evaluation Criteria for Responding to Texts

Evaluation Criteria for Response Logs

Name _____ Term _____ Date _____

A) Engagement of the Reader

1) With the Text

- Connects personal experience to the text
- Expresses creative, interesting, insightful views
- Says something meaningful
- Identifies with character(s), theme(s), setting(s), idea(s)
- Finds familiar elements in text (author, genre, character)
- Relates text to other texts (literary or media)
- Sees parallels between literature and life
- Supports views with reasons

2) With the Responding Process

- Has definite point of view
- Responds with confidence
- Can express an opposing view in a positive way
- Remains open-minded, can change point of view
- Takes risks and tries to read between the lines
- Describes own response process
- Considers multiple points of view and meanings
- Uses technology to enhance communication
- Has mixed reaction, sees both positive and negative elements

B) Making Sense of the Text

- Goes beyond summarising plot
- Forms an opinion about text or elements of the text
- Supports opinion with evidence from text
- Goes beyond personal taste to find value in a text
- Asks questions about the text
- Makes predictions about the story
- Tries to read between the lines
- Struck by a particular aspect of text and explores it

- Introduces a new idea into the discussion

C) Awareness of Literary Conventions

- Aware that literature is a particular way of understanding the world
- Questions author's intentions or point of view
- Comments on the way text is written (style, language, imagery)
- Refers to genre elements, such as:
character, setting, action, theme, atmosphere, point of view, symbols, conflict
(May use the concept without using the correct term.)
- Uses evidence from text to support views

D) Group Work Skills

- Demonstrates serious approach
- Acknowledges individual members of the group
- Acknowledges group as a learning community
- Adopts a respectful tone towards others
- Asks others thought-provoking questions
- Can build on and encourage comments of others
- Supports opinions of others
- Able to stimulate discussion with own comments
- Asks for clarification, more information
- Argues politely for own point of view
- Corrects definite factual errors

Comments

Appendix G
Reading and Writing Attitude Survey

YOUR VIEWS ON READING

- 1.) Are you a reader? Why or why not?
- 2.) What do you think readers do when they read?
- 3.) Why do you think people read?
- 4.) What do you think you have to do to become a good reader?
- 5.) In general, how do you feel about reading?
- 6.) What kind of book do you enjoy reading most? What do you look for in a good book?
- 7.) What kind of book do you like least?
- 8.) How do you choose a book to read?
- 9.) If you start to read a book and you don't like it, what do you do?
- 10.) Have you ever read a book more than once? Can you name it?
- 11.) Do you have some favourite authors? Can you name them?
- 12.) What is the best book you have ever read?
- 13.) Do you read at home for pleasure?
- 14.) Can you say about how much time you spend each week reading?
- 15.) Where do you do most of your reading?
- 16.) What is your favourite place to read?
- 17.) Can you estimate how many books you own?
- 18.) Can you estimate how many books are in your house?
- 19.) Can you estimate how many books you have read in the last year?
- 20.) What do you remember about learning to read?
- 21.) What was your best reading experience in elementary school?
- 22.) Do you think you have to be a reader to be a writer? Why? Why not?
- 23.) Do you like to write? Why? Why not?
- 24.) What kind of writing do you like to do best?
- 25.) When did you first realise that you could write?
- 26.) Do you only write in school?
- 27.) Was learning to read easier than learning to write for you?
- 28.) What do you remember most about learning to write?