

Can I bring my cars in case we write a story?

Supporting struggling readers

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ABSTRACT

The research describes the experience of a beginning special education teacher who examined and adapted her teaching practices to attempt to meet the learning needs of the young struggling readers and writers with whom she was working. Autoethnography allowed the researcher to probe and analyze her classroom practice. As the researcher shares her teaching experiences, simplistic solutions to reading difficulties are discounted as ineffective. The hegemony of standards-based instruction and assessment practices are challenged. An educational system whereby some students are labeled as deficient due to their sociocultural or socioeconomic differences is viewed through a critical lens. The researcher proposes that fostering students' freedom to demonstrate their knowledge using multimodal expression while supporting students within their zones of proximal development is the key to enhancing literacy learning. Creating learning opportunities that allow students to build on their strengths and pursue their interests ameliorates the injustice of the typical skill drill lessons regularly prescribed for students struggling in school. Teachers need to be respected as professionals who can make programming decisions that are specifically designed to support students at their level of need.

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Introduction to the Research

August 2010 – First Day as a Special Educator

I enter a Grade 1 classroom during the first week of school, not in my former role as the classroom teacher but as a beginning special educator. I notice the classroom teacher assisting a boy spelling three-sound words with letter cards as she directs the rest of the class from beside him. I tell her that I will help the boy, eager to begin supporting both teachers and students in my new role. I sit next to the boy with confidence. I have used this phonemic awareness activity with my own students and had demonstrated it to multiple groups of teachers in my position as a literacy consultant during the previous school year. I quickly determine that the boy is going to need much more practice with blending and segmenting words before he masters these skills. After class, I meet with the classroom teacher and offer to continue to work with this boy and a few others regularly at the back of the room. The classroom teacher eagerly agrees. We both want to do what is best to assist these students in becoming successful readers and writers.

The Problem: The Practices and Politics of Reading Instruction and Remediation

In today's world people need to be literate in order to gain employment and to simply navigate daily life. Students who struggle with reading and writing need to be supported early and in an effective way to ensure that one day they will be able to live independent and fulfilling lives. According to Fountas and Pinnell (1996), it is common for 20 percent of early readers to experience difficulty learning to read. Due to the potential consequences of low literacy ability, special education has commonly been employed in schools to assist students who are struggling to read and write to catch up to their peers and become literate. Although the supportive context of special education appears beneficial and benign, aspects of special education need to be

examined in order to uncover possibly harmful practices involved in the process of reading remediation.

Traditional practices of literacy instruction and special education are often seen as neutral by mainstream society, therefore, questions about the fairness and appropriateness of remedial reading instruction remain unasked. Multiple concerns regarding remedial reading instruction do exist including the opinions that: special education typically operates using a deficit model whereby students are chosen and labeled according to what they cannot do, students requiring literacy support are often blamed for their inabilities along with their families, and students from certain demographics tend to be the ones selected as requiring reading remediation. Remediation practices are often reductionistic, skill-based exercises that can confuse struggling readers and writers. Due to the cost to society if citizens fail to become literate, politicians have become involved in the literacy practices of schools through mandating instructional regimes and regular standardized assessments in an attempt to address the learning needs of students at risk of literacy failure. Unfortunately, these efforts on behalf of struggling readers and writers often lead to a narrowing of literacy instruction by teaching to standardized tests making it even more difficult for many children to adopt the literacy practices valued in schools. In framing my thoughts and queries, I pose the research question, “How does one teacher adapt teaching practices to enhance the learning of struggling readers and writers?”

Special education can be considered to be based on a deficit model that holds students and their families to blame for their learning difficulties (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009). In order to identify a student as requiring special education services, student test scores must deviate from the norm according to standardized benchmarks (Wohlwend, 2009a). When a deviation occurs, it is commonly attributed to the child’s internal deficits. Deficit views are

often held “about children of color, those who speak languages other than English, and those from low-income households” (Lopez-Robertson, Long, & Turner-Nash, 2010, p. 93). Once identified and labeled with deficit laden characteristics, students are at risk of being sorted as less capable and worthy as other learners (Sato & Lensmire, 2009). Regrettably, school systems may be implicit in failing to recognize the role they play in academic failure when student differences of culture and linguistics are frequently viewed as deficiencies at school (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009). The prevailing myth is that children whose home literacies are different from the literacies valued at school are considered the problem rather than the education system. Often the remedy for these children’s deficits include quick fixes in the form of skill drills and decontextualized learning.

Inappropriately, when school systems attempt to serve students with reading and writing difficulties, students are typically supported with a myriad of decontextualized learning drills that actually make learning more difficult. Skill-based activities have their roots in behaviouristic models of reading instruction which endure today in special education (Gillen & Hall, 2003). The behaviouristic model is heavily influenced by psychology and the medical model which focuses “on the individual as a site of pathology” (Heydon & Iannacci, 2005, p. 13) so that when students struggle to read and write, it is considered a problem within their brains that needs to be fixed. The quickest way to address the problem is through a program characterized by the practice of discrete skills related to reading and writing. According to Taylor (1999), there are many reasons why exercises involving discrete literacy skills would be inappropriate as they are performed during isolated cognitive tasks that are separated from children’s everyday lives, are artificially disconnected from the functional meanings of print, force children to work from abstract exercises to reading as a meaningful activity, and assume

transfer of learning and cultural uniformity. Students requiring the support of special education need to learn skills in the context in which they are used in a meaningful manner (Lesley, 2003). Furthermore, programs which promote a skill-based approach to early literacy depend on the mastery of complex technical skills that pose great challenges to students who do not have well-developed language (Flewitt, Nind, & Payler, 2009). When literacy instruction consists of a collection of exercises in a manner decontextualized from actual literacy practice, it loses its meaning and is less likely to be remembered, transferred, or valued by students.

Proponents of skills-based reading approaches do not see any potential harm arising from students learning the skills they will need to become successful readers and writers. They tend to view these types of school practices as advantageous and harmless to all. Street (2003) stated that literacy practices are often presented as neutral and universal disguising the cultural and ideological assumptions behind them. As a result a disproportionate number of minority, poor, male, and non-conforming students are considered low achieving (Goodman & Goodman, 1990). At times, educators fail to see that literacy practices including assessments used to label students as able or disabled are based on white, middle-class values, experiences, language, and cultural norms. Children of color “enter school already designated as ‘lagging behind’ and often become part of low-level reading groups, qualifying for early intervention programs largely because of their cultural, linguistic, and racial identities” (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 104). Many school systems require students to be assessed to monitor their performance but there is little explicit reflection on how these practices create or exacerbate students’ difficulties (Heydon & Iannacci, 2005). “[A]n education system blind to class will be unable to meet the needs of many children” (Dutro, 2009, p. 91). This blindness leads to the inability to see students for who they are and

the needs they have and instead places pressure on teachers in the form of increased accountability.

Currently, there is a thrust for teacher accountability in the education system. It is important for educators to consider the impact these trends and pressures place on teachers and students as well as the effect they have on curricula, teaching, and assessment practices. In the United States, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has had a huge impact on teaching and assessment. Former President George W. Bush stated “Accountability is an exercise in hope. When we raise academic standards, children raise their academic sights. When children are regularly tested, teachers know where and how to improve” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). NCLB has impacted education in Canada. Presently, there is an increased focus on accountability and testing in Saskatchewan as the Ministry of Education recently announced that it will be launching an “initiative to improve student achievement in the province to ensure all students from Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12 are provided with regular and consistent feedback on their progress. It will also identify and provide the assistance each student requires” (Government of Saskatchewan, 2012).

Educational initiatives like the ones proposed by the governments of the United States and Saskatchewan emphasize autonomy, mastery, and individual achievement. Also accompanying these initiatives are proficiency testing, the surveillance of teachers, and the normative labeling of students (Hicks, 2002). Considering literacy as a collection of “discrete skills that can be transmitted through scripted curricula and demonstrated through high-stakes tests operationalizes the ‘boot strap’ mentality that locates school struggles in individuals rather than in systemic issues such as poverty and institutionalized racism” (Dutro, 2009, p. 91). Standardized tests are unable to pinpoint how the reader makes meaning as s/he reads and cannot

determine where the processes of reading comprehension break down. Standardized tests are not diagnostic in that they only provide generalized information about readers but do not generate solutions to their reading problems. The loss of professional autonomy through the narrowing of literacy practices can make it difficult for the teachers of struggling students to create personalized instruction to meet students' needs.

Increased testing for accountability purposes and the preference for scientific reading instruction has led some educators to voice their concerns over what they feel is a narrowing of the curriculum. Crocco and Costigan (2007) stated that the educational reforms in the United States have narrowed what counts as curriculum, limited pedagogical options, undermined creativity and autonomy, thwarted personal and professional identity development, and diminished the ability to forge relationships with students. Literacy has become defined solely in terms of school-based literacy while other forms of literacy are largely ignored (White, 2009). Boldt (2009) stated that we are in a "profit-driven era of education in which teachers are subject to the demand that they translate an academic curriculum designed by others into exercises for mastery from their students" (p. 16) which in turn requires that "every moment in the classroom be measured for its utilitarian gain on a visible and quantifiable scale" (Boldt, 2009, p. 16). Those of economic means have control over the media and government which then provides the wealthy with control of "how material resources are distributed, how the efforts of individuals and groups are valued and evaluated, and whose perspectives are privileged in social institutions such as schools" (Dutro, 2009, p. 90). Educators and society need to question what this means for our education system and in particular its marginalized populations so action can replace inaction.

Inherent Injustices of the Education System

There are systemic problems in the Canadian and American education systems. Teachers are frequently frustrated when caught between what they feel is developmentally appropriate instruction for their students and what they are mandated to teach. Often, teachers turn the lens on themselves and their teaching practices to determine the root of the problem rather than examining how the system has impacted their practices and the positioning of their students (Wohlwend, 2009a). Educators should consider how their silence perpetuates inequities and whether they need to challenge the school discourse regarding the instructional practices that determine and define student deficits (Lopez-Robertson, Long, & Nash, 2010). A critical appraisal of how disability is produced through early literacy practices needs to take place (Heydon & Iannacci, 2005). White (2009) stated that “[m]aking spaces for voices and life literacies that have historically been marginalized through school’s hegemonic discourses and practices is a social justice agenda” (p. 438). By questioning school practices, spaces for all children to become successful readers and writers may be created.

Social Models of Learning

Educational theorists Freire and Vygotsky have described models of learning that focus on supporting the intellectual growth and creativity of children instead of emphasizing control and the detection of student deficiencies. Freire (1970) described how the economic, social, and political domination of the dispossessed was preserved by a culture of silence. The culture of silence is maintained in large part by the educational system as it subtly programs us to conform to its systematic logic (Freire, 1970) with input from teachers in the field. “Verbalistic lessons, reading requirements, the methods for evaluating ‘knowledge,’ the distance between the teacher and the taught, the criteria for promotion: everything in this ready-to-wear approach serves to

obviate thinking” (Freire, 1970, p. 76). Freire suggests that human life only holds meaning with communication and therefore dialogue is essential between teachers and students for learning to occur. The social constructivist Vygotsky (1978) also believed in the social nature of learning and held that children grow into the intellectual life around them with the support of teachers and peers. Freire and Vygotsky believed that learning is natural and social for everyone. In summary, schools can become places where the prior knowledge and aptitudes of all students can be valued and used to build new knowledge when teachers are given the authority to base instruction on students’ strengths, interests, and needs. In order to answer the question “How does one teacher adapt teaching practices to enhance the learning of struggling readers and writers?” analytic autoethnography can be employed. Analytic autoethnography enables teacher researchers to connect the personal stories surrounding their teaching to broader theoretical and social understandings in order to enhance educational practices for students who seemingly fail to learn.

Literature Review

For decades there has been controversy concerning how best to address the needs of struggling readers and writers. Conceptions regarding literacy have undergone a variety of shifts over the last century that alternate between the direct instruction of literacy skills and more student-centered approaches to literacy instruction. More recently, educational theorists have been using qualitative inquiries to study the social nature of literacy learning and discussing the importance of embracing the sociocultural and linguistic knowledge of students in order to provide more meaningful literacy instruction (Dyson 1993, Hicks 2002, Taylor, 1998). Meeting students where they are in terms of their background knowledge and preferred modes of communication requires a broadening of the literacy practices that have been traditionally acknowledged and celebrated. Reading instruction has a history of being influenced by various forces and trends which in turn have impacted how struggling readers have been perceived and supported.

Influence of Behaviourism on Reading Instruction

At the beginning of the twentieth century, reading was defined as the ability to decode words. Reading was considered a primarily associative activity centered on sound/symbol relationships and perceptual identification and matching (Gillen & Hall, 2003). Students were required to memorize the letter names and then their sounds, followed by syllables such as ba, bo, bi, bu before they were allowed to read primers (Stahl, 1999). Early notions regarding the emergence of early childhood literacy were influenced by the philosophy of psychology known as behaviourism which determined that children were considered to be mentally and physically mature enough to learn to read when they reached a mental age of six years and six months (Gillen & Hall, 2003). Although the studies supporting the concept of reading readiness were

based on arbitrary notions of what is considered reading, “an industry emerged concerned with promoting and selling reading readiness, usually with non-print-related activities and materials” (Gillen & Hall, 2003, p. 4). The influence of behaviourism remained dominant in the area of reading instruction for the next 50 years defining literacy as a hierarchy of skills.

Behaviourists asserted that reading development could be controlled by breaking down reading into narrow skills and by linking the learning of these skills to systematic reinforcement systems (Gillen & Hall, 2003). Reading instruction for beginning readers was based on the assumptions that: children’s roles in reading, interests and experiences were insignificant, children needed to be manipulated by teachers in order to learn, and reading and writing were individual acts comprised of a hierarchy of isolated perceptual skills (Gillen & Hall, 2003).

The major consequence of behaviourism and reading readiness theories was that for much of the twentieth century researchers seemed to have believed that there was simply no point in investigating or even considering very young children’s thinking about, understanding of and use of reading and writing; the possibility of this had been defined out of existence until they arrived in school and faced a teacher” (Gillen & Hall, 2003, p. 4).

Not all educators agreed that literacy instruction should be divorced from children’s personal lives instead believing that literacy instruction should be based on children’s experiences.

In the 1960s, two movements in literacy instruction evolved. The Language Experience Approach (LEA) and an activity-based approach developed by Col. Francis Parker and John Dewey were considered parts of a progressive movement toward more student-centered approaches (Stahl, 1999). Col. Parker believed that reading should be interesting and personally

connected to the beginning reader (Stahl, 1999). He created a huge library of children's books and distained the use of textbooks (Stahl, 1999). His school had a printing press in order to publish the children's writing which was in turn used as reading material for the students during their first three years of school (Stahl, 1999). The student written texts became the source for phonics and sight word instruction (Stahl, 1999).

Similarly, LEA captured student dictation on charts for use in reading instruction. In using the experience and language of the children, "the instruction becomes an extension of children's preschool learning rhythms, in which they generate a system of language usage primarily in the course of using it *to satisfy their own purposes*" (Stauffer, 1980, p. 2). LEA was considered to be the best approach for working with disadvantaged students because it used their language and dialects to teach reading rather than attempting to teach students standard English and reading at the same time (Stahl, p. 19). One of the initiators of LEA, Russell Stauffer (1980) described how LEA allowed students to achieve total communication through the combination of the verbal arts of reading, writing, listening, and speaking with the iconic arts of sketching, painting, and recording. With the LEA approach, reading instruction grew out of the rich experiences springing from human interaction (Stauffer, 1980). LEA could partly be considered a reaction to educators' increasing dissatisfaction with bureaucratic control of reading instruction.

Although behaviourist theories regarding language learning were discounted by Chomsky in 1959 (Gillen & Hall, 2003), reading instruction continued to incorporate the behaviourist model of habit formation and stratified skill development (Bialostok, 1997). During the 1970s, reading instruction became dominated by basal reading programs and a focus on phonics instruction (Chall, 1989). Basal readers are designed to teach the language arts and have

dominated reading instruction for decades in North America (Bainbridge & Malicky, 2004). Basal programs generally consist of student anthologies, teacher's manuals, and student workbooks that typically follow a scope and sequence of hierarchically arranged reading skills and introduce a controlled vocabulary (Bainbridge & Malicky, 2004). During this decade, critics became dissatisfied with the bureaucratic control wielded through the use of basal reading materials and standardized tests (Wolfe & Poynor, 2001). Instead of looking to psychological studies to inform the teaching of reading, some researchers chose to observe children in their natural classroom environments for clues about how children learn to process written texts.

Reading as a Meaning Making Activity

In the 1970s, reading researchers Clay and K. S. and Y. M. Goodman studied the strategic behaviour of children engaged in literacy (Gillen & Hall, 2003). "They saw that while many of the children's literacy behaviours were technically incorrect, they nevertheless revealed how children were strategic in approaching literacy and were working hard to develop hypotheses about how the system worked" (Gillen & Hall, 2003, p. 5). Smith (1971) applied the research regarding adult reading from disciplines of cognitive psychology, psycholinguistics, and communication studies to children's learning to read (Gillen & Hall, 2003). Smith's analysis affected how beginning reading instruction was viewed. "Reading could no longer be seen simply as an associative process. It had to be recognized as a much more complex activity involving cognitive and strategic behaviour" (Gillen & Hall, 2003, p. 5).

The work of the social constructivist Vygotsky began influencing research on literacy after his work was translated in 1978 (Gillen & Hall, 2003). Vygotsky (1978) investigated the prehistory of children's written language to track its development from play to drawing, to written language. Vygotsky (1978) believed writing was a "complex cultural activity" (p. 118)

and that reading and writing instruction must be relevant to the life of the child. “The feature of Vygotsky’s work that captured the interest of researchers was his recognition of the role of culture in learning, especially that individuals are inseparably connected to cultural history” (Gillen & Hall, 2003, p. 6). The meaning of reading was now seen to rest in the reader, instead of being assumed to exist merely in the print (Gillen & Hall, 2003). In 1965, Rosenblatt described how beginning readers draw on their past experiences of life and language to garner meaning from print and then use that meaning to reorganize their past experiences to reach new understandings (Rosenblatt, 1995). The approach of these literacy researchers led to some major changes to the way literacy development was understood. No longer was literacy development regarded as beginning “at the start of schooling after a bout of reading readiness exercises, it was becoming a much broader continuum that had its origins in very early childhood and drew its meaning from making sense rather than formal teaching” (Gillen & Hall, 2003, p. 6).

In 1976, K. S. and Y. M. Goodman gave a talk entitled *Learning to Read is Natural* (Stahl, 1999). They melded K. S. Goodman’s psycholinguistic model of reading with sociocultural views of language and Y. M. Goodman’s study of preschool children’s emerging reading knowledge to create the beginnings of the whole language movement (Stahl, 1999). As a theoretical approach, whole language promotes meaning-based instruction and assumes that learning will involve social interaction (Bergin & LaFave, 1998). The premise of whole language is that oral and written language should be learned in meaningful contexts where it is required for communication, information, or enjoyment (Turner, 1995). Erroneously, whole language is sometimes simply thought of as a method of teaching reading without phonics. K. S. Goodman (1989), stated “[w]hole language does support the learning of phonics, to the extent that phonics

is the set of relations between the sound system and the orthographic system of written language” (p. 215). K. S. Goodman (1989) did not believe that direct instruction in phonics was necessary stating that inventive spelling and writing are the most useful contexts in which phonics relations develop. Whole language was not simply a radical swing of the pendulum from skill and drill phonics instruction but a socio-political reform movement (Wolfe & Poynor, 2001).

Whole language theorists do not think of whole language as a collection of activities or a teaching method but a philosophy that guides the professional decisions teachers make (Stahl, 1999). In an article entitled *Roots of the Whole-Language Movement*, Y. M. Goodman (1989) described whole language as a grassroots movement that focuses on the needs of the learner, not on content. “Teachers are knowledgeable about students as well as content, but their major commitment is to plan learning experiences that build on the background and experiences of the learners” (Goodman, Y. M., 1989, p. 114). The whole language movement represented the empowerment of teachers to act as professionals to create learning environments adapted to enhance their students’ learning interests and needs.

Whole language was considered widely as encompassing many instructional practices which were supportive for disadvantaged and struggling learners. One reason why whole language has been thought to benefit students experiencing difficulties with reading and writing is that it increases student motivation. In the early 1990s, teachers were more interested in motivating students to become avid readers than in simply increasing reading achievement (Stahl, 1999). Turner (1995) found that whole language classrooms tended to engage students in more open tasks which lead students to be “more likely to use reading strategies voluntarily, to persist when work became difficult, and to take actions to maintain attention to their academic

work” (p. 434). Open tasks often included children reading real books and composing writing for authentic purposes such as letter writing (Turner, 1995). When students are interested they read for longer periods and are capable of deeper processing which allows them to comprehend and recall the multiple layers of story (Bergin & LaFave, 1998). Whole language classrooms have been found to be less stratifying and provide a more positive atmosphere for struggling readers (Stahl, 1999). Whole language teachers emphasize students’ self-esteems, recognize that approximations occur in all learning, and are less likely to push students to read material they are uncomfortable with (Stahl, 1999). Students in whole language classrooms are more likely to view themselves as readers and writers (Turner, 1995).

Understanding that teachers and students do not operate in tightly controlled laboratories, K. S. Goodman studied children and their teachers in the authentic learning environments of the classroom (Bialostok, 1997). Traditionally most educational studies were narrowly focused on a small aspect of literacy instruction whereas K. S. Goodman “was concerned with *everything* the child was doing while reading” (Bialostok, 1997, p. 624). He collected whole data (observational notes and artifacts) in order to gain insight into the reading process as it occurs in a meaningful language context (Bialostok, 1997). Teachers began to see the reading process in an entirely different way when K. S. Goodman “integrated the various characteristics and functions of language, along with literary, psychological, social, and cultural theory to help make the reading process knowable and understandable” (Bialostok, 1997, p. 627). He listened to teachers and respected them for their questions and what they had to say (Bialostock, 1997). Teachers became researchers and co-researchers within their classrooms (Goodman, K. S., 1989). K. S. Goodman helped teachers view themselves as professionals who would pose and then answer their own questions by “watching, talking to, and learning from

children in classrooms engaged in actual learning events” (Bialostok, 1997, p. 627). The philosophies of whole language theorists were soon challenged by reading researchers who measured reading success in a statistical manner.

The whole language movement became heavily criticized and fell out of favor when the standardized reading scores of students dropped (Bergin & LaFave, 1998). “The Whole Language Umbrella was unable to combat the near constant bombardment of ‘scientific research’ that indicated whole language ‘didn’t work’ (Wolfe & Poynor, 2001, p. 18). The conclusion was made that disadvantaged students “may need much more support than whole language provides” (Stahl, 1999, p. 19). At one time challengers of whole language were considered opponents of the disadvantaged, but whole language educators were now seen as the enemies of the poor as they “may do such children a disservice, denying them the knowledge they need to succeed in a world dominated by middle class norms”(Stahl, 1999, p. 19). Low-achieving students often do not share the culture of the school, therefore, they cannot be expected to infer its cultural rules (Bergin & LaFave, 1998). These students require the explicit instruction provided by a preset scope and sequence of skills (Bergin & LaFave, 1998). Opponents of whole language stated that children have shown greater reading achievement with systematic decoding instruction and with basal reading programs than with whole language and language experience models of instruction (Arthaud, Vasa, & Steckelberg, 2000). Lyon (1999) demonized whole language-type instruction by stating:

the research efforts that led to the romantic conclusions that children learn to read in the same way they learn to speak, and that children should be taught to guess the pronunciation of unknown words by using context are of limited quality and indeed have served to influence educational practices that had horrible consequences for many

children. (p. 20)

Whole language was attacked as the reason for students' apparent literacy failure rather than considering the possible mismatch between standard assessments and actual classroom practice.

The Need for Explicit, Systematic Instruction

In 1997, the United States Congress asked the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), to convene a national panel to assess the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching reading. The National Reading Panel (NRP) undertook a "comprehensive, formal, evidence-based analyses of the experimental and quasi-experimental research literature relevant to a set of selected topics judged to be of central importance in teaching children to read" (The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2006). The panel summarized research literature related to beginning reading instruction and found phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (referred to as the five pillars of reading instruction) beneficial (The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). The panel established that teaching children to manipulate phonemes in words accompanied by systematic phonics instruction significantly improves students' reading ability (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) and is especially beneficial for at-risk learners.

Like the National Reading Panel, Torgesen (2002) recommended that every child receive a balanced, high quality reading program in early elementary school that included the critical components of reading instruction comprised of explicit phonemic awareness and phonemic decoding skills, fluency practice in word recognition and text processing, vocabulary, reading comprehension strategies, as well as writing and spelling skills. Torgesen (2002) also

recommended a regimen of explicit instruction, extended practice, phonemically explicit instruction, and phonemically decodable text for students at risk of reading failure. Although some children will learn to read through incidental teaching, “others never learn unless they are taught in an organized, systematic, efficient way by a knowledgeable teacher using a well-designed instructional approach” (Moats, 1999, p. 7).

Most reading difficulties are associated with a phonological deficit (Scarborough, 2001). Phonemically explicit instruction is linked to the strongest reading growth for all children but particularly important for students entering first grade with the weakest phonological skills (Torgesen, 2002). Torgesen (2002) acknowledged that traditional reading instruction programs have significantly underestimated the variation in children’s preparation and talent for learning to read including socioeconomic differences and opportunities to attain language prior to formal schooling. “It is now abundantly clear that reading acquisition is a process that begins early in the preschool period, such that children arrive at school having acquired vastly differing degrees of knowledge and skill pertaining to literacy” (Scarborough, 2001, p. 97). Torgesen (2002) recommended that at-risk students receive more intensive direct instruction than was provided in the regular classroom in the form of one-to-one individualized instruction or in groups of three to four students.

In the United States in 2002, the Bush Administration unveiled an initiative entitled Reading First. It was designed to provide support for struggling readers in Grades K-3 with a focus on high poverty, low-achieving schools (Slavin, Lake, Davis, & Madden, 2009, p. 4). Instruction was based on the five pillars of effective reading instruction listed by the National Reading Panel. Reading First teachers increased reading instruction spending “more time on phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The Reading First

teachers were significantly more likely to use basal textbooks that were revisions of traditional basals designed primarily to increase the focus on phonics and phonemic awareness” (Slavin, Lake, Chambers, Cheung, & Davis, 2009, p. 1426). Basal reading programs are typically designed to assist teachers in teaching reading using a skills perspective that orders reading instruction into component skills that are learned one at a time through drill, repetition, and practice (Bainbridge & Malicky, 2004).

Once whole language was labeled an educational disaster due to its failure to be supported by scientific research (Wolfe & Poynor, 2001) a political backlash against whole language ensued. Strict scripted programs demanding direct, systematic instruction and synthetic phonics lessons were imposed (Stahl, 1999). Many teachers were mandated to teach phonics for one hour per day in Kindergarten to Grade 2 which is more phonics than has been taught in the past or is necessary to assist the automatic recognition of words (Stahl, 1999). Educational funding was provided for studies collecting statistical data alone and funds were prohibited for any program promoting inventive spelling or contextual cues over fluent decoding (Stahl, 1999). The student-centered teaching of whole language was eliminated along with teacher flexibility (Stahl, 1999) that would direct instruction to a child’s zone of proximal development.

A new focus on the prevention of early reading failure commenced. Many reading researchers began to advocate for the early detection and treatment of phonological impairments. Students who are most at-risk should be identified in Kindergarten or Grade 1 as dyslexia can be prevented in many children with early treatment (Torgeson, 2002). Torgeson (2002) recommended that students be assessed for phonemic awareness, letter-sound knowledge, and vocabulary three times a year beginning in Kindergarten until third grade. Torgeson (2002)

stated that the majority of poor readers rely too much on contextual cues while reading due to having extremely impaired abilities to use phonics.

The emphasis on preventing reading difficulties resulted in an intense focus on measuring young children's progress in learning to read. In order to determine what constituted reading difficulties, a 'normal' pattern of reading development needed to be defined. The discipline of psychology merged child development and mental assessment to create a linear model of child development that classified and regulated children through the use of measurement tools such as checklists (Kontovourki & Siegel, 2009, p. 32). These assessments measured skills decontextualized from the actual acts of reading and writing students engage in for their own purposes. An example of psychological reading assessments related to learning disabilities included assessments of "phonological awareness, rapid naming, verbal short-term memory, non-verbal short-term memory, lexical/vocabulary, speech production, perceptual-motor functions, and visual attention" (Fletcher, Foorman, & Boudousquie, 2002, p. 41).

Some reading advocates criticized the teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness in isolation. Taylor (1998) questioned whether "we want to base the way in which we support the early literacy development of young children on quasi-experimental studies that reduce children's lives to a meaningless exercise?" (p. 119). At times experimental studies that are considered flawed by scholars in the research community, will still be used by politicians to pass legislation (Taylor, 1998, p. 119). "The epistemological basis of this approach to teaching reading disregards the social, cultural, and intellectual lives of children. Learning to read is disconnected from their every day lives. Meaning is ignored." (Taylor, 1998, p. 123).

Students often fail to understand the significance of the skills they are practicing in isolation to the real-life applications of reading and writing. A common criticism against

phonics instruction is that beginning a “reader’s career with meaningless parts will not foster the child’s understanding of the meaningfulness, and hence usefulness, of print, and will, as such, greatly diminish the child’s motivation to tackle the difficult task of learning to read” (van Kleeck, 1998, p. 38). Some critics of phonics believe that it is such an unreliable system that it handicaps the reader who relies on it too heavily. Smith (2003) stated that although “[s]uperficially, phonics looks as if it should work [w]ritten language doesn’t decode to speech in any dependable way, and the number of rules involved in trying to connect letters and sounds is both vast and unreliable” (p. 30). Over 200 rules are necessary to spell a set of 6000 words in order to account for all the ways individual letters are connected to corresponding sounds (Smith, 2003). Smith (2003) believed that the time to teach phonics is while children are engaged in the act of reading because children that are “forced to pay attention to the nonexistent sounds before they are confident readers are simply bewildered by the instruction” (p. 35).

Smith (2003) also dismissed phonemic awareness instruction stating that it has only been constructed to explain the frequent failures of phonics instruction. The importance of phonemic awareness training for beginning readers was questioned by Allington and Woodside-Jiron (1999) when they noted that there was no evidence that the comprehension or orthographic reading skills of students with phonological difficulties improved as a result of daily 20 minute pullout sessions. The only area that improved for these students was their ability to read phonetic pseudowords (Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1999). Thirteen years later, Allington (2012) came to a similar conclusion when he described the results for students that were a part of the Reading First initiative. Once again, the Reading First group could read nonsense words more accurately than the control group but this skill did not improve the group’s overall level of reading achievement (Allington, 2012). Although teachers in Reading First schools were

teaching more phonics than teachers in comparable, non-Reading First schools, there was no positive impact on comprehension measures and only small effects on first grade decoding measures (Slavin, Lake, Chambers, Cheung, & Davis, 2009).

Reading Instruction as Big Business: The Impact of Profit Potential on Interventions for Struggling Readers

Some reading advocates believe that the whole language-phonics debate is not about which method is the most appropriate for struggling learners but is really about control and money. The insistence on systematic phonics instruction regardless of the learning needs of the students is just the beginning of “radical changes in education, primarily driven by commercial and ideological agendas” (Smith, 2003, p. 26). K. S. Goodman (1998) described how political campaign managers know how to:

move bills through Congress and the various legislatures, often without substantial opposition. . . . They have skillfully folded misinformation into a scientific paradigm, creating the impression that widely rejected commercial programs . . . are the only ones based on scientific research. They have been highly successful in determining press coverage by local and national media. A key goal of the campaign is to marginalize the entire educational establishment: state and federal departments of education, researchers, teacher educators, local authorities, and teachers (Setting the Stage, para. 6).

Overt control of what is taught in the classroom may be the beginning of a campaign to privatize public education and hand control to those with commercial interests as the producers of systematic educational materials sell \$1.5 billion worth of products annually (Smith, 2003) while many effective yet inexpensive teacher-directed practices are typically ignored.

Allington (2005) listed several evidence-based practices that are vital to effective reading instruction yet seem to receive little attention in the political world of reading. Some of these practices include daily writing, sound stretching during daily writing, the use of word walls, extended independent reading, discussions after reading, reading aloud to children, appropriate texts, readers theatre, focus on student motivation, and the importance of teacher expertise. “[O]ne of the reasons there seem to be few proponents of these ten evidence-based practices is their lack of profit potential” (Allington, 2005, p. 220). Allington (2005) questioned why the work of the NRP resulted in standardized reading programs that require every child to read the same contrived texts and complete the same controlled activities instead of supporting engaging, motivating classroom environments. Smith (2003) stated “The issue concerning learning is whether the learner should play an active or passive role in learning to read” (p. 27). Political decisions regarding the control of education leaves one to wonder if educational decisions are made with the students’ best interests in mind.

Many educators acknowledge that effective reading instruction and the remediation of reading problems does not require expensive commercial materials. Allington (2012) suggested simply reading as one of the most critical factors in ensuring reading success. A large volume of high comprehension, accurate, fluent, and interesting reading is a crucial element in enhancing reading achievement (Allington, 2012). “Kids need to read a lot to become proficient readers. They need books in their hands that they can read accurately and fluently and that are of interest to them” (Allington, 2012 p. 156). Allington (2012) suggested that students engage in the act of uninterrupted reading for 90 minutes a day and spend 30-45 minutes each day writing. Allington (2005) stated that the NRP acknowledged that independent reading was at least as effective as seatwork in raising test scores.

Struggling readers need individualized programs. Clay (1993) stated that “[w]hile a commercial kit may be a slight improvement on nothing, the ideal programme will have activities individually selected to meet the needs of a particular child” (p. 10). She developed Reading Recovery, an early intervention program designed to meet the needs of hard-to-teach children who do not follow predictable paths of literacy progress. Reading Recovery requires that students are provided with daily, individually designed and delivered lessons created to allow struggling readers to catch up with the literacy progress of their classmates (Clay, 1993). Struggling readers have different strengths and weaknesses so they require different program adaptations to help them succeed (Clay, 1993). Reading Recovery “gave particular hope that tutors with extensive training could prevent reading failure with a substantial proportion of the children who were failing in first grade and were therefore at risk of serious difficulties throughout their time in school” (Slavin, Lake, Davis, & Madden, 2009, p. 4).

Clay described how readers make meaning while reading and how teachers can monitor their students’ ability to do so. Although phonics has received much more attention than the other cuing systems readers employ while making meaning from text, all readers actively integrate and monitor information from multiple sources as they read. “Readers need to use, and check against each other, four types of cues: semantic (text meaning), syntactic (sentence structure), visual (grapheme, orthography, format, and layout), and phonological (the sounds of oral language)” (Clay & Cazden, 1990, p. 206-207). When students utilize higher-level reading strategies, they read with attention focusing on meaning, and are able to simultaneously check several cues against each other (Clay & Cazden, 1990). If higher-level strategies fail, they shift focus temporarily to a single, lower cuing system such as letter-sound associations to make sense of what they are reading. The focus of early reading instruction should be on meaning making in

context, not letter-sound correspondences or sight words out of context. Letter sounds are taught in the context of reading and especially during the writing of meaningful text. The larger the chunk of text the reader can process, the richer the information the reader can use to make meaning while reading. Clay and Cazden (1990) consider phonemic awareness an outcome of reading and writing, not a prerequisite. Sound awareness is taught during writing through the segmentation of words into sounds as they are spelled. Cutting up a story written on a sentence strip is one method of practicing sound-letter relationships and spelling patterns in a meaningful context. Teaching reading and writing in the manner described by Clay and Cazden (1990) requires the professionalism of a teacher to observe the strengths and learning needs of his/her students and to adapt instruction on the spot as needed. This type of instruction cannot be packaged into workbook pages or a kit that can simply be purchased and completed as prescribed.

Just as many whole language advocates believe in teaching phonics in context, phonics advocates acknowledge that students require a much broader literacy curriculum than simply phonemic awareness and phonics drills. It is not the teaching of phonics that should be the focus of literacy instruction but the ability to read and understand connected text (Chall, 1989). Chall (1989) complained that teachers who teach phonics are often seen as simple-minded educators who are not “concerned with the cognitive, meaningful, creative, and joyful aspects of literacy” (p. 532). Chall (1989) acknowledged that in addition to phonics instruction, it is very important that students receive early exposure to literature, reading materials at the student’s level, and instruction in writing, vocabulary, and comprehension. Instruction should be designed to foster a love of reading. Ultimately, one can see that the goals of literacy advocates whether they be whole language or systematic instruction supporters are very similar in that all educators hope

that students will learn to read and write. Many literacy researchers acknowledge the need for readers to use multiple cuing systems as they read and have changed their focus from the phonics/whole language debate to considering how to offer students more choice in how and what they wish to learn.

The Need to Broaden Literacy Practices

Currently, many educational leaders are placing emphasis on assessment, efficiency, and accountability which impacts literacy instruction. “Academic rigor, high standards, common learning, technical proficiency, excellence, equity, and self-development [are] themes [that] have arisen over and over since the founding of the public schools” (Greene, 1995, p. 169). The public’s desire for predictability, stability, and security (Greene, 1995) leads to the search for quick fixes to complex problems like illiteracy. Greene (1995) stated that the return to a single standard and one dimensional definition of achievement will only lead to further the injustices to the poor and at-risk. Dyson (2006) appealed for a new set of basics in school founded on children’s lived experiences, their diverse cultural and linguistic resources, and their rapidly expanding communicative practices.

There is an increasing awareness amongst educators that they need to facilitate ways that their students can become more personally present in their own learning processes (Greene, 1995). Addressing students’ learning needs is not limited to the learning of new pedagogies, dialects, cultural practices, and injustices (Hicks, 2002). “[C]hange also has to entail a moral shift, a willingness to open oneself up to the possibility of *seeing* those who differ from us. This is very hard work, but work that lies at the heart of teaching.” (Hicks, 2002, p. 152). Effective teaching requires educators to seek to understand and be responsive to the realities of children’s lives and to embrace their sociocultural backgrounds.

A significant shift in literacy studies occurred that began to emphasize the social nature of literacy, beyond arguments regarding the effectiveness of whole language or phonics instruction (Gillen & Hall, 2003) and beyond the focus on preventing and remediating reading difficulties (Street, 1995). A movement to consider literacy in a broader manner as a social practice and with a cross-cultural perspective began (Street, 1995). Many have come to reject the “dominant view of literacy as a ‘neutral’ technical skill” (Street, 1995, p. 1). Western academic models, which are often based on autonomous practices of literacy, fail to value the different conceptions of the knowledge of children (Gillen & Hall, 2003). Literacy does not have to be solely connected with school (Street, 1995). The concept of illiteracy could be seen as a result of the acceptance of a narrow definition of literacy and the failure to “understand the full and rich meanings of literacy practices in contemporary society” (Street, 1995, p. 111). Taylor (1998) stated that educators need to learn more about the coping strategies and social support systems of their students in order to provide meaningful reading and writing instruction. Schools need to “adjust to the differences of learners rather than trying to reshape children and their families to meet arbitrary, often unexamined, demands of schools” (Taylor, 1998, p. viii).

Along with increased attention to social literacy practices, came a shift to social semiotic theory (Gillen & Hall, 2003). Social semiotic theory emphasizes the social dimensions of how humans actively choose to represent meaning socially in the concrete world according to their interests and the resources available to them (Stein, 2008). Literacy is about making meaning (Narey, 2009) and children characteristically make meaning in a wide range of ways beyond print. Children naturally move across communication systems to include multiple modes of expression including art, music, and dance (Gillen & Hall, 2003). By allowing children the right to express themselves using a multimodal approach, they could “explore and represent their

worlds in playful, imaginative, and uncensored ways that combined multiple discourses and modes of representation” (Stein, 2008 p. 4). The recognition of children’s creativity challenges deficit views regarding the intelligence and resourcefulness of the poor (Stein, 2008). Schools need to rethink how print is the privileged mode of meaning and begin to acknowledge the use of children’s multimodal semiotic resources.

The primary aim should be to develop children’s voices with an intention like Freire’s critical pedagogy (Stein, 2008). The classroom should become a transactional space where students are engaged in a genuine search for meaning and cultural differences are viewed as resources instead of obstacles (Stein, 2008). In order to critically engage students, instruction should start with the lives and experiences of the children and allow them “to explore and negotiate their personal and broader social worlds” (Stein, 2008, p. 96). Allowing students the freedom to express themselves in the modes of their choice is not intended to refuse students access to dominant literacy discourses but to reconceptualise teaching and learning to permit students to build on the rich variety of resources that they bring to learning contexts (Stein, 2008). Educators should be questioning how many students would no longer be considered learning disabled if school literacy was designed on the situated learning histories of every child (Hicks, 2002).

In summary, initially early childhood literacy appeared relatively straightforward and unproblematic but became more complex during the twentieth century (Gillen & Hall, 2003). Literacy education is no longer just about reading and writing competence but confronting the racism, classism, and sexism that are embedded in educational policies (Compton-Lilly, 2009). Greene (1995) called for an authentic dialogue amongst educators to begin to personalize teachers’ and children’s stories. Continuing dialogue amongst educators regarding the

broadening of literacy practices, embracing sociocultural perspectives, building on students' interests and experiences, and upholding the professionalism of teachers will enhance instruction for students struggling with school-based literacy practices.

Research Methodology

Determining My Research Methodology

As a beginning special education teacher, I have been struggling with how to best support my students as they learn to read and write. During my first year in special education, I became quite disheartened as I realized that the reading test scores of my students remained dismally low despite following teaching practices recommended by my school division's literacy coach, the provincial curriculum, and techniques purportedly proven by research to be effective. I was frequently frustrated by the disengagement of my students in the lessons I had planned for them.

While completing a class for my Masters of Education degree, I worked with a professor who is an experienced qualitative researcher. A combination of our class discussions and the reading of the book *Reading Lives: Working-Class Children and Literacy Learning* by Deborah Hicks led me to see my students in a new light. In my practice, I became a novice ethnographer, recording the emotional reactions, expressions, gestures, comments, and conversations of my students in a notebook as I taught. I no longer saw my students as deficient and a source of discouragement due to their apparent lack of success on the reading tests required by our school division. I began to revalue my students as individuals with passions and abilities that I could capitalize on to plan more engaging and responsive lessons for them. I also revalued my abilities as a professional educator and began to trust my knowledge of my students to guide my educational decisions instead of continually looking to an outside expert who had neither met my students nor me.

Qualitative research.

In my study I examined my teaching practices in order to address the learning needs of my students. Owocki and Goodman (2002) warned that static curriculums designed to connect

with the literacy practices of typically white, middle-class children result from unexamined personal ideologies on the part of teachers and hegemonic political and institutional discourses in society. Hicks (2002) suggested that research regarding literacy practices requires the specificity of lived time and a rich understanding of the lives of students engaged in literacy learning. As a special education teacher in charge of designing programs for some of the most vulnerable students in the school system, I needed to “search for sensitive analytic tools and concepts that will enable me to grasp and describe with accuracy and subtlety a complex historical reality from the perspective of the powerless” (Motzafi-Haller, 1997, p. 216). To assist me in examining my teaching practices, I chose a qualitative research design to help me with my quest as qualitative research plays an important role in raising questions regarding our present pedagogies of reading and writing and developing new understandings of local literacy practices (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

Qualitative researchers recognize that reality is socially constructed and acknowledge the intimate relationship between the researcher and his/her research participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). I explored how the education system defines disability, how deviance is socially created, and how certain subgroups of the population are more often selected as having deficits in reading and writing ability. Due to the nature of my teaching position, I had an intimate relationship with my research participants whose reactions to my teaching plans were observed and reflected on to determine my success as a responsive teacher. I engaged in a process of systematic introspection (Ellis, 2004) using my thoughts, questions, feelings, and my reactions to my students’ comments and feelings as my primary data. The methodology of analytic autoethnography assisted me in fulfilling the purpose of my research which was to reflect on the

challenges I faced as a beginning special education teacher trying to determine the best way to support struggling readers and writers.

Analytic autoethnography.

Analytic autoethnography suited my research because it requires that the researcher's interests are deeply intertwined with their personal lives (Anderson, 2006). I was the central participant in my research as I examined my own teaching practice and how it has evolved since becoming a special education teacher. Autoethnography demands visibility of the researcher's self which demonstrates the personal engagement of the researcher in the social realm being studied (Anderson, 2006). As s/he recounts his/her own experiences and thoughts, the researcher is required to openly share changes in his/her relationships, beliefs, and attitudes regarding issues as they evolve over the course of his/her fieldwork (Anderson, 2006). As full-fledged members of the worlds they are investigating, autoethnographers are expected to reflect on the fluid, ever-changing nature of their research including how their actions have influenced social understandings and relations (Anderson, 2006).

Autoethnographers are expected to explore divisive issues as they arise, and pursue the feelings and attitudes of the other participants as well (Anderson, 2006). In order to analyze my teaching practices and to hypothesize why certain phenomenon were experienced by me, my students, or by the teaching staff I worked with, my research had to reach beyond my personal thoughts and interpretations to engage in dialogue with data and others in order to develop theoretical extensions that transcend to the broader sociocultural contexts in which we live (Anderson, 2006). The engagement in a dialogue within the social science tradition is how analytic autoethnography and evocative autoethnography differ, as evocative autoethnography is written largely to evoke emotion (Anderson, 2006). My main purpose for choosing

autoethnography was not to evoke the emotions of my readers. The purpose of my autoethnography was to tell my story as I attempted to meet the learning needs of my students, to question the current practices and trends in early literacy and remedial reading education, and to offer my opinion on several supports that may be beneficial including a change in perspective regarding the definition of literacy and literacy success. Although I followed the advice of Ellis, a leader in the field of evocative autoethnography regarding how to write autoethnography using narrative writing techniques to attempt to share emotions experienced or displayed, I hoped that my research would serve a broader purpose than to merely express and explain the emotions involved in remedial reading instruction.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Qualitative research makes the world visible through the interpretive practices of field notes, conversations, recordings, interviews, photographs, and memos to self (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The documentation of the evolution of my teaching practices is evident through copies of my students' work. Dyson (1993) described how handwritten notes and photocopies of drawn and written products can be used to reveal children's moods, levels of participation, types of products created, the social situations that energized students' work, genres and themes preferred by students, and how these preferences change over time. My data collection included student artifacts but was also very dependent on observations that were recorded in the field through the use of field notes.

Field notes.

Field notes often consist of cryptic jottings taken while the researcher is in the field. The researcher may record brief statements, short notes, and unusual phrases or terms heard that may trigger the researcher's memory when writing up full field notes later (Berg, 2004). While

working with various groups of students, I always kept a notebook on hand to chronologically recount what was occurring while I was teaching. If I was separated from my notebook and I felt the need to record an event, I would write it down on a piece of scrap paper to incorporate it into my full field notes at a later time.

Berg (2004) recommended, in addition to the date, time, and place of the observations, that specific facts, numbers, details, sensory impressions, personal responses, specific words, phrases, condensed conversations, and questions about people and their behaviour be chronicled for consideration in the future. In my notebooks, I documented the date, whom I was working with, a brief description of what we were working on, and the materials we were using. The bulk of my field notes consisted of verbal exchanges as talk is “understood first and foremost as a vehicle of human action” (Perakyla, 2008, p. 360). I recounted the stories students told me. I also noted facial expressions, emotional reactions, postures, physical actions, or gestures that gave me an indication of how my students were reacting to the learning environment. I used notebooks to record any strong emotional reactions I may have had or conversations I had with colleagues that I deemed important enough to include in my notes for possible use when writing full field notes. Outside of school hours, I reread the notes I made in the field and added to them to create full field notes later. I incorporated information gleaned from my professional reading as well as my thoughts and feelings regarding my current teaching practice and my plans for future changes through journaling.

Over time I felt increasingly concerned that although I was trying to write down everything as truthfully as possible, I could not possibly record everything or I would not be able to do my job which was teaching my students to read and write. Adler and Adler (1987) acknowledged the near-schizophrenic nature of the autoethnographer’s task, requiring him or her

to participate in the activities of the research setting while attempting to record events and conversations. Although, I tried to take notes while I was teaching, at times I was too engaged in the act of teaching to write anything beyond a jot note to aid my memory later. My memory played a huge role in my reflections as I decided how a lesson was working by gauging student reaction based on his/her actions, facial expression, posture, or tone. It would be next to impossible to record all of the reactions of a small group of students and my counter reactions in writing as I was teaching. Research data that relies on memories sometimes fails to be viewed as legitimate data but many ethnographers have argued that fieldwork cannot be separated from the memories or the headnotes that they are shaped with (Wall, 2008). Headnotes include experiences, impressions, and scenes that are too numerous to record but have an important impact on the researcher's findings (Wall, 2008).

Writing autoethnography.

Once the daily field notes have been written up into full field notes, I began to use the conversations and emotions portrayed to rewrite the field notes into stories (Ellis, 2004). When the researcher is ready to begin transforming his/her field notes into autoethnography, Ellis (2004) recommended that s/he revisit the scene emotionally in order to add details to round out the narrative by conjuring up visual and sensory images:

I start with my personal life and pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions. I use what I call 'systematic sociological introspection' and 'emotional recall' to try to understand an experience I've lived through. Then I write my experience as a story. By exploring a particular life, I hope to understand a way of life. (p. xvii)

Literary techniques.

When writing autoethnography, the researcher is free of the conventions of traditional social scientific writing. Autoethnographic texts are often written in first person with the author the object of the research (Ellis, 2004). Instead of trying to conform to the standard procedures of scientific writing, autoethnographers attempt to make meaning of their thoughts, feelings, and actions (Ellis, 2004). Employing narrative fiction techniques, autoethnographers construct detailed chronologies of events, emotional reactions, conversations, decisions, and coping strategies (Ellis, 2004). Storied relationships are “depicted in an episodic form that dramatizes the motion of connected lives across the curve of time” (Ellis, 2004, p. 30). The lifelike story highlights the emotional experiences and private, reflexive connection existing between researchers and participants (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnographic texts “showcase concrete action, emotion, embodiment, introspection, and self-consciousness portrayed in dialogue, scenes, characterization, and plot” (Ellis, 2008, p. 48). The goal of autoethnography differs from traditional social science forms of research representations as it strives to show rather than tell (Chase, 2008). One of the most effective ways to accomplish this is by using the narrative writing techniques of a novelist.

Turning transcription into dialogue is an important aspect of writing autoethnography as fiction writers use conversation as the main way to show readers what is happening in the story (Ellis, 2004). Conversation hooks readers by holding their attention and arousing the senses (Caulley, 2008). Conversations can add emotion to the text making it “more memorable, more human, and more understandable” (Caulley, 2008, p. 432). During conversations, people rarely speak using correct sentence structure. Caulley (2008) advised autoethnographers to revise quotations so that they are understandable but not so changed that they no longer sound like

conversation. Avoid fabricating dialogue by making up what characters said (Caulley, 2008). When writing my field notes into a fiction format, I usually began with dialogue I captured in the field, adding descriptions of gestures and body movements that I felt helped depict what actually occurred during the scene. I strove to write as accurately and honestly as my memory would allow.

Selecting themes.

As the full field notes are written and rewritten into narrative format, themes will begin to emerge. The autoethnographer should begin to organize the stories by theme and continue to generate new hypotheses and themes that were unrealized earlier (Berg, 2004). While drafting, the autoethnographer will have to choose a plot line to develop while disregarding information that does not fit his/her current theme (Ellis, 2004). Even though the field notes have been rewritten into a narrative format that fits a theme for sociological study, Ellis (2004) believed that autoethnographers should stay as close as possible to the words and meanings of the participants that were shared in the field. Berg (2004) also cautioned against the possibility of losing details and the nuances of the data when field notes are reduced in order to create the autoethnography. The emotional experience that was conveyed during the recording in the field should be the same as the one depicted in the storied version and characters should recognize themselves when reading the autoethnography (Ellis, 2004). The researcher should think and collect information like an ethnographer and then write like a storyteller (Ellis, 2004).

I collected a large amount of field note data over the year and a half I was permitted by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board to perform my research. It was easy to gather copious field notes because I worked with small groups of my students for approximately 30 minutes every day either in my office or in their classrooms. I had to decide

which story I wished to tell and then choose only the events that supported my theme. The stories I had written had to be reduced to include only the aspects that supported my chosen theme. I did not invent any dialogue but everything included in my final product went through a heavy culling process. I tried to maintain the emotional and conversational integrity of each scene depicted although it was selected to permit discussion of a particular educational issue.

The culling process was guided by the developmental level of my students, access to parental consent, and the stories I wanted to tell my readers about the challenges I faced and the lessons I learned as a beginning special education teacher. Initially, I recorded field notes for all of my students which were in Grades 1-5. Eventually, I decided to limit my research to beginning struggling readers and writers so I chose to only focus on the field notes recorded for students in Grades 1-3. Some of my students in that age range moved and no longer attended my school so I was unable to include stories that involved them even though I would have chosen some of their stories if I could have obtained parental consent.

I wanted to include stories that demonstrated the learning I was engaged in as a new special education teacher as I learned to revalue the gifts of my students and follow my own professional instincts. I wanted my readers to observe my increasing trust in my judgment to follow the interests and abilities of my students instead of simply teaching from a purchased program. Many of the stories I chose show how my support allowed the students to engage in literacy practices that were far more advanced and personally satisfying than what they could have achieved independently. I also wanted my readers to appreciate the anxiety my colleagues and I experienced at times over low test scores while working with students who did not seem to learn to read and write at the same pace as the majority. It was important to me to describe the responsibility my colleagues and I felt regarding our roles in supporting our struggling students.

I chose stories that showed how limited statistical data can be in describing the learning of my students in a time when statistical scores are being given so much importance as a means of determining if learning has occurred.

Layered text.

Layered text is the prime method I have employed to present my data in my autoethnography. Layered text is a technique that places the autoethnographic text alongside the traditional literature informing educational theory. It has enabled me to share both the emotion and action of what I have encountered in my teaching practice. Writing layered text allowed me to sociologically connect my teaching practice to the literature that informed my changing thoughts and methods in regards to my teaching. Hicks (2002) used layered text to construct a “dialogue between literary readings of working-class childhoods and educational research on literacy practices” (p. 136-7) by inserting recollections from her childhood into literacy theory and research using a multilayered analysis. Caulley (2008) described how writers of creative nonfiction typically use layered text connecting a series of dramatic scenes with a series of summaries. The dramatic scenes provide the vitality, action and life to the story (Caulley, 2008) while the summary provides theoretical statements and references in the style of a traditional qualitative research report. Both the dramatic and summary scenes are based on factual information that was either observed directly or referenced from the existing body of scholarly knowledge.

Analyzing accounts.

Once I had transposed all of my field notes into narrative format, connected my stories to the existing body of literature, and had assembled all of the student artifacts I was considering for use in my final product, it was once again time to analyze the data. This represents the

terminal phase of qualitative inquiry when the researcher “assesses, analyzes, and interprets the empirical materials that have been collected . . . [to] produce interpretations, which are then integrated into a theory or put forward as a set of policy recommendations” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 403). All of the layered accounts I had selected were reexamined to ensure that they focused attention on the educational issues that I felt were important to discuss and helped to tell my story as I had intended it to be told. I considered whether the layered accounts I had written helped me arrive at certain conclusions about my teaching practice and make recommendations regarding the types of support that should be offered to struggling readers and writers.

Evaluating autoethnography.

When autoethnographers are facing a decision on what stories or characterizations to include in their research, reflecting on the ultimate purpose of the genre of autoethnography may help the writer choose what to do. In order to determine if the research achieves its purpose, the researcher can ask him/herself the following questions to evaluate the quality of his/her autoethnographic writing: Do my stories evoke readers’ responses emotionally and intellectually? Do my stories open up the possibility of dialogue, collaboration, and move readers to action? Do my stories contribute to our understanding of social life, help us change institutions, promote social justice and equality, and lead us to consider consequences, values, and moral dilemmas? (Ellis, 2004; Richardson and Adams St. Pierre, 2008).

Critical Analysis of Methods

Criticisms of autoethnography.

There are several common criticisms of autoethnography. Some consider autoethnography as insufficiently realist because it attempts to be too aesthetic and literary (Ellis, 2009). Writing in first person is considered by many in the social science community to be

unprofessional (Ellis, 2009). Literary critics often demean the quality of aesthetic writing produced by autoethnographers (Ellis, 2009). These critics view autoethnographers as “literary poseurs who write transparent realism and care little, if at all, about the complexities and nuances of the literary imagination” (Ellis, 2009, p. 232).

In contrast, post-structuralists accuse autoethnography of being too realist (Ellis, 2009). They question how autoethnographers can believe that they are able to reveal their secret selves when the self is unknowable (Ellis, 2009). Instead of better data, post-structuralists “want writers to engage with more texts that will interrupt the linearity of the personal stories and turn them into more useful, unresolved, untidy, skeptical, and fragmented ones” (Ellis, 2009, p. 231).

Autoethnography has also been criticized for being a movement away from trying to understand the world of the other (Tierney, 2002). Autoethnographers are sometimes condemned as “navel-gazing, self-absorbed narcissists who don’t fulfill their scholarly obligation to offer conclusions, analyze results, or theorize social and cultural contexts” (Ellis, 2009, p. 231). Davies (1999) warned that the danger of incorporating subjective experience into ethnographic work is that it may lead to self-absorption which causes the research to lose its sociological value. Self-absorption is the result of autoethnographers failing to engage with others in their field (Anderson, 2006).

Some social science critics complain that the data produced by autoethnography is suspect because autoethnographers provide no systematic analysis (Ellis, 2009). Some researchers have strived for credibility through their field notes but a problem lies in the fact that many researchers are not actually taught how to take field notes and experts on ethnography disagree on what exactly field notes should entail (Bass Jenks, 2002). Bass Jenks (2002) described how questions often arise for autoethnographers regarding determining where the

boundaries of the field exist, when one starts and stops taking field notes, and exactly what one records.

Concern has also been raised regarding the depiction of others in autoethnography. Finley (2008) questioned how researchers can write about their understandings of participants without othering them, exploiting them, or leaving them voiceless. It is recommended that qualitative researchers record concrete details in the field. Caulley (2008) provided a list of features researchers should carefully observe regarding their participants including: “clothes, facial and bodily features, how they wear their hair, color of their eyes, any accent, the way they talked, content of their conversation, and surroundings” (Caulley, 2008, p. 432). I preferred to describe attributes that directly reflected upon my teaching practices such as student expressions of excitement, interest, boredom, or frustration. The only time I referred to the physical characteristics of students was when their posture or use of gestures and facial expressions showed how they were feeling in regards to our lessons. Although I have been conscientious in recording what my students said and their emotional and bodily reactions, I felt uncomfortable commenting on their physical appearance or accent because I was concerned that readers might feel that I was judging or showing disdain for my students’ social class or cultural backgrounds. If I described a student’s jagged, dirty fingernails, disheveled clothing, or Cree accent, it could sound like I was valuing these students as being less than or different from me. By representing my students in terms of what they said and did, I hoped to provide a fair and accurate portrayal of their behaviour.

The therapeutic orientation of autoethnographic work is questioned and some accuse autoethnography of replicating the trauma culture of television (Ellis, 2009). There can be a heavy price for the autoethnographer as a result of their dramatic self-exposure. Ellis (2009)

warned that autoethnography is dangerous due to the substantial demands of self-questioning. The researcher has to confront unflattering things about the self, fears, doubts, and emotional pain (Ellis, 2004). The writers of autoethnography are made vulnerable once they have exposed themselves as they have no control over how their readers interpret their work and are unable to take back what they have written if they later come to regret what they have revealed (Ellis, 2004).

Fear of being judged poorly sometimes leads autoethnographers to “repress, censor, or choose to deny our memories and our desires” (Ellis, 2009, p. 188). There is a danger when writing autoethnography that the writer will employ narrative smoothing (Spence, 1986) so that everything turns out well in the end (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Autoethnographers select the facts and details that they wish to include in their research, thereby, setting the boundaries for the topics they choose to write about (Caully, 2008). “Selecting only the positive aspects of a person, place, and event and leaving out the negative aspects will affect the tone of the text” (Caully, 2008, p. 446). As I recorded field notes, I was concerned that I was always focusing my attention on the same behaviours and not really capturing the entire picture of what was occurring. I was busy teaching so I usually only made time to record detailed field notes when I felt that there was some significant dialogue or action taking place. My day-to-day teaching was fairly routine and quite repetitive so I simply recorded the date, who I was working with, and what we were working on. I wrote detailed field notes when I perceived that I had made a breakthrough with a student such as when I felt I had uncovered a student strength that I could use to enhance my instruction for that child. Often it was the stories that aroused our emotions that I chose to concentrate my attentions on. If any aspect of my teaching evoked particularly strong positive or negative emotions within the students, such as their excitement and

engagement on a particular day or their rejection of my teaching plans on another, I recorded what the students and I did and said. Consequently, it can be concluded that my research was heavily influenced by what I selected to focus on in my field notes and which stories I decided were important for me to tell.

A further limitation of autoethnography is that because it is intensely personal it may be difficult for writers to generalize their data for the larger population or to actualize any change in the world. Motzafi-Haller (1997) described her experience with autoethnography as a description of everyday struggles without any dramatic resolution when she stated that the story of her life she constructed “is in no way a tale of my ‘heroic’ resistance to dominant rules. In many ways, it depicts, on the individual level, the more common compliance to, despite some efforts to maneuver within, dominant structures and forces” (Motzafi-Haller, 1997, p. 216).

The inability to reproduce results can lead to misgivings regarding the value of autoethnographic research. Different ethnographers will stimulate a different set of interactions with their participants which will lead to different observations, and, ultimately different conclusions (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000). Qualitative researchers accept that reality is socially constructed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). I acknowledge that my background influenced what I believed to be important to notice about my students and therefore chose to record in field notes and selected to include in my final research paper. There is always a connection “between the researcher’s positioning in society and history and the kind of research agenda and understanding such personal background shapes” (Motzafi-Haller, 1997, p. 216-7). Ellis (2004) claimed that “[f]ield notes are one selective story about what happened written from a particular point of view at a particular point in time for a particular purpose” (p. 116) and Burgess (2005) suggested that “note-taking is a personal activity that depends upon the research context, the

objectives of the research and the relationship with informants” (p. 191) so I realized that as the researcher and the principal research participant I could decide what I wanted to focus on and which stories I deemed were important enough to tell.

Benefits of autoethnography.

I have worked with many of the same students over the past three years as a special educator so I have had time to witness both my students and me change and grow over that time. Hicks (2002) referred to the knowledge of research participants over an extended period of time as historicity. Hicks (2002) chose to use narrative to write about her students’ literacy and personal experiences so that she could enable her readers to see and feel the complex histories and stories of working-class children’s identities and engagement with school practices. Narrative descriptions may enable a better understanding of the complexities faced by a research participant because it allows the writer the freedom to attend to life through three-dimensional space allowing researchers to represent the wholeness of their lives and the lives of their research participants (Clandinin & Huber, 2002). Narrative allows the fullness of the participants’ lives to be shown as their focus points inward to consider feelings, hopes, reactions, and internal conditions and also to describe when the focus of participants is outward toward existential conditions or moving backward or forward in time to the past, present, or future (Clandinin & Huber, 2002). Hicks (2002) hoped that her long-term project could play a part in how education could become more of a liberating force for poor and working-class children. She wished that the act of “[l]ooking closely at language and learning processes over time, seeing things up close and personally, may engender more subtle ways of changing hegemonic relations in public schools” (Hicks, 2002, p. 8). Hicks (2002) believed that her rich understanding of her student

participants' lives enabled her to appreciate "the complex weaving of gender, social class, and literacy in their lives" (p. 9).

Argrosino (2008) contended that "[w]e move in a more productive direction if we begin to ask questions based on our experience of life among the poor and marginalized rather than on our experience of what others have written or said about them" (p. 175). Taylor (1998) complained that inner-city children and their families were portrayed negatively in social science literature because of the focus on their low literacy skill levels. She believed that the social sciences have a fetish regarding discovering what is wrong with people. Engaging in field practices and analytic autoethnography took my focus off of the failure of my students to achieve at the same rates as the mainstream students and begin to question why certain groups of students were the ones continually performing poorly on the tests of phonemic awareness and early reading behaviours that were intended to alert teaching staff to which students required early literacy intervention.

Paris (2010) described how his field methods allowed him to fully understand and inspire his students through humanizing them instead of colonizing them through his research. The careful observations required to complete my field notes have assisted to me to see my students in a truer light whereby I could more fully share in their interests, successes, and struggles. I began to see them as full human beings, as people with passions, motivations, stories to tell, and yearnings to connect and be creative. Analytic autoethnography requires the researcher to reflect on the connection between the researcher and his/her effect upon the research situation (Anderson, 2006). My research methodology facilitated my examination of my actions and how they directly impacted the motivations and successes of my students.

Rewriting field notes into a narrative format has allowed me the opportunity to reflect on and better understand how my teaching has evolved over the past three years. Ellis (2009) described how the telling of personal stories can be an act of transformation:

By telling and writing, looking back, reinterpreting and retelling, we can sometimes reframe our lives in ways that are easier to bear. We can learn from thinking systematically about our experience and come to see our lives and ourselves in new ways. (pp. 165-166)

She believed that the act of reexamining our life events and the stories we have shared about them allows us to deepen our understandings of our lives and our work (Ellis, 2009). The act of writing the stories of myself and my students from the past year and a half I have spent as a special education teacher has caused me to reflect on my 17 year teaching career reexamining the stories I have told myself about my students, my colleagues, and me. Writing analytic autoethnography has allowed me to observe my evolution as a teacher

Autoethnography facilitated my endeavor to write from an emotional first-person stance that invites my readers to experience the world of struggling readers and writers, not to label these students as having a deficit and then outlining a cure but to help build an understanding of what it is like to struggle with literacy and what the literacy practices of our current educational system say about our culture (Tillmann-Healy, 1996). According to Ellis (2004), autoethnography is about gaining insight into yourself and fitting into the world: not about fixing problems. I intended to use my research to discover means of reaching my students in ways that are more fulfilling for them and myself. By allowing myself to be open and vulnerable, my research took me on a journey of self-discovery and self-transformation (Foltz & Griffin, 1996). It is hoped that my personal text will move my readers into a “space of dialogue, debate, and

change” (Holman-Jones, 2008, p. 206). “[H]umanizing research does not end when the study does” (Paris, 2010, p. 147). Like Paris, I hope to remain relational with my participants and continue to inspire them as they have inspired me.

The Ethics of Autoethnography

The ethics involved in writing autoethnography can cause considerable concern. It is very tricky to write about oneself and others close to the self in an intimate manner without worrying about the possible effects that writing may have. Autoethnographic writers have a tendency to cleanse their stories as they want to be seen as fair, sympathetic, and likeable (Ellis, 2009) but “[a]s interpretive and critical ethnographers, we are responsible for providing a complex portrayal and interpretation of the communities we study, including our place in them” (Ellis, 2009, p. 342). Richardson (1992) wondered how autoethnographers can honor and empower the people they include in their writing. I have felt apprehension regarding how my colleagues may feel about my work if they happen to read it. I felt a responsibility not to embarrass my students and their parents, colleagues, or school division yet believe that there is only worth in this research project if the truth is told.

Institutional review boards (IRBs) govern research involving human subjects striving to protect research participants and their privacy (Angrosino, 2008). IRBs play an important role in protecting vulnerable populations such as children and people with disabilities during the research process (Angrosino, 2008). Most of the guidelines issued by IRBs involve research that is being conducted on strangers which does not fit the premise presented by autoethnography where relationships with participants pre-exist or develop over the course of the research (Ellis, 2009). Rallis and Rossman (2010) felt dissatisfied with the procedures outlined by IRBs for the protection of human subjects participating in qualitative research. They used the concept of

caring reflexivity to describe the “moral principles played out in the relationships that researchers built with their participants” (Rallis & Rossman, 2010, p. 495). The concern researchers express regarding the relationships they have developed with their participants tends to guide the decisions made by the researcher more than the procedures set out by the IRBs (Rallis & Rossman, 2010). Autoethnographic researchers often begin to follow personally imposed ethics as they contemplate how they can act in a humane and non-exploitive manner while still maintaining the role of a researcher (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Daily, the researcher is faced with moments that require ethical decision making (Rallis & Rossman, 2010). These in-the-moment decisions are answered through the use of the researcher’s reflexive moral reasoning (Rallis & Rossman, 2010). The ethical and competent researcher understands that the researcher and his/her participants are morally interdependent in caring relationships that honor well-being (Rallis & Rossman, 2010).

Cause no harm.

The ethical code many ethnographers abide by is to do no harm (Angrosino, 2008, Ellis, 2004). Ellis (2009) instructed her students that their autoethnographic studies should create positive change and help to improve the world. “Strive to leave the communities, participants, and yourselves better off at the end of the research than they were at the beginning” (Ellis, 2009, p. 316). The means used to produce the ethnography including activities such as the researcher inserting him/herself into a social network, using photographs, or personal records must not cause more damage than the potential benefits of the research (Angrosino, 2008). As all research methods have the potential to do harm, the researcher must carefully choose the method s/he thinks has the least potential to cause injury (Angrosino, 2008). Ellis (2009) explained how she

uses pseudonyms for all names of places and people and changes as many identifying characteristics as possible without altering the meaning of the story and her experiences.

Writing ethnography honestly.

It is common for the writers of autoethnography to fear how their participants will react when they read what has been written about them. Ellis (2009) encouraged autoethnographers to write their first draft as truthfully as possible and then consider what they have written to decide if they are comfortable with how they have represented their participants. Writers can choose to rewrite any offending passages, trying “to show the dust and clutter without saying [the participants] are dirty” (Ellis, 2009, p. 312). Ellis (2009) stated that it is important that writers of autoethnography write as if their participants will read their research. Participants should be given the opportunity to read drafts whenever possible and provide feedback on any aspects that they feel are not accurate representations of what they said or did (Ellis, 2004). Allowing participant response creates more challenges in writing autoethnography. Once again, the autoethnographer is faced with a possible choice between producing stories that represent the truth as s/he sees it or engaging in narrative smoothing to ensure no one appears offensive. Ellis (2009) admitted that the ethical issues surrounding the writing of autoethnography “are complex and no simple mandate or universal principle applies to all cases” (p. 307). It can be difficult for autoethnographers to maintain a balance between protecting participants and having the freedom to write critically and honestly. As the researcher decides what should be included in his/her final draft, s/he can be guided by a consideration of “*how the discourses of qualitative research can be used to help create and imagine a free democratic society*” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 403).

Protecting my Participants.

Protecting my participants was very important to me as they were also my students. Although the focus of my research was self-reflection on my evolving teaching practices, my students heavily influenced my instructional practices and, therefore, they were inherently involved in my research. Initially, I discussed my research with my principal and the superintendent assigned to our school. I gave them both a letter outlining my intentions. My superintendent stated that I just had to make the division office aware that I was completing research and that he would put the letter in my file. I informed the parents of the students I worked with that I was working on a Masters of Education degree and handed out a letter describing my research during parent-teacher interviews at school. I described how I was researching my teaching practices and would be taking field notes as I taught. I told them that I may possibly ask for their signed consent to use some of their children's writing or drawings in the future. I assured them that their participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw consent at any time, and that their child would be observed reacting to regular teaching practices. I also let them know that I would use pseudonyms to protect the identity of my participants and that the name of our elementary school and small, rural community would not be used. Later, once I had decided which students' stories and work samples I was going to include in my initial draft, I phoned each parent and explained my research again and assured them that their participation was voluntary. I sent home a letter for the parent and child to sign that stated that their child's identity would be protected, that they were free to decide against contributing their child's work without penalty, and that students would only be described in terms of their comments and reactions in regards to their written or drawn creations or the reading materials that I had chosen for them. I attached photocopies of the student work I was planning to include

to the letter so parents could see the work I had selected. I informed parents that I would provide them with an executive summary of the results of my study once it had been completed. All of the parents I approached agreed and returned their signed letters of consent. In the end, I had signed consents for eight students, seven male and one female, to participate in my research. I currently work with six of these students. The two I no longer work with are presently working independently in a Grade 4 classroom.

Presentation of Results and Analysis

January 2010

“Now change the word man into mane.” I say directing the four students around me to manipulate their letter cards once again in an effort to increase their phonics skills. The girls successfully added the e card to the end of their words while the boys wait for me to show them what to do.

“It said, /m/ /a/ /n/,” I say each sound as I touch the corresponding letter card. “What happens if we put an e on the end?” I ask. The group doesn’t respond even though their classroom teacher and I have modeled the power of the “magic e” before. I continue through the prescribed word list, eventually every student is able to successfully place or remove the e card to transform words from words containing a short vowel to a long vowel. Just as I begin to believe that most of the students are experiencing success, I decide to ask the students to read back the words we had built. The group couldn’t read them back! I look at Nicholas’s face, his eyes tired and withdrawn. “What is the value of this exercise at this point?” I ask myself. “They aren’t ready to understand this yet.”

My new position as a special education teacher was turning out to be more challenging than I had thought. As a primary classroom teacher, I had taught many students to read and write in the past. The struggling readers I was working with now seemed harder to engage. They did not appear to make the connection between the skill we were practicing and any purposeful activity. I knew from my previous teaching experiences that students need to practice skills in the context of reading and writing so how come I chose to treat these students differently? I knew I needed to change my instruction to make our short time together more meaningful.

I had allowed my teaching to become that of a technician, directing the students to complete the phonics task that was expected to provide these apparently immature students with the pre-reading skills they needed (Wolwend, 2009a). I was hoping these students simply needed more time and practice in a small group to help them keep up with the reading and writing assignments in their regular classroom work. After all, there is so much research supporting the need for systematic, explicit instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness for beginning readers (National Institute of Child and Human Development, 2000, Torgesen, 1998).

Deep down, I knew that there was more to the students' struggles than just needing time to mature. Did the students even understand why we were learning phonics? Did they care? These students did not see themselves as readers and writers. I had not given them a reason to view themselves as such. I had created an environment where reading and writing were taught in a manner divorced from the literate practices that occur in the students' lives (Taylor, 1998). Taylor (1998) explained that it is "possible that many children 'fail' because they never have the opportunity to experience the diffuse, moment-to-moment uses of print . . . Print is presented to them as some abstract decontextualized phenomenon unrelated to their everyday lives" (Taylor, 1998, p. 92). I needed to find a way to bridge the gap between where my students were in terms of their literacy development and the literacy expectations of the school system.

Street (1995) warned against "lessons on word building [that] tend to go on indefinitely without learners developing reading and writing habits that are embedded in real-use contexts" (p. 137). Street (1995) compared skill-drill type lessons to Freire's banking approach to learning. Freire (1970) described a banking model of education which "transforms students into receiving objects" (p. 77) by attempting to control their thinking and action. The phonics drill I

had been providing had narrowed my instruction focusing it on just one aspect of literacy learning.

“I made the quad books,” my colleague said as she entered my office.

“Oh,” I replied trying to decide how I was going to explain to her that I have changed my mind about using them. We were planning to make pattern books with simple repetitive sentences like “The quad is red. The quad is blue.” for Nicholas. He loves quading and we thought he might be more interested in learning to read if we made easy to read books about something he enjoys.

“Actually, I have been thinking of using a language experience approach with Nicholas instead. I would like to capture his words to use as text in order to increase his engagement and personal connection to the reading and writing activities we are involved in.” Rather than focusing on the reinforcement of sight word vocabulary, I would like to create more meaningful, memorable text. Instead of imposing text that contains simple repetitive sentences, I intend to try to include Nicholas’s voice and passions celebrating his interests and background knowledge.

“I don’t know why I don’t quit teaching,” muttered my colleague. I nodded my head in understanding. Teaching can be so frustrating when you try to do everything you know how to do for struggling kids but they still seem to flounder. You get mentally exhausted from blaming yourself and wondering why the methods you use for other children just don’t seem to work for them. I feel bad about changing my mind about the sight word quad book we were planning earlier. I have a feeling that using Nicholas’s stories will be more meaningful and engaging to him. The sight word book would be more drill hidden in the context of a picture book with quads.

Today we read our little copies of The Napping House by Audrey and Don Wood. Nicholas was still having difficulty reading the words and and on in the sentence frame I had made earlier using sentence strips. He seemed to be able to read along with us but still didn't seem able to understand the print-voice match. I decided to try to help him do this by printing the repetitive refrain from The Napping House to read with him leaving two blanks where the words change throughout the story. The sentence frame read as follows: "And on that _____, there was a _____." I had him suggest the characters from the story to write on the cards. I had him orally segment the words cat, dog, and mouse and then help me to spell them.

While we worked, I noticed Nicholas was telling me fantastic stories about Skidoos and snakes. He appeared to be very excited as his eyes were lit up, his face was animated, and his whole body was moving. Immediately, I thought of the boy Hicks worked with in her book Reading Lives: Working-Class Children and Literacy Learning. Like Hick's young research participant, Nicholas often appeared disengaged during literacy instruction but when he got a chance to share a lived event, he became animated pantomiming the actions: seemingly fully engaged and alive. I decided to listen carefully to Nicholas's story about how he went ice fishing on the weekend and began to record the details in my notes. I quickly connected his story to The Napping House story structure and improvised by incorporating elements of his ice fishing story into the sentence frame: "And on that ice, there was a fire. And on that fire, there was a hot dog. And on that hot dog, there was some ketchup." I modeled how to read the sentence frames and then had Nicholas echo me.

"I'm good at reading that," said Nicholas. It must have been the first time he has felt this much success with reading. I thought the sentence frames were going very well, not only

because Nicholas was able to read them and feel success but because he was really enjoying connecting his home life to our practice at school.

Figure 4. 1. Nicholas's Pattern Story

And on that ice, there was a fire

And on that fire, there was a hotdog

And on that hotdog, there was some ketchup

By Nicholas

After I incorporated Nicholas's ice fishing experience into our daily work, my intentions at school changed. I had an awakening. I discovered the reading lives of my students when I really started listening to and observing them in order to make my instruction more personally relevant to them. Rosenblatt (1995) cautioned against teachers choosing material for their students based on the belief that they ought to read it stating that "[c]hoices must reflect a sense of the possible links between these materials and the student's past experiences and present level of emotional maturity" (p. 42). Instead of simply choosing reading material based on students' reading level, I wanted to connect my students to my instruction and myself by allowing students to share their voices and to engage in more collaborative, social learning. Wenger (1998) referred to this type of collaboration as a community of practice. Communities of practice are dependent upon the mutual engagement of participants as they develop shared histories of learning and ways of understanding the world (Wenger, 1998). Wenger warned that "[f]ocusing on an institutionalized curriculum without addressing issues of identity thus runs the risk of serving only those who already have an identity of participation with respect to the material in other contexts" (p. 269). When a student displays learning difficulties apparently due to a lack

of interest or an inability to learn, it may simply be a result of a desire for ownership of the subject matter or a disconnection from actual practice that hinders the student's learning (Wenger, 1998). Dewey (1938) stated that "[t]he most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning" (p. 48). Building communities of practice seemed the best way to instill this attitude. I started incorporating what my students were currently interested in spontaneously into what we were working on, freeing myself to follow my students' leads in the hopes of engaging them and motivating them to keep trying when school work often seemed so difficult. The excitement I felt as Nicholas responded to our incorporation of his ice fishing experience with the sentence frame assured me that I was beginning to change my practice for the better.

I found a book version of the poem I Like Bugs by Margaret Wise Brown to read to my students with the intention that we would try to read it and take the opportunity to write our own parallel versions. When I asked Mary to change "I like bugs" into something that she liked, she picked horses. Her family owns horses and she spends a great deal of time working with them. This girl is usually quite reserved when working with the group, not engaging with the others much. When we wrote her horse chant together, she came up with specialized vocabulary regarding horses such as the words corral, chestnut, and buckskin. Because I am familiar with members of her family, I was able to prompt her to say more by asking her questions regarding her family members and their interactions with the horses.

When Rex wanted to write about machines, I wasn't really sure what he meant. He didn't seem able to describe machines in the manner required to create a poem that paralleled the poem I like bugs. We went to the library and found books on machines that are used in construction. "Lifting machines, digging machines, pushing machines!" he exclaimed as we

flipped through the pages, viewing the illustrations. I decided to write his exclamations on the board. After we were finished looking at the books, he read his exclamations back to us and then chose which words he wanted to include in his poem. I marvelled at how tapping into the students' interests seemed to enable them to display how smart they really were.

Figure 4.2. *I Like Bugs* Pattern Poems

I Like Horses

Black horses.

White horses.

Buckskin horses.

Chestnut horses.

Any kind of horse.

A horse in the corral.

A horse in the pen.

A horse up the hill.

A horse on the road.

I like horses.

Nice horses.

Gentle horses.

Fast horses.

Mean horses.

Bucking horses.

Biting horses.

I like horses!

I Like Machines

Yellow machines.

Orange machines.

Big machines.

Noisy machines.

Any kind of machine.

A machine on the road.

A machine in the dirt.

A machine in the shop.

A machine in the mud.

I like machines.

Flying machines.

Floating machines.

Lifting machines.

Digging machines.

Pushing machines.

Farming machines.

I like machines!

Looking back, I refer to this as my parallel plot phase. Whenever I discovered a text the students enjoyed and were able to learn to read, I would allow students to create a parallel text that would match the sentence structure of the original text by choosing a subject they were interested in. Allowing student choice helped make their work more personally relevant. Using these students' background knowledge, interests, family information, and photographs offered the students support and motivation to create their own poems that paralleled the author's. It was through our dialogue that students were able to find the language for their poems. I typed their poems and made multiple copies to make booklets we could reread together as a group. I would have done this literacy activity with any of the regular primary classes I had taught in the past. Lesley (2003) argued that "the curriculum [for special needs learners] should mimic the same rich literacy experiences that are typically reserved for regular classroom settings" (p. 449). My students were able to accomplish a meaningful reading and writing task that enabled them to create and demonstrate their background knowledge making them appear as accomplished students when they were usually relegated to the ranks of the weakest readers.

In order for my students to participate in the same literacy activities as I would assign to a regular class, I would need to provide more individualized assistance. I was able to adjust the type of support each student needed to participate in writing their own poems through speaking to each student about his/her interests and background knowledge. Vygotsky (1978) believed in the importance of teachers determining two levels of student achievement, what the student can achieve independently and what the student can potentially achieve with the support of teachers or peers. If students are given assistance to perform tasks they are unable to accomplish, they will eventually be able to perform these tasks independently in the future (Vygotsky, 1978). Language and dialogue are crucial to effective instruction and cognitive growth in that the

teacher's verbal mediation of a learning situation creates a zone of proximal development.

Vygotsky's zone of proximal development plays a pivotal role in education both for the regular stream and in special education.

"He doesn't recognize the word the again!" cried Nicholas's classroom teacher at my door.

"This has happened before," I said attempting to reassure her. "He tends to forget words that he seemed to recognize earlier. I think he is making gains although they may be smaller than those made by most children. Have him read this to you and you will see what I mean." I said handing her the poem I Like Bugs.

"I have never had a student who could not read the word the before," said the teacher. I know how hard she has worked on helping him to remember that word. She actually tacked the word the in front of many of her classroom labels and had him read them with her each day: the light switch, the door, the window, the desk, etc. He still had trouble remembering it from day to day.

"Nicholas could read the poem and recognize the word the in context," reported his teacher later. I knew he would. Recently, he almost always recognizes it when encountering it in the context of meaningful, predictable text.

Ashton-Warner (1963) had a theory explaining why Nicholas had so much trouble remembering the word *the* as she believed that the words students initially learn must be personally significant to them. "Words having no emotional significance to him, no instinctive meaning, could be an imposition, doing him more harm than not teaching him at all. They may teach him that words mean nothing and that reading is undesirable" (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 44). She contends that first words must have an intense meaning and be part of the dynamic life

of the child. The length of the word does not matter, in terms of how memorable it is. It is the power of the word and how the child relates it to his/her personal relationships or fears that help the child remember it and begin to develop a personal vocabulary that launches him/her into reading (Ashton-Warner, 1963). High frequency words such as *the* lack power and personal meaning, therefore, make little impression on struggling readers at first.

“They will wonder what we have been doing all of these months!” exclaimed a teacher at my door as she worried what the literacy consultants at the division office will think of her class’s low test scores. It is testing time again. Three times a year teachers become particularly frustrated with the low performance of a group of students from their classrooms.

“The division office and the Ministry of Education understand that struggling students exist in most classrooms,” I said trying to reassure myself as much as her. I completed part of the testing for her classroom. Eight out of 18 students are performing below grade level. Five are performing seriously below grade level according to our school division benchmarks. I am not sure what to do. This position as a special education teacher is challenging because I am constantly working with the weakest students who typically do not make expected gains. I am the one my colleagues come to for solutions.

Soon another teacher came to my door to share her concerns over two boys that I work with from her class.

“They have very poor comprehension. They need a remedial reading program along with sight word drill and comprehension questions,” she offered as a solution. I returned a weak smile. Those suggestions were amongst the last three things I wanted to employ but I did not say anything more. I am starting to see the inadequacies of describing and labeling kids according to their reading levels and the dangers of over-focusing on having students move up levels

without considering what the students are actually capable of doing while they read. We are not using the test results to determine what the students know and what they need to learn next. If students are not performing well, many teachers simply assign more drill and practice. Why? The reading tests are used in a summative rather than a diagnostic manner which would help to pinpoint where students are grappling with reading.

My feelings tell me I do not want to drill anyone in sight words or quiz students after reading short passages. I have already tried spending half of my teaching sessions reviewing sight words and manipulating phonemes and letter cards. The students and I found it dreadfully boring and it did not raise test scores or reading levels. Our test results actually show that most of our students are already quite successful at phonemic awareness tasks and identifying letter sounds in isolation. Many teachers constantly return to drill and practice as a cure to reading difficulties. Typically, lower-achieving readers in Grade 1 spend roughly half as much time actually reading as their higher-achieving classmates while spending much more time on word identification drill, letter-sound activities, spelling, and penmanship (Allington, 2012).

Goodman and Goodman (1990) explained this reliance on skill drill exercises as resulting from the influence of behavioural science on education: “Behavioral learning theories support imitative, memorizing, and cloning activities that reduce the zone [of proximal development], trivialize it, narrowing the opportunities for students to expand on and develop to their fullest potential” (p. 246). Taylor (1998) warned that when literacy instruction is reduced to a skills approach, the natural development of reading and writing as complex cultural activities is eroded. Learning becomes irrelevant, boring, and arduous when it is treated in an institutionalized fashion which assumes that learning has a beginning and an end, is an individual process, and that knowledge must be demonstrated out of context (Wenger, 1998).

Teachers need to be empowered to teach their students. They should not be “reduced to powerless technicians administering someone else’s work sheets, skill drills, and basal readers to powerless pupils” (Goodman & Goodman, 1990, p. 235). The International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English (1996) recommended shifting instruction away from the passive learning practices of drill and practice to more inquiry-based, small group, and community-based learning.

As I ended my first year as a special education teacher, I was beginning to formulate a new teaching identity for myself. I knew that I was not interested in a skills-based approach to teaching. I was no longer teaching to merely increase reading levels or tests scores. Instead I had learned the power of observing my students, noting their reactions to my teaching, always searching for ways to make their learning more personally relevant by basing my instructional decisions on their strengths, interests, and needs. Rather than allowing the pressures of testing to dictate my instruction, I really began questioning the ultimate purpose of education.

September 2010

As I started the next school year I was ready to facilitate my students’ personal paths to literacy. I began to understand the power of learning as a social process that needed to be placed in the context of students’ lived experience (Wenger, 1998). This understanding would lead to a revolution in my teaching practices. I adopted a social constructivist model to teaching; following students’ leads, capturing their voices, and exploiting their interests in order to build on their literacy learning. Hartle and Jaruszewicz (2009) stated that social constructivism helps “teachers reposition their views on how children develop literacy symbols through visual and performing arts and modern technologies to realize the interdependent nature of children who live in highly fluid, dynamic and complex social contexts” (p. 189). Throughout my second year

as a special educator, I developed my ability to support students as they melded their personal literacy practices with those expected at school. I learned to broaden my view of what literacy entails to include storytelling, drawing, socio-dramatic play, and the inclusion of technology as a means for students to express their knowledge and follow their desires on their personal paths to literacy.

“Can I read The Red Stunt Bike? You might have to help me.”

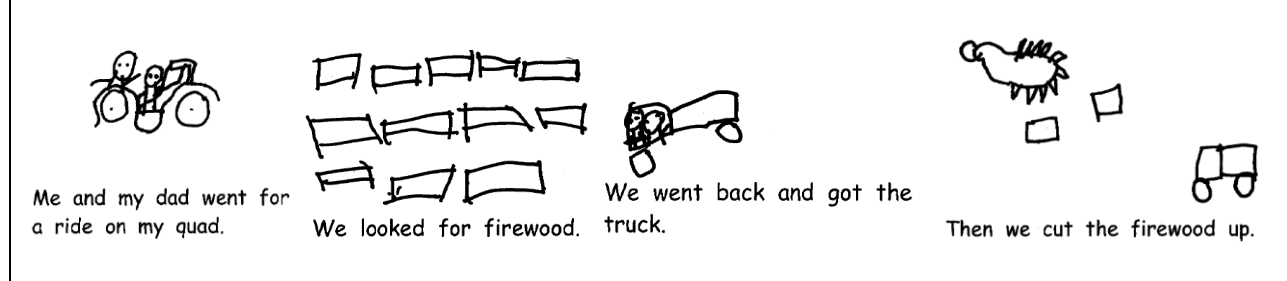
I smiled as I remembered how easy it was to make Nicholas’s book The Red Stunt Bike. As soon as I sat down beside him in his classroom, he began describing how he is going to be given his uncle’s bike.

“My uncle has a red stunt bike. It has pegs on the back and front. He is going to sell it to me when I get older. He’s going to fix it and then give it back to me later.”

Nicholas knows that when he tells a story, I now try to capture his words in my notebook as he talks. Once he is done sharing his story, I read back what I have recorded to see if he agrees with how I have transcribed it and to determine if he wishes to add any details. I then type the text up after school placing only a sentence or two on each page so that Nicholas will be able to draw separate illustrations depicting each event. These separate depictions will assist him when he reads the text later.

“I tried my best,” said Nicholas, after he finished reading. Flipping through his book box again, he said, “I am looking for Looking for Firewood,” referring to one of his recounts that he dictated and illustrated based on a chore his family performs regularly.

Figure 4.3. Excerpt from *Looking for Firewood*



After reading, Nicholas must have had a sense of his increasing proficiency as well as he said, “It’s easier to read if I write my own books. I don’t have to spend a lot of time [trying to read].”

Nicholas seems eager to read texts he is successful with so he continually chooses to read the books we make from his book box when it is reading time. This preference is probably due to the fact that they are based on Nicholas’s experiences and words. His meanings are preserved through his language and illustrations giving him the support he needs to read the text.

I had begun to use the Language Experience Approach to capture Nicholas’s recounts of his work and play. The Language Experience Approach provided Nicholas with the opportunity to “see, react, think, speak, listen, read, and share” (Stauffer, 1980, p. 39). Nicholas’s recorded accounts of events he had experienced firsthand were much easier for him to remember how to read. “The likelihood of word recognition increases with individual dictation. The reasons seem obvious: a personal account, the language flow, oral memory recall, individual illustration, the intimacy of individual dictation” (Stauffer, 1980, p. 41). The Language Experience Approach teaches reading as a process of thinking and communication and is naturally differentiated (Stauffer, 1980). Each child uses words that s/he is familiar with so that written words are introduced in a context of communication enabling students to learn to use semantic, syntactic,

and phonetic cuing systems while they reread their dictations in the context in which they occur (Stauffer, 1980).

Not only was using Nicholas's own words an aid to his memory, but the use of the Language Experience Approach drew upon his funds of knowledge. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) used the term funds of knowledge to describe the "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (p. 133). Recording Nicholas's recounts helped him to feel appreciated for his lived knowledge and experience. A student's oral description of his/her interests and activities could be further developed into other modes of communication such as written text through the process of transduction (Kress, 2008). Our acts of transduction, or moving Nicholas's spoken words into the alternate modes of writing and drawing, helped Nicholas understand his ideas in the mode of written communication. The books we created together helped him associate his prior knowledge with the literacy practices of school.

Ashton is eager to tell a story today now that he has seen Nicholas and me model the process. He is not normally a storyteller like Nicholas is. Ashton has learned how to do it from him. I quickly try to capture his exact words in my notebook.

"Go Green Grove. Go Skidooing. I go fast on a Skidoo. I go Joe's again. Joe's a field. Joe's a hopper." he manages to get out.

"So you went to Green Grove to go Skidooing?" I ask smoothing his language into a grammatically correct sentence, while providing a language model and confirming his meaning.

"Yes," says Ashton eagerly rocking up on his knees.

"When you go Skidooing, what do you do first?"

"Grandpa start Skidoo," replies Ashton.

“First your grandpa starts the Skidoo,” I repeat modeling how to use the transition word first.

“Then what happens?”

“I hop on,” says Ashton.

“Where do you drive the Skidoo?” I ask.

“In snow,” replies Ashton.

“You drive the Skidoo in snow,” I repeat slowly as I write in my notebook.

“I make lots of tracks!” exclaims Ashton rocking his body and smiling.

“What does your grandpa do while you are on the Skidoo?”

“Watches me. Get on Skidoo and drive.”

“Your grandpa watches you and then he gets on a Skidoo and drives around too?” I ask.

“He gets on with me. We drive around yard.”

“Oh, he gets on your Skidoo and drives around the yard,” I clarify.

“Where’s your grandma?”

“She sees me too. A window.”

“Your grandma watches you out the window.”

I finish writing. I will use the grammatically correct text that Ashton was able to understand with the scaffolding I provided to make his new book.

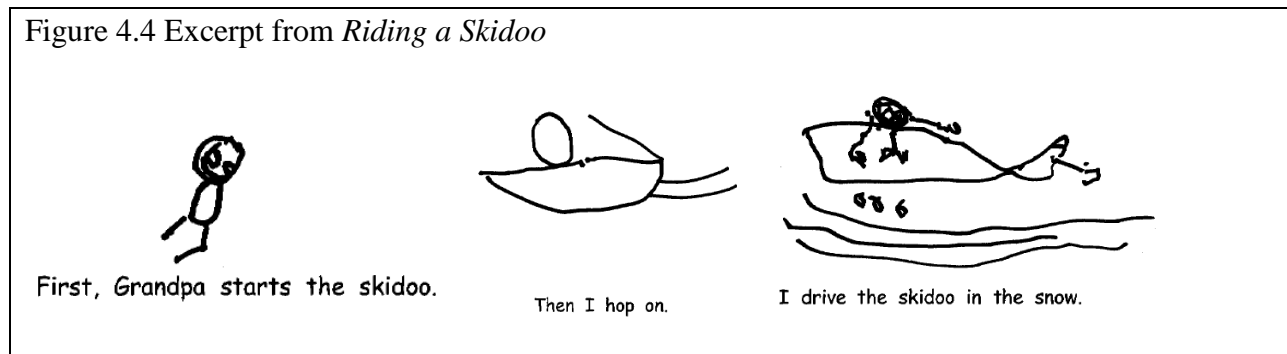
The next day I bring a copy of the story Riding a Skidoo. I reread it to Ashton and he draws an illustration for each page. We need to discuss what to draw and how to draw it prior to Ashton actually using the marker to draw on the typed page.

“This page says, ‘First grandpa starts the Skidoo.’ What do you think we should draw on that page?” I ask Ashton.

“A grandpa.”

“Show me on your white board how you are going to draw Grandpa,” I instruct. I know Ashton has experience drawing people so he will be able to draw a person quite easily. He has trouble drawing things he has never attempted before so I show him how to draw novel items on my white board and then he tries to copy it. Once he has practiced, he is ready to draw on the paper.

Figure 4.4 Excerpt from *Riding a Skidoo*



Ashton needed a teacher to scaffold his language and quickly accommodate his needs for language support as they arose. No scripted program could provide such personally relevant support as a teacher who had worked closely with Ashton for a year. Taylor (1998) stated, “We need to know more of the learning styles, coping strategies, and social support systems of the children we teach if instruction in reading and writing is to be a meaningful complement to their lives” (p. 93). It is only when students are able to construct using literate language that makes sense to them that their awareness of written language develops (Taylor, 1998). The forms of our communicative system including listening, talking, reading, and writing were used together to describe and share activities that were meaningful in Ashton’s everyday life (Taylor, 1998).

In addition to requiring support for his oral and written language, Ashton also required assistance with his drawings. I felt that drawing was an important part of the communicative process for Ashton. A relationship exists between drawing and thought and it becomes a

powerful meaning making tool when used in a collaborative and communicative manner (Brooks, 2009).

I helped Ashton choose which drawings should go on each page so that they matched the corresponding text and made “visible the essence of an idea or concept” (Brooks, 2009, p. 19). When Ashton shares his book with his peers or family members, his drawings will allow his readers to recognize his thoughts, link his ideas to their own, and become part of the cultural resources of the classroom or the home (Brooks, 2009). It is my hope that Ashton’s books become much more than simply a reading exercise but a means of communicating his experiences and interests with the people he cares about and a way for them to deepen their sharing of his world.

A new school year means new Grade 1 students to be concerned about. Every student in our school in Kindergarten to Grade 3 is given a phonemic awareness and phonics screen in the fall. Generally, the results of these tests help me determine who to begin working with right away to prevent early reading failure. I check the end of the year Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) results of any students who perform poorly and then discuss the test results with the Kindergarten and first grade teachers to decide if the students the test has red- flagged really do seem to require extra support. In my first year of teaching special education, I tried to remedy the students’ apparent lack of phonemic awareness and phonics skill with drills but now I am much more assured that I can use my professional judgment to determine what my students need to learn next. In my second year as a special educator, I feel much more comfortable returning to the routines I developed while working as a primary classroom teacher who introduced reading and writing with a process of shared and interactive writing.

When this year's fresh batch of Grade 1 students seated themselves in my office, I opened up my scrap book, removed the top from a Sharpie marker, and looked at the students with a gleam in my eye.

"Let's write a story. What do you want to write about?" There was a very eager student who was a natural storyteller that began telling a fanciful tale that incorporated herself and the other student present. As she told the story, I quickly drew a depiction at the top of the page. Then I wrote the text. I tried to capture the language of the students while increasing the coherence of the story by suggesting details that would make the sequence more understandable to an outside audience. As I transcribed the student's words, I modeled how to isolate the first sound of the words as I wrote.

One day Raymond and Jenna went for a walk. They were walking Jenna's dog. They were picking flowers. They didn't know that the flowers belonged to the dragon. The dragon used the flowers to trap kids. The flowers were attached to an invisible rope. The dragon woke up. He raced out of his tunnel. He ate Raymond. Jenna's dog barked at the dragon and scared it away. She was saved.

I reread the text when we finished, employing oral cloze to see if students could use semantic and syntactic cuing systems to figure out the missing words. I then began orally isolating the initial sound of the first word of each of the items in the illustration giving students the opportunity to tell me the letter sound if possible.

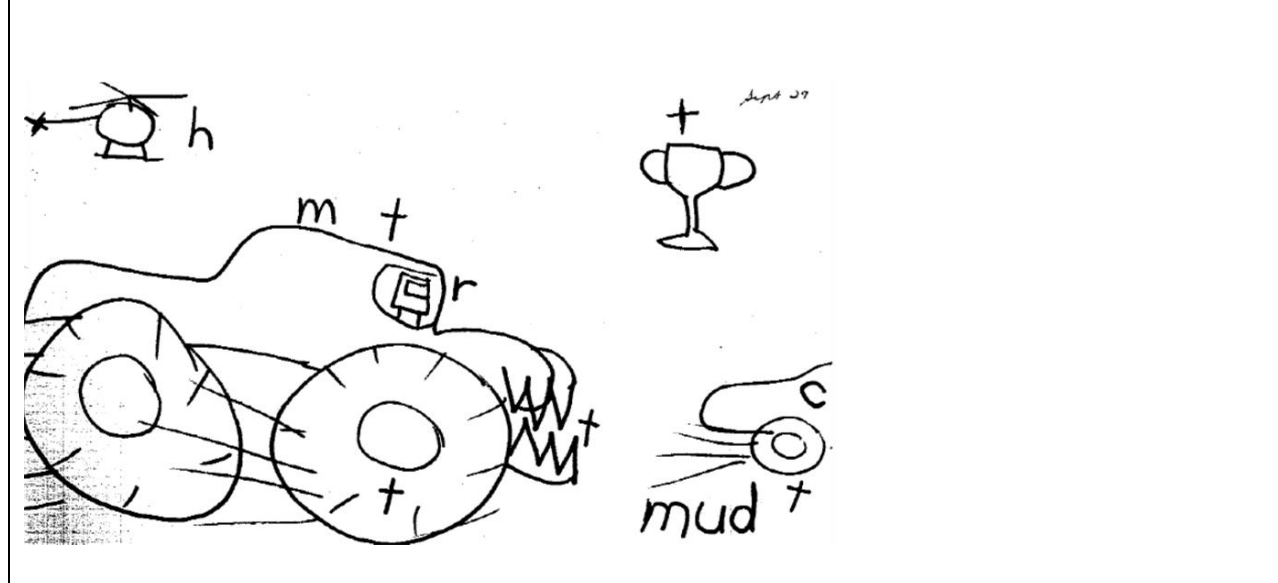
"/r/ /r/ Raymond," I modeled as I wrote the letter R beside Raymond's picture. "/j/ /j/ /Jenna/." I continued labeling my illustrations of the dog, flowers, sidewalk, and the dragon orally isolating each initial sound as I wrote.

Sometime after our initial meeting, I realized that this group of Grade 1 students always chose fiction: stories about adventures, heroes, and villains. Ashton and Nicholas almost always chose to recount personal events even though I had let them play with toys at times to explore fictional storytelling. I was willing to be decentered as the most knowledgeable member of our newly formed writing community as I followed the students' unpredictable journeys (Ghiso, 2011). At this point it did not matter to me which genre they preferred as I was interested in supporting the students in whatever path they chose to gain entrance to the world of reading and writing.

Even though I knew from our test results that these students did not recognize many letter sounds, I did not choose to begin with letter sound drills, I wanted to give students a personal purpose for reading and writing. Vygotsky (1978) wrote that the teaching of reading must make it clear to young children that reading is "necessary for something" (p. 117). The meanings of children's words need to have "immediate relevance to their everyday lives" (Taylor, 1998, p. 76). Although many teachers and parents feel it is beneficial for children to learn the ABCs, numbers, and colours before coming to school, "what in fact matters most to a child's later literacy are the opportunities children have to take the moments of their lives and spin them into stories." (Calkins & Oxenhorn, 2003, p.IV). The sharing of stories provides children with an academic advantage as stories are essential to a child's language development (Calkins & Oxenhorn, 2003).

In later sessions, I continued to start with an interactive storytelling session recorded in our scrapbook. Advancing from a focus on initial sounds, I soon began to model the blending and segmenting of one syllable phonetically regular words that the students have chosen during our storytelling sessions. I wrote the words next to my drawings.

Figure 4.5. Interactive Story Drawing



I gave the students their own little notebooks with the top half of the page blank for drawing and the bottom half of the page lined for writing so students could begin choosing their own topics to draw and write about. I realized that my students could recognize only a few letter sounds so some would say that giving them a writing task would be too challenging for them at this point. Ghiso (2011) stated that “writing is characterized as making sense and worth doing when it is identified by the writer as important, as conveying ideas that ‘matter’” (p. 348). Ghiso (2011) acknowledged that when guided by this characterization, teachers will accept that their students’ intellectual sophistication will be at a greater level than their knowledge of the writing conventions such as spelling or punctuation. My aim was to engage students in the writing process without a risk of failure by allowing them to approximate the desired outcome (Rushton, Eitelgeorge, & Zickafoose, 2003). When the teacher supports student learning without chastisement, students feel empowered to continue learning.

Raymond shares his ideas as he draws. “I’m making a saw. This monster is a sawfish. The sawfish is going to cut my legs off!” he excitedly announces to the group. “I get rescued by the pony, fly away, that’s it. Could you write this word for me?” Raymond asks me.

“What sound does sawfish start with?” I query tapping his drawing of the sawfish. Raymond glances at me briefly and then looks away. He often slouches to avoid eye contact and questions he cannot answer. I had witnessed him orally isolating the initial sounds of words as he drew earlier so I decide to ask him to try to do it now. After a few seconds of inaction, I prompt Raymond by pronouncing a drawn out “/s/.” Although Raymond seems to feel a lack of confidence, I want to show him that he can begin to write by labeling his drawings with initial sounds. It is one step toward becoming an independent writer.

“Who can help Raymond find the right letter to spell the word sssawfish?” I ask the group, once again elongating the initial /s/ sound as I begin removing extra magnetic letters from the board and placing them in a bucket so the task of finding the correct letter is simpler. I leave only the letters s and p on the board. Another boy from the group comes up and touches the letter s.

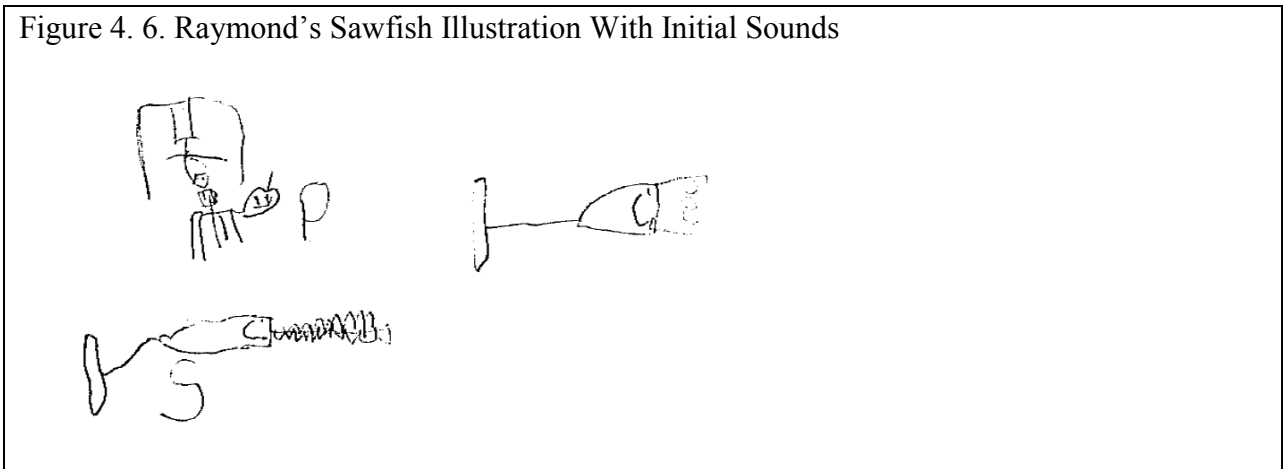
“That’s right, sawfish begins with /s/” I say. “Raymond, can you print /s/ beside your sawfish?” I ask tapping his paper where he should write the letter s. Raymond picks up his pencil and copies the letter s. “Now can you find the sound that /p/ /p/ pony starts with?” I ask knowing that the only magnetic letter left on the board is a p. Raymond gets up and touches the p.

“That’s right. /p/ p/ pony starts with /p/,” I say trying to draw attention to the similarity of the sound of the letter p and its name while once again taking the opportunity to demonstrate how to stretch initial sounds orally. “Let’s label your picture of the pony with /p/.”

Finally, I scribed what Raymond dictated regarding his picture when he completed his drawing.

I got stuck on the wall. A sawfish came and sawed me off of the wall. A pony came. I jumped on it and it ran away.

Figure 4. 6. Raymond's Sawfish Illustration With Initial Sounds



I had developed this process of teaching beginning reading and writing throughout my years as a primary classroom teacher. The labeling of drawings with the initial sounds of words is a way of teaching letter sounds with purpose and in context. Since I began my teaching career I have believed in contextualized teaching. Most of my students and I found the drawing, storytelling, and first attempts at writing enjoyable. It is also very labour intensive as the teacher supports each student's growing independence. I was surprised to find how my method of teaching early writing and reading fit with Cambourne's Conditions of Learning, a constructivist theory of literacy learning (Rushton et al., 2003).

The first two conditions Cambourne (2000) outlined are immersion and demonstration. The modeling I provided with the scrapbook stories support these conditions as each day as we create another shared story, I demonstrate how to tell a story with a beginning, middle, and ending, as well as a problem and a solution and how to record our ideas in drawings. After we are done creating the story, I model how to write the story and read it back, how to isolate initial sounds, and how to blend and segment the sounds in one syllable words.

Cambourne's condition of engagement is built into our sessions as I always attempt to

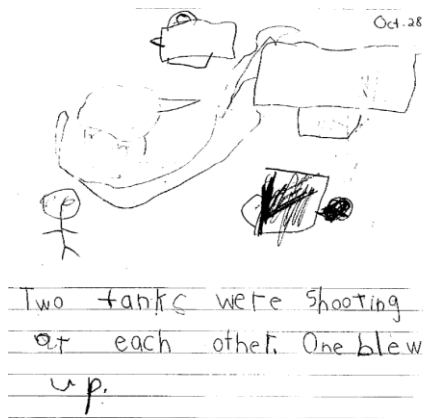
follow my students' leads while writing the plot of our stories and they get time to create their own drawings and stories once we have generated one as a group. The condition of responsibility comes into play when students are expected to start to isolate initial sounds, then segment short words, and finally attempt to write words and sentences with support. The conditions of employment and approximation occur when students are allowed to practice their developing writing skills in a social atmosphere and are encouraged to take risks while learning new skills (Rushton et. al., 2003).

The final condition is response which occurs when students receive feedback from each other and the teacher. This condition is dependent upon the teacher's close attention to the students' approximations to determine where they need continued support (Cambourne, 2000). I attempted to create what Rushton, Eitelgeorge, and Zickafoose (2003) referred to as "an enriched learning environment that fostered what educators call 'high involvement-low-stress' activities . . . [that provide] multiple opportunities to be physically, socially, and mentally immersed in their learning" (p. 21). The complex process of learning to read requires high degrees of mindful and contextualized teaching which could occur only if a certain kind of learning community is created by the teacher (Cambourne, 2000).

Once I see that the boys understand how to blend and segment simple words, I switch from scribing the boys' stories for them to a more interactive style of supported writing where in addition to creating a story while they are drawing and labeling their illustrations with some initial sounds and short words, the boys have to begin writing the sounds they can "hear" as they print on the lines in their books. I support them the entire time by orally segmenting words they cannot, drawing out the sounds I think they should be able to write easily, and by writing in any complex or unphonetic letter combinations that they would not be able to write or remember

at this point. My focus is on providing enough support to make the task of composing and writing manageable for these boys, to avoid frustration, and to instill a love of creation and writing for their own purposes.

Figure 4. 7. Interactive Writing



Although the boys often like to tell action packed, detailed stories, now that we have moved into interactive writing, I am afraid I have to cut their stories down into something we can manage to write within the 30 minute time frame we are working in. After listening to Buddy's story about tanks fighting, I suggest, "Why don't we write 'Two tanks were shooting each other. One blew up.'" I wait to see if he agrees. I want to maintain his language and what he feels is essential to include in the story.

I sit opposite the boys. I have two small tables stuck together at an angle so I can sit close to them and be able to touch each of their books to assist the boys whenever necessary. I begin by printing the word two in Buddy's book. I am printing upside down so that he sees the message right side up. "Two tanks . . ." I pause, "/t/ t/ tanks . . . Buddy, you print the /t/ right here," I direct pointing to the exact spot in his book. Many beginning writers need constant reminders to leave spaces between their words. After Buddy prints the letter t, I spell the ank part of the word knowing that it is best at this point to focus on the sounds that are easiest to

hear, especially the initial and final sounds. "Tanksss," I say emphasizing the /s/. "What sound do you hear on the end of tanksss?" I ask. Again, I point to the place I want Buddy to print the letter s. We continue working our way through his message with me orally rehearsing the next word, segmenting words, and pausing just before the sound I wish Buddy to attempt to determine for himself before I supply it. I fill in any parts of words with my pen that I feel are too challenging for Buddy at this time.

Calkins and Oxenhorn (2003) instructed teachers of writers in the primary grades to provide hands-on support so that they will develop confidence and competence:

[S]tay with the children as they write, reminding them to say words slowly, to listen for sounds, to reread often with their fingers under the print, to leave spaces between their words, and so on. Remember as you do this that your aim is not perfection but independence. (p. 67)

Beginning readers and writers require timely and appropriate assistance so it is very important to support them as they grow but to avoid pushing them so much that they become discouraged. I rely on my intimate knowledge of what my students have demonstrated they can do as they are engaged in the acts of reading and writing when making instructional decisions. I am not following a commercial program but trusting what my years of working with children have taught me as I have watched children make initial approximations. I am aware of the zone of proximal development I have created with my students and am consciously adjusting it depending on the continually developing needs of my students.

I am incorporating phonics and phonemic awareness training into our daily sessions. They are taught in a contextualized manner, embedded in our storytelling and writing, not taught as separate tasks. Allington (2005) stated that the most successful Kindergarten classrooms for

at-risk children were those that offered more opportunities to engage in meaningful writing activities where the teacher modelled sound stretching during invented spelling. The students in these classrooms “significantly outperformed children from the other classrooms on virtually every literacy measure and specifically in their ability to identify individual phonemes in spoken words” (Allington, 2005, p. 221). Our school division requires that every student in Kindergarten to Grade 1 be assessed regarding their phonemic awareness three times a year. It is good to know that our writing community may be preparing them for their assessments but that is not why we are writing. Narey (2009) stated that the importance of students’ “work should not be determined in terms of test scores, but rather viewed in light of the diversity, multiplicity, and complexity of ways our children are able to make meaning” (p. 6). My students do not seem to mind all of our sound stretching as it assists them in creating their stories that they are so excited to write.

The Grade 1 boys had only been working in a small group with me for a few sessions and they have already developed a relationship around writing. I observed the boys feeding off each other’s creative energies as they drew and planned their stories:

B: All these little lines are aliens. David’s and mine and Raymond’s ship. I’m the driver. This is the biggest thing of all.

D: Look, I’m shooting. This is going to be right in his bum (laughs). Look! Look!

R: (makes shooting noises). My (indiscernible) are inside his body. What is yours about?

B: Aliens. You are going to be freaking out when you get out of this.

D: Look, you’re going to die.

B: David, we’re getting attacked by aliens.

B: Look it, this guy is getting shot.

D: Look, he's falling to Earth. He's going to die.

R: /y/ /y/ Unicorn (attempting to isolate the initial sound of the word unicorn to label his picture). Whatever.

T: Good Raymond, I am glad you were trying to figure that out.

D: You shot me (slumps over in his chair and talks from under the table).

B: Then this is you and you are going to be dead.

D: I am going to shoot you.

T: Boys, we shouldn't be writing about shooting each other. If you want to write about shooting then you have to use pretend characters, not people you know.

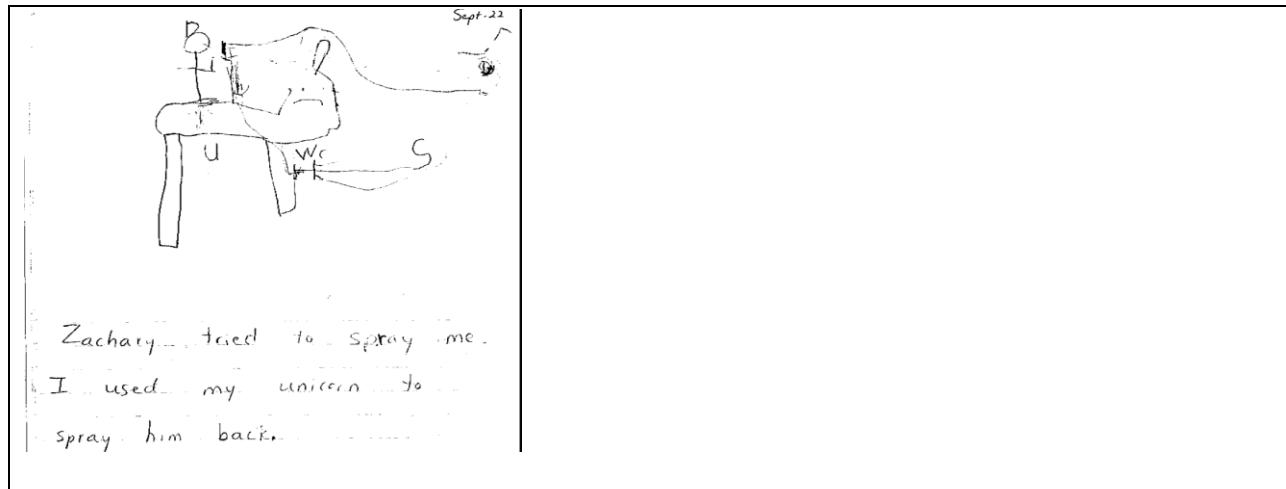
B: These are all aliens.

Figure 4.8. The Excitement and Engagement of Creation

The figure shows a child's drawing and writing. On the left, a large, messy drawing is enclosed in a dashed line. It features several stick figures and abstract shapes. The date 'Sept. 22' is written in the top right of the drawing. The letters 'M' and 'A' are written near the bottom left and right of the drawing, respectively. To the right of the drawing are two smaller sketches. The first is a stick figure with a vertical line above its head, labeled 'ZAC'. The second is a stick figure with a vertical line above its head, labeled 'SAD'. Below the drawing and sketches is a short story written on lined paper:

These are aliens and monster trucks. We were friends and we crashed.

One time Zac was stuck in a hole. I was so sad I was crying.



These boys needed a reason to want to learn to read and write, just being sent to school every day was not enough. Allington (2005) listed ways to enhance student motivation and engagement in learning which included providing students with choice, positive classroom collaborations, high success activities, and peer interactions. Our writing community offered all of Allington's suggested elements and the students' engagement in creating stories is apparent. Their writing is highly social. They feed off each other's creative energy and wish to include each other in their stories. McLane (1990) and Dyson (1997) described how children's writing often becomes playful and social when they are given control over their subject matter. The children use writing "to elaborate on their drawings; to extend the functions of sociodramatic play; to experiment and play with the forms and conventions of written language; and to conduct and comment on their social relationships with each other" (McLane, 1990, p. 309). Wohlwend (2009b) compared children writing together to an enactment of a videogame. Action becomes another modality the children use as they write "to interact with each other, to co-construct interactive meanings as well as social space to carry out peer-valued practices" (Wohlwend, 2009b, p. 128).

I try not to be judgemental about their chosen topics but I cannot resist interfering when the students start speaking of shooting each other. When their writing gets too violent or too

personal, I ask them to change course. Katch (2001) described how she imposed rules on her students to curb their violent fantasy play. Later, she recognized the importance of allowing her students opportunities to distinguish between pretend violence and behaviour that hurts others and to create rules that will assist them in treating each other with respect and empathy. Dyson (1997) wrote about the prohibition of commercial culture from many writing classrooms due to the fact that many adults find the inclusion of physical aggression and unchallenged gender-stereotyped plots offensive. Dyson (1993) calls for educators to “create worlds that allow more social, intellectual, and artistic space for all children” (p. 8). I try to create these worlds by embracing students’ interests in the hopes that participation in our community of practice and exposure to new experiences will broaden the scope of interests students have beyond fighting, videogames, and cartoons. My ultimate goal is to engage my students in the action of writing. Allowing choice over the subject matter is very motivating for most students. Permitting students to use their imaginations fosters a desire to continue to learn to write despite difficulties coordinating all of the skills required to generate written communication.

“I want to make a crazy mixed-up dinosaur, “suggested Raymond. After we all looked at him for a moment indicating our initial confusion, he clarified, “I want to write about a dinosaur with mixed up body parts like my book at home.”

“Oh, do you want to create your own dinosaur by putting different body parts on it like wings for flying and a long neck for catching birds . . .?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Raymond. The other boys thought it was a good idea so I quickly found a selection of informational books on dinosaurs from our school library. We flipped through the books and viewed the illustrations. We discussed the different body parts, where the dinosaurs lived, and their names. Then I got out some drawing paper and some markers and let the boys

draw. Once the boys were finishing their drawings, I had Raymond explain his creation, the spikeosaurus. I wrote down his description as he spoke. While describing his dinosaur in his own words he used partial words at times such as 'tection' for protection and 'pikes' for the word spikes. As they drew, Buddy began sharing the dinosaur he was crafting.

"It has armour to protect its babies. It is a fast runner. It goes really fast. It has three plates on its back. Each plate has three spikes coming out of them. It jumps on other dinosaurs and kills them. It has big, sharp teeth."

"What are you going to name it?" I asked.

"Sharkosaurus!" suggested Buddy.

Raymond seemed to invest so much in learning to read his description of the dinosaur he created. His eyebrows were furrowed as he intently concentrated on reading the words. He remembered most of the words, even the words he mispronounced initially.

I would catch myself questioning the time I let the boys spend drawing. They were at risk of reading failure after all. I, like many other teachers, often feel pressured to push young students through systematic phonics lessons (Renck Jalongo, 2009) in hopes of a quick cure. Many would ask how drawing and fantasy would be the means of helping these boys considering "fantasy and imagination as frivolous, immature, and anathema to 'real learning.'" (Renck Jalongo, 2009, p. vii). Negative attitudes toward the use of the imagination are most likely due to the fact that creative thought often is considered to have no practical value unless it saves money or advances technology (Renck Jalongo, 2009). When the education system limits the curriculum to print literacy, while dismissing art as busywork, the communicative tools of the young child are restricted (Renck Jalongo, 2009). It is important for educators to recognize that drawings allow students to represent their sensory lives in ways they are unable to when utilizing

language-dependent modes of representation (Kendrick & McKay, 2004). Drawing can make literacy more appealing to learners by acting as a tie from image to word (Sidelnick and Svoboda, 2000). Sidelnick and Svoboda (2000) described how drawing was used as a primary symbol system by a struggling student to organize and store her thoughts in a way similar to how language assists most students. “Drawing can be used to give children with learning disabilities the desire to learn and to write” (Sidelnick & Svoboda, 2000, p. 176). By encouraging my students’ to use their imaginations and allowing them to draw, they have become engaged, active learners, at least when they are observed in the act of writing. How they will perform on an assessment is still questionable and a concern.

“I allow the students to choose what they want to draw about. Then I help them write a message by encouraging them to label their pictures with their initial sounds,” I explain to an educational psychologist trying to account for the apparent success of a student in my pullout group to read and write compared to what she is willing to accomplish in her classroom.

“I help them to write a message on the lines by orally segmenting the sounds in easy words. I remind them to leave spaces between the words. I spell parts of the words that are too difficult for them to spell because of phonetic irregularities, just to make sure that they don’t become overwhelmed.”

“But can they read it back after they are done?” asks the classroom teacher.

“At the time they can usually read most of it back,” I reply. “I often photocopy their entries so that I can make multiple copies that we can practice reading in a group. Over time they learn to read everyone’s stories quite fluently. Of course I only have a few students to work with at a time so I can provide more support than a classroom teacher can,” I explain not wanting the classroom teacher to feel criticized as I began to feel judged myself.

“I am not using our writing as a reading test but as a method of supporting my students as they learn to read and write.” I decide to stop talking not wanting to sound overly defensive or to make anyone else so. I know the value of what I am doing. Our storytelling sessions allow students to practice segmenting, blending, and to review high frequency words and letter sounds while we write. Our shared reading practice allows students to collaboratively employ the reading strategies I have modelled for them.

Vygotsky (1978) believed that the only valuable education is that which is ahead of the students. I am scaffolding students through the writing process so they can feel a sense of accomplishment and can experience working through the steps of writing even though they cannot yet do so independently. Students should initially be taught in a social setting so that they are later able to consolidate that knowledge in order for it to be used in an independent, self-regulatory manner (Vygotsky, 1978). When the teacher asked me if her students could read back their writing, I immediately thought of Allington (2002) describing how the manner of most teaching is nothing more than a repeating schedule of assign and assess. I am not using my students’ writing as a reading assessment although it often surprises me how much they can read when they are reading something they have written compared to how they perform when reading independently during a test. Instead, I am actively instructing my students in strategies they can employ while composing and decoding through the methods of modeling and demonstration (Allington, 2002). Wohlwend (2009a) described an intentionality discourse which “celebrates what children *can* do and values their intention to create social messages over their accurate mimicking of conventional forms” (p. 345). It is my intention that my students will become capable, independent readers and writers with continued support.

“Raymond does have a memory!” his teacher exclaimed.

“I’ve noticed” I said smiling in agreement. I had observed that he was tracking print and able to read the repetitive parts of his I Like Dinosaurs poem. I was amazed because he shows such little progress when it comes to remembering sounds and blending and segmenting. He may have simply been very motivated to read the material even though he said it was hard.

“He said it is because he has been working ‘with that lady,’” his teacher continued quoting the words Raymond had said to refer to a retired Grade 1 teacher in our community. “She has been volunteering to take a small group of my students into the library to read. They don’t read at home consistently so I thought it would be great if they could have a grandma figure to read with them at school.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” I said.

“I told her that I was working a lot with word families with these kids. She went to a reading website and made little phonics books with titles like Rat and Pat Sat on the Mat. Then she made an assessment up for accountability purposes. She intends that these books and assessments go home with the students at the end of each week.”

“Could Raymond’s improvement be due to working with the volunteer?” I asked myself. Although I should have been happy that these kids were getting help from an experienced teacher who has taught Grade 1 for 35 years, this news made me feel insecure and inadequate. So much for all my worry about student engagement and the student-produced text I supported. The volunteer has many more years of experience teaching Grade 1 than I do. Just because my philosophy to support student-produced text over artificial sounding phonetic text seems superior to me than hers, is it what these kids need to become readers and writers? Should we fill these kids full of skills so that one day they will be able to use those skills for the authentic

purposes they were intended for? Will phonetic, word family books and tests make them suddenly want to?

I feel a lot of internal pressure to get these kids reading. Since I heard about the boys reading with the volunteer, I have been trying to incorporate sight word practice into my sessions. I asked the students to find high frequency words in their dinosaur descriptions as a means of more meaningful, contextualized practice than reading them in isolation off of a list. I have been intentionally using a range of sight words to ensure that they are being exposed to the words they need to know, alternating sentence stems in our dinosaur descriptions with “He has horns, it has spikes, she has sharp teeth, and they have fast legs.” I feel mollified doing this as I am combining the study of common words and phoneme manipulation with words we are reading in context. I am including sight word and word family instruction so that I can feel confident that I am covering all the bases. Secretly, I am frightened that I am the cause of these boys’ continued reading difficulties and that if I would just let go of my pious attitudes toward drill, they would be farther ahead by now.

Once again I fall victim to the myth of the quick fix. Hicks (2002) warned against attempting to remedy children’s histories and learning difficulties by assigning “a single method of teaching or theory of learning. Such moments of teaching require the hard work of seeking to understand the realities of children’s lives and to respond in ways that extend from those contextualized understandings” (Hicks, 2002, p. 96). I think it is good that I am continually questioning my teaching practices and always looking for a way to reach my students. Britton (1987) described teaching as a discovery process “a matter of looking closely at the stuff of our lessons, our students, and ourselves. We are all in the business of learning by experiment, for effective teaching is grounded in inquiry” (p. 13). I have always rejoiced in the experimental

nature of teaching, believing that is what keeps it exciting and rewarding. Now I feel so unsure of the instructional choices I have made when working with struggling readers and writers because of their apparently slow progress. I know that the boys have been exposed to sight word drill and the study of word families in their classrooms and at home. It has not worked yet either. I have been teaching beginning readers and writers long enough to know there are no easy fixes but it would be so much easier if there were. Maybe I should stick with what makes us happy during our short time together.

I open the door to the Grade 1 classroom. Instead of my boys quickly getting up and approaching the door, they remain seated, pretending not to notice my presence.

“Are you taking us now?” asks David with a slight scowl on his face. The boys’ teacher approaches the door.

“Nobody wants to come with me!” I quietly whisper to her.

“It’s just this time of year,” she says trying to reassure me. We are nearing Christmas break and our school routine is broken by numerous seasonal activities. I remain unconvinced.

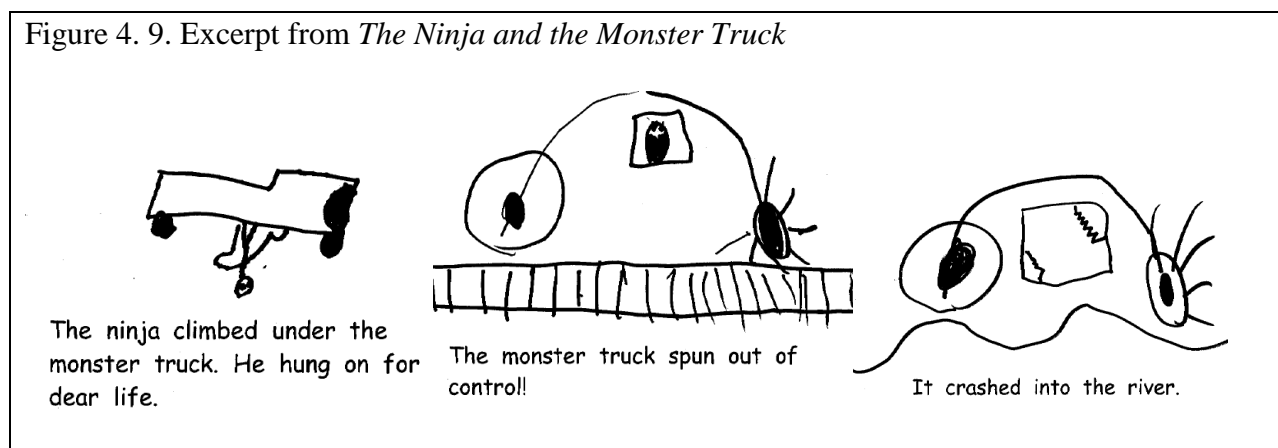
“Maybe I have raised my expectations too quickly,” I say.

“They used to love going with you,” she replies. I am trying to push the students into more reading. They are supposed to be reading at level 6 by now and will probably be lucky if they score level 2. I know this isn’t all about levels but the pressure is there because the levels do exist. How can I justify my work to my students’ parents and my colleagues if these students’ reading ability remains below grade level?

I begin examining my practice. I have been focusing more on creating books that we can read together. “I am trying to follow the genius of the students.” I remember recently boasting to a colleague as we were discussing the importance of following the students’ leads. I

recounted how the Grade 1 boys didn't want to read our chants today. They were really missing writing stories so we wrote an epic three-page story about a ninja driving to Saskatoon who was attacked by a monster truck.

I used a lot of their language in the story, like when Buddy suggested using the phrase, "He held on for dear life." I decided to type the story for them to create copies for each student to see if they could read it because of their high degree of interest. Although the reading material we have created together is challenging to read, the boys seem to find it exciting and meaningful. I let each boy illustrate the pages of their choice. The boys were happy with their pictures saying, "I made this one" as they browsed through the pages. As we practiced reading the book, I read the text first and then they echoed me. Then I ask the boys to read it chorally. Once we were done reading, I had the boys find and frame with their index fingers high frequency words from within the text.



We also used the magnetic letters on the board to build word family words connected to the word tree from our text such as see, bee, sweet, street. I carefully avoided using the words river and driver or the and he. I would have trouble explaining the reasons behind those spelling variations. Luckily, these boys were reading for meaning so they didn't get too caught up in the

inconsistencies of phonics. Then again they wrote it so they were already very familiar with the meaning of the text.

I recognized the boys' boredom with the word building part of the lesson, how their movements became sluggish and their voices quieted. This bothered me because I felt like I was doing good work with this group, trying to balance their desires to create with the basic skills that will give them a foundation to grow from. But the boys seemed uninterested . . .

"Mrs. Stene, what are those cars for?" asked Buddy referring to my plastic bag of toy cars sitting on the shelf. I immediately decided to capitalize upon his interest and let the boys play with them to see what kind of story we could come up with. I captured the action on my digital camera. I have not yet figured out how to coordinate scribing what the students are saying while simultaneously taking pictures of the fast moving action. Once the story is done, I plan to bring the boys back to have them retell their story so I can scribe their dictation as they view the photos on my computer.

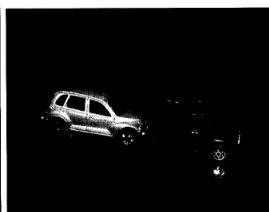
I am still trying to resolve the ideological differences between direct, skill instruction and student-led learning (Wohlwend, 2009a). White (2009) lamented the fact that "[i]n their haste to make children literate through skill and drill exercises, reading curricula leave no space for the real-life literacies of the students" (p. 438). The home literacies of students that revolve around video games, trading cards, information books; things that are real in the lives of children, should not be excluded from the classroom (White, 2009). Reluctant and at-risk students need to be part of a community of readers and writers who develop relationships around stories, play, books, story dictation, and dramatization (McNamee, 1990). Although I agree with the messages of these authors and I believe in our communities of practice, I do not always have the courage to trust my convictions.

The next time I go to pick up the Grade 1 boys, Buddy and David are busy finishing some classroom work so I take Raymond alone. I show him the photos we took for our car story. I have him dictate to me as I try to type what he is saying onto each page. I have to revise his wording at times to make the story more grammatically correct and to conform to story conventions. I do try to stay true to the language he uses and his chosen plotlines as much as possible. Raymond chooses flamboyant words such as damaged and destroyed instead of simple words even though he cannot always pronounce them correctly the first time he tries to use them. How many six-year-olds are witnessed to be actively trying to enhance their vocabulary? He suggested the title Flip Over which matched the story perfectly because it includes several instances of vehicles flipping over.

Figure 4.10. Excerpt from *Flip Over*



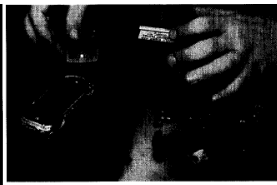
The race car slammed into the semi.



There was a semi hauling a car to its owner. The semi got lost on its way.



Suddenly, as the semi was crossing a bridge, a race car zoomed out of the bushes!



The semi tipped over into the water. Its back wheels popped right off! The car flipped upside down.

By allowing these boys to be creative and play, I am actually developing their language and thinking skills to a much greater degree than reading exercises ever would. They appear to be much happier and alive when they are involved in creative acts. They seem more competent in our learning community than their individual test results would ever show. Vygotsky (1978) considered play as a leading factor in child development. Play creates a zone of proximal development because the child always acts beyond his/her age during play (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) believed that drawing and play should be employed to further develop

children's writing. "[M]ake-believe play, drawing, and writing can be viewed as different moments in an essentially unified process of development of written language" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 116). After writing our book *Flip Over*, the Grade 1 boys and I began playing with toy action figures, vehicles, and blocks I had brought from home. We began to make stories using my digital camera on a regular basis producing many books to read at home and at school.

"My dad really likes these books. We should sell these books. I can't wait to take this one home," says Raymond as he opens the book we created together entitled The Good and Bad Robot: Part 2. He really tried to read it. He had a methodical concentration as he tried to figure out every word. Raymond is capable of using some phonics now. I asked him to frame three or four high frequency words from the text and he could.

Raymond could only read a book at level 1 independently during his January assessment which is at grade level for mid-Kindergarten. I think Raymond is learning a lot even though our tests do not show it. According to his test results, Raymond cannot read, produce letter sounds, segment or blend. But I know that if you let him write a story about his fantasy play he will try to read it. I can see him attempting to recall each word as he reads. He tries so hard to remember these books that he can read them quite well even though they would be considered much more advanced than his assessed independent reading level.

Raymond shows growth in many ways that a paper and pencil test cannot measure. He seems to be gaining confidence and he has stopped lowering his head in an attempt to hide as he did when I first met him. Raymond attends to details when choosing words for his stories or drawing his illustrations. He gets the toys out and looks carefully at them while drawing. When I inadvertently used the word *evil* to describe both the monster truck and the transformers at the beginning of our first series: *The Good and Bad Robot*, he really wanted me to change the second

word to *wicked*. I redid all of the pages for him to meet his request as his interest meant so much to me. I felt I had to honour his preference as I have never encountered a 6-year-old boy who placed so much emphasis on word choice. I indulge him as much as possible using the thesaurus on Microsoft Word to allow him to choose just the right word. Normally, I would assume that only high achieving students would place so much emphasis on detail. Raymond is willing to experiment with somewhat unfamiliar vocabulary to get the story sounding better, simply for the love of his stories.

Raymond responds when I show respect for his requests and concerns. I take pleasure in the fact that the boys and I have formed a partnership. I am not in the role of task master. At this point I do not have to be, the boys are motivated to read and write even when it is difficult for them to do so. McLane (1990) stated that children will be motivated to write and to learn to do so more effectively once they realize that writing “offers them an interesting, useful, and powerful means of expression and communication”(p. 318). My role is to support the boys so they can handle the complexities of written communication.

Ashton wanted to write about snowmobiles and Nicholas wanted to write about quads. I asked our school librarian for some books about snowmobiles and quads. She said we had very little on those two topics and the books we do have are always on loan. I could not find any books that the boys would be able to read from the public library system either but I borrowed some that we could share together. When the books about quads and snowmobiles arrived I handed them to Ashton and Nicholas.

“That’s nice,” said Nicholas looking at the front cover.

“I love it. Wow, huge! I keep this one today,” said Ashton hugging the book to his chest.

“I like this one best.”

“Nice skidoo. My dad love it. Take it home. Love it.”

“Polaris Sports. Ashton, look inside. This is just like cool. I’m going to look in this one. I know what this is. They race three-wheelers. My dad used to have one of these. How do they make it spin?” asked Nicholas as he browsed the photos in the book

“Dirt bike,” said Ashton pointing out a pastime his older brother enjoys.

“That’s a 4-wheeler dune buggy. I just want to look at this first. This is what they used a long time ago. They used tracks and skis. Polaris – See those little symbols on the front? That means Polaris,” said Nicholas pointing to the page so Ashton could see what he was referring to.

The boys showed a high degree of interest in these books and Nicholas’s background knowledge was apparent. Picture support, topics of personal interest and connections to students’ prior knowledge make books easier to read (Allington, 2012) and also to write. We have just found the topics for our next books.

“If I get a new email, can you send it to me so my parents can see it?” Nicholas asked hoping that he would have the opportunity to share his photo story on quads with his parents.

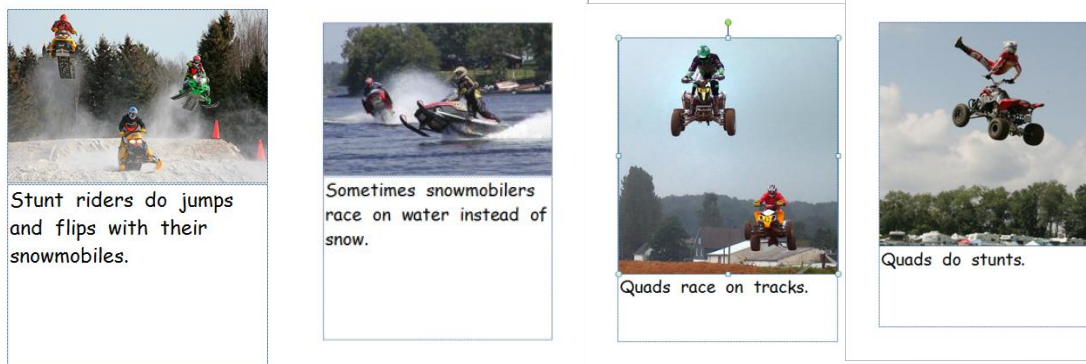
“The file would be pretty big. It might be hard to send,” I warned him.

“Can you show my mom and dad when they come to the school?”

“Yes, when they come for parent-teacher interviews.” This work seemed significant to Nicholas. We had been busily working on a digital story using Microsoft Photo Story 3. It took a long time because of the difficulty Nicholas had in reading the words. Nicholas and I wrote a book about quads using a parallel plot to Ashton’s book on snowmobiles. The reading level was appropriate for Ashton but Nicholas couldn’t read his. I should have known that Nicholas needed to use his own language in order to be able to read the book. When we were selecting the

pictures for it from the internet, I realized that he wouldn't be able to read most of those words if we were to make a photo story at that time. I decided to let him describe each of the images in his own words as he knew the background information on quads that we used to select the pictures. He did and I tried to write it down and turn it into a text very close to what he had said. I hoped this would enable him to read his book more successfully. If the words aren't written in a manner that he is accustomed to, he has trouble reading. We had to continually adjust the sentences to suit his language patterns and vocabulary. He got a lot of reading practice in as we worked each page out. He really wanted to please. Often we had to rerecord a page because he would ask, "Was that good?" before I could press the pause button.

Figure 4.11. Excerpts from *Snowmobiles* and *Quads* with Level of Difficulty Adjusted



I made an error when I used too much of the book language from the book on quads instead of basing the book on the language Nicholas felt comfortable using. Britton, (1982) explained:

[a]t the stage when they first try their hands at writing, most children have rich language resources, in terms of syntax and vocabulary, but they are with few exceptions spoken language resources. If they are to become writers, they have to adapt these resources to

the new demands of writing: the more the written forms resemble spoken forms at their command, the easier the transition is likely to be. (p. 125)

Nicholas was eager to share his photo story with his family members. The making of his quad movie became a socially significant literacy activity for him (Taylor, 1998). When students make movies by combining images and words, they employ visual learning styles. This makes learning more meaningful for students who were unable to make connections between home and school literacy practices (Hartle & Jaruszewicz, 2009). “Digital storytelling has the capacity to not only motivate struggling writers as they experience the enjoyment of creating stories enhanced by multimedia, but also to reposition themselves from struggling writers to competent writers” (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009, p. 291). The polished look and sound of a digital movie gave Nicholas’s writing a professional feel that Nicholas and his classmates considered a substantial accomplishment. The finished digital production had the power to elevate both Nicholas’s and his classmates’ perceptions of Nicholas’s abilities as a writer.

I performed running records while my Grade 1 boys read texts at a DRA 2-3 level. My Grade 1 boys all failed to read these texts at an independent level even if I read the first sentence for them to familiarize them with the textual pattern. Considering Raymond’s quantitative score, I can conclude that he is still unable to read a beginning Grade 1 text independently which makes him appear incompetent. Consequently, this conclusion could lead me to lament how I haven’t taught him anything or blame his parents for not reading with him enough at home or complain about the inexperience of his Kindergarten teacher and so on. But all of my finger pointing isn’t going to help Raymond read.

Alternatively, if I perform a qualitative assessment of Raymond’s reading performance like the one described by Owocki and Goodman (2002) and mark each sentence that Raymond

read with the word YES if it was read without miscues, read with miscues that didn't alter the meaning of the text, or where unacceptable miscues were self-corrected then Raymond would have scored 98% instead of 79%. He tried to use phonics to read "move" and said "moe" as he knows how the letter e on the end is supposed to make the long o sound occur in the word. He commented, "It doesn't really make sense" which is a great indicator that he is monitoring his comprehension. He also commented "no" after another miscue which is another indication of his metacognitive processes at work. Buddy would have scored 100% on his test. His miscues were semantically and syntactically correct and every miscue started with the same letter as the word printed on the page (bikes for bicycles, what for wind, ships for shuttle). David would have scored 100% on one of his running records as well as he added an s ending to the words plane and boat as well as reading bikes for bicycles and ship for shuttle which were miscues that did not change the meaning and were grammatically correct. The boys were also able to use a summary statement to effectively demonstrate their comprehension. Examining their reading this way, it seems they have learned a lot. Most importantly, they have learned that the reading process is about making meaning.

K. S. Goodman coined the word miscue to avoid the pejorative view of error that often occurs when readers have unexpected responses to written text (Owocki & Goodman, 2002). "The term miscue suggests that readers engage in making sense of what they are reading, intelligently selecting cues from the text based on their background knowledge and understandings" (Owocki & Goodman, 2002, p. 63). Y. M. Goodman (1996) warned of the dangers of simply counting up miscues to obtain a numerical score for the purposes of evaluation. Instead, the miscues must be evaluated based on the degree they interfere with the meaning of the passage. "The number of miscues a reader makes is much less significant than

the meaning of the language that results when a miscue has occurred” (Y. M. Goodman, 1997, pp. 534-535). Observing a child as s/he reads provides the teacher with a great deal of information regarding how the student is able to read and offers direction as to what the student needs to be taught next. As educators we need to take steps to move beyond a simple quantitative score when assessing reading and employ a qualitative analysis to determine what students are able to do and what instructional plans and supports need to be put in place to assist them in learning more.

“I’m a good reader,” announces Raymond. I can’t believe Raymond has gotten to the point where he believes in his ability to read despite all the troubles he has experienced. It is wonderful! Raymond’s confidence has helped me decide that it is time to begin reading books from the library. So far the boys have been reading only the texts they write themselves. I would be doing them a disservice by not introducing them to the wonderful world of literature now that they are gaining some reading proficiency. Rosie’s Walk by Pat Hutchins is a very entertaining text that these boys could read with minimal support. I put three copies of Rosie’s Walk in front of the Grade 1 boys.

“Do we have to read this? I just want to read our own stories. It’s not so much words,” says Raymond. I pretend to ignore his comments as he starts looking at the pictures.

“Oh, that’s really good. He’s going to pull the rope and look what’s going to happen,” Raymond comments about the comical events of the story as he browses through the rest of the book. “That’s really good,” he laughs. “Now he’s safe. That’s a fun one,” he says as he closes the book. “Yeah, this gives me a good idea. I’m going to have a bees’ nest,” says Raymond as he begins planning the next story he intends to write.

At first, Raymond did not want to read the outside author's book. I felt guilty and disappointed immediately when he said, "Our books have less words." I was afraid that the only reason he liked our books is because they are easier than what he is expected to read in class. *Rosie's Walk* is a book with very few words as the story is told mainly through the illustrations. Raymond's comments as he read the book demonstrated how much he enjoyed it. He even credited the book with giving him an idea for writing. I planned to incorporate a diet of trade books into the boys' reading to enrich their writing ideas and vocabularies, to help them realize that they can read some of the material they find in the library, and that books are worth reading and can be enjoyable.

Later when we revisited Rosie's Walk, it appears to have become a favorite with the boys.

"Yummy," says Raymond picking up a copy of Rosie's Walk. "I love this book. It's my favourite."

"Can I look at the pictures? I love this part," says David flipping the pages.

"Let me see," chimes in Buddy, trying to see the page David is referring to.

"/A /a/ across," decodes Raymond. After trying unsuccessfully to sound out the next several words, Raymond begins telling the story using the illustrations. "This is my favourite part." The boys make sound effects for every page that coincides with the activity of the story.

"Splash! Poof! Oh, I'm itchy. Psstp!"

"Ahhhh!" shout Buddy and David as they trace the trail of bees chasing the fox with their fingers across the page.

I suddenly became aware of a method of support that I was providing for Raymond as he attempted to read. After I allowed Raymond to read the text, employing all of the cuing systems

and problem solving strategies that he had in his repertoire, I found myself echoing him instead of the other way around. It seemed to support him by acknowledging that he read the pages correctly. It was like I was building his confidence by confirming what he had figured out while reading. I was modeling how to read the text fluently as well. Lesley (2003) described how she engaged in various forms of shared and guided reading allowing the special needs student she was tutoring to decide how she wished to be supported. I had not planned on echoing Raymond as he read. This form of support just naturally arose and seemed to fit our situation that day.

The Grade 1 boys and I now begin each session reading trade books and then engage in supported writing. Even though it is listed at a DRA level of 18-20, the boys fell in love with the book Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus by Mo Willems.

"Let's read this!" Once we are finished reading, Buddy grabs Don't Let the Pigeon Stay Up Late also by Mo Willems and suggests, "Let's read this one again!" When the story comes to the part where the pigeon begs the reader to let him drive the bus, Buddy gets up from his chair and drops to his knees on the floor wailing, "Pleeease" with his hands clasped above his head. We laugh enjoying Buddy's dramatization. Once we are done reading the Mo Willems books, we move onto writing.

I was surprised to find out that the book *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* was considered to be at a DRA level of 18-20 after my boys managed to learn to read it. Of course, they had a lot of support from me initially and we reread it repeatedly over several sessions. High levels of support and the opportunity for rereadings allows students to profit from reading more difficult text (Allington, 2012). "When teachers know their students well and are more expert about estimating the complexity of texts, they typically do not need readability estimates to find appropriate books for the children in their classrooms" (Allington, 2012, p. 77). Success

in reading is not only influenced by the level of the text but by what the reader brings in terms of motivation, background knowledge including his/her experiences and language ability, as well as what the teacher offers in terms of support and emotional climate (Glasswell & Ford, 2011).

Leveled reading programs can sometimes lead to an oversimplification of reading needs. As a teacher with a close personal relationship with my students, I am in the position to gauge which texts are suitable for my students and what level of support I need to put in place to ensure that they can successfully read the chosen texts. Starting with a hands-on primary experience can be a valuable support for students.

Ever since his family took a vacation to Disneyworld, Ashton has been drawing jets on his white board every day since he returned from his trip. No one from the Ministry of Education or the division office will bother to measure this, a boy's developing passion for drawing his world when a year ago it was a struggle for him to hold a pencil to make a line or a circle. I tapped into his passion for jets this week. I got him talking about jets and concluded that he took an Air Canada plane when he described the jet by saying, "Leaf on it." We looked at images of jets on Google and I ascertained that he had picked up some vocabulary regarding jets such as take off and runway. We went to the library to find some books on planes so that we could look at more pictures and gain some more specialized knowledge to make our own book about jets. Ashton was able to find out what the round things under the wings were that he was so interested in. They were the jet engines. Because this topic was so motivating for Ashton, I planned to use it as part of his performance task assessment for his personal program plan. As part of the performance task, Ashton had to answer general questions about jets and be able to verbally describe them.

"What are jets?"

“White jet,” replies Ashton.

“Jets are flying machines,” I say echoing the book we have just finished reading. “What do jets do?”

“Take off! Landing on wheels. Fly in the air. People. Us.” Ashton uses a series of phrases he has learned to describe the actions of the jet.

“What does it look like?”

“Canada leaf. Red. Wings are grey, black, and white.”

“What are jets made of?”

“Made of metal.”

“What parts do jets have?”

“Wings. Air Canada. Lots of windows.”

“Where do you find jets?”

“Airport. Fly over clouds.”

“What else do you know about jets?”

“Caillou movie. TV on the back of the seats. Buckle up for takeoff!”

Figure 4.12. Excerpt from *Jets*



Jets have two large wings. There are jet engines on each wing.



The front of the jet is called the nose.



On the end of the jet, there is a tail.



When passengers ride inside a jet, they ride in the cabin.

I am attempting to make Ashton's expertise visible and use it to build a meaningful literacy experience for him (Lopez-Robertson, Long & Turner-Nash, 2010). Sato and Lensmire (2009) stated that "[r]ather than dwelling on children's perceived deficits, we believe teachers should be encouraged to focus instead on children's competence as cultural and intellectual people" (p. 366). Teachers must be willing to get to know their students as thinkers and people by asking them questions (Sato & Lensmire, 2009) in order to determine ways that literacy can be used in a meaningful manner that matches the real life circumstances of the students (Flewitt, Nind, & Payler, 2009). It is important that Ashton have the opportunity to learn through hands-on primary experiences before he is expected to talk, read, and write about them (MacDonald & Figueredo, 2010). I tried to build on Ashton's ability to express himself verbally as a strong foundation in oral language is critical for literacy success (MacDonald & Figueredo, 2010). Reading our book on jets will assist Ashton in learning the language he needs to share this important event in his life with others.

I can't sleep. Depression has hit me once again as I have to face another testing season with most of my students continuing to score below grade level. During our staff meeting, we were looking at the quantitative reading data our school has been collecting. The numbers are presented as the truth, as scientific evidence, but I know that numbers do not tell us everything especially when it comes to my students. Averages make my students look like they are incapable of learning or that their teachers are unqualified to help them learn. Simple scores ignore the strengths of my students, what interests them, what motivates them to keep on trying when learning can be such a challenge for them. The test scores we study do not show us what my students can achieve with support. Ashton's playful nature is not considered as we plan for the next school year. Playfulness cannot be measured statistically just like other important

qualities such as creativity and perseverance. Qualities that are not easily measured with numbers are discounted as unimportant but I know they are necessary for these boys to achieve bigger and better things in the future.

It is ironic that the numbers can sometimes give a false message of success as well as failure. I know that Raymond's recent test scores show that he recognizes most consonant sounds and vowel combinations in isolation yet I have rarely witnessed him independently using this knowledge while reading and writing. What is the purpose of demonstrating knowledge when one cannot apply it in the context it was meant to be used? How useful *is* that quantitative data we are studying in our staff meetings? Why are so many blind to the limitations of numbers?

The key to a more appropriate education lies in our willingness to develop relationships with our students and to adapt to each student's unique situation. The more we know about our students the easier it is to expand their learning around their passions which in turn can help create lifelong learners. The level of focus for education should be at the relationship level, this is where the magic happens.

On the very last day of school when students and their parents drop by to pick up their report cards, I notice a Grade 1 student that I do not work with and his mom walk by my office.

"They go in that room with the light on and they make so much noise. There is so much noise coming out of there!" the boy says pointing to my office. His mother's eyes and mine meet briefly and we politely smile.

I consider what parents and other teachers think about what occurs in my room. Once again I question my practice. Am I really providing the best service for these children? Is spending all this time talking, drawing, acting, and playing really worthwhile? Wouldn't it be

much more efficient to just sit down and read and write? Allington (2012) believed that classrooms are to be noisy because the conversation and learning that thoughtful literacy entails requires noise. Ashton-Warner (1963) stated that although workbooks can provide teachers with reliable peace, allowing students to work at a creative level will foster a high degree of engagement with their work. She warned that student engagement always involves noise. Paley (2004) argued that since fantasy play nourishes cognitive, social, and narrative growth, teachers should provide early school experiences that best suit the natural development of children. Despite the support of theorists, it is hard to fight the faith in quiet order and efficiency.

Suddenly, a different mental image emerges. It is of another student that I do not work with. I feel satisfaction as I think of the numerous times he has stopped me in the hall or passed by my office to ask, “Mrs. Stene, when are you going to take me in your room to do one of those projects?” He is attracted to the noise, the energy, and the fun of engagement as well as the accomplishment of producing a book or a movie that is a totally unique creation.

August 2011

It’s our first day back. I am ready to save my students once again. I have been reading Reading Recovery by Marie Clay because Allington (2012) claimed it is the only program that has been proven to help struggling readers. I decide to try structuring my sessions like a typical reading recovery lesson. I plan to have the boys read easy books, spell some phonetic words, do some writing, and have them reassemble their writing using cut up stories. I listen to Nicholas read a book at DRA level 4 which would be considered extremely low considering he is starting Grade 3. I have him attempt to read the 30 “first” sight words from my new kinesthetic word cards that have raised letters so that you can trace them with your finger. He can read 19 out of

30 of the words in isolation. Soon Nicholas begins to dictate his own agenda as he begins to tell me about his puppies.

“I have a blonde Cocker Spaniel named Keena and a Pomeranian named Katie. I have two puppies, one’s named Angel and the other one is Bullfrog. One baby is black. Her name is Molly. It jumps and charges. The puppies play with each other. They have so much fun outside.”

I try to record as much information as I can, knowing that Nicholas’s spontaneous stories were a goldmine as far as enabling me to create relevant literacy materials for him last year. We have to narrow down the message because this year I am expecting Nicholas to do the writing. The story becomes, “This summer my puppies were born. Molly is black. She loves to play.”

I note that Nicholas remembered how to spell or. He has trouble with the word this which allows me to make use of the kinesthetic word cards. I had already planned to review the sound ow using the magnetic letters to spell phonetic words that contain ow. It quickly becomes apparent that Ashton and Nicholas want to tell me stories. I feel pulled knowing that I want to hear their stories and that it is an important way for us to reconnect after the summer break. I also want to get my preplanned lesson finished afraid that if Nicholas’s reading failure continues, I will be labelled a failure, too. Nicholas tells me more stories about his puppies and his cut finger. Ashton mentions a monorail, speeding motorbikes at the circus, and his cousin.

My teaching agenda dissolves further when I meet with the Grade 2 boys. Raymond begins talking about a video game that involves hunting animals. We read a book from a guided reading set entitled Where Do Plants Grow and were going to spell phonetic words that contained ow as well. The boys spontaneously decide they should make up their own story with

the puppets. I ask the boys what kind of problem they could come up with to guide the plot of their story. David begins telling this story: "Kay the turtle was walking in the water. He saw the Brooklyn Bridge. Then he went on it. The clown jumped on it. The porcupine ate the turtle." As soon as he finishes telling the story, he reconsiders saying, "No, that doesn't make sense." Raymond then suggests that the "porcupine should be shooting his spikes."

I start to feed off of the boys' energy and get involved by suggesting, "The clown was an evil scientist who made some animals huge in his secret lab. Once the huge animals stepped onto the bridge, the cables collapsed. The owl flew the cars on the bridge to safety."

Buddy then came up with a different idea. "There was a turtle and a porcupine walking to school. When they got to school, nobody was there. The gym doors were all locked. The lights were off. It was pitch black. There were zombies in the school. The animals could fight zombies. (At this, David stands up and begins to walk with his legs stiff like a zombie). The turtle went into his shell. The porcupine shoots his quills up fast."

I propose some more violent drama to thicken the plot. "The quills shoot the zombies right in the head but there were still two standing. One zombie punched the turtle's shell. It was so hard the zombie thought it was a rock. The turtle ran home and got a catapult. It catapulted itself at the zombies and killed them."

I understand that this story is ridiculous and violent but the boys were revved up. I did feel a bit apprehensive before joining in with their play, thinking that it was wrong for me to encourage their violent fantasies. Katch (2001) described the importance of teachers listening to their students' play in order to understand it. She suggested that violent fantasy play may assist boys in lessening their feelings of vulnerability. If I demonstrated excitement and accepted their interests and ideas, then they were much more likely to accept me and allow me into their inner

circle. When I showed how I would allow my ideas to fluently flow without fear of judgement, I modeled that it is okay to let loose and take risks creatively. Paley (2004) described fluency in dramatic play as “a reciprocal process, with teacher and student feeding each other ideas. There are teaching moments in children’s play and stories that go well beyond ‘B is for bear’” (p. 73). Like Paley, I saw the value of harmonizing my teaching with the fantasy play of my students.

Freire (1970) suggested that teachers and students should both take the lead in determining the course of learning by fostering a problem-posing approach to education whereby the teacher is not the only one teaching but is a learner through interaction with his/her students. The students are no longer docile, waiting to be filled with information but “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire, 1970, 81). Freire (1970) believed students should be engaged in inquiry and creative transformation, having the “freedom to create and construct, to wonder and to venture. Such freedom requires that the individual be active and responsible not a slave or a well-fed cog in the machine” (p. 68). I realized that forcing the students into regimented lessons would diminish their creativity and therefore their humanity.

At the end of the last school year, the Kindergarten teacher alerted me to who was likely to have academic difficulties in Grade 1. “Stuart is the only one,” she said. “Take it easy on him. He is learning but if you put too much pressure on him, he’ll shut down.” When Stuart started Grade 1, I obtained parental consent to work with him. I was a little apprehensive about working with him because I knew he had some speech difficulties and our Speech Language Pathologist reported that he would begin crying whenever she had asked him to try anything he had difficulty doing. When we reached my room, I said in a cheerful voice, “We are going to make up a story. Do you like making up stories?” Stuart shook his head to indicate no.

“Do you like to draw pictures on the white board?” Stuart nodded and got up. “What are you going to draw a picture of?”

“My family.”

“You want to draw your family?” I asked.

Stuart nodded and said, “Do black one?” which I interpreted to mean “Can I use the black marker?”

“Sure you can use the black marker,” I replied. Stuart began drawing people with green, blue, and black markers.

“Who are you drawing?”

“My family. The lasted one, my little baby broder, dat one my mom, dat one my little baby broder.”

“Who’s that?” I asked pointing to the figure in progress.

“My dad,” replied Stuart as he drew the biggest person.

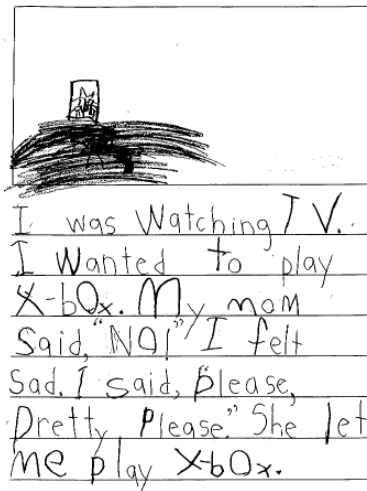
“How many people are in your family?”

“Lots. This is my little broder, Ryan. /d/ /d/ dad like /d/ /d/dog,” said Stuart as he made a dancing gesture he learned to accompany with the sound /d/ in Kindergarten. “I like all the X-Box games. I don’t know how to draw a couch. I sit on the couch all day.” I decided to have him recount a personal event on paper. He chose to draw himself playing his X-Box.

“I need to draw a light saber. I am drawing Star Wars and the Clone Wars. I am using a light saber. There is robots coming and I need to fight them. That’s me sitting on the floor. I have a videogame.”

I had Stuart hold his pencil and write some of the initial sounds of the words. I wanted to gauge how cooperative he would be and how much supported reading and writing he could handle this early in the year.

Figure 4.13. Supported Writing



From this brief session working together, I could tell that Stuart could isolate some initial sounds, knew some consonant sounds, and could read back some words from his writing when I pronounced their initial sounds as a cue. I could see that speech and language were issues. I had to add extra words to his description to develop it into school language. He also added in little words while rereading that didn't affect the meaning which meant that he understood that reading needs to make sense. Stuart did demonstrate a lot of ability for a student at the beginning of Grade 1. I decided to continue working with him for a while longer to get to know him better. His grammar and pronunciation problems would probably hinder his ability to read.

To tell the truth, I was not sure where to start with Stuart: he did not seem comfortable, I wasn't sure if I could understand him, and I was scared that he would shut down and refuse to participate. Drawing on my white board with coloured markers always seems to interest children so I was hoping that Stuart's drawings would give us something to talk about.

“Vygotsky (1978) advocated the use of children’s drawings to tap into their narrative impulses, and thus, art can be an especially effective entry point for beginning writers” (Gabriel & Gabriel, 2010, p. 680). Allowing Stuart to draw would give him the opportunity to direct the lesson in that he could choose to speak and draw about subjects he was familiar with and interested in. “Schema theory tell us that prior knowledge is essential for comprehension of new knowledge and that learning difficulties can often be traced back to insufficient background knowledge” (Gabriel & Gabriel, 2010, p. 679). Paley (2004) advised educators to resist the impulse to ask what can be done to fix a student before finding out who s/he is. Creating texts that access Stuart’s background knowledge was the strategy I used to learn more about Stuart and to determine what skills he possessed and what I should teach him next.

The next day I picked up Stuart again. “What did you write about last time?” I asked trying to remind him of our initial session.

“X-Box. You taught me already,” replied Stuart.

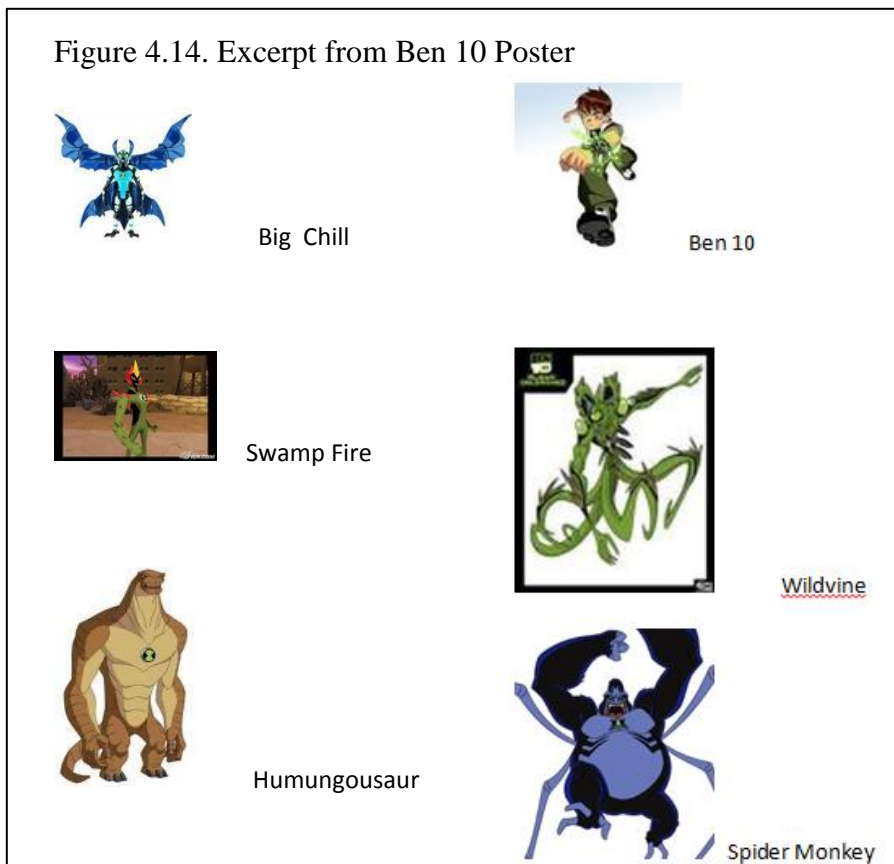
“What do you want to write about today?” I asked trying to keep the mood positive by giving him choice.

“Right dere,” said Stuart pointing to the white board.

“You want to draw something on the board first?” Stuart got up to draw on the board.

“What kind of toys do you have?” I asked thinking about how I could try to hook him by allowing him to talk, draw, and write about his personal interests. Stuart began talking excitedly about Batman and Ben 10 but I couldn’t understand several of the names he mentioned or tell who the characters were from his drawings. I decided to use images from Google as a tool to decipher what he was saying. Once we found the image he was talking about, I could find out the name of the character using the internet as well. We created a Ben 10 poster with the images

of the characters Stuart had selected. I typed in the names of the characters beside them.



When I started my position as a special education teacher, I was quick to judge students that talked only of TV shows or video games reasoning that the time they spend in front of screens is what led them to require educational support in the first place. Hicks (2002) stated that “teachers had to confront their own racisms and classisms before they could see the richness of children’s culturally saturated lives” (p. 26). Now I am quick to embrace anything that will help me connect with Stuart as I could still sense his apprehension.

Although I had some familiarity with Batman characters from my childhood, I was unaware of Ben 10. I thought of using images from Google to assist in discerning what Stuart was saying and to increase his interest in working with me. The poster idea came serendipitously as I had no idea we would end up making a poster at the outset of our meeting. The poster enhanced our ability to communicate. As we created the Ben 10 poster, I was

attempting to place Stuart at the centre of the meaning-making process supporting him as we used technology to remix symbols from the media to compose a new form (Labbo & Place, 2010). “In today’s primary classrooms, the definition of ‘text’ has expanded to include multiple modes of representation, with combined elements of print, visual images, and design” (Hassett & Scott Curwood, 2009, p. 270). Viewing the images on the internet excited Stuart and helped me learn the character names so we could incorporate Ben 10 into our school literacy practices. I had not fully realized the value of visual images until now.

Using technology helped Stuart and I create a new literacy form by combining Stuart’s funds of knowledge regarding TV cartoons and videogames to schooled forms of writing developing a connection between his personal knowledge and school literacy practices (Wohlwend, 2009b). Wohlwend (2009b) described how the union of old and new literacies requires a bidirectional bridge “so that teachers can also learn to understand and value the new forms that children are already writing” (p. 134). Luckily, the internet is a ready source of information that helped me quickly gain familiarity with the Ben 10 series.

Nicholas sits with his head propped against his hand. He doesn’t look at me when I sit beside him. “What do you want to write about?” I ask. Nicholas remains silent, slowly looks around with his eyes. His body remains still.

“I don’t know what to write about.”

“Are your quad and dirt bike working?” I ask.

“I didn’t ride them last night.”

“What about writing about when you were on the swings with Ethan?” I ask suggesting a story he told me earlier.

“I was on the swings?”

“Remember when you showed me how you were hanging on the bar?”

“Oh, I want to write about something else.”

“Well what did you do yesterday?”

“I didn’t do anything yesterday.”

“We’ll make something up then,” I reply with a slight edge in my voice.

“I’ll write somping” says Ashton pulling a writing paper out of my box with a smile on his face.

“What’s he writing about, maybe I can help him?” says Nicholas.

“My dog almost ate my hamster. I’m not writing about that,” states Nicholas. I wonder why Nicholas is acting like this. For the last two years he has always been very eager to tell me stories recounting experiences he has had. Now he seems avoidant. Is this because I am asking too much of him, having him write his stories this year? He is in Grade 3 now. Shouldn’t I be pushing him to become more independent? Am I enabling him to remain at his current level by doing too much for him? Am I expecting too much? I will give it time. Maybe he is just tired today but he has never acted like this before.

Reichert and Hawley (2009) stated that boys will disengage in lessons either through passive inattention or disruption until they elicit the pedagogy they need from the teacher. Boys require a relationship with their teacher and an element of transitivity before they can be successfully taught. Transitivity refers to an element of instruction that arouses and maintains student interest. The teachers of boys must demonstrate their commitment to their students’ success by adjusting the content, their relational style, or manner of presentation (Reichert & Hawley 2010). Nicholas was obviously giving me a sign that I needed to take a new approach to keep him engaged in learning to read and write.

“Not At the Beach, not At the Beach!”

“I don’t like At the Beach.”

“But you are getting so good at reading it. We’ll only read it until Friday and then we will switch,” I coax.

“Not the kite one,” groans Buddy. “I like the David books.”

The books the boys rejected are from a set I found in our special education storage room. The books seemed okay but the boys’ reactions were clear. Were the boys just trying to avoid reading because they were feeling lazy? Buddy indicated he was willing to reread a series of picture books the boys found hilarious by David Shannon. I have borrowed funny books from the school library, the public library, and my home collection to make a set so that we can read them together. Now I am planning to spend my own money to purchase books that the boys are interested in reading including more non-fiction and pop culture. I hope that means I will never have to force my students to read. I hope they will want to read.

I received the hard cover editions I ordered of our favourite books Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus and Knuffle Bunny, both by Mo Willems.

“Yes, you got this one” says Raymond holding a copy of Knuffle Bunny.

“Yes, yes, yes! How come you brought this book back, because we love it?”

“Oh Raymond, this one!” says Buddy picking up Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus.

“This one is awesome!”

“She’s like this!” says Raymond waving his arms acting like the main character Trixie having a tantrum as he flips through the book looking at the illustrations. Together the boys laugh. Buddy leaps out of his chair.

“Let’s read this one!”

The boys' comments demonstrate their passion and curiosity for reading. My suspicion the boys wanted to avoid reading was wrong. We were just reading the wrong books. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) stated that boys are more inclined to read informational texts, magazine and newspaper articles, graphic novels, comic books, electronic texts, book series, and books containing escapism, humour, science fiction, or fantasy. Access to interesting texts, allowing choice of what, with whom, and where to read, permitting student collaboration during reading and writing, and acknowledging student effort over outcomes are four factors strongly related to student growth in reading (Allington, 2012). When I am present to mediate the boys' reading, selecting reading material they are interested in is much more important than simply providing books at their independent reading level. Allington (2012) believes that we should measure reading success in terms of ability to read at grade level but also whether students become avid, voluntary readers.

“He fight bad guys. He fight Joker and a big bad monkey and a freeze guy. Lots of bad guys fight Batman. He has friends that help him fight bad guys. Look on your computer. Look on your computer. Look on your computer,” instructs Stuart. We looked up images of Batman villains on the internet.

“Batman fight Catgirl. She kisses polices. She shoots bad guys. Her called The Garden,” says Stuart as he points out Garden Girl. Stuart then points to the Batman image on the front of his t-shirt. “See Batman fight that guy. He have this . . . stss, stss,” Stuart points his fingers as if aiming a gun and makes shooting sounds.

“Hey watch! Penguin does like this,” Again, Stuart holds out his arms like he is shooting. Then he begins quacking and walking. “The ducks explode.”

As Stuart dramatized the action of the information he was sharing with gestures, actions, and sound effects, he was creating a “multimodal event, that is, an event that extended beyond linguistic resources to also include voice, image, and bodily movement” (Kontovourki & Siegel, 2009, p. 35). Stuart positioned himself as both the narrator and a character within the action of his story transforming it into a textual toy (Dyson, 2003) while creating a space for play within his school day (Kontovourki & Siegel, 2009).

“I need the clown girl. She a bad girl. The girl kiss the Joker. He her friend. They married,” smiled Stuart as he described the villainess Harley Quinn from Batman. I added a page about Harley Quinn to our Batman book once I found her image on Google. We had been making a new book for Stuart based on the knowledge he has regarding the villains from Batman videogames and TV shows. Stuart’s easy and enthusiastic dramatizations of the world of Batman assured me that he was very emotionally drawn to this topic. After we found the images he wanted to include, Stuart described each character and I typed what he said. He typed the initial and final sounds. I added words at times to make the sentences grammatically correct. Stuart chose to title the book Batman and the Bad Ones.

Next the day, when I asked Stuart to try to read back what we had written, he began holding his head and rubbing his eyes. “I don’t know. I can’t read it. I want to go back to my classroom,” he groaned and began breathing heavily.

Stuart appeared to be highly interested in the Batman images he had chosen from the internet. His interest would probably lead him to enjoy himself, pay closer attention, persist for longer periods of time, and learn more (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000) during our time reading his book but it was not possible for him to read it independently at this time. As soon as Stuart began to become upset, I knew the text he dictated was too advanced for him. Frustration-level

reading defined by word-by-word reading, accuracy below 95%, and poor comprehension should be avoided due to its negative impact on learning and attitudes toward reading (Allington, 2012).

I had to make this book easier to read so that Stuart did not become discouraged. I did use Stuart's language but it was obviously too difficult for him to read. I decided to turn the book into a pattern book in which the images Stuart selected were preserved but the text was much simpler and predictable because it followed a pattern. I renamed this version *Batman and the Bad Guys*.

Figure 4.15 . Excerpt from *Batman and the Bad Ones* – Original and Revised Versions



The Riddler fights Batman. His weapon sprays green stuff. The green stuff makes police choke.



This is the Riddler. He fights Batman.

Nicholas brought a little toy stunt bike to school. The toy bike was designed to be disassembled and rebuilt.

“So, first, you see how the wheel comes off and stuff? That’s the frame of the bike,” Nicholas explained as he manipulated his toy bike. I quickly realized Nicholas’s interest in this topic and began jotting down his description of how to assemble the toy bike in my field notes book.

“These are the pegs. You just screw them on like this. The fun part about building is that you can take off the front wheel ‘cause see how the wheel just slides off here and then see how the pegs screw on? These are the things that broke.”

“The pedals?” I asked showing interest.

“Yep. See how this just slides on like this?”

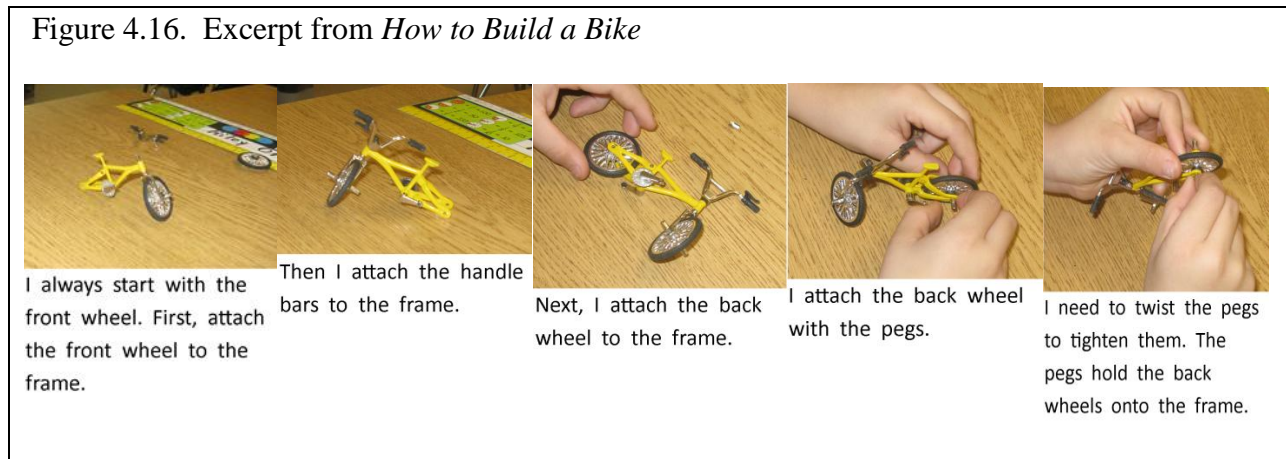
“What is this called?” I asked as I touched the bike’s frame.

“The frame. If you wanted to put the bike back together, if you want to put it upside down, it would drive like this. You can put the back tire on again.”

Nicholas agreed to write about the process he followed to assemble his toy stunt bike.

I started to rearrange his words a bit to create the book How to Build a Bike.

Figure 4.16. Excerpt from *How to Build a Bike*



Earlier, Nicholas seemed to have lost interest in telling stories and writing. His disinterest may have been due to what Hicks (2002) described as the dissonances between working-class values and classroom learning practices. At home, children are free to move between activities, learn by doing, and engage in three-dimensional constructive activities, whereas at school students are expected to perform segmented tasks while seated and participate in two-dimensional learning tasks with paper and pencil (Hicks, 2002). I knew from his stories that Nicholas’s home life revolved around activities with his dogs, recreational vehicles, and

tasks like gathering firewood or plowing snow. Allowing him to share and sequence his knowledge about how to assemble his toy bike allowed him to engage in action-based participation while joining in a school-based literacy project. Recognizing “a wider range of early literacy activity as valid participation is a first step in creating early childhood classrooms that are socially inclusive, developmentally appropriate, intellectually challenging, and ideologically equitable” (Wohlwend, 2009a, p. 350). Later, Nicholas brought his Tech Deck toys and some Lego vehicles he had created to school so we could write about them as well. Action and toy-based writing brought renewed interest for Nicholas regarding writing and reading self-made texts.

The next fall, the book about jets we made proved to be of value again when Ashton chose it out of his book box to read to his friend.

“See this title? Jets by Ashton. It’s mine!” Ashton giggled pointing out the title of his book to Jack, his reading partner.

“Did you get these pictures off the internet or something?” asked Jack. “You did really good Ashton.”

“Nose, cockpit, tail. Look. Jets by Ashton,” said Ashton again pointing out the title. “Copy me, come on, follow along,” instructed Ashton as he tracked the text with his finger on Jack’s book. Without any teacher direction they began taking turns reading, first Ashton then Jack.

“Very good, you follow me. Look, two of them engines. Look nose,” said Ashton pointing to the pictures.

“Whoa,” responded Jack.

“Look,” Ashton stood up on his knees and pointed to the picture of the plane landing.

“Landing. Look landing.”

“That’s like a microphone,” commented Jack referring to the picture of the air traffic controller.

Jack was able to connect with Ashton as Ashton shared his knowledge of jets using the book we had made. The images of the jets assisted Ashton to correspond with the text and communicate with his friend as photographs and graphics help to visually compensate for the details that struggling writers may omit (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009). In Ashton’s case, I wrote the majority of the text but the images helped Ashton communicate the key details about jets he wished to share with Jack. In this case, internet images became tools that Ashton and I used to “maximize the inextricable connections of a child’s mind with the world of social activity, the world of the text, and the world of meaning making” (Hassett & Scott Curwood, 2009, p. 273) in order for Ashton to fulfill his desire to share his intellectual and emotional life and be understood (Dyson, 1993).

During parent-teacher interviews I hear the questions I ask myself every day in this job:

“How far behind is he? Is it helping?”

Other comments that stay with me are: “He still enjoys working with you. I thought he might be outgrowing it.”

“What do you do? He says you play with toys.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I want him to get extra help. Some of my friends ask, ‘Why would you want him to go to that?’”

I am barely able to say anything to defend my practice. I mostly just sit and smile and let the classroom teachers explain the benefits they perceive for their students as a result of

receiving extra help with reading and writing. I cannot give any assurances that the work I do is making a difference. Although some of my students are now able to read at grade level, the majority cannot. Once again, is this the only way we measure literacy success? Why was I so reluctant to try to explain what my students and I do together?

Underlying my work is the premise that a conflict exists between the institutional practices of schools and the lives of my students due to hegemonic discourses that can be disempowering and demeaning for students and teachers (Hicks, 2002). “The educational establishment has ceased admiring the stunning originality of its youngest students, preferring lists of numerical and alphabetical achievement goals” (Paley, 2004, p. 33). Traditional educational practices have been strongly influenced by behavioural psychology. Although these practices are widely accepted by educational leaders and society, they lead some students to become labeled as deficient. Instead of focusing my instruction on students’ perceived deficits, I am attempting to create space for children’s identities and passions by adopting social constructivist teaching practices. Engaging in this type of critical literacy education “requires the slowness of historical time, and the complexity and richness of attachments” (Hicks, 2002, p. 152). How can I fully explain the depths of our struggle against the hegemony that exists when most parents have never thought to question traditional educational practices? Many parents and educators are simply hoping for a quick fix and a satisfying numerical score. I continue to teach my students hoping that I will have the freedom to allow my instructional practices to evolve as my students’ learning needs and interests change over time.

Conclusions

Quick fixes abound in the current milieu of early literacy instruction. Throughout Canada and the United States, the present focus is on preventing early literacy failure by ensuring that students are not suffering from phonological deficits, a condition purportedly easily detected through standardized assessment and remedied with decontextualized phonemic awareness and phonics drills. My research documents my journey as a beginning special education teacher who was initially caught in the spell of offering phonemic awareness and phonics drills to students as simplistic solutions to their apparent early reading failure. I soon realized the isolated drills I was providing lacked meaning for my students who did not understand the connection between the drills and their life experiences outside of school. It was the relation of literacy to their life experiences, not letter sound drills that would serve as the beginning of their school literacy journeys. I began to revalue my teaching self and the abilities of my students once I started to respect their literacy behaviours and capitalize on student knowledge and interest to enhance the literacy instruction I was providing. The qualitative nature of my research allowed me to: discover the innate literacy practices my students were already employing, explore different means to engage students in the literacy instruction of school, and question the concept of literacy failure.

Strengths of the Study

Choosing a qualitative methodology allowed me to document the abilities of my students rather than focus on their apparent disabilities. A consequence of ethnographic research is that it allows researchers to see what academic and social strengths children demonstrate during their literacy participation at school (Gillen & Hall, 2003). The finely focused observations of ethnography permit educators to discern differences between the language and literacy of home

and school without simply dismissing the child's home language as impoverished (Gillen & Hall, 2003). In autoethnography, the story-telling nature of my research allowed my students to be viewed as "full persons with dreams and aspirations of success, with abilities to use language with sophistication, and with intelligences that may be underappreciated in schools as institutions" (Sato & Lensmire, 2009, p. 365). The stories I told of my students during my journey showed that they are capable of engaging in intellectual work and can contribute ideas as creative and thought provoking as students not identified as needing early literacy assistance.

The stories of my students and I engaging in literacy provide a demonstration of how social constructivism works. Rather than concentrating on my students' deficits, my research describes my attempts to demonstrate the ability and level of participation they could achieve with conscientious teacher support. The stories shared in my research show how I employed a social constructivist theory of learning as I followed my students' interests to provide a platform to display student knowledge and expertise. Ethnographic research allows for detailed examinations uncovering how interactions were constructed and negotiated between students and teachers during literacy sessions (Gillen & Hall, 2003). Flewitt, Nind, and Payler (2009) stated that literacy is most effectively learned when it is embedded in social practice and used in a meaningful manner in real life situations. The recounting of children's experiences approaching school literacy practices shows the difference in student engagement when students are allowed to participate socially while reading and writing rather than when literacy is treated as a set of technical skills. The storied nature of my research chronicles the development of the students' relationships with each other and the importance of social learning to the students. The low test scores of my students that led them to require the services I provided as a special educator could have led me to the conclusion that they could not learn or that they required a

simplified curriculum. Instead, I endeavoured to provide the type of support that would enable them to successfully engage in schooled literacy practices in a fashion that was challenging and personally meaningful for them.

My study demonstrated the value of historicity in educational research as it permits an examination of the changing nature of my teaching practices as I began to question the remedial instruction that my students were being offered. Smith (2003) described phonics as hazardous when it is “imposed blindly and mindlessly – systematically, in other words – on children who are not yet readers. It becomes a hazard when it takes the place of reading, and especially when it becomes a prerequisite for reading” (Smith, 2003, p. 31-32). Readers can see how Smith’s warning applies to my teaching situation as I recount my journey. In my research, decontextualized phonics and phonemic awareness instruction is discounted as a “cure all” for my students who seemed bewildered by the isolated drill I was providing each day. The recording of my students and my day-to-day interactions through field notes related how my quest changed to concern over how to link my students’ home literacy practices with the practices valued at school instead of imposing programmed lessons onto students. One can observe my changing values and how my confidence waivers as a teacher of struggling readers and writers as I wrestle with my institutional role as an upholder of policy demands (Wenger, 1998). In using autoethnography, my research enabled me to explore my increasing feelings of self-assurance in my competence to assist my students in beginning to gain control over the concepts of print literacy as well as my growing comfort in allowing my students space to be playful, explore, and represent their worlds as fully expressive human beings. Research of shorter duration would not have permitted the changes in my teaching practices to be evident and may not have provided as much opportunity to question ideas and practices related to schooling.

My evolving understanding of the hegemonic practices underlying remedial reading instruction is described as I began to question the nature of failure in school. “Discourses are deeply embedded and largely invisible to participants within them (although not to those outside them). Some discourses have historically gained immense power and status, something that becomes unproblematic to those subscribing to their ideas and practices” (Gillen & Hall, 2003, p. 8). Achievement standards imposed on educators and students are rarely questioned as literacy has been typically conceived of as a combination of mental and verbal skills (Mui & Anderson, 2008). Through my research I began to question why the majority of my students were male and why a disproportionate number were culturally, racially, or socio-economically different than the mainstream student population of our school. The racialization of school failure is rarely examined (Souto-Manning, 2010) but simply blaming low-achievers fails to consider alternate, systemic explanations for school failure (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009). The detailed descriptions ethnography can provide of student literacy practices raises questions regarding the contrast between literacy as a social practice and the autonomous model of literacy currently privileged by many governments (Gillen & Hall, 2003). It is the difference in how literacy is viewed that leads to many children being designated as functioning below grade level and possibly contributes to the waning of student motivation.

Through the act of recording student reactions and comments regarding our shared literacy practice, I was able to observe student motivation for reading and writing. Ethnography allowed me to document student likes and dislikes and permits readers of my research to hear student perspectives almost first hand. One can observe the confidence and interest of my students increase over time. When student interest seems to fade, readers witness the questions I ask myself regarding how I can adjust my teaching practice to once again engage my students.

My goal remains to create avid readers and writers. Despite their continuing struggles with literacy, the passion of my students for reading and creating text is evident in many of the stories I share. Autoethnography allowed me to probe and analyze our ability and willingness to engage in broadening literacy practices.

Choosing a research model that allowed me to look closely at my students' approaches to learning, enabled a much broader view of what constitutes early childhood literacy to emerge. I no longer considered literacy instruction to begin with the alphabet but understood how students had been part of a continuum of literacy learning since birth and that playing, drawing, and storytelling were natural parts of that continuum. Expanded notions of authorship which included multimodal expressions of drawing, acting, playing, and storytelling, the inclusion of popular culture in my teaching, and the involvement of technology to enhance communication became part of the everyday literacy practices in my classroom. The writing of field notes assisted me in perceiving the inherent learning styles of my students by concentrating my attention on my students' actions and reactions during our sessions. As a result, the increasingly responsive nature of my teaching practices are recorded for my readers and my consideration.

Limitations of the Study

My research is not generalizable as it is limited to stories of beginning readers and writers who were deemed as behind according to school division literacy benchmarks. All of my research participants were in Grades 1-3 and were mostly boys. A limitation of my research is that it centres on one elementary school in a small town. As it tells the story of my personal journey as a beginning special education teacher, my research is meant to inspire educators to question how the everyday practices of education help or hinder the students we work with. My

results and conclusions are highly personalized and are not meant to provide a generalized program for teaching all struggling readers and writers.

Writing autoethnography involves unique ethical issues including a risk of personal exposure. I am wary of the possibility that I will be made somewhat vulnerable as a result of choosing autoethnography as I am sharing my opinions, my insecurities, my lack of knowledge, and teaching failures with readers. Although I collected large amounts of field notes regarding my practice with students and certain conversations with colleagues, I had to select a theme to follow in my writing and disregard the rest of data that was not meaningful to the study. Containing the topic of my writing to beginning struggling readers and writers left me with a smaller pool of participants to write about which means that their identities may be more difficult to conceal. While our community will not be named and students will be protected by pseudonyms, if someone from our community did read my research, there is a possibility s/he could determine who some of my participants were. I wanted to ensure that the stories I told were true but would not be a source of embarrassment for my participants.

Another great concern to me during the past three years in my role as a special educator is my continued failure to rescue most of my students from their designation as below grade level readers. There are different views on my inability to bring the reading competence of my students to grade level. Macmillan, and Forness (1998) stated that the frequent failure of special education to assist students to achieve at grade level “cannot be taken as evidence of ineffectiveness. This is like evaluating the competence of internists and oncologists based on survival rates of their patients. Special education serves more difficult cases” (p. 249). Allington (2009) described how on average, special education is only able to add a month or two of reading growth for struggling readers annually. Later Allington (2012) stated that remedial

and special education support needs to be redesigned as “virtually all children can be taught to read, even those with a supposed learning disability or dyslexia” (p. 158). Providing high-quality professional development for classroom teachers eliminated much of the need for specialist teachers (Allington, 2012). My research focuses on my personal growth as a special education teacher. It shows little reflection on a team approach between my colleagues and me to improve classroom instruction or an increase in the availability of support services. I continue to struggle with feelings of failure due to the poor test scores of the majority of my students.

Lessons Learned

In comparing how my key findings relate with previous research, I recognize that other literacy researchers (Dyson, 2006) have supported the importance of many of the same aspects of teaching and literacy instruction as I have in this study. Like me, other researchers have found that teacher professionalism, positive teacher-student relationships, student-directed learning, social constructivism, and belief in the learning capacity of all students enhance early literacy instruction. My research does not support many of the current trends in early literacy or remedial reading instruction such as increased systematic phonics instruction, phonemic awareness drills, and assessment of reading subskills, which can be perceived as eroding the abilities of both teachers and their students to direct literacy learning.

Currently, governments are imposing standardized, comparative assessments that align closely with Freire’s description of the banking model of education. The banking model controls thinking and inhibits creativity as it defines education as an act where the teacher deposits information that students memorize and repeat (Freire, 1970). The act of reducing education to the measurement of discrete bits of information causes certain students to appear inept and easily labeled as deficient. The imposed assessments deeply influence the type of instruction teachers

can provide in their classrooms as they will be under pressure to have all students achieving according to government benchmarks of success. We are living in a “policy climate in which the mastery of discrete skills and straightforward inferences about text are the coin of the realm and literacy curricula are increasingly scripted, leaving teachers little room to adapt to the needs of their students” (Dutro, 2009, p. 97). It is this policy climate that has influenced the recommendations I am making based on my research of how students struggling with reading and writing prefer to be supported in their literacy journeys. The most effective way to support a struggling student is with a teacher who is regarded as having the professionalism to gear his/her instruction to meet the individualized interests and learning needs of each particular student.

Attain teacher professionalism.

Reaching beginning struggling readers and writers requires an expert teacher who can arouse excitement through teacher modeling and interactive reading and writing. Competent teachers know what steps to take to move students toward independence in order to create students who begin to avidly read and write for their own purposes. Smith (2003) stated that the responsibility for planning the educational activities of students should rest on “a teacher on the spot who knows the children, can see them, and is sensitive to their needs and interests” (p. 82). Owocki and Goodman (2002) described the job of the literacy teacher as one of intensely observing and documenting ways students construct and express knowledge in order to plan curriculum and instruction tailored to meet the learning needs of students. Allington (2002) described how exemplary teachers elected a high-autonomy/high-accountability model and “seemed to understand that professional responsibility meant choosing how to teach, what to teach, and with what sorts of curricular materials and tasks: they rejected the low autonomy/high accountability models that seem increasingly popular with advocates of ‘proven programs’”

(Allington, 2002, p. 9). Meaningful literacy instruction is dependent upon competent teachers with the authority to make professional decisions.

A lack of confidence in teachers on the part of policy makers can endanger students' interest in literacy. Unlike educational consultants, Schwab (1973) described teachers as the professionals who: are always present to relate to children, are sensitive to their reactions, and can display the flexibility to employ new ways of teaching when necessary to meet the ever-changing learning needs of students. If pedagogical and institutional demands on educators begin to displace their ability to be co-participants with their students in communities of practice, then our greatest teaching asset is lost (Wenger, 1998). "[P]olicy should honor the crucial need for teachers to have the flexibility to follow children's leads as they build personally and intellectually rich connections between their lives and the stories they encounter in school" (Dutro, 2009, p. 97). Engaging students in learning as they participate in constructive relationships and confidently begin to assume control over academic tasks, requires the facilitation of a teacher who knows his/her students' learning interests and needs.

A crucial aspect of attaining teacher professionalism is admitting and accepting insecurity when working with struggling students. It is impossible for a teacher to be able to address the learning needs of all his/her students with a one-size-fits-all approach. Teachers have to examine what is working and what is not in order to decide which teaching practices may need to be adapted to better suit the instructional requirements of students. Employing a diagnostic teaching cycle is essential whereby teachers are continually gathering information based on student reactions to guide the establishment of learning outcomes, the planning of instruction, and assessment (Fahsl & McAndrews, 2012). Constant teacher inquiry is the key to effective instruction. Paradoxically, teachers need to trust their professional judgment while at the same

time continuing to question whether their current practices are meeting the learning needs of their students.

Facilitate student-directed learning.

Despite the pressure teachers feel to raise test scores, students need to be given the freedom to express themselves and discover ways of learning at school that work for them. Instead of looking to particular teaching methods that tend to narrow the opportunities for freedom in student learning, educators should observe their students to determine their preferred modes of learning. “Learning is a lifelong process that is not limited to educational settings but *is* limited by the scope of our identities. In this regard, educational designs must aim to launch this broader learning process rather than substitute for it” (Wenger, 1998, p. 273). A widening of accepted modes of learning will enhance educators’ abilities to meet the needs of an ever-increasing diverse student population. Students may choose to express themselves with multiple modes of communication or may select personal areas of study based on their sociocultural backgrounds. School should not force children to choose between their identities and learning because of conflicts between their personal lives and engagement in school instruction (Wenger, 1998). Educators need to maintain a space for play and the imagination of children. The power to preserve spaces for children that allow them to retain their identities and create according to their imaginations requires teachers to be regarded as professionals with the authority to follow their students’ leads. Multimodal and play-based learning are the natural ways children explore and make sense of their worlds. All teachers should be empowered to encourage students to create meaning in a manner natural to them as they venture into the literacy practices of school. Allowing students the opportunity to determine their paths to literacy by establishing their learning on their interests, sociocultural backgrounds, and the modes of expression they feel

most comfortable employing, empowers students to become critical and creative learners. Built on student strengths, instruction that is negotiated between teachers and students becomes meaningful, engaging, and supports achievement. Inquiry-based education is dependent upon teachers and students working in tandem to create knowledge unique to their personal interests and aptitudes. Student-directed education is liberating because it allows all children to experience success.

The key to interesting students in their learning is for educators to build personal relationships with their students in order to meet their particular learning needs. Hicks (2002) described the importance of educators developing understandings of the community life of their students: “This is not so much a set of general theories about “what works” for working-class children (or girls, boys, Latino children, etc.). Rather, it is an effort to learn about *this* community, *this* neighborhood, *this* family” (Hicks, 2002, p. 154). Souto-Manning (2010) recommended taking the “time to listen to what children say and engage in activist research that respects child-centered time and cultural experiences as they negotiate their roles as readers of words and worlds” (p. 113). Teacher familiarity with students’ personal lives facilitates the possibility of student-directed learning as teachers can adapt their instruction to each student’s unique situation. If teachers are forced to ignore student creativity, imagination, and preferred modes of communication in order to prepare students for assessments that serve an outside agenda, possibilities to create literacy instruction that students find meaningful may be eroded.

View all students as capable learners.

Despite certain students’ difficulties in learning to achieve according to the expected literacy benchmarks, it is important that all students be viewed as learners. Teachers need to value the cognitive, social, and linguistic resources of students (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009)

and students need to view themselves as literate beings (Souto-Manning, 2010). In order for students to gain independence, they need teachers who believe in the ability of all students to be capable, creative learners instead of viewing some as too low functioning to achieve control over the conventions of language (Owocki & Goodman, 2002). Student proficiency in the literacy practices of school requires an emphasis on the competency of all children. Most importantly, educational policy should be geared to support instruction designed to build upon the competencies of students, rather than current trends or conceptual models adopted from outside the field of education.

Adopt conceptual models created for education.

The field of education tends to look to other professions for its conceptual models. Special education has largely adopted the medical model that tends to pathologize students for their differences and the business model that defines student success in terms of narrow measures using statistics and SMART goals (Doran, 1981). Defining educational success in terms of narrow measures identifies students from certain demographics as lagging behind in school. Educational models like that of critical theorist Freire and social-constructivist Vygotsky consider learning as an active process that students and teachers engage in together, based on mutual interest, respect, and the students' stages of development.

Freire's model is based on the importance of liberating students through what he refers to as a problem-posing education (Freire, 1970). The problem-posing education is liberating for students and teachers as they share equal roles while they engage in creative and critical thinking in dialogue with each other (Freire, 1970). "The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own. The role of the problem-posing educator is to create" (Freire, 1970, p. 81).

Like Freire's problem-posing education, the learning that Vygotsky described in social constructivism requires cooperative and dynamic interactions between students and their teachers. Social constructivism plays an integral role in the teaching of students requiring assistance learning to read and write. Theorists Vygotsky and Cambourne described the importance of providing modeling and scaffolding for students as they work to attain independence and control over literacy practices. Taylor (1991) advised that instruction for students requiring the support of special education focus on meaningful experiences, building instruction on what students already know about oral language, reading, and writing. Teachers should support struggling readers and writers in a way that they feel successful, emphasizing what they can do instead of their errors. "Children are motivated to become literate, not by dreary lessons, but by opportunities to make meaning and communicate with others" (Renck Jalongo, 2009, p. viii). Rather than the typical mechanized instruction recommended for struggling learners, Vygotsky emphasized social learning recognizing the varied roles that dialogue and language play in order to mediate cognitive growth (John-Steiner & Souberman, 1978). Social constructivism allows for students to be supported in a way that they require and that interests them. Teachers need to look holistically at student learning considering how student background experiences influence their learning and means of comprehending their worlds.

Foster support for success in the regular classroom.

All educators should consider how they can incorporate more student-directed, multimodal, teacher-supported instruction into their regular classroom practice. Instead of providing struggling readers and writers with more drill separated from the acts of reading and writing, educators need to find ways to help all students see themselves as capable readers and

writers. By basing instruction on what students are passionate about, students can be placed at the centre of the meaning-making process. When teachers are aware of any dissonance between what is valued in student homes and classroom learning practices, they can find ways to assist students in expressing themselves in more activity-based, three-dimensional learning to allow students to share their emotional and intellectual lives at school. This level of support is appropriate for all levels of education, not just students working directly with a special education teacher. Providing more individualized instruction will require a greater number of adults or more proficient learners to offer assistance within students' zones of proximal development. The regular classroom teacher could work with small groups of students who require extra help while more independent students could work with less direct supervision. The special education teacher could co-teach with the classroom teacher in order to deliver more individualized student support. Parent volunteers could be trained to provide in-class assistance as well.

Special educators often have to act as student advocates as they need to encourage classroom teachers to adapt their teaching practices to allow students requiring extra assistance to succeed within the regular classroom. Special educators may have to embolden their colleagues to question what is behind the concept of literacy failure and to switch their focus from the apparent disabilities of students to what they can achieve with appropriate support. Special educators can demonstrate how social constructivist practices can enable students struggling with reading and writing to participate in personally meaningful literacy instruction within mainstream education despite their low test scores.

For Future Research

The impact of government policies on teacher and student freedom to engage in inquiry to construct and create new understandings should be examined in Saskatchewan as its Ministry

of Education implements a provincial assessment program. Educational researchers need to continue to question the neutrality of the practices of literacy education. Many educators and members of the public accept the traditional practices of schooling without considering the impact these practices have on different segments of society. Kontovourki and Siegel (2009) suggested that as educational reforms increasingly dictate what counts as literacy learning, teachers should “seek out opportunities to make space for play in their classrooms as a way to bring children fully into the curriculum whenever possible and to stretch who gets recognized as a successful literacy learner” (p. 37). Studies documenting how teachers are attempting to meet the developmental needs of their students despite assessment pressures would be valuable at this time in educational history. Ethnography would provide an effective method of documentation.

Using ethnography to study literacy as a social practice has permitted comprehensive research that has included detailed descriptions of the significance of and the participants’ perspectives regarding family and community literacy practices (Gillen & Hall, 2003). In order to further enhance instructional focus on literacy as a social practice, teachers should be observed engaging in social constructivist instruction so that the various methods of support and scaffolded coaching they provide can be shared with a wide range of educators. Lopez-Robertson, Long and Turner-Nash (2010) indicated that “[w]e all have biases even when we think we don’t, both personally and institutionally” (p. 100). Ethnographic studies could be used to prompt educators to examine their perspectives regarding social practice, literacy instruction, student achievement, the use of popular culture in classroom learning, and the ease of locating appropriate student reading material.

Allington (2009) proposed huge amounts of high success, high interest reading as the most effective way to remediate struggling readers. A significant part of the problem in many

schools is the lack of availability of books that appeal to struggling readers. Many struggling readers are boys who often prefer non-fiction. Smith (2003) stated that it is the teacher's job "to find material that will be interesting and comprehensible for each individual learner" (p.17). Research tracking how teachers of struggling readers find engaging material or how they create appropriate text with their students would be helpful for many teachers attempting to provide meaningful reading experiences for the children they work with.

Finally, ethnography could also be used to document the feelings of pressure experienced by teachers as they try to ensure that their students perform well on mandated assessments. The impact upon students when they are being pushed by teachers to succeed on assessments could also be studied. The ability of both teachers and students to enjoy their time at school may be affected if both parties feel stress related to instruction that is mismatched for the learner in order to try to speed him/her toward success on an assessment. The feelings of teachers placed in a situation where they feel judged based on the test scores of their students could be examined to determine how the teachers deal with their angst either internally by devaluing their opinion of their personal effectiveness as professionals or by reacting externally by blaming students, their parents, or educational policy makers. Rather than simply focusing on the statistical data garnered by mandated assessments, educational leaders should examine the broader impact educational policies have on the day-to-day lives of teachers and students.

Final Words

Educators can already predict what the results of the provincial assessments will be. It is common knowledge that middle-class students receive upbringings that support the types of instruction that is traditionally valued in schools and as a result they tend to perform well whereas areas with high populations of students living in poverty will perform poorly. The real

question relates to what the government willing to do to assist struggling students once they are officially identified through testing. Blaming the students, their parents, and teachers will not remedy the situation. Mandating skill-based curricula that reduce the complex and cultural act of literacy into meaningless skills will further confuse students who do not understand the purpose of drill instruction. Purchasing the latest literacy program touted to be suitable for all students no matter their learning interests, strengths, and needs is not sufficient.

Allington (2002) stated that “Good teachers, effective teachers, matter much more than particular curriculum materials, pedagogical approaches, or ‘proven programs’” (p. 1). Instead of spending educational resources on a provincial assessment system, I suggest increasing the number of teachers working in disadvantaged areas and enhancing teacher professionalism.

Allington (2012) suggested increasing the number of hours struggling students spend reading and writing under expert tutelage by extending school hours after school and during the summer.

More emphasis is needed on making schools places kids want to come to by avoiding institutional-like practices such as drill and workbook completion while incorporating more learning like the kind children naturally choose to engage in. Enhancing teacher professionalism will assist teachers in observing their students more closely looking for what motivates them and documenting the ways they choose to express themselves. Teachers of beginning readers and writers need to learn to broaden their understanding of literacy practice to value the wide range of ways students choose to comprehend and express their understandings. Under the guidance of professional teachers, students can learn to read and write as an extension of what they do naturally: play, tell stories, and draw. Attentive teachers build their literacy instruction onto the knowledge their students bring to the classroom. Professional teachers who have the autonomy to develop instruction based on students’ interests will be able to motivate students to become

avid readers and writers much more than teachers who are pressured to focus on improving test scores. Under the guidance of professional teachers who are free to make adaptations to suit various learning needs, all students can enjoy meaningful and developmentally appropriate instruction.

Fortunately, I have had this valuable opportunity to use autoethnography as a writing tool to analyze my classroom practice. My writing has allowed me to examine my teaching in a way that has strengthened my ability to meet my students' learning needs through becoming a more attentive teacher. The act of writing about my journey has given me a new awareness of the forces acting on education and how these influences directly affect my teaching practice and the instruction that is offered to my students. My beliefs regarding my professionalism have been reinforced by the understanding that as the teacher of my students, I am a life-long learner and am the most knowledgeable person in regards to how best to support my students in their literacy instruction. I can see the bridges I helped to construct between my students' innate literacy practices to the ones traditionally valued in schools. My research has assisted me in revaluing the abilities of my students and the importance of the work I do each day as a teacher of some of the most vulnerable citizens in our society. Our children deserve our very best.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A

List of Scaffolding Processes Used to Support Student Learning

Elkonin techniques with letter cards p. 53

Creating reading material matched to the reader's skill level and interest p. 56

Pattern writing p. 57

Development of community of practice p. 57

Connecting instruction to students' personal lives p. 58

Referring to book images to support vocabulary development p. 58

Using dialogue to determine and develop a zone of proximal development p. 58

Adoption of a social constructivist model p. 64

Dividing stories into one line/one illustration per page p. 65

Language Experience p. 66

Modeling correct syntax during student story dictation p. 67

Parallel drawing and talking with whiteboard p. 69

Modeling and shared writing p. 71

Sound stretching during writing p. 71

Providing a risk-free environment for student approximations p. 74

Incorporation of high involvement-low stress activities p. 74

Cambourne's Conditions of Learning p. 75

Interactive writing p. 76

Allowing student choice of genre and subject matter to enhance motivation p. 79

Practicing high frequency words in the context of meaningful text p. 87

Broadening the definition of literacy – storytelling, drawing, socio-dramatic play, inclusion of technology p. 91

Using student language to ensure readability p. 94

Digital storytelling as a means of enhancing student motivation and esteem p. 94

Assisted reading p. 99

Encouraging students to use hands-on primary experiences as subject matter to talk, read, and write about p. 101

Kinesthetic word cards p. 105

Using images to enhance communication p. 111

Allowing student choice in reading material p. 115

Allowing students to express themselves through play and actions to enhance engagement and communication p. 116

Revising student –inspired reading material into pattern books p. 117

Using student action-based activity to be the basis of school-based literacy activity p. 118