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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

LITERATURE - LITERACY AND YOUNG CHILDREN

BY

JUNE MCCONAGHY

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Literature - Literacy and Young Children

submitted by June McConaghy

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

of Master of Education

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(Supervisor)

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Date: October 8, 1986

DEDICATION

For Tom,

Joanie, and Janet

ABSTRACT

This study explores the nature of the literary experiences of young children in my grade one classroom, and looks at the relationship between their literary experiences and their literacy development.

Over the past few years a greater number of teachers in primary classrooms have been using children's literature as part of their language arts programs. Storybooks and selections from both traditional and contemporary literature are being used as content for independent reading and for activities designed for shared reading. More and more teachers are reading stories to children throughout the day. While children's literature may be providing more appealing content for children to learn to read, the primary purpose for most teachers using literature is to teach the skills of how to read. Very little attention is paid to the potential that reading literature holds for children to experience the stories personally and to learn more about themselves and the things in their world.

Very little information is available about how very young children experience the literature they are reading and writing, or what kind of meaning they give to these experiences. Very little is known about how children's literary experiences relate to their learning to read and write and to grow in a personal way.

The theoretical framework for this study has been provided by the literary theories of Louise Rosenblatt and the language learning theories of James Britton.

I carried out this study as a teacher-researcher in my own grade one classroom over a period of two years. The classroom is child-centred where literature is a central focus throughout an integrated day. During this study I was both the teacher and the researcher, where researching became part of my mode of teaching. I continued to use literature as part of the curriculum for teaching and at the same time I recorded observations of children's engagement with the literature. I collected samples of children's art work and their own writing. The number of children in the class averaged 25 throughout the year; the children were from middle class homes and represented a broad range of interests and abilities.

Not all children experienced literature in the same way. Children did not always express their experiences with literature immediately after reading or hearing a story, and their responses were not always verbal. Children expressed their literary experiences through other modes, such as art, drama, and their own writing.

I discovered that children's experiences with literature had a strong connection with their literacy learning, and that children whose literary experiences were rich and diverse had more desire to read and write, and were learning to read and write more competently and critically.

I conducted this study as a means of developing and enhancing my own pedagogy. However, many of the things I learned concerning children and their experiences with literature may be appropriate and applicable to other teachers who are interested and concerned with literature, literacy and young children.

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To Dr. David Dillon: who visited my classroom regularly for nearly two years and read stories with the children and guided their writing. I am grateful to David for encouraging me to undertake this study. His knowledge of literature and language learning and his understanding of young children made him a very special friend and a valuable advisor.

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To Dr. Max van Manen: for our many stimulating conversations which led me to a deeper understanding of myself as a teacher and of the children in my care.

AND

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> Through books the reader may explore his own nature, become aware of potentialities for thought and feeling within himself, acquire clearer perspective, develop aims and a sense of direction.
>
> Louise Rosenblatt

For many years many elementary teachers have relied almost entirely on the traditional basal reading series as a way of teaching reading and writing. The basal reading series, with its accompanying teacher's guide and workbooks, made reading appear to be a deceptively simple act. However, new theory and research has led us to reexamine many of the basic assumptions which supported some of our instructional beliefs surrounding the teaching of reading and writing.

One of the things this research has revealed is the importance of children learning to read by reading meaningful print such as favourite books and stories. As a result some primary teachers are bringing stories and books from children's literature into their language arts programs. These teachers are using selections from literature mainly to teach children how to read. Even some of the newer basal reading series are featuring selections from well-known stories. While these changes are not happening in every classroom, they have become evident in classrooms that use what is often called the whole language approach.

It is encouraging to see children's literature appearing as reading material in more classrooms. Yet, the use of literature in these classrooms is often not very different from the way basal readers are used, namely, to teach the skills of reading and writing. If this is the only reason that teachers are bringing literature into their classrooms, then the literature will simply be used as an extension of the basal reading series, and the real potential that literature holds as a learning medium will be lost.

Literature is not created primarily for learning how to read and write, to decode words and read for information, although reading literature can serve as a valuable means of accomplishing this end. Rather, literature is written by people who wish to shape their experiences aesthetically through narrative writing. Authors of children's literature usually write because they have a story to tell and they want to tell it. We can learn many things through the experience of reading stories; we can learn about ourselves and the significance of our own lives, and we can broaden our horizons to see worlds different from our own. I discovered that even very young children can begin to learn these things through reading literature.

For the past few years I have been using children's literature extensively within my grade one classroom. I have presented books and stories to children for enjoyment and for the sheer pleasure that reading together can bring. I have also allowed a great deal of time for children to read literature on their own, without any demands for reading for specific information placed on them while they are reading. My intention was to interfere as little as possible between the children and the story.

While discerning the meaning of print literally is of course a necessary part of reading, it is only part of the picture in becoming a reader. The other part of the picture involves learning to read creatively and imaginatively and to respond to what is read in a personal way. It is this purpose for reading that is most lacking and neglected in elementary schools.

Although I was not using formal instruction in the teaching of reading and writing, the children were learning to read and write successfully while they were experiencing reading literature. I had a strong sense that their love for reading and writing and their success in literacy learning were due largely to the abundance of literature they were reading and the way the literature was presented to them.

I became fascinated with the way children were using literature in their discussions and in the ways they were weaving literature into their own writing. My desire to know more about how children were experiencing the literature and the kind of meaning they were giving to those experiences led me into this study.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of children's experiences with literature within my grade one classroom in order to discover more about the relationship between these experiences and their growth in literacy learning.

Research Questions

Throughout my research the following questions guided my study:

1. What is it like to experience a story from a child's point of view?
2. In what ways are children expressing their experiences with the literature?
3. How are children using language for learning?
4. How do their literary experiences relate to their becoming readers and writers?
5. What is the relationship between the learning environment and the literary experiences?
6. What are children's literature experiences like outside of school (from the child's perspective, from the adult's)?
7. Can a pedagogy flow from children's experiences with literature?

Procedures

My attention focused primarily on the following areas:

1. Interaction
2. The literary context
3. The literacy context
4. The curriculum (in the broad sense to include the human context, environment, materials).

This research was carried out within my own classroom as a teacher-researcher study. The research proposal had been approved and funded by the National Council of Teachers of English Research

Foundation. It was conducted during the regular course of teaching my grade one class and was carried out over a period of two years. Written permission and support was obtained from the school administration. Parents of the children involved in the study were also kept informed and were interested and cooperative in assisting with information about the ~~home~~ experiences with literature. Other teachers on the staff of the school were aware of the study and were also supportive and helpful in providing information that allowed me to confirm many of my observations.

A description of the methodology I used is included in the chapter "The Teacher as Researcher."

Literature Related to Literacy

A search of the literature reveals that there is a tremendous lack of research studies concerning young children's experiences with literature as sense-making or meaning-making experiences. As a result, there is a large gap in what is known about children's literary experiences or how these experiences might relate to their growth in literacy learning.

Very little is known about how children, particularly very young children between the ages of five and seven, come to understand themselves and their world through reading and writing literature. How do they critically transform themselves and their world through it? How do they become critically conscious readers and writers? We know very little about the kind of meaning that children give to their

experiences in reading and writing of stories or how a particular context helps to foster or shape these experiences.

While I had little primary source research to guide my study, there was ample theoretical guidance about the nature of the literary experience as it applied to adults and older students. Because of the lack of research that dealt with young children in this area, I turned to the work of people such as Louise Rosenblatt, whose transactional theories of reading, and James Britton whose theories of language learning I have used as the theoretical framework for my study. I have also drawn on the work of Margaret Meek who, as senior lecturer in the English Department of the University of London Institute of Education, has carried out studies in the field of literacy and children's literature.

The work of Margaret Meek (1983) with adolescents suggests that aesthetic experiences with literature are a vital aspect of learning to read and write. Meek's work concerning the importance of literature as a means of providing children with a meaningful reading experience as an avenue to literacy development focuses on the relationship of the reading experiences of young children and their growth in learning to read and write. Apart from the question of developing literacy, Meek (1982) and other professionals such as Bettelheim (1976) attest to the basic importance of the literary experience itself for human existence and growth. A small but significant body of research has existed for some time under the rubric of "response to literature"; however, these studies rarely deal with children under ten years of age, and few research studies investigate the context in which the response occurs. The focus in

these studies, as in reading education, tends to be on **how** the reader responds, not on what meaning the reader has created for himself.

One of the few studies carried out on children's response to literature that was conducted in the classrooms of an elementary school was Janet Hickman's study, **New Perspectives on Response to Literature: Research in an Elementary School Setting** (1981). Hickman's study consisted of a sample of 90 children ages 5 to 11 years in three grades, K-1, 2-3, and 4-5, within one elementary school. Hickman arranged to become a participant observer, using the tools of ethnography to explore the children's response to literature. The fact that Hickman looked at nonverbal responses as well as immediate verbal response relates to the concern about children not having the opportunity to express their experiences with literature in modes other than verbal; modes such as art, drama, and writing.

Hickman's study broke important ground in describing students experiencing literature within a social context where reading books is going on throughout the day. Yet her study falls short in revealing the important link between children's response to literature and their development in literacy. Her data did not reveal evidence to suggest that younger children had the capacity to transcend the text, and to engage in discussions that went beyond the story. My study, however, indicates that young children were very capable in this respect. They showed a tremendous capacity to discuss and articulate ideas well beyond the text itself. Hickman indicated that it was only the older children who were able to "consciously manipulate the text," in contrast my experience is that many younger children were very adept in this area.

The nature of children's response to literature or any kind of expression depends so much on the atmosphere of the classroom and the kind of relationship that children have with the adults around them. In Hickman's case, she was an outside researcher who did try to establish a rapport with the children for the period of time she was in the classrooms. In my case, I was probably in a better situation to carry out such a study. As the children's classroom teacher, the relationship between the children and me was well established and an atmosphere of intimacy and trust had been built over a longer period of time. However, Hickman's study in 1981 and her subsequent work in this area have been helpful and inspirational to me.

In order to understand the significance of my particular study in relation to research studies in reading education, it may be helpful to look briefly at some of the trends in language arts research over the past few decades. For many years research in reading education supported the early assumptions about how children learned to read and write on which the basal reading series were built. These assumptions were based on behaviourist learning theories which suggested that children were passive receptors of language, that they learned language by imitation, and that they progressed by continual positive reinforcement of the adults who were their teachers. It was thought that reading and writing required formal instruction and were best learned by rote and by learning a series of skills in a systematic and sequential order. Children were taught to read words first, and only later on would they engage in actual reading. The teaching of reading always preceded the teaching of writing and both skills were viewed as completely separate subjects. Reading itself was thought of as being

divided into two distinct parts: the first called decoding, which meant deciphering the symbols of print sometimes referred to as "cracking the code"; and the second part called comprehension, which meant understanding the meaning of the symbols in relation to the message in the text. The whole procedure was a technical and mechanistic approach to learning to read.

Although some of these assumptions were questioned by a few educators, their concerns were not taken seriously. As early as 1908, Edmund Burke Huey expressed his belief that the reading process involved the interrelationship of language and thinking, rather than only the recognition and naming of words. But it was not until the early 1960s that any significant changes occurred in the way we viewed the teaching of reading and writing.

It was during the end of the 1960s that reading education first felt the influence of the psycholinguist researchers such as Ken Goodman and his associates, and Frank Smith. Psycholinguist theories deal with the aspects of developmental psychology and language. These new theories marked a major turning point in research on reading and writing and led to the establishment of a view of reading and writing as process rather than product. Goodman focused on what children actually do when they engage in the reading process itself. As a result of the work of Goodman and other researchers who based their work on psycholinguistic theory, reading and writing became recognized as a process that involved an interaction between the reader and the text in order to construct meaning from what was read. During this period many important findings were established concerning some of the factors that influenced the reader's ability to successfully create

meaning from the text. It was found that the experiences the child brought to reading played an important role in his or her making sense out of what was read. The need for children to develop self-concept as readers and writers was understood. It was also recognized that reading and writing were learned largely by engaging in the act of actually reading and writing (Smith, 1978).

It was mainly through the work of Frank Smith that the theories of reading and writing as process were implemented into practice in the classroom. The notion that children learn to read by reading and learn to write by writing prompted teacher educators to encourage teachers to allow time for actual reading and writing by children. This whole concept was later extended to children learning to read by writing and learning to write by reading, as educators became increasingly aware of the interrelationships between reading and writing.

A brief summary of Smith's ideas from **Reading Without Nonsense** (1978) and **Essays into Literacy** (1983) reveal his ideas about reading. Smith does not so much define reading as he describes it. On the surface, says Smith, reading appears to be a process in which print is decoded into sounds that generate meaningful ideas in the reader's mind. However, reading is less a matter of extracting "sound from print than bringing meaning to print" (Smith, 1983, p. 41). He goes on to say that to understand how reading is bringing meaning to print we must understand the two kinds of information that are used in reading: visual and nonvisual information. Since visual information is the print, it is obvious that one cannot read without it. Smith gives an example of a sentence written in the Dutch language. If we

cannot read the sentence it is not because we lack visual information but because we did not have the necessary nonvisual information. The nonvisual information lacking in this case was a knowledge of the Dutch language. A reader approaches print with questions in mind. The questions are mostly implicit since readers are not aware of them. The questions reflect the reader's expectations based on personal knowledge of the language, experiences, and knowledge of the subject matter. Thus, in the process of asking questions, the reader makes predictions. The reader does not anticipate letters or words to come but does anticipate **meaning to come** (Smith, 1978, Chapter 2).

We owe a great deal to the psycholinguistic theorists for their contributions to research in the teaching of reading and writing. They have provided insights into the structure of language, the meaning of reading, and many of the important influencing factors which contribute to success in learning to read and write. When Frank Smith linked learning to read with learning speech, he opened new possibilities for research in areas that had been neglected for a long period of time. This included language learning in nonschool settings such as the home, and research which focused on how children learn oral language.

While research in reading has previously concentrated on the teaching of reading, emphasizing how the teacher should teach rather than on the learning of reading and how the child learns to read, a new perspective on research in reading was also being pursued. More and more attention was being directed toward looking at children who have been described as natural readers. These are the children who come to school already reading. Don Holdoway (1979) points out that

there is much evidence to suggest that these children "were not deliberately taught, but learned in natural, developmental ways" (p. 38). Many studies on early literacy have sought to learn more about the kinds of things that have influenced these children in learning to read in nonschool settings, and in the years before school. All of this research has supported the link between a child's ability with oral language and success in learning to read and write. These studies have indicated the similarities in the factors that are involved in learning to talk and learning written language whether in reading or writing. These studies in early literacy attest to the importance of a literary environment in which children are introduced to print and books in meaningful and purposeful situations. Within these environments it was found that one of the most significant aspects of preschool experiences in learning to read is the children's active involvement with books and stories (Holdoway, 1979). It has been mainly through the work of Holdoway, Doake, Veatch, and Goodman that teachers have realized the value of using literature in the teaching of reading. But while the importance of using children's experiences with story reading, familiarity with books, and being read to by adults is well established, we still know very little about children's actual experiences with reading literature, whether at home or at school.

We have come a long way in our understanding of how children learn to read and write. The work of psycholinguists has helped us to understand reading as a process, an act of creating meaning from the text. Reading for meaning in this way refers to understanding what is read for understanding the message that is conveyed by the writer. This

This has often been called reading comprehension. While reading for the purpose of creating meaning from within the text or reading for information is, of course, an important part of reading, it is only one understanding of the purpose for reading.

There is another purpose for reading which is called aesthetic reading. When readers choose to read aesthetically their attention focuses on their own ideas and feelings that are evoked by the reading experience. This kind of reading allows the reader to think imaginatively and creatively, to use his or her senses, and to experience what is read in a very personal way. Reading aesthetically is reading for a very different purpose than reading for information only. Time should be devoted to both kinds of reading, but it is aesthetic reading that is most neglected in school. Yet, in order for children to become competent in reading for information, learning to read aesthetically plays a very important role. My view of the importance of the aesthetic reading event for children who are learning to read is supported by the transactional theory of literature of Louise Rosenblatt (1978).

Louise Rosenblatt (1978) makes a distinction about the reading of texts. Apart from any text's intention, readers can read efferently or aesthetically, she says. Efferent reading tends to be informational, factually driven, and dominated by the text. Aesthetic reading, on the other hand, is textbuilding within and by the reader, a transcending of the text. She claims that when a particular reader encounters a particular literary text at a particular time and in a particular context, a particular and special meaning (which she calls a poem) is created by the transaction between the reader and the

text. At different times and in a different context, the same reader and text may create different "poems." Rosenblatt uses the term **transactional** to distinguish aesthetic reading from the kind of **interactional** relationship between reader and text that is suggested by efferent reading and a text-driven mode of comprehension (pp. 20-29).

Today the term "response to literature" has many and diffuse usages. Rosenblatt (1982) points out that "few theories of reading today view the literary work as ready-made in the text, waiting to imprint itself on the blank tape of the reader's mind" (p. 268). Rosenblatt does not believe that a story or poem comes into being simply because "of the reader's ability to give lexical meaning to the words" (p. 268). For her "reading is a transaction, a two-way process, involving the reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances" (p. 268). She believes the important elements to be reader and text. "The reader brings his past experience of language and the world" to the task of reading (p. 268).

Texts are produced for different purposes and Rosenblatt suggests that this implies "a constant series of selections from the multiple possibilities offered by the text" (p. 268). For instance, if a reader reads a text for information such as a driver's manual or looks only for meaning or directions to be retained, she calls this **efferent** reading, derived from the Latin word meaning "to carry away".

If a reader chooses a story or a poem so that "his attention will shift inward," then he centres "on what is being created during the actual reading" (p. 269). Instead of just abstract ideas being called up, what arises in the reader's consciousness are "personal feelings,

ideas, and attitudes ... Out of these ideas and feelings, a new experience, the story or poem, is shaped and lived through" (p. 269). Rosenblatt calls "this kind of reading **aesthetic**, from the Greek word meaning 'to sense' or 'to perceive'" (p. 269).

Rosenblatt makes it clear that the reader is an important part of the reading process (p. 269). The stance the reader takes determines, to some degree, whether the text is being read efferently or aesthetically. Yet, as she says, "the text sometimes gives us confusing clues" (p. 269). Therefore "any reading event falls somewhere on the continuum between the aesthetic and the efferent poles, between, for example, a lyric poem and a chemical formula" (p. 269). Because of the "confusing clues" in the text, it is important for the reader to have "selective attention in the reading process" (p. 269).

As early as 1938, in her book **Literature as Exploration**, Rosenblatt stated, "The reading of any work of literature is, of necessity, an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of a particular reader" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. XII). She traces the well-known shifts in the history of the theory of literature from Plato to the present and concludes that for the most part the reader was invisible. Today the reader still remains invisible even though "he is treated as a member of something referred to under such collective rubrics as 'the audience' or the 'reading public'" (p. 4).

To illustrate the dynamics of the reading process, Rosenblatt borrows the term "transactional" from the terminology of Dewey and Bentley. Their transactional formulation was "a 'known' assumes a

'knower,' a 'knowing' is the transaction between a particular individual and a particular environment" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 17). For Rosenblatt, "The transactional phrasing of the reading process underlines the essential importance of both elements, reader and text, in any reading event. A person becomes a reader by virtue of his activity in relationship to a text, which he organizes as a set of verbal symbols" (p. 18).

Rosenblatt rejects the idea that efferent reading precedes aesthetic reading. As she says, "The notion that first the child must understand the text cognitively, efferently, before it can be responded to aesthetically is a rationalization that must be rejected" (p. 273).

As my study progressed I also rejected the rationalization that Rosenblatt so firmly condemns. It was obvious from the verbal and written responses of children to literature that in many cases the children may have been reading aesthetically before they were reading efferently. This conclusion is well dpcumented in Chapters 4 and 5 of this study. The children brought into their enjoyment of stories a linguistic development and capacity for aesthetic experience that they enjoyed from stories read to them by their parents.

Another important factor in my study is what Rosenblatt (1982) calls "a receptive, nonpressured atmosphere [that] will free the child to adopt the aesthetic stance with pleasant anticipation, without worry about future demands" (p. 275). This importance of the teacher's first act to establish an atmosphere of trust in the classroom is necessary in order for children's natural responses to literature to take place. Louise Rosenblatt's theoretical basis for

using literature as the means for developing literacy learning parallels the literary theories of James Britton. Throughout this study I have relied a great deal on Britton's literary discourse model and his theories of language learning.

Britton (1982) says, "A response to a work of literature is after all an interaction between the work and the reader" (p. 34). He defines literature as a particular kind of utterance--an utterance that a writer has "constructed" not for use but for his own satisfaction. Therefore, "what a child writes is of the same order as what a poet or novelist writes and valid for the same reasons" (p. 36). It is this valuing by the teacher to a child's verbal and written response that is lacking in our schools. Britton searches for "the factors and common ground" that shape the literary experience as a whole. He was anxious to "find the common ground between much of the writing children do in school and the literature they read" (p. 49).

Britton (1982) puts forth the following theory from his research of what happens to literature in the schools. In schools, literature "was not something that students **do** but always something that other people **have done**" (p. 49). To bridge this gap, Britton borrowed the terms "participants" and "spectators" from Langer's tale of the Two Scotsmen, which dealt with the kind of gossip about events that most of us engage in daily. In other words, "it is not whether the events recounted are true or fictional, but whether we recount them or listen to them as spectators or participants" (p. 49). He differentiates between these two roles by saying:

> If I describe what has happened to me in order to get my hearer to do something for me ... I remain a **participant** in my own

> affairs and invite him to become one. If, on the other hand, I merely want to interest him, so that he savours with me the joys and sorrows and surprises of my past experiences and appreciates with me the intricate patterns of events, then not only do I invite him to become a **spectator,** but I myself a spectator of my own experience (p. 49).

Britton points out that "as participants we apply our value systems but as spectators we generate and refine the system itself" (p. 51).

Throughout my research in the classroom I was always consistently aware of the roles of participant and spectator. It became evident to me that the children assumed both of these roles at various times. But it was when they assumed the spectator role that their literacy learning went beyond the act of reading and writing for meaning only. In the spectator role the children became involved in thinking critically and reflecting on both the story and on their own experiences.

The establishment of the roles of participant and spectator is essential to Britton's theory of transactional, expressive, and poetic forms of discourse. (It should be noted here that Britton's use of the term "transactional" differs from Rosenblatt's use of the term.) Britton (1982) uses the term "transactional" as a form of discourse that most fully meets the demands of the participant in events (using language to get things done, to carry out a verbal transaction). On the other hand, he uses the term "poetic" as a form of discourse that most fully meets the "demands that are met by making something with language rather than doing something with it" (p. 53).

Britton uses the term "expressive writing" to mean "writing that assumes an interest in the writer as well as what he has to say about the world" (p. 53). In Britton's model expressive is the form of discourse in which the distinction between participant and spectator is "a shadowy one." As he says:

> The expressive function in our model is not simply the informal end of two scales, the neutral point between participant and spectator role language, but has its own positive function to perform ... The positive function of expressive speech is in simple terms, to make the most of being with somebody, that is, to enjoy their company, to make their presence fruitful--a process that can profit from exploring with them both the inner and outer aspects of experience (p. 53).

This aspect of togetherness is important. As Britton says, "The writer invokes the presence of the reader as he writes; the reader invokes the presence of the writer as he reads" (p. 53). The many verbal and written responses documented in my study reveal how the children strongly identified with the writer as well as with what the writer had to say.

Britton distinguishes between context in ordinary language and context in literature. As he points out "context in ordinary language will include aspects of the social situation in which the utterances take place and the remarks that have gone on before; whereas in literature, context consists of the verbal fabric alone" (p. 54). He cites from Widdowson the various patterns to be found in literary works. "At the heart of literary discourse is the struggle to devise patterns of language which will bestow upon the linguistic items

concerned just those values which convey the individual writer's personal vision" (p. 54). These linguistic items could be meter and verse form, syntactic structure, and patterns formed by semantic links. In literary discourse, the message is self-contained, it is not addressed to a single receiver and therefore not dependent on who sends it or receives it (p. 55).

In school "what is important," according to Britton's model (1982), is "that children should write about what matters to them to someone who matters to them" (p. 110). My study shows that the children considered themselves writers and authors. They also respected each other as authors and anxiously looked forward to reading their stories to those classmates "who mattered to them."

The theories of both Rosenblatt and Britton on the nature of the literary experience and language learning have served as a theoretical framework for my teaching and for this study. Their theories combined with the current established theory of language development in the field, which also points to language only being learned as it is used to make meaning by the child, have been the basis of my approach in the classroom to the teaching of both reading and writing.

During the past few years some teachers in elementary schools have been moving away from the traditional approach to teaching writing to the process/conference approach supported by research studies of people such as Graves (1983), Murray (1984), Calkins (1986), and others. This approach, which places more responsibility and ownership of the writing with the child rather than with the teacher, has been most successful in developing a strong interest in writing for children and in showing teachers an improvement in the

writings of the children. Within this approach, children are encouraged to choose their own topics from their experiences and interests and teachers guide the children through the writing process, from prewriting activities to publication. Donald Graves in his book **Writing: Teachers and Children at Work** (1983) stresses the importance of literature in the lives of children who are learning to write their own stories and who are engaged in writing across the curriculum. He also points out the importance of teachers reading children's own writing and the writing of professional authors at the same time and treating both in the same critical manner. He maintains that when this happens "the children's concept of authorship [changes] dramatically" (p. 65). **Writing: Teachers and Children at Work** is a practical book for teachers based on several years of research on how children learn to write. It was one of the first and most influential books to reach the hands of teachers who were beginning to show an interest in looking at the process involved in children becoming writers and authors. The book focuses on some very important aspects of learning to write, such as classroom environment, what to write about, ways to help children revise for meaning, and conferencing techniques and suggestions.

Graves has stated that it was not his intention to write a book about writing that would be a step-by-step teaching guide for teachers to follow like a cookbook. But, unfortunately, many teachers have done just that. They have taken the ideas and have adopted them instead of adapting them to their own style and classroom. As a result, Graves' theories and ideas have become a rigid "method" and blueprint for teaching writing. While many of the suggestions are

valuable for teachers working with older students, the organizational suggestions for things like conferencing and revising are sometimes not appropriate for teachers of young children.

Any suggestions and techniques that I have borrowed from Graves, such as the author's chair, I have transformed into my own situation and adapted the ideas to suit the particular needs of my students and me. Graves' approach to writing focuses strongly on the process of writing, or on helping children learn the skills of writing. He does not stress the importance for children of using expressive language (language that we use in order to create meaning for ourselves). He does stress techniques and methods of getting children to write, ways for teachers to respond to children's writing, and ways to help them develop as writers. Because I am more interested in children learning to write as a way of knowing and understanding the things they are writing **about** more clearly, I did not find that Graves' theories served as a theoretical basis for my writing program. Rather, I relied on Britton's literary discourse model as the theoretical framework for the teaching of writing.

The review of the literature on reading, writing, and literacy would be incomplete without a brief reference to **Becoming a Nation of Readers**, the report on the Commission on Reading, published in 1984. Members of the Commission on Reading who produced this report were educators, psychologists, and reading specialists. Unfortunately, only one classroom teacher was included among this group.

Becoming a Nation of Readers is the only report among all the many recent national reports that tackles the question of literacy. The study was intended "to summarize the knowledge acquired from

research and to draw implications for reading instruction" (p. 3). The report is based on more than 20 years of research into the teaching of reading and writing. According to the writers of the report, this research resolved most of the early controversies surrounding early reading instruction.

The report does make some very sound recommendations for improving instruction in reading and writing, but it falls short of investigating the many research studies that deal with language development and the process of teaching that leads to literacy. Some of the important research carried out by Britton, Meek, Rosenblatt, Rosen, Smith, and others are not mentioned, or are only mentioned briefly in the report.

The report's panel of nine experts in the field of reading base their study on research on cognition in child development, psychology of language, linguistics, and research on environmental influences. Most of the classroom investigations to which they refer are based on studies involving statistical analysis and are directly related to test use.

The report acknowledges the weaknesses that now exist in the areas of reading instruction. It says some good things about what constitutes the teaching of reading and writing; reading is a holistic act; performing the subskills one at a time does not constitute reading; reading is a process in which information from the text and the knowledge possessed by the reader act together to produce meaning; good readers skillfully integrate information in the text with what they already know; meaningful context speeds word identification (pp. 7-8).

The report also questions some of the practices carried out by teachers. It questions the value of worksheets, readability formulas in the basal readers, the insistence on correct spelling in beginning writing, and the boring content of the primers and readers. Although these and many other questionable practices used by teachers of reading and writing are cited by the report, there is no attempt to cite current research to provide teachers with the theory and classroom research that makes learning to read a pleasurable, natural, and exciting activity.

As Jeanne Chall, one of the Commission members, points out "the panel was very cautious and very careful to endorse only instructional practices that are demonstrably successful and practicable" (Education Week, May 15, 1985), leading one to ask the question: demonstrably successful; and practicable to whom? To school boards, administrators, state legislators, politicians, the business community, and critics of progressive methods in language arts? Although the report may not be completely bureaucratic, it is overly cautious and consequently sends conflicting signals to language arts teachers. The stress on phonics and basic skills in decoding words with the more enlightening statements about the use of literature, less reliability on worksheets, and the harm of readability formulas and texts aimed only at assessing ability in reading words are rather contradictory.

An unfortunate consequence of the report is that it gives the Good Housekeeping seal of approval to confirming long-standing beliefs about reading. Secretary of Education, William Bennett, said on receiving the report, "The results of this research are intended for direct use in the classroom ... if we fail to teach reading to every

child, it is not because we don't know how" (Education Week, May 8, 1985).

If the recommendations in the report are accepted and a nation of readers is produced, as the writers hope will happen, what kind of readers will we have? Probably the efferent type of reader that Rosenblatt (1982) believes the nation is now producing when she says: "Throughout the entire educational process, the child in our society seem to be receiving the same signal: adopt the efferent stance (reading for meaning only)." She goes on to say that "what can be quantified - the most public of efferent modes - becomes often the guide to what is taught, tested or researched" (p. 224). In order to satisfy the public concern about reading and writing in our schools, **Becoming a Nation of Readers** selected only that research which confirms the efferent stance of reading. The research done in the past few years on the development of what Rosenblatt (1982) calls reading aesthetically (reading imaginatively, experientially in order to create and experience the text) was completely omitted. Even when the report urges teachers to read more stories and to choose more interesting texts, the message to teachers is to test students for factual details. According to Rosenblatt (1982), asking factual questions about the stories and expecting correct answers leads the child to "approach the next texts with an efferent stance" (p. 274). Therefore, I believe my study on literature, literacy, and children fills an important need for teachers who want to reflect on the role of literature in reading, writing, and literacy, and to help children read aesthetically as well as efferently.

I have written most of this thesis in narrative form because the study itself and the writing of the research has been a personal search for me to try to discover the meaning of children's experiences with literature in relation to their developing literacy. The purpose of this study was also a personal one; I was concerned mainly with learning and growing as a professional teacher and enhancing my own pedagogy.

While I carried out this study I was both teacher and researcher in my classroom. In order to explain the role of the teacher as researcher and what this means, I have included the following chapter "Learning Through Teaching: The Teacher as Researcher." This chapter is written in two sections. The first section is an overview of the term of "teacher-researcher". The second section is a personal narrative account of how my experience as a teacher-researcher became a "way of knowing" for me.

CHAPTER 2

LEARNING THROUGH TEACHING: THE TEACHER AS RESEARCHER

> Teaching is something we do; research findings are something we come to know; development is the process by which we bring this kind of knowledge into relation with this kind of doing.
>
> James Britton

In recent years the term "teacher-researcher" has not only become more credible in the eyes of teacher educators but is also being encouraged by many educators as an important and positive change for improving the practice of teaching.

Teachers engaged in their own research within their classrooms are learning by carefully exploring aspects of their own teaching; by observing what is going on in their classrooms; and trying to see these things in new and different ways. A teacher-researcher is an inquirer, a searcher of knowledge, and someone who wants to add to his or her own pedagogy. Teacher-as-researcher involves reflection--reflection on the things that are observed with children and reflection on her own reading and discussions with other professionals in the field. Teachers who become researchers are learning more about themselves and their teaching while they are learning more about the children they teach. In other words, the researcher becomes both the subject and the object of the research that is being studied. They

are insiders as opposed to the outsider who comes into the classroom to conduct a traditional study.

Not all classrooms are alike. A classroom is a very complex community and in certain respects can be like some other classrooms, like no other classrooms or like all other classrooms. But no matter what a classroom looks like to one looking in, there is a prevailing atmosphere that has been created by the teacher and children in that setting. The atmosphere of the classroom usually reflects the teacher's personality and beliefs. The teacher is the planner, decision-maker, and actor who has the most intimate knowledge of, and greatest influence on, what is going on inside the classroom. A thoughtful teacher is in an excellent position to study the complexities and the way children interact and the way learning occurs in such an environment.

Inquiring teachers who are consciously concerned about their own teaching and learning and who are reflecting on these concerns will usually discover that researching is an avenue which leads to change. And when teachers find that such changes can bring an aliveness and a sense of adventure to their teaching, they are encouraged to continue to look at new ideas as opportunities for change and growth.

The interest that led me to carry out this research study in my classroom was the children's enthusiasm and response to stories I was reading to them several times a day. Wanting to know more about the children's literary experiences and more about the place that these experiences held within the context of their total learning, I decided to become a teacher-researcher. My own interest in literature, my background in language arts and early childhood, and my understanding

of children, provided me with the background for this study. I compared my observations and insights as to how children were using literature in our classroom with what other teachers were saying about their perceptions of children's experiences with literature. I continued to read and to talk through ideas and concepts with other people in the field of language arts. I also studied the work of enthnographers and the methods they used in carrying out research.

Many of the procedures used to gather data and record observations in this study were those of ethnographic research. Although these procedures were helpful in this study, the turning point for me in documenting what was happening in the classroom and making sense of what I was seeing was when I began to read some of the writings of phenomenologists such as Maxine Greene. It was through my experiences with these readings that I began to focus more intensely on exploring the children's experiences with literature from the child's point of view. My looking at the literary experience from the child's perspective led me to a deeper reflection on the kind of meaning that children were giving to their own experiences.

The following is a description of my procedures and experiences as a teacher-researcher during this study.

Research as a Way of Knowing

One of the things that has kept teaching alive and exciting for me over the past couple of years has been the experience of being a teacher-researcher within my own classroom. I found that researching as a way of knowing became an adventure in learning that I have never

experienced before. However, it was not until recently when I began to reflect on some of the things that happened during the researcher years that I realized the tremendous impact this experience has made on me as a teacher and learner. It allowed me the opportunity to develop my own knowledge about some of the things I was doing in the classroom and to build this knowledge in such a way that helped me to understand children and learning more fully. This knowledge and experience has helped me to become a more effective teacher.

The concept of teachers doing their own research as part of their teaching is one that appealed to me when I was at a point of wanting to know more about how the children in my classroom were experiencing literature and how this experience was contributing to their becoming more literary readers and writers. It was not difficult for me to decide to explore and to find my own answers to my own questions. What was difficult for me was to know exactly where to begin.

However, it was not long before I realized that I had already started without really knowing that I had begun. Like so many teachers I knew, I had always been a kind of researcher because I tried to plan my teaching in a way that allowed me to learn something more about either the student or myself as well as all the things going on around us.

I had only an introductory knowledge of methods of research and so I found myself relying on my intuitive sense along with the help of an experienced researcher friend who guided me with the suggestion to "cast out a big net." In other words, I would continue to teach in my natural way but record as much as possible the ordinary things that I was seeing everyday. On the one hand this made sense, but it also

seemed rather vague and lacked a neatly-bound framework. I wondered if a more efficient teacher-researcher would not begin with knowing exactly what to look for. Only later did I know just how much I would have missed had I begun with such tunnel vision. I do not think I have ever really ceased to "cast out that big net." Even months later when the study became more refined, the focus a little more narrow, and the questions more specific, I still tried to remain continually aware of the whole as well as the parts.

One of the first things that happened was that the ordinary things happening around me began to take on a new meaning or I began to see things as if I were seeing them for the first time. I became more attuned to the children's use of language, their interests, and activities. I began to really listen to what children were saying and to record these observations in the form of anecdotal records and notes in a notebook entitled "Kids and Literature" which I kept open on my desk at all times. When children would ask me what I was writing I would answer "I want to remember the things we are saying and doing together so I can think about them later on."

As I collected this data I sorted, numbered, and categorized them into kinds of response and time of response. I soon detected a pattern of response emerging. The data were further sorted into emerging patterns which became new categories. Some of these categories were predicting, identifying, confirming values, and going beyond the text. I also searched the data to determine patterns in examples of meaning that were revealed either in spoken kinds of response or through other modes such as painting, drama, and writing.

The writing samples were looked at in an attempt to determine the kinds of issues that children were dealing with in their writing. Many of these issues reflected themes found in the stories they were reading. Some of the issues that children seemed most drawn to were danger-fear and safety, friendship and loneliness, love and rejection, life and death, and things beautiful and ugly.

In my notebook "Kids and Literature" I recorded the names of the books we were reading at Story Time and any spontaneous remarks that were made during discussions or throughout the day. The following are some of the early entries at the beginning of the year:

September 16, 1984 **Mop Top** - Don Freeman.

Interest - High

After Story:

Jonathan: "I'm wondering if he thought about spending that money on lollipops instead of at the barber."

Stephen: "I like getting my hair cut. What's a barber?"

Laurie: "It was funny when the lady thought he was a mop, why do they keep the brooms in that thing?"

I also recorded observations that I made of the times throughout the day when children were using ideas from the stories for painting and drama.

October 5, 1984 **Blueberries For Sal** - (Read in September)

Many of the children are painting pictures on their own now that illustrate parts of stories read. Carla painted "Sal and her Mother" today.

I observed that Robert and Rick were telling the story of **The King The Mice and The Cheese** at the puppet centre, recalling most of the story and adding different characters.

It was interesting to me the way I began to see for the first time some of the things we were already doing as established routines in the classroom. For example, I had always provided lots of time for real reading during the day and children were free to choose their own books from the class library. It was only when I looked more closely at how children were choosing particular books to read and share that I often linked their selection to a book that we had read together. Once I started noticing one connection, I began to discover other reasons why children were choosing certain books. I recorded as many of these things as possible at the moment they were happening, but I also learned fairly quickly that recording research in an active classroom can be quite a challenge. Young children demand a lot of immediate attention and want to get on with other things, so I developed my own shorthand and then wrote more fully when I had a quiet time. At the end of each month I took quite a bit of time to reflect and write about my thoughts concerning literature and learning. I usually wrote about this in the form of a letter to myself beginning with "Dear Me." These letters proved to be extremely valuable to me at the end of the project.

End of December 1984 (From Dear Me notes)

"... I'm becoming more convinced than ever that a literature-centred class allows a kind of sharing that reveals more of self than any other. Only when self is revealed can we know the intentions of kids and they know ours ...

End of January 1985

... So many questions now. Why do some kids respond in particular ways to literature? What does this tell me about the adult reader and classroom environment? ...

... I'm more aware of the number of issues that kids are trying to deal with. Can literature help them to understand such complexities of human relations and how? ...

Many of the things I wanted to know could only be learned by talking with the children themselves. It was their experience with literature that I wanted to understand, and so I spent a lot of time in conversations with many of the children about books, stories we were reading together, and their own writing. We talked during class discussions, at centres, or at anytime throughout the day. The informal classroom setting provided an ideal opportunity for meaningful interaction. I think one of the reasons that my conversations with the children were so successful was that my questions were completely honest. When I asked a question they knew I really wanted to know their opinion. I often tape recorded our chats or made brief notes while we talked. I remember one conversation which took place with Mark, Doug, and Jason about a book we had read called **The Dog Who Thought He was a Boy** by Annett. I asked them if they had enjoyed the story, and if they had any comments about it.

Mark: "Was this book written before **Rotten Ralph**? (another book read earlier) because I think they copied the same ideas."

Doug: "And it reminds me of the **Jungle Book Story**, only here it's a dog who never knew any other dogs."

Jason: "Yeah, it would be the same thing if we were never with people we wouldn't know who we were either."

When I recorded the above conversation I did not realize just how important these remarks were in relation to becoming a reader. It was only later when I began to read the theories of Rosenblatt and others that the significance of the children's remarks took on a different kind of meaning. These young readers were demonstrating how books speak to each other and how even young children can link their lives to a story in such a way that reading literature can become a meaning-making experience. Talking with children proved to be one of the best ways of finding out my own answers and at the same time creating my own new questions. In the same way that my interacting with children helped me to know more about their understanding and experience with literature, I found that my interaction with colleagues and others who were knowledgeable in the field of language learning was vital to me in making sense of what I was seeing. Like the children I was teaching, I, too, needed encouragement to continue to learn through experience and taking risks while exploring what were new areas of knowledge for me.

I also talked to the children about their own writing of stories and could see that much of the writing reflected their experience with literature. I set up a sample file for each child's writing and photocopied and saved as many of the originals as possible. I collected samples of their paintings and drawings even if I did not see the direct link to literature immediately. I am still looking at the writing and art work and discovering patterns emerging as I look at several pieces of work over time.

As the year went on and I continued to do the kinds of things that were required for the research inquiry, while continuing to teach, the teacher-researcher distinction soon dissolved as the researching became a natural part of my interaction and being a teacher. I was focusing on the aspects of teaching that I believed were most important--getting to really know the children I was teaching and learning along with them. As a learner, I was practising some of the things I knew were essential to children's learning and found that many of these things applied to me as an adult learner as well. For example, I found that it was during the moments when I knew that I was making connections between the things I already knew and the things I was seeing for the first time that I gained the tremendous sense of discovery. I knew that children loved to have stories read and that this played an important part in their language learning. However, not until I made the connection between the reading literature experience and some of the specific aspects of learning to read and write did I feel a deeper understanding and progress in my own learning. It was the difference for me in seeing and discovering.

Gradually, my understanding of some of the ideas I was reading about became clearer. I began to connect the concept of controlling one's own learning and building one's own knowledge with many of the things I was doing in the research approach to teaching. I was now beginning to see the difference between knowledge acquired from other people's experience and knowledge that I had gained in a very personal and intimate way--knowledge that I now felt I owned. I was also learning that the roots of knowledge becoming personal lie in doing.

Classroom research means learning through doing and it can be an energizing experience that is fulfilling and rewarding both for teachers and their students. The opportunity to contribute to educational research allows the teacher to become more confident and to grow in a very personal way toward a deeper understanding of what is meant by the art of teaching.

CHAPTER 3

ORGANIZING FOR THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: A DAY IN THE CLASSROOM

> If we offer him verbal teaching instead of his own doing, we deaden his mind; but on the other hand if we deprive him of free speech with his fellows, we take away from him the most valuable means of intellectual and social growth.
>
> Susan Isaacs

The approach to teaching and learning that is revealed throughout this study of children's experiences with literature requires a different kind of organization than that which is usually found in most classrooms.

The environment that I am concerned with, which plays an important role in the way children experience literature, goes beyond the physical arrangement of the room. It stresses the importance of the human context in which the child is learning. It emphasizes an atmosphere where children's feelings and ways of thinking are valued, and where their individual personalities and development are taken into consideration.

Learning within my classroom involves learning through an integrated day. This means that the learning is not divided into separate subject areas but, rather, is unified as much as possible into experiential activities. This way of learning is based on

children's natural approaches to learning which are more concerned with acting and doing that with subjects.

The room is planned around a number of play-based learning centres which allow for individual and group learning experiences. Because natural learning involves movement, I tried to plan for sufficient space to allow children to move around the room freely and to talk to each other as much as possible.

The following description of a day in our classroom begins with the afternoon session.

It was early afternoon in October and I quietly closed the door to the classroom so the chatter of children's voices would not disturb anyone in the adjoining library. I was a few minutes late in arriving and most of the children were already there. Karen and Angela were waiting in the doorway to greet me. Karen let me know very quickly that our visitor had arrived and was already in the room. "Did you forget she was coming?" she asked. I told the children that I had not forgotten, but because she was coming from such a distance I had not expected her to arrive quite so soon. We had many visitors to the classroom, yet, the children never seemed to lose their enthusiasm for showing people around and talking to them about the things we were doing in our Grade One class.

When I looked around the room I had a little difficulty spotting Mrs. Collins, our visitor. There was a lot of activity going on, and I was very glad to see that some of the children were already getting started on their own with the things they had decided to do. Some of the children were writing in their journals, others were looking at books or were gathered around the centres looking over the materials

they would later use at centre time. I noticed Stephen was at the painting centre, eyeing the pots of paint that I had mixed up at noon hour. A number of children were still at the coat rack chatting with each other and sharing some of the prized possessions that they had brought back to school after lunch. Over in the Story Corner I could see our visitor who was sitting on one of the children's small yellow chairs. She was busy talking to the group of children who were clustered around her with their writing folders and some of the books they were reading. Karen and Angela accompanied me across the room to meet our guest. Before we got there, Angela pulled on my arm and whispered "She has red hair, just like [redacted]." [redacted] who constantly complained about her red hair, always seemed [redacted] by meeting someone else either in real life or in a story who, as she described, "had this funny colour hair."

I introduced myself to our visitor and apologized for not being there when she arrived. "Not to worry," she said, "I've been well looked after, and I'm having a wonderful time reading the stories the children have written." Ken beamed as she handed back to him his writing folder which already contained many pictures he had drawn; most of them included Ken's early attempts with print as well. Carla still had the book open at the page she had been reading to Mrs. Collins. I noted that it was one of the books that we had read together a few days before. One of the girls told me that our visitor was a teacher, too, and that she had heard that we had a lot of learning centres and she wondered how they worked. Mrs. Collins had also come to see the kind of books we read and how a classroom that had been described to her as "literature-centred" was organized.

"We usually start the afternoon with a story," I said. "That is why I was a few minutes late, I wanted to go through the library to pick up a copy of a book I had promised to read this afternoon." "It's **Sylvester and the Magic Pebble,**" Angela added still standing beside me. "And we've read it two times now, well once in kindergarten." Although it was still early in the year, many of the children were already beginning to request that stories be repeated for the second or third time. We read several stories throughout the day, and I had exposed the children to a variety of books already, but I was still in the stage of experimenting and exploring the kind of literature they were interested in and able to enjoy. I knew the choice of books was very important as well as the way these books were presented.

The children quickly settled into a group on the floor ready for the story. Mrs. Collins pulled up a little chair and joined the listeners. I began to read:

> Sylvester Duncan lived with his mother and father at Acorn Road in Oatsdale. One of his hobbies was collecting pebbles of unusual shape and colour.

When we came to the part of the story where Sylvester used his magic pebble to turn himself into a rock so he could escape from a lion, Angela remarked, "I wouldn't have wished to turn into a rock, I'd wish I was home." Stephen added, "I'd wish the lion would disappear." There seemed to be more comments than there were questions being asked during the reading of the story this time. One of the things I have noticed is that when a story is read for a second or third time, children seem to focus on different parts of the story

to comment on during the rereading. For example, the first time we read **Sylvester and the Magic Pebble,** the conversation that took place during the reading seemed to focus on questions asked by the children. I remember some of the children asking, "Why did he turn himself into a rock?" or, "How did that work?" or, "Where was his mother?" One of the values in rereading a book is that it allows children to concentrate on different elements of the story at different times.

As the story continued I could hear Jason's voice, "It would be terrible to be inside a rock like that." And Ken toward the end of the story said, "good thing they got together at the end."

This particular story was longer than many of the books we read. Yet, when I read those famous words, "The End," Tina remarked, "That was so short! When we read it the first time it seemed longer." I have noticed that children, just as we often do, view the length of an activity on the basis of how much they are involved in what they are experiencing. Stephen commented on the illustrations and he thought the artist had "done a good job." He referred to his own painting of Sylvester that he had created after hearing the story for the first time, a few weeks before. Stephen's picture was a large grey rock sitting in the middle of a green field. He had chosen to illustrate the story in this way, while some of the other paintings that surrounded it on the wall portrayed different kinds of pictures about the same story.

We talked a little after the story about parts that we had enjoyed, and parts that had puzzled us. Scott's hand went up to ask a question, but his concern was that we move on to centres. He was

right, it was time for centres. While the children were getting themselves organized at the different centres, I chatted a few minutes with our visitor.

Mrs. Collins had several questions about the kinds of books I read to the children, especially "how did I choose them" and "were they in connection with any particular theme"? She also wondered how the children knew which centre to go to, and what to do when they got there. Mrs. Collins also commented about the story reading. "You seemed to be very involved in the story yourself," she said. "What I mean is, that you were really reading it as much for yourself as to the children." I found her comments extremely helpful to me because as so often happened when visitors asked questions about what we were doing, I learned more about the kinds of things I was doing in my teaching. I invited our visitor to explore around the room and talk to the children who would explain how the centres worked. We walked over to the painting centre together.

There were four children using painting. Two were painting on paper which was flat on a table and the other two were standing on either side of an easel attaching fairly large sheets of paper to the board. Rick was involved with his painting and rather than beginning a new picture he had decided to take down the painting from the line above the easel where it had been drying and "put some more things in it." Stephen who was painting beside him stopped his own work to ask Rick about his painting.

Stephen: What are you painting, Rick?

Rick: It's a graveyard and Dracula is under the ground.

Stephen: Is he dead, Rick?

Rick: Of course he's dead, he wouldn't be buried if he was alive.

Stephen: Will he ever come out of there?

Rick: Of course not. I told you before that he was dead.

Stephen: Really not ever?

Rick: Well ... maybe just once he might.

I found this conversation interesting, particularly when I was trying to get to know the children. I also found their words very helpful for me in observing the different ways each boy was approaching the subject of reality and fantasy. Although Rick and Stephen were not far apart in actual age, there was a tremendous difference between background experiences and their interests.

Rick, through his painting, had created images of Dracula buried in a graveyard. It is difficult to know what he was thinking about when he painted this picture, or why he chose this particular subject to paint. It might have been prompted by the story of **The Teeny Tiny Woman** read earlier, or the idea could have come from his television viewing. The important thing about this particular incident was the interaction that took place between Stephen and Rick about what was going on in the picture. Through Stephen's persistent questioning, Rick moved from outside his painting to venture into the world of make-believe--a world that allowed Dracula to come out even "just once." This incident at the painting centre illustrates how learning is going on even when the teacher is not instructing. Working together in small groups where talking with each other is encouraged and valued, there is an open invitation for children to share their feelings and ideas and learn from each other.

Sometimes when children are working together their sharing does not go quite as smoothly as Stephen and Rick's experience at the painting centre. Jason and Mark were having a strong difference of opinion at the math centre and it turned into more than a verbal disagreement. Both boys had decided to use the huge pail of buttons and to work together, but they had their own ideas as to what they were going to do with the buttons. The buttons were piled in a heap on the floor and they were arguing about the criteria they were going to use for sorting and classifying this many buttons. There were many choices of concrete materials at the math centre, games, clocks, weighing and balancing scales, puzzles, unifix cubes, and blocks. I might have decided that Jason and Mark work apart, but it was important that they try to work through their differences on their own. One of the girls was working beside them ordering numbers from 1-25 on cards that when placed together in the correct order would form a picture. She seemed completely absorbed in what she was doing and quite oblivious to the argument going on beside her. I took note that this child was having a lot of difficulty in ordering her numbers, so I stopped long enough to work with her before responding to the call of my name that I was hearing from the writing centre.

As I approached the round table that was our writing centre, I almost bumped into our visitor who was gingerly stepping over a "train" that Ken was building out of unifix cubes. The train stretched across the floor, under my desk, and out the other side. During centre time, the space in the room seemed to get smaller and smaller as children needed more space for materials and began to spread out and use any available table or floor space they could find.

Mrs. Collins was coming from the writing centre where she had been helping writers get their ideas down on paper and listen to parts of stories that were in progress. She asked me quickly about spelling. "Do you spell words for the children or are they supposed to try to figure them out for themselves?" This was a difficult question to reply to briefly but I did tell her that I dealt with spelling in a number of different ways, depending on the particular child and the point he was at in his writing. Mrs. Collins appeared to be comfortable in this informal environment. Again her comments were helpful to me. "A couple of things that stand out to me," she said "are the way the children are so actively involved in what they are doing. When I talk to them they seem to know exactly what they are doing and why. I also noticed that you don't seem to feel it necessary to tell all the children the same thing at the same time."

I think Mrs. Collins' last comment about responding to children individually applies very strongly when they are writing. As learners they are all at a different place in their learning, their interests, and their experiences. This is true when it comes to language learning as well. There are groups of children who are doing similar things in their writing, but they all need individual attention to what they are doing and how to continue to grow beyond that point.

Stephen, who had been painting, but had moved on to join the writers, was standing on his chair trying to reach the mobile sign which indicated that this centre was for writing. The sign hung from the ceiling above the table. The other five children at the centre were busily engaged in writing and talking about their writing as they created pictures with crayons and felt pens and stories with print.

Karen and Carla had decided that they would write a story together about a princess. They had begun with "Once Upon a Time" which they had copied from a frame I had printed and put on the wall above the centre. There were several frames on the wall now. Each time I became aware that certain words or phrases were requested over and over, I usually printed them out on cardboard and pinned them on the wall near by. Stephen decided he would get on with his picture. "How do you spell rocket?" he asked. He wanted to print the word underneath his picture. I printed the word on a small piece of paper and handed it to him to copy. It had only been a couple of weeks ago that Stephen had begun to attempt to even copy print. Until that time he was happy with my printing words on his pictures and then reading them together. It will be very soon, I thought, that Stephen will be figuring out his own sounds of letters, especially the beginning of words that he wants to write and then he will move into inventive spelling. Right now he was needing to produce words quickly in order to feel like a writer.

Angela put down her pencil and announced that she had finished her first poem. She began to read her poem, called Angels.

Angels are beautiful
Angels are nice
Angels take care of you
All day and all night
I like angels
I saw angels when I was sick
The end.

The other children at the centre had stopped to listen, and so had others working nearby. Stephen was the first to respond to

Angela's work. "That's really good. It's just like Robert Louis Stevenson." Stephen had just claimed Stevenson as his favourite author after discovering his book of poems. Angela put her finished poem in a box on my desk so I could photocopy it later in the day, before she took it home. She would not rework this poem, as it was not a draft to be polished and corrected. It was, in Angela's eyes, a piece of art that she had created and it was in that sense finished.

I asked Carol how her story was coming along. "Oh it's a book now, I'm on page 14." Carol had started her "book" a few days ago and had stated that she did not want to share it with anyone until it was finished. However, today she did tell me it was about a hamster who got loose inside a school and got into all kinds of trouble exploring the gym and the kindergarten rooms. I wondered if it was coincidential that we were reading a chapter each day of **The Adventures of Fingerling**, which was about Fingerling, an elf, who found himself inside a school. Handling print came easily now to Carol. She was reading and writing before she came to school and as she so often reminded me, "My mother taught me at home, and I didn't even need real teachers to [redacted] to read and write."

A sud[redacted]st of music filled the air. Scott had unplugged the earphones at the listening centre and was desperately trying to find the right hole to fit the right plug to close off the sound from the rest of the room. Several children ran to his aid and one of the girls proceeded to give him detailed instructions about how to avoid this in the future. However, Scott had made a wonderful discovery of being able to control the sound on the tape recorder. I often recorded stories onto tapes, and sometimes divided up several stories

on one tape with music in between. Paper and crayons were always available at the listening centre for children who wanted to illustrate while they were listening. Those who were working at story writing, especially later in the year, often turned off the tape recorder, but remained at the table to write their own stories or rhymes. This centre also had a number of choices of things to do. There was a film strip viewer and kits that contained the film and a read-along book and other tapes that provided listening games like following the directions to the haunted castle.

Near the listening centre were a number of language arts games and manipulative materials. Susan and Don were figuring out the order of cards that contained words and sentences that could be used to build rhymes in a pocket chart. There were matching words to picture games on file-folder size posters stapled to the wall where children could sit on the floor in front of them. This area also held a large flannel board propped against the wall for children to engage in dramatic play as they arranged and rearranged the flannel shapes of queens, princesses, woodsmen, cottages and castles, animals, trees, and flowers. This centre is one of the places in the classroom where stories are told. Carla and Ken were at the listening centre telling stories together, stories they were making up as they went along. They were using flannel shapes to represent characters from fairy tales, but they have changed the setting to a modern shopping mall. The "King" is telling the "Queen" that she cannot have a new television, that their old one is good enough. "We are running out of money, Queen," said the King, "and we have to pay our mortgage." Ken is telling a story about a situation that fits into some of his

experiences with hearing adults talk in a shopping situation. Yet the way he is telling this story still allows him to remain within the realm of the stories he has read. Nancy Martin (1976) calls these stories ministories

> that comprise so much of adult conversation--tales from the launderette, the bus queue, the doctor's waiting room .... the office. There are, of course, other forms of conversations, discussion, arguments, information ... most of these go on embedded in a tapestry of little stories and children from their earliest years move around in this environment of adult narrative (p. 38).

The stories that children use in their play are often modelled after their experience with adults' narrative, or with the children's own experiences, as well as the narrative they hear in the stories that they read or listen to which usually come from books. Whatever the source for the ideas within the stories that children tell, the children always tell them through their own use of narrative.

Our improvised puppet centre often served as a vehicle for children to retell the stories they had heard, and to enable children to represent their own experiences as narrative. Don and Susan had moved on from the slightly more structured word-building games and puzzle activities to get behind the oblong chart stand which easily became a stage. They were playing out a story which represented an incident in the schoolyard, after the bell had rung and they were lined up to come in. Susan became the teacher in charge, and Don the boy who was pushing in line. They had made a sign which was taped to the front of the "stage." This play was called "All about School." I

listened as Don, a particularly quiet, passive child, became extremely aggressive. As I remember this incident I am reminded of Caplans' words when talking about children engaging in dramatic play. "In their dramatic play, children often reverse roles they normally assume in real life" (Caplan, 1974, p. 80).

A few of the children had wandered over to listen to this story coming from the puppets' mouths. They could become part of this story too, for the experience might have been shared by them. They applauded when the actors had finished. Scott announced at that point that when he went to the puppet centre tomorrow he was going to "do" the story of the **Chocolate Moose**, because he really liked that story and he knew it really well.

Many of the children used the puppets to retell stories they had read in books. Sometimes they reshaped the events and seemed to enter into the story themselves. Retelling stories provided the children with a different way of knowing them, understanding them, and savouring them.

Jerry, who had come over from the I Can Make Centre to see what was going on with the puppets, was standing beside me. "Would you come see my raft I've made?" he asked. Several other children were busily involved in making different crafts. "Look what I've made," Jerry exclaimed with great enthusiasm. He held up a boat he had made from the lid of an egg carton, construction paper, and pipe cleaners. "Look," he said, "it's me in Max's boat in **Where the Wild Things Are**. I'm sailing through the swamp and I'm never coming back." Jerry had responded creatively to the story read to the class the other day.

Although all the centres are open-ended, this particular centre was one of the most popular with all the children. Here they could create whatever they imagined in whatever way they liked. There were no boundaries or preconceived objectives set by anyone except themselves. They could choose to be Max on a raft made from an egg carton or they could become a fairy princess with a paper crown. The need to create is basic and as children create, their imaginations are alive, vibrant, and fully operative. "They are captain and pilot of the vessel" (Alexander, 1984, p. 478). Studies have shown us that there is a strong link in the ability to create, to play with ideas in order to develop fluency in thinking. Children who are most successful in language learning at school are often children who have had the opportunity to play creatively.

Literature has proven to be a great stimulation for children's involvement in creative activities, such as Jerry's creation of the boat at the craft centre. Often, at this particular centre, I have observed children designing their own follow-up activities to the stories we have read together. Here we could talk while they were working with the materials, and I could hear their comments and questions about the things they were mainly concerned with. The topics they wanted to discuss were often stimulated by happenings in a story, but were now being talked about within the realm of their personal experiences. Talking about the story first often helps a child to go beyond the story itself and think about his own experiences. This is part of the extraordinary power of literature.

The afternoon was coming to an end, and this meant clean up time for centres and time for sharing some of the things at which we had

been so busy all afternoon. But first we had our class story reading time. The children returned to their desks and sat quietly while I read a chapter from **The Adventures of Fingerling**. I found that this kind of reading provided a sense of closure and relaxation. The children had a choice of "resting" or colouring a picture while they listened.

Before hometime, we have our author's chair. This is the time when children who have written stories throughout the day sit in the "author's chair" and share their writing with the class. This sharing is an important part of the day for the children who are authors but also for those who become the audience. The children's writing is read and treated in the same way as our reading of professional books. Comments and questions are asked of the author and suggestions are often made about things they might add to their writing at another time.

It is then time for home and maybe a frantic search for a lost lunch pail, and a reminder for some children that another kind of school experience awaits them at a daycare.

I have presented the way I have organized and developed the teaching and learning environment by describing an [illegible]oon in the classroom. For those who are unaccustomed to the atmosphere of a classroom that is child-centred and interactive, the amount of activity going on might seem somewhat overwhelming. However, it is in the midst of this activity that the children's own ideas are flowing freely. They are engaged in learning by doing and are rewarded through the excitement and satisfaction of discovery. When learning

happens in this way, children are far more apt to understand concepts and to remember.

I have organized the classroom in this way because I believe that children need more space and time during the day to experience learning by being actively involved and in control of the things they are doing, rather than sitting and listening to the teacher providing them with facts and information. However, an approach to learning that emphasizes informality, choice, and confidence in children's ability to learn must also include a time where the role of the teacher moves toward information-giving and instruction. This approach to learning also requires careful and thoughtful planning by the teacher, both for the children and with them. Everyone is involved in ensuring that the instruction and learning through interaction blend together and move as smoothly as possible. In our classroom, the morning is the time when the focus shifts in this direction and the emphasis for the first part of the morning is on organizational tasks for the day. It is then that specific information and instruction is provided for the things that require "telling." This does not mean that the teaching approach becomes in any way less centred on the child or on the importance of interaction. Many of the ideas that we plan for the day come from the talk that children bring into the classroom first thing in the morning.

8:45 - The children are hanging up their coats, changing their shoes, and those who brought lunch are storing their lunch kits on top of the coat rack. This morning, Mark decided to have a look inside his lunch pail to see what kind of goodies might be included to select

from for a snack at recess. To his surprise, his mother had placed a note addressed to him inside his lunch pail, and he proceeded to try to read it. Several of his friends gathered around to help, and he read it out loud. "I hope you have a happy day at school. Love Mom." Mark was delighted. One of the boys suggested that he answer it while someone else suggested that they could all write a note to their parents telling them to include notes in their lunches. For the rest of the school year, notes went back and forth between parents and their children as a result of Mark's original discovery between his sandwiches. It was a small event, and one that might have been overlooked in a classroom where children were not encouraged to talk with each other or make suggestions for things they could do together. I mention it because it is important for teachers to seize the opportunities to plan learning activities that are built in children's interests and on their ideas. This incident illustrates what is usually meant by language learning being developed when it is purposeful and meaningful to the learner.

9:00 - Time to sit down at the desks so I can see who is here this morning, make any announcements of things the children need to know, change the organizational charts that tell the children who the helpers will be for that day, and a look at our calendar and, most importantly, the agenda which is listed on the chalk board and serves as an outline for the routine of the day. I have discovered that routine is very important for young children so they can have a sense of security and order. However, I also know that flexibility within that routine is equally important. For instance, a seat work activity might have been planned by me for the children and listed on the

agenda. But, if the children are reading books or we are reading a story together when I am reading aloud, and they are intensely involved in what they are doing it would not make sense to close off this learning so that I might begin something that I had planned, simply because I had planned it. Today's morning agenda read:

Morning Agenda

1. Sharing - announcements and calender
2. Meet together for story and planning
3. Printing
4. Choose books for reading
5. QRT (Quiet reading time)
6. Meet together - Shared reading - story
7. Class activity
8. Centres
9. Lunch time

At the beginning of the year, reading the agenda aloud together became one of our first group reading experiences. Of course, the items listed were different then, as they are different now. I numbered the items listed, so the children could refer to a specific item if they were having difficulty understanding what it said, or if they had any questions about it. The categories are fairly broad and I have not specified page numbers in books or stated step-by-step directions that we would follow. I have done this deliberately for two reasons: first the children already know what we do when it is printing time, and they know that when a subject area is mentioned we will talk about it first. The second reason is that the focus for learning must remain on the child rather than on the lessons. The

written agenda for the afternoon is written up beside the morning's, and continues with the numbers from the morning agenda, extending to 18.

Afternoon Agenda

10. Mrs. Collins is our visitor today - Story time
11. Reminder: return library books today
12. Journals
13. Meet together - story and planning
14. Centres
15. Clean up time
16. Chapter 8 of **The Adventures of Fingerling**
17. Author's Chair
18. Au revoir

As the agenda suggests, the day moves back and forth from whole class activities to small group work to centres. Teacher-initiated learning experiences must be clearly balanced with child-initiated strategies and topics for learning. It is important that precise knowledge and skills be demonstrated carefully in areas that require them, such as printing and certain concepts in math. There are many things that children need to learn and know about. Some of these things can best be learned through direct instruction but many cannot be taught directly; they are not learned simply by someone telling them how to do it. They are learned within a well-planned learning environment and with a teacher who understands the significance of children's actions and the things they say, and the kinds of questions they are asking.

Some days we only read the agenda for the morning when we begin our day, but today we read right through to the end of the day. The questions seemed to focus on the items listed for the afternoon. Ken called out, "Who is Mrs. Collins?" "We have been her before." I explained who Mrs. Collins was, and how the arrangements had been made earlier in the week for her to visit our classroom today. "She probably wants to see our centres," Ken added. One of the other boys asked "What do children do all day if they don't have any centres in their room?" For these children centres were such an integral part of their time in school that they could not imagine what it would be like to be in a room with just desks. Sometimes, when a new student has come in the middle of the year from a classroom that is more teacher directed and does not feature any interactive experiential kinds of learning she needs a little time to adjust. However, it has been my experience that because the child-centred open approach is based on the same principles that children operate from in their learning outside of school, they feel at home very quickly.

9:10 - Just as our day ends with literature, so our day begins in the same way when we meet together as a group in the Story Corner where the children sit on the floor. I had chosen an amusing tale called **The Man Who Never Washed His Dishes** to read this morning. It was the story of a hermit who tried to find a solution to his great dislike for washing dishes. One day when he had used up his last plate and cup and the sink was stacked with dishes, he noticed dark clouds in the sky. He quickly piled the dishes into the back of his open truck and drove it out into the middle of a field, where he left it until it rained. The children loved the story, and laughed at the

absurdity of the situation. Rick, who usually waited until after the story had ended before making any comments, said in a loud voice, "What he needs is a wife!" While Rick's comment might be amusing, coming from a six year old, it also tells us something of Rick's perception of how a family works.

A little later on when the children chose their books for reading on their own, Carla picked up the copy of **The Man Who Never Washed His Dishes**, took it back to her desk and began to read. Carla did not know all the words she was seeing on the pages, but she knew the story now, and she wanted to read it for herself. For the next half hour the children would be engaged in reading real books that they had chosen from our class library and from the box of books that I had brought from the public library. I provided the children with some time to choose the books they want to read and allowed them time to talk with their classmates around the bookshelves. Their talk would be about books they have read or want to look at again. They would also discuss with a friend what he or she might have thought about a particular book. The kind of social interaction that is going on during this time is a very important part of reading. I have found that when children are given a choice in what they read they are far more interested in learning strategies to figure out the print, to understand what it says, or to know the story. It is during this reading time, while the children are actually engaged with books, that I take the opportunity to intervene appropriately in order to help them advance as a reader.

Toward the end of this time for reading we move into what the children decided to call "our QRT." This is a time for quiet

reading. We all read independently at our desks, focusing on the book we have chosen and reading silently. This is a time for me to finish that last page of an article in a professional journal, or to continue reading the novel that I had started on the weekend. The children are always interested in what I am reading and I usually share my feelings or the purpose for what I have chosen to read.

For the rest of the morning, the children move mostly on their own through the curriculum areas, using the agenda as a guide. Not everyone is working on the same thing at the same time, but the important thing is that they know what to do when they finish a particular task. It is their responsibility to move on to the next item, to make choices, and to discover that there are more resources for learning and more sources for information than the teacher.

A large block of time in the morning is planned for learning at the centres, and the children move on a daily rotation basis from one centre to another just as they do in the afternoons. They have the option of choosing activities from an "everybody centre" when they have finished at their special area. Within the centres the children are free to choose tasks and materials, to create and develop concepts and skills, that will apply to any of the subject areas of the curriculum. They will move from structured to unstructured centres, where they will engage in activities that suggest a reason to finish a task, such as a child putting together a sequence of a word puzzle to complete a rhyme, to completely unstructured artistic endeavours such as painting or molding clay.

If cleanup time at the centres goes smoothly we usually have time before lunch for another story, some shorter readings of poetry,

or perhaps time to hear more of the stories and poems that have been written in the morning at the writing centre.

11:30 - "Five minutes before clean up time," I announced to the class. Five minutes does not mean much to these young children who are just beginning to understand a sense of time, but it does let them know that I am aware that they are doing something very important, and that they need time to wind up their tasks.

The centre approach is one that I have found more successful than any other in helping me to create an environment within the classroom that is congruent with what I believe about children and teaching and learning. Within the activities that children engage in at centres, they can use their curiosity and their ability to create, think, and learn. They can use language in ways that have purpose and meaning, and in this way are extending the natural process of language learning that began long before school. However, I think the real success of the centres lies in the nature of the play materials and the joy that children experience while learning through play.

I have structured the environment because of the things I believe in relation to learning. The organization has focused around activities based on children's interests and needs. At the core of these activities, literature plays a central role. As we have seen throughout the day, the children themselves see literature as a vital part of their learning experiences. Stories and books occupy a large part of their day and, through their own initiative, they respond to these stories in a number of different ways. Sometimes the response takes place during discussions at story time, but often response comes about in a different form, through the arts or through children's own

writing. The children's responses and experiences with literature have played a major role in the kinds of things I do and reflect on in my teaching.

CHAPTER 4

EXPERIENCING THE STORIES

> In the last analysis, the kids should come full of spontaneity - with their feelings, with their questions, with their creativity, with their risk to create, getting their own words into their own hands in order to do beautiful things with them.
>
> Paulo Freire

Anyone who has read stories to young children will be familiar with the spontaneous questions and remarks they often make during the reading of the story. In fact, when children are very young, either before school or perhaps in kindergarten, we usually encourage this kind of interaction, this talk about books. It seems natural for a parent or a teacher of young children to point out interesting things about the pictures or the people in the story, and to respond to the comments that children are making. This kind of narrative is part of reading to children and is one of the things that makes the reading together so enjoyable. But as Harold Rosen reminds us, "the further up the school system we go, the less likely it is that spontaneous pupil-made-narrative will be able to insert itself comfortably and naturally into the flow of talk" (Rosen, p. 18). This is unfortunate because the most natural thing to do when we have enjoyed reading a book is to share this experience with our friends. This applies to

children even more; they want to talk about the stories they are reading with their friends, and to sort out what it all means.

I found that the children in my classroom had a very strong desire to talk about the books and stories they were reading. This need to talk about the books was particularly evident during our story time when they chatted at the beginning of the reading time, or often made comments aloud during the reading. More talk would usually flow when the story was finished and individual children wanted to share their feelings or questions about the story. Sometimes these discussions were initiated by me, especially at the beginning of the year; but, as children understood that their ideas and opinions were recognized and welcomed, they usually wanted to take part in the discussions and to share their ideas with all of us. I always marvelled at the richness and diversity in the things children had to say about the stories and about their own experiences. So often teachers overlook the importance in talking and in listening to what children have to say. As Gareth Matthews (1984) points out in his book **Dialogues with Children,** "what has not been taken seriously, or even widely conceived, is the possibility of tackling with children, in a relationship of mutual respect, the naively profound questions of philosophy" (p. 3). I found it fascinating to discover how even some very young children's remarks can reveal the capacity for philosophical thinking.

I was reading a story to the children in my class of five and six year olds, and commented on the variety of things that different children were saying about the same story. I pointed out to the children that it was interesting that some people enjoyed the story

very much, while others felt it was disappointing and unappealing. At this point Jason remarked, "Yeah, and everybody's different, everyone has a different mind and a different imagination." Jason's remark was a very insightful explanation of something that was becoming more and more evident to me as I continued to read stories to children everyday; not all children experience literature in the same way.

The book **Mop Top** which we read together at the beginning of the year provides an example of the variety of comments that children made, and the way they inserted "their own narrative into the flow of talk" that took place during the reading of the story. **Mop Top** is the story of a little boy whose red hair had grown long and unruly and his mother sends him off to the barber. On the way he stops to look in a store window and as a last effort to delay the haircut he hides in a nearby store where he is mistaken for a mop by a shopper.

I learned very quickly that this book was already familiar to some of the children. Even before I opened the cover, Jonathan remarked, "I've read this before. I've got it at home." "Me too," said Carla, "we read it in kindergarten." They agreed that it was a funny story and they had enjoyed hearing it. It was important for these children to let us know that they had read this book before and that they knew what the story was about. I asked the group how they felt about reading stories for a second or third time and they agreed that it depended on "how good the book was."

The story began:

> This is the story of the boy who never wanted to have his hair cut. Everybody called him Moppy because on top he looked like a floppy red mop.

At that point Stephen asked "Why didn't he want to have his hair cut? I like it when I get mine cut." I continued to read:

Here's some money, sonny, his mother said. I've just called Mr. Barberoli and he says he'll be ready for you at 4 o'clock sharp.

I could hear Tina's voice, "Who is Mr. Barberoli?" Carol, who was sitting in front of Tina on the floor, turned around and said "He's probably the barber."

At this time I did not stop reading to deal with the comments and questions even though I was hearing them. But when I finished reading the story I turned to the questions that had been raised and asked the person what they would like to say about it. I did not find that the remarks made during the story were distracting or that they interfered with the flow of the story for other children, because they were usually said quietly and almost blended into the words from the text that I was reading. However, being aware of what was being said, and wanting to acknowledge these comments in some way, I simply replied with a nod or a smile in the "right direction." I felt it was important to indicate my acceptance of these remarks because to ignore them completely can convey a different kind of message. The children's remarks and questions tucked away in my mind helped to provide me with some early insights into the children's involvement in the story. At the same time the children were learning about my approach to presenting literature to them in the way I dealt with their responses. The story continued:

Don't need my hair cut at all anyway not now, he grumbled and stumbled along until some bright red lollipops in a candy store window caught his eye. They looked so good he had to stop.

The reader was never told whether the view of the candy in the store window presented any problems for Mop Top who held the money in his hand that was meant for the barber. This incident was referred to very briefly within the story and only mentioned once. Yet, this was the part of the story that Jonathan commented on when I had finished reading. "Do you think," he asked, "that Mop Top wanted to spend that money on a lollipop instead of his haircut?", and then he added, "I wonder what would have happened if he had." "Hmm, I wonder too," I replied. Just then Tina's voice became very authoritative, "Well, if he did, he would just be stealing and he would go to jail." Then Laurie asked about the brooms in the barrel: "I think it was funny when the lady thought he was a mop. Why do they keep the brooms in that thing?" Jonathan explained to Laurie, "that's where they kept those things in the olden days." Another little girl compared the scene in the general store to her experience shopping with her Mom in the supermarket.

What was happening during the reading of Mop Top and during the discussion that followed illustrate the way the children engaged in dialogue as part of the story reading. What went on was very different from what so often happens in school when the teacher is reading to children. The children in my classroom were demonstrating how capable they are at carrying out a discussion, not just in a question-answer or turn-taking style, but more in the way of a dialogue or conversation.

I have encouraged this kind of dialogue at story time but, in order to have it work well, I have found it is important to try to create an atmosphere that is relaxed and free of the tensions that

often exist when children get concerned about "coming up with the right answer." Sometimes teachers create these kinds of tensions very inadvertently by suggesting ahead of time that children should "listen for" specific information, such as "I want you to listen for the name of the boy's brother in the story," or "I want you to listen for the clue the author gives that tells us when this story took place." These requests are often asking for literal facts from the story. When children focus their attention on the literal aspects of the story they often miss the opportunity to become personally involved with the story, or to enter into the story itself. I have found that when children have been allowed to experience the story for its own sake, to respond personally to what is read, and are given time for reflection, the dialogue that follows the story becomes more rich and diverse. The dialogue then becomes, in Freire's words, "not an empty instructional tactic, but a natural part of the process of knowing" (Freire, 1985, p. 15). As we have seen with the children's experiences in reading the story of **Mop Top**, children talk about the stories in a number of different ways.

During the time I was observing the way children were experiencing the stories in the classroom, I noted three kinds of experiences they were having with the literature during story reading time. I have called these three kinds of experiences "Literal," "Role Playing," and "Transcending the Text." These categories are loosely defined and are not mutually exclusive, but they allow me to differentiate between some of the elements of children's literary experiences. These experiences applied to the children's writing as well as to the reading, but for the remainder of this chapter I will

focus more specifically on the reading response and deal in greater detail with the writing in the following chapter.

Literal

When children were reading or hearing literature in a literal way, their questions and remarks tended to remain strongly within the boundaries of the text. Sometimes these comments would focus on the literal aspects of the story and sometimes they would become more inferential. But in either case, their remarks indicated that they were looking at the text from the outside rather than entering into the story. Examples would include Stephen's question, "What is a barber?" or Tina's "Who is Mr. Barberoli?" during the reading of the story **Mop Top**. Other comments during the reading of this story which focused on the more literal aspects were "Moppy liked that dog he met" and "He got a really short haircut."

Karen brought the book **Blueberries For Sal** by McCloskey from the school library and asked me to read it to the class. It is the story of a little girl and her mother who go up a mountain to pick blueberries. On the same mountain a mother bear and her cub are looking for blueberries. The little girl and the cub become separated from their mothers and inadvertently switch places. The mix-up is eventually overcome and the cub and the girl are reunited with their own mothers. The book is filled with illustrations which are all in very dark blue, which gives the impression of black and white photos. When Carol saw the "black-and-white" pictures she stated very emphatically, "I know what this book is about, it's about the olden

days, because all the pictures are in black and white and they didn't have any colour in those days." Carol's hypothesis was based on her experience with old TV movies and as she told me she had also seen a "wood stove, just like that one in the picture, on Little House on the Prairie." Carol's comments during the story continued to focus on the literal aspects of the story. "Those are blueberries" or "That's the mother bear." Most of the children's comments during this story indicated that their responses remained within the boundaries of the text.

Sometimes when the remarks centred around the book itself the comments dealt with features of the print such as the size and format of the book. I remember reading Mercer Meyer's **There's a Nightmare in my Closet.** I had anticipated comments about dreams and nightmares that the children had experienced but instead, the interest was on the format of the book itself.

Rick: How come the cover is upside down on the back of the book?

Carla: There aren't many words on each page.

Angela: Why do the words stop and the pictures go on? How can you read a story if there are no words on the page?

The last two pages of this particular book feature full-page illustrations without any text. These illustrations give a special effect to the end of the story because the reader is able to leave the words of the author and continue to read in his own imagination, either recreating another ending of his own, or better still, leaving the story unfinished. Children who deal with literature only in the literal sense will always have difficulty "reading" a story with only pictures on the page.

So many of the questions that accompany teachers' guides to literature focus on the literal aspects of stories, and do not encourage or even allow any room or space for children to transform or create their own texts out of the story that is read. Britton (1982) reminds us that, as teachers, "our aim should be to refine and develop responses the children are already making" (p. 33). Children who read literally are often dealing more with fact and information that is to be carried away or, as Rosenblatt describes, reading efferently.

Role Playing

This second kind of literary experience is indicated by a greater degree of involvement with the story on the part of the child. The talk proceeds beyond the literal aspects of the story, beyond the questioning about events within the boundaries of the text. But the text is not abandoned altogether; rather the child seems to enter into the story, move around inside, so the story becomes part "me" and part story. Sometimes children imagine themselves within the situations described in the stories and their remarks indicate they have exchanged places with some of the people they were meeting through the literature. It is almost as if children are asking, "What would I do, or how would I feel in that kind of situation?"

One day I read a story to the class called **The Plant Sitter**, which was a story about a boy who took in other people's plants while they were away and he took care of them. The problem in the story is that the house becomes so full of plants that the people living in it are almost attacked by them and cannot live their daily lives. Many

children offered solutions to the problem, but the important thing is that the solutions were theirs. "I'd go to the bathroom and lock the door," said Ken. "I'd get an axe and just chop down all the plants," offered Stephen. Later in the day, Ken and another boy reconstructed and played out at the puppet centre the experience of the plants taking over the house. Their story brought to life by puppets included having the plants spread to neighbours' houses and eventually the whole street.

A similar thing happened with the reading of **Ira Sleeps Over.** Many of the children "became" Ira in their dramatic play. They experienced "with Ira" the dilemma of wanting to sleep over at a friend's house, but being uncertain about sleeping with their teddy bear. Ira was faced with the choice of suffering without his bear, or risking being laughed at by his friend. When I asked the class what they thought about this problem, Rick announced that it would not be a problem for him because "I've given up sleeping with toys a long time ago." Carla suggested that Ira might solve the problem by "trying to do without his bear for just one night." Sometimes children compare themselves with characters in the book. Stephen said, "I thought everyone slept with bears and things, I do." Carla continued to think about the solution she had offered to Ira and later wrote her own story called "Sleeping Over."

> One night I slept at my friends. She had two bears and she lent me one to sleep with.

The reading of **Ira Sleeps Over** prompted many stories both written and told. Children referred to this book as one of their favourites and often selected it to read themselves. There were a number of paintings

of Ira created at the painting easel. It seemed as if this story stayed in children's minds for a long time.

The stories seemed to be acting as problem-solving experiences for children providing a way that they could participate in the story and come up with their own suggestions based on their own values. The stories acted as a kind of sounding board against which they could measure their own beliefs while becoming more aware of the beliefs of others.

When I read the story called **A Bear in the Bathtub**, which was about a bear who would not get out of the tub so others could use it, Stephen became very emotionally involved in the story. Again, various children were offering their solutions. Their ideas ranged from coaxing and bribing the bear to screaming at him, and finally to placing dynamite underneath the bathtub and "blowing him away." While I was reading the story, Stephen offered his solution directly to the picture of the bear on the page. He got up from where he was sitting and spoke directly into the book. "You'd better get out of there before something happens to you," he warned. This was not the first time that Stephen had spoken directly to someone in a story. Another time, during the reading of **Are You My Mother**, he offered comfort to the baby bird who could not find his mother. "You will find her soon," he called out to the bird in the story, and the baby bird did.

Stephen's strong identification with the bear and the baby bird and his active involvement in the stories reflects his lively excitable personality. Not all children are so demonstrative and it may appear that they are less involved in what they are hearing. They may or may not articulate their comments during the discussions.

However, many of these children expressed their experiences with stories in different ways. Sometimes their involvement with stories was revealed in their painting and writing. Many children would create images from the stories that closely resembled the illustrations in the books or sometimes they would paint images they had created in their imaginations which were very real or clear in their heads. I think of the large painting created by Laurie after hearing the story of **Thumbelina**. Laurie portrayed her whole family living on a lily pad which was floating down the river. Another painting I recall is one by Tina called "My House" where she painted a picture of the boot that housed the old woman who lived in a shoe.

Other children wrote stories that reflected the strong influence of literature in their own writing. One little boy who was extremely shy wrote a lengthy story called "Me and The Beanstalk" in which he focused on his mother's disappointment in the way he was planting his garden. The boy's story included many elements from **Jack and the Beanstalk**. Like so many of the fairy tales we read during the year, children wanted to hear this one over and over. The children seemed to remember and retell fairy tales to each other during their dramatic play more than any other stories. Perhaps it was because they were so familiar with them.

When readers of any age enter into a story, engage in the role of fantasy, and become involved by living through the experiences of the people in the story, the stories can become very real. Older readers usually choose to become involved in fiction and fantasy; and, even though they are "lost in the book" while they are reading, they are aware intellectually that they are engaged in fantasy, not reality.

With very young children the distinction is sometimes not as clearly defined when they are living fully within the story.

One time, Jonathan told me that "My Mom was reading me a story about a hamster and all of a sudden I thought I was the hamster. I felt small and furry. It was a funny feeling, but kinda scary too." It was evident that many children were struggling to sort out what belonged to the real world and what belonged to the world of stories.

One day, while I was reading a story to the class called **The Dragon and the Mouse**, Stephen asked the question, "Are dragons real?" Another little boy answered, "Dragons are like giants and witches, they aren't real, but they are just a part of life." Embedded in this child's comment is the reality-fantasy reasoning that he has used, based on his experience with stories and television.

For children whose lives have been filled with the world of stories and TV dragons, like giants they are "a part of life," at least a part of their storied lives. In role playing they can become "Max" in **Where The Wild Things Are** or they can dance with Cinderella at the ball. "Thus in listening to stories the children have both the virtual experience (Langer, 1953) of the characters and actions (the naughty princess, the valient little tailor) and the literary experience of the telling" (Meek, 1984, p. 92).

Transcending the Text

This third kind of literary experience, which may include the other two, involves readers going beyond or transcending the text to a deeper understanding of their own experiences. This kind of reading

seemed to suggest a different kind of engagement with the text than we saw in the literal and role playing sense of experiencing the literature. When children were experiencing literature in the literal sense, they appeared to be assuming a reading stance of reading for information and accepting the words in a more passive way. When the reader entered the story more fully, as in role playing, the interaction became one of more involvement but still remained within the boundaries of the text. Neither of the two processes, however, explained how young children begin to transcend the stories they are reading and subsequently build a greater sense of order and knowing about their world by reading literature.

Children who were transcending the text in their reading seemed to be making strong connections between the things in the stories and the events and people in their personal lives. Rather than simply reacting to the story, they were actively involved in giving meaning to their own experiences. They were reading the story and were also reading their own lives. This is what Karen was doing when she heard the story that I was reading called **The Bus Ride** by Nancy Jewell. As I closed the book Karen said, "That story reminds me of when I go to the doctor's office. Sometimes I meet a friend and we play and then she goes into her doctor and I go into mine and we never see each other again." **The Bus Ride** was not about a visit to the doctor but rather about a friendship that developed between a child and an elderly woman who shared a seat on a bus. When the little girl reached her destination she sadly said goodbye to her new friend knowing they would probably never see each other again.

Karen's experience with this story is not an uncommon event and it is one that adults often take for granted; but, for Karen it proved to be one in which she linked her personal experience with the text being read. It seemed to help her make a little more sense of her own experience of developing a short-term relationship. She was able to see the events within the story in relation to her own experience and it seemed to help her understand the story more clearly, too.

In a story Karen wrote which was prompted by her reading of **The Bus Ride**, she turned herself and her friend at the doctor's office into the characters of bears.

> I went to the doctor's office and I met a friend. Her name was Randy. Randy is a bear and I am a bear too. Randy went into her doctor. I never saw her again.

Shelly, who had just learned that she would be moving away and changing schools, expressed her understanding of **The Bus Ride** when she wrote in her journal.

> Once upon a time I went to school and I knew everybody because I knew them before. I stayed there for three days and I moved. I didn't see friends again.

The Bus Ride illustrates the type of story which helps children to transcend the text. Such stories develop a more powerful catalytic and shaping role in the "coming to know" in new ways for the children. Rather than studying and analyzing the style and structure of the text, this type of reading the text is, as Freire (1985) suggests, "a matter of studying reality that is alive, reality that we are living inside of" (p. 19).

The story of **The Dragon and the Mouse**, which I mentioned earlier, involves a verbal mix-up. The child in the story leaves a note to explain to the mother where he is, but part of the message is ambigious and the mother reads a different meaning into it and so worries about the child. When the child returns and explains what the note meant, the mother says "I should have known you were alright."

Karen, who had been worried about a friend who had moved away and had not contacted her, commented to me after hearing this story, "I'm going to stop worrying about my friend, he's probably alright too." Karen's comments indicated her desire to take immediate action in changing the way she viewed her friend's absence.

Shelly was reading the book **Don't You Remember** by Clifton, which provides a further example of children reading in a way that brings about a new kind of awareness and knowing. Shelly was raised in a home that presented her with a highly moralistic view of the world. She shared with her parents a black-and-white, right-and-wrong approach to living. Her family's religious beliefs allowed birthday parties with exchanges of gifts, but no cake. Coffee was also prohibited in her home.

Shelly heard the story of Tate in **Don't You Remember** which was about a black girl whose family never remembered to fulfill promises that were made to her. Finally they all remember her birthday and throw a party for her complete with cake and coffee. About a week after hearing the story, Shelly, who is white, brought the book to me to talk about it.

Shelly: I wouldn't like to be Tate.

June: Why not?

Shelly: Because she is chocolate. I don't look good in brown. Some people wear brown. I look good in skin colour.

June: Oh!

Shelly: I wish I was Tate. I could drink coffee and have a birthday party, but no cake.

June: Would you like to have a cake?

Shelly: Yes, but I wouldn't want to have a different mother and father. Our church doesn't let people do bad things.

June: What kind of things?

Shelly: Like smoking and drinking coffee. I look better with my skin colour. I think this (holding up the book) is my story.

Shelly's conversation and her writing following the story portray her explicit attempt to make meaning about this aspect of her life. Not long after that Shelly painted a picture of Tate. In the painting, Tate was black but she was wearing Shelly's bright pink, framed glasses and she had fair hair.

Shelly's writing about Tate and "me" followed very closely the story she had told me in our conversation.

I don't want to be Tate because she is chocolate and I am white.

I want to be Tate because she gets to have a birthday cake. I love Mom and Dad. I don't want to have a different Mom and Dad.

I want to try coffee.

Shelly's reality was living as a part of a family that she loved and did not want to change; however, as she contrasted her own experiences with those of the child in the story she became more aware of some of the differences between her family and the family described in the story. It was as if this story posed some very important

questions for Shelly about her own values and those of her family. Shelly had gone beyond the story in her response to literature in a very personal way to hear her "own story" embedded within a story. Bettelheim and Zelan (1982) emphasizes the importance of the readers' willingness to respond personally to the text's content. They state that "Only as we begin to respond personally to the text's content and open ourselves to its message, (irrespective of whether the consequences of this is an acceptance, modification or rejection of it) do we go beyond a mere decoding or perception of the words and begin to perceive meanings" (pp. 36-37).

I have talked about the children who have adopted a reader's stance which has allowed them to become open to the message within the text and to go beyond the text to read the story within their own lives. While the reader affects the message that is in the story, at the same time the story itself has much to do with the reader's response at a particular time. In other words, creating meaning from what is read is a reciprocal process between the reader and the text.

Some books lend themselves more easily to being read aesthetically by their very nature, style, and kind of vocabulary. I am reminded of Charlotte Zolotow's powerfully written books for children, and the experience we had when reading **Somebody New.** The story is about a little boy who is feeling restless and unsettled. The things that once interested him no longer hold much appeal, such as the patterned wallpaper on his bedroom wall, some of his toys, and even some of his well-read books. He begins to sort out his things and pack away in a box several of the toys and books that he no longer wants. He seems to be confused and puzzled by the changes that he is

experiencing. The book is beautifully illustrated and each page contains just a few lines of text, yet the message is powerfully implicit.

The children's reaction to this story was similar to the little boy who was packing up his belongings. They were puzzled and very curious to know why he was putting away, as Ken pointed out, "so many neat things." Carla asked "Why is he feeling sad?" Karen suggested that he was probably hiding his things from his little brother. (It was Karen who had the little brother.) Stephen concluded that "he just didn't want to share things with anyone."

When we finished reading the story, **Somebody New**, Tina asked if I would read the story again. The other children were definitely not interested in hearing the story reread at this time, yet it seemed so important to Tina to "hear it once more."

Occasionally I had the opportunity to read alone with one child. In a class of 27 children this did not happen very often. It was very difficult to spend uninterrupted time with one child while being with a group of many young children. However, today with a parent in the room I was able to read with Tina for the second time the story of **Somebody New**. We sat on pillows on the floor off in a corner, and Tina decided that she wanted to read the book to me. I was surprised at how well she was dealing with words that she had probably not seen before in print, at least not in many of the books she was already reading for herself.

I knew there were many things in her life that Tina did not understand such as her living situation with foster parents. She knew that soon she would be moving to live with another family. [illegible]body

New is not a long book and we were able to read and talk our way through the book to the end. Tina closed the book and said, "I know what this book is about now. This little boy is probably going to live with a new family and they'll be different from the old one, and so he'll be somebody new too." Tina had heard this story at a particular time and in a way that she felt compelled to hear it over again. The meaning that she had given to this story was strongly embedded within her personal response. I agree with Rosenblatt that "a most eloquent verbal sign that the story or poem is being aesthetically experienced is in the child's 'Read it Again'" (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 272). I was discovering that not only were children experiencing the same stories in different ways, but the experiences were contextually determined by the particular children involved and the particular text they encountered at a certain time.

Discussion

Some of the children's responses to stories, both verbal and written, illustrate what I called the literal interpretation of the story where their attention was focused on specific details and information about characters and events. These children usually listened to stories with obvious delight but I sensed very little discovery except about the text itself. They remained at a distance, somewhat outside the story as if they were looking in the windows but not wanting, or not able, to come in.

While some children might be less explicit in their comments about their participation in stories, they were still engaging in a

kind of role playing as they took on the problems and played out situations from stories in their dramatic play. I saw children playing out stories in the same way they often engaged in their play outside of school or at recess. I think most of us can relate to this experience of role playing in our own childhood. "You be the princess and I'll be the wicked Queen," we would say or, "I'll be the troll and you three can be the billy goats gruff." It is a way of becoming involved in the story as we take on the roles of the characters in it and retell the narrative in our own words. Children who experience stories in this way are beginning to rework or rewrite the text. They imaginatively move the characters and events around to begin to create their own meaning from the story and, yet, still stay within the realm of the text itself.

Then there are the children whose experiences I have identified as transcending the text. These children who read and hear stories where their transaction with the text takes them beyond the boundaries of the text to the things in their world. This kind of experience seems to suggest a new kind of articulation about the stories. Children appear to be doing something quite different in their minds and imaginations concerning the literature. They are creating a bridge between their known experiences and the messages created by the author, which is what all readers do in the process of reading. But the meaning that these readers are creating involves going beyond the literal text or the story itself so that the readers begin to see the literature as a natural extension of their own life experiences. Karen's experience with reading **The Bus Ride** illustrates that even young children have the capacity to transcend the story in order to

see events in their own lives more clearly. Shelly's experiences with talking and writing about her feelings evoked from reading the story **Don't You Remember** and Tina's reasoning about the dilemma of the boy in **Somebody New** also illustrate this point.

We usually associate this kind of meaning making in reading literature with adult readers or much older children. We have been led to believe that young children are not ready to take on the point of view of others, or to soar beyond the bounds or egocentricism. Our knowledge of learning theories based on research studies of the developmental psychologists have sometimes prevented us from allowing children to explore these possibilities. Fortunately we are seeing changes in the way children's learning, and particularly language learning, has been viewed over the past years.

Margaret Donaldson, in her book **Children's Minds**, draws our attention very sharply to the importance of freeing children from the constraints that our traditional understanding of stages of learning have placed on teachers in the things we do with children. Donaldson (1978) points our that "During the past few years, research has yielded much new evidence about the basic skills of thought and language which children already possess when they come to school" (p. 8). Her research has prompted many recent studies on children learning language in the years before school.

In this chapter I have depicted children who are engaged in conversations about the stories they are reading and writing. We have seen their "different minds and different imaginations" at work as they experience literature in a variety of ways. The stories have provided the interactive situations, but the children have initiated

their own learning as they have experienced literature. They have demonstrated clearly that their capacity for reinterpreting past experiences and going to what Lindfors (1980) describes as the "beyonds": "beyond the present, beyond the personal, beyond the possible" (p. 246). Children have made this clear to us through their spontaneous comments and questions while hearing and reading stories.

The same things apply when children are creating their own literature by writing their own stories. In the following chapter I will focus on the way that children weave literature into their own writing.

CHAPTER 5

EXPERIENCING THE STORIES THROUGH WRITING:
THE INFLUENCE OF LITERATURE ON CHILDREN'S STORYWRITING

> By using words, the child orders his responses to the world, arranges them and in doing so reaps the benefit of grasping more of their meaning. But as response grows more complex they may sort themselves out only in written language.
>
> James Britton

Children who are surrounded with literature have a rich language resource to draw from when they are learning to write. Through the experience of reading stories, children can learn many of the things they need to know to become authors.

I knew the children truly enjoyed reading and hearing stories, but at times I wondered if they did not enjoy writing about them even more. Toward the end of the year the children requested a third writing centre because, as they so often reminded me, "everyone wants to write." One of the reasons why writing became so popular was that it was treated more as an art, a creative act to be experienced, rather than as a discipline that must be learned and mastered. And so the children went about their writing with the same vigour and freedom to create that they experienced in their play. My main concern was that they become confident in their ability to write and to experience writing in a way that would provide satisfaction and at the same time

help them to discover on their own just what written language could do. I wanted them to "find their own words and to get them into their own hands" as Freire says. In order to do this, they needed to begin by experiencing the writing materials and exploring different ways of expressing their ideas in written form. The more they engaged in this practice of writing, the more they grew in learning to write.

As the children continued their experiences with literature into their own writing, they wrote about the stories they were reading and they also created their own fictional stories based on what they had read and their personal experiences. They combined and integrated their knowledge of language, their personal lives, and their experiences with literature. Much of this writing strongly reflected the influence of literature on their work. The literature provided the stimulation and ideas for creating their own stories and while they were engaged in the writing they were developing a keen sense of authorship. This is evident in the case of Carla's stories.

Carla is already an author. Her story reflects her knowledge of how a story works, and how one is constructed. The story that she wrote toward the end of the school year illustrates the influence of literature on her writing. It also shows us how she has used other resources along with the literature to create such a story.

The Prince and the Princess

Chapter 1

Once upon a time there was a prince and a princess who loved each other. And they got married. One night they were in bed and they had a fight because the burgular alarm went off. The princess said "They took my jewellery." "It's not mine said the

prince. Then the prince said "What! they took my VCR. The princess said "I thought I told you to get rid of it., "They took my best panty hose" said the princess. "Well, who cares!" said the prince. "I care" said the princess. They split up and never saw each other again.

Chapter 2

One day the princess was walking to the grocery store and she saw the prince. "Hi" said the princess. "You look beautiful" "Thank you" said the prince. "You look beautiful too." And they kissed and got married again. They never got into a fight again.

Chapter 3

The prince and the princess went for a walk. They walked right through a rainbow and they didn't even notice.

In this particular story of Carla's, she clearly demonstrates how she has combined her experience of literature with her knowledge of written and spoken language along with her personal experiences in her everyday life.

This story is one of my favourites from the collection of stories that she wrote during the year, partly because it is a good story to read and also because it illustrates the way a young child draws on all her resources for writing. Another reason I find myself going back again to this particular story is because when I read it, I am reminded of the sparkle in Carla's eyes and her radiant smile when she read it to me. She was overjoyed with her achievement in creating such a story and in having the opportunity to share it with all of us.

The strong influence of literature is evident in her choice of a prince and princess as the people in her story. The conventions of fairy tales, such as "Once Upon a Time," and the happy ending as well as the story language, such as "who loved each other" are directly from all the stories she has heard. Her attempt to divide the story into sections called chapters has been learned from written stories, and her use of dialogue and the appropriate quotation marks tells us that she is learning about the way words that are spoken are distinguished from her own words. I think the term "they split up," which of course is a reflection of her spoken words, is a good example of the way she integrates the language of stories with her own language. Carla blends the things she knows from her personal experiences into her own fairy tale. She lives in a home where a VCR and expensive jewellery are commonly found items. Those of us who know Carla have heard about the frightening situation her family experienced recently when their home was actually broken into and robbed.

I have watched Carla develop as a writer from her first experiences at the beginning of the year where writing a story for Carla meant drawing a picture. She developed from this stage to printing one or two words, using her knowledge of letter-sound relationships to create inventive spelling. Her text became longer and longer as her ability to handle print increased with practise in writing stories. Carla came a long way from using a picture as the only means of conveying her message to this thoughtfully written story.

The pattern in Carla's writing development is very similar to most of the other children in the class; however, there is one

important difference. While the pattern is similar, the difference lies in the point every child was at in their writing when they came into my class and also their varied rate of growth throughout the year, which of course is different for each child. Children were learning different things about writing at different times while they were writing. One of the audio tapes that I recorded of children's conversations at the writing centre reveals many of the varied aspects of writing that children are learning individually, yet they are all engaged in writing together. The following are some of the comments that I selected from the conversation to illustrate this point:

Ken: I'm not going to use "Once upon a time" in this story, because it's a really true story about my holidays.

Karen: I'm writing about The Three Bears Story, but I'm going to call Goldilocks "Shirley" because that's my sister's name.

Jason: This story doesn't make any sense. I can hardly read it now. I don't know what to do.

Shelly: How do you spell coffee? Let's see, hmm ... K-f-f-i. How do you spell porcupine?

Rick: (In answer to Shelly) Why don't you get the book we read yesterday, it has porcupine in it.

Ken: Hey, I'm inside my story. Karen, can I put you in it too?

These children are learning a number of different things while they are writing. Ken and Shelly are learning some of the conventions of print and story language. Shelly is learning to use inventive spelling which will lead her closer to conventional spelling. Karen is rewriting a story she already knows in order to include someone close to her inside it. Both Karen and Ken are learning that they can

manipulate the text and change things around to suit them as authors, for they are in control of their writing. Jason's comment points out how children who know the way stories are put together to make sense can recognize writing that is unclear. When Jason is introduced to the idea of editing, he will have a better understanding of why we make changes in what we have written.

It was becoming increasingly evident that the children were growing as writers and that writing was very important to them. It was an enjoyable experience and one that brought a great deal of satisfaction and pride in what they were doing. These children wanted to write, to do creative things with words because they knew they had something worthwhile to say. They knew that even their early attempts to create print in order to say something would be appreciated by others. When children have this kind of confidence in themselves and the people around them, they are not afraid to risk making mistakes and to experiment with new ways of using print and playing with ideas to create a deeper meaning through the act of writing.

These things apply to both reading and writing and when children are learning through their own mistakes and their own experiences they are better able to develop their own strategies for learning to read and write. While it may be helpful for teachers to suggest particular strategies that have worked for others, the most useful strategies for children to know are the ones that they discover work best for them. These strategies usually emerge for children at the time they are needed or when children are actually reading and writing. Like so many things that children need to know to be successful in learning to read and write, the strategies are best learned when the occasion

demands them, and often without the influence of direct teaching. Reading and writing is a collaborative process that involves children learning from their own practice, learning with each other and with the teacher.

In order to help children to become better writers, I tried to create an atmosphere within the classroom which told the children it was important for me to know them and for them to know me as a person. This kind of intimate and honest relationship is essential in building the feelings of trust that are so necessary for teaching and learning that involves dialogue and artistic endeavour as part of the learning to read and write process. I was concerned with providing writing and reading events that had purpose and meaning for children and at the same time I was consciously aware of the expectations that came out of the administrative context of which I was a part. I tried to see these things from the child's point of view as much as possible.

Sometimes in our planning for writing we forget how much time is needed at one session for children to get into the writing task, to think about what they are writing even before picking up a pen and applying it to paper. I was reminded of this concern when I recently visited a classroom where all the children were busily engaged in writing--all except for one little girl who was busy playing with her shoelaces instead of writing. When I asked her about her writing, she remarked, "I don't like writing because you just get started and you have to pack up and go to the gym." In my classroom I feel much more relaxed about children spending a lot of time with writing, because I

remember how important writing can be for all aspects of literacy learning.

I was also concerned that I learn to recognize what children know and what they are attempting to do in their writing. Only with this knowledge would I be able to effectively encourage and support children in what they were doing. For instance, when Ken placed a period at the end of every second word in his story, he was attempting to use punctuation, he just did not know where to use it. It would have been defeating for him if my response had been to draw his attention to the fact that his "dots" were used incorrectly rather than letting him know I realized what he was trying to do. In his next piece of writing we could probably work together on appropriate places for this kind of punctuation, because I now know that Ken sees a need to learn something of these conventions.

To encourage children from the point they are at to where we would like them to go requires a continual balancing between what Margaret Meek describes as "viewing the task from behind the child's head" and looking ahead with the eyes of the teacher. It involves asking the kind of questions and making the kind of comments that will provide this direction. This is not an easy task, but one that is possible to develop with experience and an increased awareness and sensitivity to the child's point of view. Usually questions such as "I wonder what happened next?" or "Would that be OK if the boy never got his hair cut?" will encourage and elicit more fluency and detail in a child's writing than a response like "I told you before ..." or "that's not what we are supposed to write about."

There are many factors involved in how well children learn to read and write. One of the most important things I have discovered about language learning is that it does not take place in a vacuum or in isolation. It is a social and human event that grows and flourishes through interaction with others. Children learn language in this way from the moment they are born. If we take our clues from this knowledge to plan for literacy learning events within the classroom, language learning can flourish there as well.

These principles apply to children learning to read and write in the beginning years at school. They need to talk to each other about the books they are reading and about the stories they are writing. This is one of the reasons I organized the classroom into centres for writing so children would have the opportunity to talk and learn from each other while they were writing. The following conversation describes some of the ways this interaction takes place at the writing centre.

"What are you writing about, Karen?" asked Rick. Karen replied, "I don't know yet, I haven't thought." Karen was sitting chin in hands, chewing on her pen as she stared not at her blank paper but out of the window near the centre. "I think I'm going to write a story about my friend who moved away and I miss him," she eventually commented. "Why did he move?" asked another little girl sitting beside Karen. "Did he go to this school?" "Did I know him?" These were questions that children really wanted to know, not questions they thought they should ask because they thought Karen needed to know what to put into her story. Karen read her story to the class from the author's chair, later in the day.

This is Robbie. He was my friend and he moved to B.C. I didn't want him to move, but he's probably alright and I'm not going to worry about him anymore.

Apparently Karen had not only been missing her friend, but she had been worrying about how he had adjusted to his new surroundings. When I talked to her about the writing, she told me that she "got thinking about her friend when I was reading the story **The Dragon and the Mouse** which was about a verbal mix-up that caused the mother in the story to worry about her child. This, in turn, had caused Karen to reflect on her friend's experience of having moved to another city.

I asked Karen if she had thought of writing a letter to her friend, and she replied, "This story is a letter, I'm going to mail it to him." Karen was not yet concerned about matching the form of what she had written with the purpose of sending a message through the mail. The knowledge of the function of language influencing the form it takes is important for teachers to know; but, when children are at this early stage of writing, it is more important for them to find satisfaction in writing for themselves first and then gradually understand the value of an appropriate form to accompany their message.

Karen mentioned the story of **The Dragon and the Mouse** as being the original source for her writing about her friend Robbie. Hearing the story drew her attention to her own feelings about her friend moving away and prompted her to write about this experience in her own story.

Many of the children wrote about the stories they were reading or hearing. I discovered that not all children were using literature in

the same way, nor did the children deal with it in the same way in all their writing. As I observed the writing I began to see patterns in the way they were using literature. These patterns were similar to the three kinds of experiences I described when children were reading and hearing literature. Again, I have called these three kinds of experiences literal, role playing, and transcending the text.

Literal

Children who were using literature in this way as a basis for their own writing tended to stay within the boundaries of the text they had read. They often transferred a character or an event directly from the story to their own writing. Their story usually consisted of one or two statements about the literal plot, such as Allan's writing indicated after he had heard the story of **Albert's Toothache**. He wrote the sentence "This is a grandmother sitting in her worrying chair" underneath his picture. After hearing the story **Where The Wild Things Are**, Stephen drew a picture of a person in a boat and printed on his picture "This is Max. He is in a canoe." For these children a particular part of the story caught their attention and they have used this focus to concentrate on in their writing. Children's first attempts at story writing often begin this way because they are at the beginning stages of handling print and one or two statements are all they can handle at this time.

However, some children who are very skilled at printing continued to write in this way. Their storywriting consisted of a retelling of a particular story in their own words, but with the intention of

remaining as close to the original text as possible. Carla had heard the story, **The Velveteen Rabbit.** She obviously enjoyed the story while she was hearing it because at the end of the story she said, "That's the best story I've heard." Later she decided to write her own tale of the Velveteen rabbit in this way.

Velveteen Rabbit

Once upon a time there was a boy. And he had a birthday. And he got a toy rabbit. One day the boy was ill and everything in his room had to be burnt. He was better. The next day a fairy came to change the toy bunny into a really bunny.

The end.

Carla's writing reveals some of the things she has learned about the conventions of storytelling. She uses the same title as the original story and begins and ends with what she knows is usually present in stories, such as "Once Upon a Time" and "The End." Carla has focused on retelling the story which she has read, and so the people and the events in her writing closely resemble the original text. She has selected what she considers to be the important elements in the story and has ordered these events sequentially as she remembers them.

It is interesting to note that even when different children are retelling the same story in their writing, the particular events or people they choose to write about are very seldom the same. This is illustrated in two shorter pieces of writing that were written by Angela and Carla at another time. They decided to write about the story of Snow White. They chose particular parts of the story that were of interest to them and drew a picture first and then printed their own words underneath their pictures.

Angela: I like the part where the witch gave her the poison apple.

Carla: Snow White had lots of friends. They liked her. They were dwarfs.

Retelling a story, whether orally or in writing, is an important way of sharing the enthusiasm of the reading experience with others. It is particularly important for children who are learning to read and write because it serves as a way of confirming the pattern of how stories are put together. The retelling acts as a way for children to internalize these patterns and this knowledge can be a valuable resource for their own reading and writing.

The children's writing that I have described indicates a more literal interpretation of the stories they were reading. This is the particular kind of interpretation they chose to focus on for their writing at this time, but it does not mean that at other times during the reading experience these same children were not engaged in a different way with the text.

Role Playing

Much of the children's writing that I describe as role playing suggests that they had selected a story from the literature to write about but instead of retelling the story by following the pattern of events they had heard in the original text, they reshaped and rewrote parts of the story so that they included themselves as characters and the stories took on a "part me/part you" story structure. It is similar to the way that children sometimes "act out stories" when

playing, such as "You be the wicked queen and I'll be the princess." When children write in this way they are usually writing with more feeling and fantasy. They are often changing the stories to resemble their own situations more closely. In other words, they are beginning to integrate their personal experiences and some of the people they know into the stories they have heard.

A favourite story of Allan's, **Lyle and the Birthday Party,** inspired him to write the following story where he and his family entered the house of Lyle, on East 88 Street.

Lyle's Birthday Party

Lyle had a birthday party. My brother and I were fighting at our house on East 88 St. My brother punched me and it hurt. My brother lives in the house on 88 St. He was alone in the house and he fell down. My Dad burned his hand on the stove in the house on 88 St. I was scared.

Allan is describing the events that happened in his story as taking place at the address of **Lyle Lyle the Crocodile** which is one of several books in the series by Waber. He has integrated into his writing some of the experiences he has had with his brother and his Dad and he is taking on the character of someone who lives in this fictional house with his family. He has become a participant with the characters inside the story.

Sometimes when children wrote stories and placed themselves inside, they announced ahead of time, while thinking out their story, that they were going to use this strategy deliberately and for a purpose. After Angela had read the story of **Jack and the Beanstalk** she told me that she was going to write a story about Jack and that

she was going to put herself inside, so "I can feel really scared." Angela worked very hard with forming letters and words to create a lengthy story, which began:

> It grew and grew until it was humungus. I climbed it and when I reached the top there was a castle. I knocked at the door and a giant Mom was there. She said, "You'd better come back, I'm going to be busy washing my hair and then we are going to have supper." I hid in the closet, I was almost sick I was so scared. I got the gold and climbed down the beanstalk and showed Mom the gold. The next day I climbed up again. I got more gold and then I quickly went down the beanstalk.

Let us imagine Angela's experience as she entered into her story.

When Angela entered into the story of **Jack and the Beanstalk**, she became Jack. As she climbed up the beanstalk she felt the same excitement and fear of the unknown that Jack experienced as he climbed upward into the sky. She saw the castle and the giant Mom through Jack's eyes. "The giant Mom was there." But suddenly her writing indicated that she was seeing the giant Mom through her own eyes and her own experiences with Moms. "You'd better come back, I'm going to be busy washing my hair and then we are going to have supper." Then Angela became Jack once again. "I hid in the closet, I was almost sick I was so scared."

For the rest of this part of her story, Angela played the role of Jack as "she quickly went down the beanstalk." Writing in this way allowed Angela to become the narrator and the author. For Angela, writing in this role playing way had allowed her reading of the story as well as the writing to become very "real" and alive. Even though

children were "making text" and creating meaning, their writing indicated a literal or role playing experience when their creations were based on and bounded by the text.

Children enjoy the feeling of being someone or in some place other than where they are. Reading literature offers children an invitation to enter an imaginative or "secondary world" to experience something other than themselves. Britton (1982) suggests that we all welcome the chance to improvise on our representations of the world basically because we never cease to long for more lives than the ones we have.

Transcending the Text

When children were writing in this way they seemed to be doing something quite different in the way they were using literature to shape their writing. This third literary experience, which I call transcending the text, and which may subsume the other two--literal and role playing, involves a going beyond, or "through" a literary text, leaving it behind to read and rewrite one's own self and world. Transcending the text seems to involve a coming to know or to understand in new ways for the children. While the themes and issues they wrote about reflected the literature they had read, the children had taken the original story and somehow transcended the characters and events in order to link the text that was read with their personal experiences.

Many of the things the children included in their writing indicated a strong understanding and feeling about the story and of

the underlying message that was often embedded within the text. This kind of writing often indicated an emerging awareness of self in relation to others in their world, especially the people closest to them in their lives.

Angela's parents were separated. Her father lived in another city and she visited him on weekends. Her shuttling back and forth and trying to maintain contact with her father was both important and troublesome for her. Charlotte Zolotow's **If You Listen** apparently provided her with new insight to her situation. The book points out that if we really listen to our inner voices we can often hear things that are too far away or too quiet to be heard normally. On the same day that I read the book to the class, Angela wrote in her journal.

If you are lonesome,
you have love.
If you listen carefully
You can hear your father's voice talking to you.

I mentioned earlier the importance of teachers knowing children in order to understand what they are attempting to do in their writing. This particular piece would not have held the same meaning for me if I had not understood Angela's situation.

There were other stories which children heard which led them to write about their story experience as it related to very personal experiences in their own lives. I remember when we read the beautiful tale **The Happy Prince** and how amazed the children were to realize that such a love could exist between people and how sad they could become at the swallow's death. After we read the story together, many of the

children wanted to talk about it. The kind of meaning the story had for each child was, of course, very different.

Tina talked about birds generally and asked why birds flew south in winter. Stephen asked if statues could really cry. But the particular writing that I will mention that followed the reading of the story centred on the notion of death. Susan and Jennifer both had recently experienced the death of a grandparent and they wrote their own stories in which they remembered that experience.

Susan wrote:

> I had to go to my Grama's house one day. My Grampa died. I was sad. I went to the funeral. I miss him. I love him.

And Jennifer:

> People that Die
>
> Once upon a time I saw some people die and my grandmother died and I was sad and I buried her. Then my grandfather was dead and I was sad again and I buried him beside my grandmother.
>
> The end.

I shared both these pieces of writing with Susan and Jennifer's parents; they were deeply moved. Jennifer's mother mentioned that Jennifer had said very little about the death of her grandfather and she added "I wondered if she really cared."

I think Murray (1984) is right when he says that sometimes we write to find out what it all means, for by writing we can stand back from ourselves and see significance in what is close to us.

The children whose writing indicated their transcending the literary text and going beyond the story itself to rewrite their own experiences show us the tremendous capacity that even young children

have for experiencing literature in this way. Their writing demonstrates clearly the link that children have made with stories they are reading and a part of their lives.

As the children continued to write, many of the stories they wrote were not linked directly to particular stories they had read. The influence of literature on their writing stretched even beyond their response to a particular reading experience and allowed them to begin to create their own fictional stories. These stories were based on the things they had learned from literature, such as the way a story is constructed, but were also based on the kinds of personal experiences they were living through, and the issues they were hearing about through television and their association with adults. They wrote about themes and issues that are often very real concerns for children and their writing revealed their search to understand some of the things in their lives. Scott was one of several children in the class who attended a day care centre after school. He sometimes had a lot of trouble sorting out the way he felt about his experiences there, and particularly about the people he was with in this situation. One day he wrote a story about his experience with day care.

The Day Care Car

The day care car is really neat because today only me and a kindergartener, her name is Janie and she is very nice because she never ever hurts anybody at the day care. The day care teachers aren't nice to me and Janie because they do not see us at the day care. When it is home time at school, when the children are out of our classroom and I hug Mrs. McConaghy I go

out to look for Norma's car "I am here, I am here" she called. And I really get nervous when she calls that. And when I go to the day care I really felt very very nervous when we go out to play at the back yard at the day care because they scream and they holler very very much and I get a headache every day.

Other children wrote about issues that were beyond their personal experience, but issues they had been exposed to through television and talk with older students and adults. Exposure to concepts such as sex and war often led some children to talk about these things in class and to write about them. While it is important for children to choose topics and write about the things they know, it is also very important to remember that writing is also a way of coming "to know." Writing can serve as a tool to craft and shape the things we know about in a surface way so we can see them differently and understand them in a new way. Graves (1983) has pointed out that children get discouraged when they choose a topic to write about and then discover that they do not know enough about it to "feel a sense of accomplishment." This may be true for older students who are at a different stage in their writing development, but I think this concern can be misunderstood if we forget that with young children we need to be less concerned about the product and more concerned about the child experiencing the act of writing expressively. My experience has been that it is not the intention of the child to deal effectively with a chosen topic, but to engage in a creative endeavour for its own sake, in the same way that they engage in art.

Doug and Carla have not experienced war and their understanding of the whole notion of war is limited to what they have heard and seen in movies and television. But like so many children they talked about war and killing, and acted out these things in their play. However, I suspect they were thinking more seriously about the whole notion of war when they were prompted to write the following stories. Both Doug and Carla were drawing on things they did know about from their personal experiences and from literature and combined these things with their ideas of how wars might begin and some of the tragic outcomes.

Doug:

About Wars

There once was a little boy and he was lonely and he found a friend and his friend had some bubble gum. The friend with no gum wanted some bubble gum. When the boy with the gum left the room, I took the gum and went home. He put it in a secret spot and was back in no time. He phoned and was surprised and came over and they got into a little fight and that's how war began. And then they got ammunition and tanks and killed everyone.

Carla:

The Sad Porcupine.

Once upon a time there was a forest and a porcupine lived in the forest. His mother and the porcupine child lived all by themselves together because the father porcupine was in a porcupine war and he got killed by an animal on the other team. And this is what happened after he got killed. The ambulance drove him to the hospital and he had his operation and in the

middle of his operation he died. Every night the mother and the child porcupine always said their prayers and sometimes they said little notes before they went to sleep. The next day he wanted to play with somebody but his mother was busy and she let her porcupine child go for a walk in the woods and she met bunny and bunny was looking for someone to play with.

It is difficult for young children to understand abstract concepts before they have had direct experience. In this case, when the concept is something as horrifying as war, none of us would wish to deepen the learning of this concept through direct experience. But one of the ways that children can deal with many of the concepts they do not understand and yet are exposed to is through imaginative play and imaginative expressive writing. As children grow and mature they are better able to handle these concepts more effectively. Britton (1982) says that "children's writing reflects this development." He suggests that much of the writing that children do when they are six or seven or eight, is more like poetry than prose in that it is a gloss upon experience rather than a formulation of it.

Children and Poetry

As the year went on I began to see the effects of my reading more poetry to the children on the format that they were choosing to write their stories. When I presented poetry to the children I did not emphasize the difference between form in the poetry and the prose we had been reading. I presented poems as another form of literature to be read and enjoyed. Some of the poems I selected had been written

especially for children, but others I chose to read because they were some of my favourites and I wanted to share them with the children so they could absorb the rhythm and flow of language through hearing them read. We read nursery rhythms, A.A. Milne, Robert Louis Stevenson's collection of verses, and even some of the works of Emily Dickinson. The children also enjoyed the contemporary work of Dennis Lee, Bill Martin, and Shel Silverstein. The reading of poetry together seldom evoked discussion. We simply read and enjoyed.

It was not long after when I began to see much of the children's writing entitled "Poem" at the beginning of their stories. They were making the distinction between their prose writing and their new-found poetry in this way. This distinction seemed to be an important one for the children to make and for some time they continued to integrate their poetry writing with their writing of stories. At one point, they decided to designate one of the three writing centres "for poetry writers only" and the following "Poems" were written at this centre.

Janet: I Like Things

I like things
that can walk
and I know one
that can walk - Me.

Brian: A Dog - Poem

I saw a dog and
I walked with him.

Ken: A Poem Outer Space

When people are up on the
moon, the earth looks bigger
than the moon looks from down here.

Scott: Peanut Butter and Jam Sandwiches

I like peanut butter and jam sandwiches
because I like the peanut butter and the jam
but I Hate the Bread.

Karen: It's night time all over the world
and everyone is asleep
It's dark
Are you Asleep?
Good night.

Robert: A Poem

I had no money
Cause when I got it
I always run to the store.

Stephen: Dragonflies - A Poem

Dragonflies can fly very fast
Very fast
Very fast
I never saw one.

Ken : Night

When the moon and the stars are out
And I am walking in the night
I feel cold.
When I walk by a house and the lights
are on it makes me feel warm inside.

When the children identified their work as being poetry, either in writing or when reading it to the class, they were very seldom concerned with trying to create rhythm or rhyme. Rather, their writing of poetry reflected what a poem indicated to them at this point in their learning. They had a sense that writing in this way was somewhat different from prose, but the difference for most children seemed to be that poems were shorter than some stories and, as one little boy told me, "Poems are stories that tell about just one thing." This knowledge and the fact that the word "poem" was included

in the title seemed to be all that they required at this time to enjoy writing "poetry."

Writing in this way seemed to satisfy their need to say the things that were important to them. Or, in the words of Britton (1982), "Poetry arises, indeed, when something needs to be said and the need is satisfied by the mere saying" (p. 14). Poetry is an important part of literature that children need as part of their repretoire. They need to engage in it and savour it and grow up with it.

Donald Graves (1983) talks about the importance of literature in the lives of children who are learning to write. He says that "All children need literature and children who are authors need it even more". He stresses this importance, not only because it provides, as he says, "drama, problem solving and precise language, but because children's literature is written by authors who know children and write with a different voice than that found in textbooks." I found that many children were hearing the voices of authors very clearly when they were reading stories. And as children continued to read and write simultaneously, our discussions sometimes turned to the authors of the stories they were hearing (p.67).

Gaining a Sense of Authorship

The children who were authors wanted to know more about the people who were the authors of so many of the books we were enjoying. We looked at the photographs often displayed on the jacket of books to see what this person who was the storyteller looked like. If there

was any information written about the author under the photograph I read it to the class. Whenever I could, I relayed any little personal ancedote that I knew about a particular author. I told the children about Robert Louis Stevenson and how many of his stories had been written while he was ill in bed. Stephen, who had been very interested in Stevenson's stories and verses, seemed genuinely upset when he discovered that this favourite author had died many years ago. The authors became very real people to these children. Simon wrote the following entry in his Journal.

Stephen: All about by Robert Louis Stevenson writes my favourite poems and he is a very good author.

Stephen

Sometimes if one book reminded them of another, they would ask, as Ken did, "Which book was written first, cause I was thinking that maybe that author got his ideas from the other author." It was mainly this interest in all authors, including themselves as authors, that led children to an increased awareness of a sense of audience in the writing of professional books and, more importantly, in their own writing. They revealed this awareness in different ways in their writing.

Karen involved her audience by asking questions throughout her story:

ALL ABOUT CATS AND DOGS AT THE POUND

Part 1: The cat and the dog made friends but they were lonely. What are they going to do?

Part 2: One day they wrote a letter to another friend, it was a cat. They played happily. Then somebody bought the dog. Then they played sadly. Would you like to have a pet?

Jennifer listed questions for the reader at the end of her story:

Jennifer: Once upon a time I was two. I went into my mothers room and broke things. Then I was three and I played with her makeup. When I was five I put on her shoes. I got in trouble.

1. What did you do at two?

2. What would you do when you were five?

Ken decided to add a comforting message for his readers:

Once there was a dragon who breathed fire. He was fierce and dangerous. He would kill.

P.S. If you ever do go into a cave, don't worry because he is really quite nice.

All these children were attempting in a very explicit way to engage their readers. Some children wrote more generally about authors and what they did, as Rick's story reveals.

Stories are written by authors. People who write stories like to write them and read them.

Doug wrote: When you write you learn to spell and you can become a famous author and if the book is great you can get money.

This kind of talk and writing about authors reveals a turning point in children's understanding of one of the essentials of becoming a writer. Children are learning that real books are written by real people, people who are involved in their writing and want to share their work with others. In other words they are learning about people with whom they feel they have something in common. The children in my

class who have been learning to write are very involved in their writing and they too want to share their writing with others. They have become confident in what they are doing and they perceive themselves as writers. As Karen remarked when someone asked her if she would like to meet a real author someday, "Yes, but we are authors--we've been writing for a long time."

CHAPTER 6

KNOWING JASON

Children tell stories about their everyday lives in many different ways to express the meaning they give to their lived experiences. They are natural storytellers in the things they say, the way they move and act, and in the way they are. And if we observe these things carefully we may learn how a child sees and understands some of his experiences from his point of view. Those of use who are teachers hold a special invitation to share some of the experiences and insights of the children we teach. We can look ahead with very little difficulty and know the kind of person we hope the child will become, but in order to help him take the necessary steps in that direction we need to know what the child is like at the beginning. It is only then that we can become clearer ourselves in the things we say and do as teachers and learners.

When I first met Jason, one of my six year old students, I had no idea that he would play such an important part in helping me to understand more clearly some of the things in the world of a child. Through his stories he shared with me some of the ways that he viewed and tried to make sense of the things that influenced his learning and growth as a person. He displayed the kind of meaning that he gives to his curriculum through his actions, his writing, and in our conversations.

It was the first day of school in September when I first saw Jason standing near the door of the classroom hugging his orange plastic lunch pail. Unlike most of the other new children Jason had not come to school with his parents but he had been dropped off by a teacher from the Happiness Factory Daycare Center where he spent long hours before school in the morning and after school until his parents picked him up on their way home. I found a seat for Jason and I could not help but notice how pale and rather unhappy he looked in his torn jean jacket and crumpled baseball cap. It was only later as I came to know him that I began to understand why he often felt so sad.

In one of our early conversations we talked about that first day of school, and Jason remarked:

> I remember I was too scared to even think, cause I didn't know what you would have to do in here or what you would be allowed to use or anything. Like I thought you would read those books but I thought only the teacher would get to use those felt pens at the writing centre.

Many children worry about meeting the expectations of the teacher. They come to school already busy trying to "read" the teacher even before they can read print. It is often difficult for them to interpret a new situation clearly including the things teachers say and do. Jason encountered this kind of situation soon after the school year began.

It was early in the afternoon when we were getting organized for center time when Jason called out from the back of the room in a voice filled with panic, "I can't write a story. I can't spell and anyway I've got no imagination."

Jason was responding to a request I had made that he go to the writing center with a small group of children to begin writing a story. He had not had any school experience before entering Grade One, but even if he had, it may not have helped him to understand that drawing a picture was writing a story in my classroom. It would seem that Jason had not understood my intentions and he had interpreted writing a story to mean literally that. However, I too had not understood something even more important. I had failed to realize just how my request might appear to him, from his point of view. This event reminded me of just how easy it is for teachers to forget that the child's perspective may be very different from that of the adult, and that adult words can convey a different kind of meaning to a child who is at a different point in his use of language. Paulo Freire (1985) reminds us that "our tendency as teachers is to start from the point at which we are and not from the point at which the students are" (p. 15).

Jason like most of the children we meet in their early years of schooling are still spontaneous and eager to show us the point at which they are, if we allow them to initiate their own learning. We can build on their experiences as natural learners by observing what they are trying to do and by responding to these things in a way that will help and encourage them to learn even more.

Sometimes Jason and I would talk when he came in early to help tidy up the room or prepare materials. We were at the painting center mixing up jars of fresh paint. I asked Jason if he would like to put on a paint shirt so he would not get paint on his clothes.

"These olds things," he said, "they are practically rags now." He held up his leg to show me the huge holes in the knees of his pants.

"Maybe Mom could mend those," I said.

"No, she would never have the time. Look at my shoes," he went on.

I saw that his toes were almost out, but I made no further suggestions about his clothes.

"What do you think of the painting center Jason?" I asked.

"It's good, not as good as the writing center, but if you want to paint and learn to mix colours it's good. For me, I think painting pictures is a waste of time, I'd rather write stories and only make pictures to go with the story if the picture fits. I'd rather make words."

Jason did not spend much time at the painting center but he did make a lot of words at the writing center in his scribbler called **My Stories**, and in his Journal. I knew that he was very aware that print conveyed meaning and that he was beginning to use it purposefully to communicate his ideas to others. When he did paint a picture he usually "made" words somewhere on the painting the way he did on the one that was hanging to dry above the easel. It was a simple painting, several strong strokes going in different directions in blue and brown. Jason had entitled the picture "The Storm" and underneath he had printed with the brush:

"This is an awful storm and I think nature can feel."

"Do you know where you got the idea for this painting?" I asked.

"I got thinking about it when you were reading that book about Wonder and The Storm," he replied.

Jason was referring to Robert McCloskey's book **A Time of Wonder** that I had read to the class a few days before. I was a little surprised to know that Jason had been inspired by this particular book as it was a very different kind of story from the ones that he had shown an interest in before. It is a story that takes the reader to coastal islands during the summer where nature is experienced in all its force and gentleness. The children who are visiting the islands leave at the end of summer to return to school "a little bit sad ... It is a time of quiet wonder."

Jason's experience with this particular book confirmed my feeling that not all children experience literature in the same way. **A Time of Wonder** spoke personally to this child's need and desire for quietude in his life. As we continued to talk about the story he told me about other kinds of books that he would not read to children, if he were the teacher. "If I were a teacher I would never read books that got everyone all excited and noisy. I would read calm beautiful stories that made me feel quiet."

I looked forward to talking to Jason again about some of the times when he does feel quiet and calm. We had that kind of opportunity a few days later in the school library. We began to look at a book together.

"I thought we could read **Emily's Bunch** again," he said.

Jason chuckled as he looked at the picture of Emily dressed up in a pillow case with a face of a monster crayoned on the front.

"She was smart at the end when she fooled her brother. Anyway you have to trick people sometimes especially if they are bigger than you. Hey, hey, I never noticed all these things in this book when I read it before. That always happens to me."

"What happens?" I asked.

"Well, when I read a book for the first time I read it too fast and then I miss a lot of things, or if there are a lot of people and noise around I don't see things. Like here we are in the library and no one else is here and I'm just seeing those globes on top of the bookcase. I never knew they were there before."

Jason knew that he could see things more clearly when he was quiet and given time. He often expressed his frustration at being rushed from one place to another. He wrote about his feelings in his journal: "My mom gets mad at me cause I'm slow and I can't hurry up and rush out so she's late for work."

It is not only working parents that are guilty of rushing children about. Sometimes in our effort to cover the curriculum or produce readers and writers, teachers try to hurry children through the stages of language development by teaching them about language in stories and books rather than allowing them to grow through living and using it.

I wondered where Jason did find quiet places to perhaps sit and think and figure things out.

"Well, not at school, at least not in the lunch room," he said. "It's really loud in there. There's screaming and everything going on. And it sure isn't quiet at Daycare, especially in the van when you are driving there. But I always get in first so I can sit next to

the window cause I don't like to be squished in the middle. Oh, I know one place I feel quiet and that's in bed. I sleep a lot because I'm tired all the time."

"Didn't you write about that this morning? I asked.

"Want me to get it and read it to you?"

Jason returned to the library with his writing book. He read his story: "I have been feeling sad today and I had no one to play with at recess. It's boring at home when Mom and Dad watch TV. I sleep a lot but I don't like to sleep sometimes."

When he finished reading he said, "Did you notice how I wrote about how I was feeling sad at the beginning of the story? Well, that's because one time when I didn't know what to write in my journal, you said, why don't you write about how you feel?"

Then he asked about my own writing.

"Do you write a lot at home?"

"Yes, a lot," I said.

"Oh, and you probably write a lot about how you feel too."

Jason was developing as a writer who understood that writing involved talking and sharing not only the content of the "story" but sharing the process of writing with another writer. He was writing about his personal experience with loneliness, an issue in his life that he was trying to sort out.

"What do you mean when you say it's boring at home when Mom and Dad watch TV?" I asked.

"Well, you see, I sit at the table to eat while they eat in front of the TV, and that's boring."

"Why don't you sit with them to eat?"

"I do on special 'vacations' but we just got a new couch a few weeks ago, and I might spill something on it. And if they sat at the table, they couldn't see their shows, could they?"

Jason was using his own narrative to organize his feelings and thoughts about a situation that was creating conflict. On the one hand he had a sense that it was a logical explanation but he seemed to be confused because it just did not "feel" right. It did not seem to "fit" his idea of what he thought a family should be like.

As Jason and I continued to talk he revealed his fantasy about family life and about himself if he were a father.

"Well, if I were a Dad," he began, "I would like us to sit and just talk about things like you and me are doing right now and I'd ask them lots of things."

"What kinds of things?"

"I'd ask them what they did at school, like did you finish any puzzles lately, because I would probably be into puzzles myself. Then I'd ask them what they liked best at school and they would probably say writing because I'm into writing myself."

While Jason's story tells us the way he imagines things might be and the way he would like them to be, he also reminds us of the importance of talking with each other in order to construct our own meaning of things in our lives. His narrative also reveals his understanding of knowing another person by imaginatively placing oneself in their place.

Just as Jason found it difficult to understand the way his family organized their lives, he experienced similar kinds of difficulties in accepting many of the rules within the school system. One of our

conversations focused on his recent snowball fights in the school yard, which was against the rules.

"Kids are such babies," he said. "They cry when they are hit by a snowball or if they get pushed down. When I get pushed, I just push back harder even if he is bigger than me."

Sometimes Jason thought up his own ways of getting around the rules. On one occasion in winter when the children were reminded that they could not stay in for recess unless they brought a note from home, Jason produced his own note written on a crumpled piece of paper, the size of a gum wrapper.

"This is all that is left," he said, "the other part fell in the snow."

Jason often told me that he did not think that rules were necessary at school but they were important at other places such as summer camp.

"You've got to have rules there, because a person could get drowned or lost in the woods, but that could never happen at school."

I wondered if Jason saw the Daycare Center as another rulebound institution, within which he was expected to function.

"Do you find Daycare like school Jason, or is it more like home?" I asked him.

"Daycare is different from school," he said. "They don't have any water fountains or desks and you don't have to listen there because it's not a place you go to learn anything."

"Why do children go to daycare then?" I asked.

"Well I think they put you there for someone to take care of you and they want you to have fun too. But I mostly rest there and think about other things."

"Do you ever think about school when you are resting?"

"Sometimes I do. I think about what we are going to do the next day, like what I'll write about. Sometimes I'm right and sometimes I'm wrong. But mostly I think about all the time I have to stay at school and then how I'm too tired to play when I get home."

As Jason was describing his "resting and thinking" at the Daycare, it was easy for me to imagine a scene where he was stretched out on the floor in the middle of a group of active children running back and forth, stepping over him as he lay staring into space. This was a familiar scene in our classroom when Jason was present, for it seemed that he had found his own way of closing out the noise and confusion around him when he entered his own world of dreams. Sometimes these dreams were shaped and illuminated by Jason's literary experience with stories and books. I remember reading Bernard Waber's **Lyle and the Birthday Party** to the class one day. It was not long after the story ended that Jason told me his own story about his sixth birthday party:

> I turned six for my birthday party on Saturday. We celebrated, me and three other friends. We all went skating, counting my Mom and Dad it would be four adults. Chip and Elsie were their names. Mom and Dad mostly wanted grownups, I mostly wanted kids. I never said anything about Chip and Elsie cause they just wanted them to come.

At first, hearing this personal narrative seemed to have little connection with the actual story by Waber. In fact some teachers might find this kind of response irrelevant and a distraction from the story. But Jason was reading literature well, for he was transcending the text in a way that raised his awareness of his own experience. Many children who enter fully into the story when they are reading in a way that they become personally involved, have often been children who have been able to read, and introduced to books at home. However, Jason told me that his parents rarely read books with him, at least not in the way we read at school.

"They don't know about authors and stuff," he said. "It's only the books at school that have authors. The ones at home are different. Anyway, I don't get read to much, but it would always be Mom if I did. Sometimes she makes me read out loud too, because she says it's good for your brain and helps your brain to think more and you'll get smarter."

"You mean that reading is good for your brain, like drinking milk helps you to grow?"

Jason laughed at my absurd analogy. He continued,

"And she makes me sound out words I don't know."

"Does that help?" I asked.

"No," Jason stated very emphatically, "and I just keep telling her that I can figure it out by what makes sense, but she won't believe me, so I just mostly read by myself."

Jason was getting two different views of reading. The view at home was providing him with the idea that reading was something that he must learn to do, which is difficult but necessary, and yet he is

not seeing anyone around him doing it for enjoyment. He is being told how to read as though by telling, he is going to learn. However, Jason has learned to compromise between what he knows works for him and what his parents want him to do and so he "just mostly reads by himself." While at school he is learning that reading can be fun, and that it can provide him with stories in real books by real authors. Jason's early introduction to authors and the whole concept of authorship seemed to fascinate him to the point that he identified with authors very quickly when he began to engage in his own writing. I asked him where he got his ideas for his own stories: "Usually from my head but sometimes from books we read like that one I wrote about 'The Mouse and the Boy'." I got that idea from the story of the **Mouse and Tim.**

> Once upon a time there was a little mouse. He was as small as a bee and he was as furry as a poodle. It was a mouse. A boy had him as a pet. One day he ran away. He came back in a week, the boy was happy. They lived happily ever after. The end.

I was interested to know that Jason was aware that many of his ideas for writing were rooted in the literature that he read independently and that we read together. He was writing everyday now, and I began to notice that his writing book was always out on his desk and that he used every spare minute to work on another story. Sometimes he took his book home, and showed me the next morning how much writing he had done. We often talked about his views on writing at the writing center. I tape recorded the following conversation.

J: This writing center is getting too crowded.

T: I agree, I wonder why it's so popular?

J: Cause everybody wants to write and draw and stuff.

T: Why do you like writing so much?

J: Cause you learn the most out of any of the other centers.

T: What kinds of things?

J: Well, you learn to make up stories, like at the puppet center you make up stories, but here you write them down. You learn how to spell words and you write them and you learn how to illustrate.

T: Illustrate?

J: Of course, you know on the front of books you always say the author and who it is and the illustrator, the guy who makes the pictures.

T: What do you find the hardest thing about writing?

J: Mostly the spelling, but sometimes what to write about. Then I remember sometimes when I'm writing and you ask me questions like "what happens next?" and so I just ask myself the same kind of questions and then write it down.

Although Jason was crediting me with demonstrating a strategy for getting kids to go on with their story and to write "more," I was also demonstrating one of the secrets of a real author in capturing his reader by creating the desire to know what happens next. It was becoming obvious that as Jason was becoming a writer he was also becoming a reader.

Jason was beginning to love stories and books and he now was reading independently many of the books that I was reading to the class. We chatted about the books we had read and often read a book to each other when we met. Our most recent conversation began with our sharing our reactions to a book read that day entitled **Rotten**

Ralph. While our conversation began about the content of the story it ended with Jason trying to figure out the complex process of reading.

"Now this is what I call a really funny story. What a cat! Want me to read it?" (I turned on the tape recorder.)

J: Ralph ruined Sarah's pardy ... party ... Is that the right way to spell party?

T: Yes.

J: Oh I thought there was a "d" there. Who took the "d" out of party? I want to start all over again because I stopped ... through his best pipe ... My Dad doesn't smoke a pipe, in fact, he doesn't smoke at all cause I taught him not to.

T: How did you do that?

J: Whenever I saw him smoking a cigarette then I told him not to. He knew it was bad but it was just hard for him to stop. Hey, look at this cat in the Dad's chair. My Dad's favourite chair would be the rocking chair. There are some hard words in this book like "afternoon."

T: You didn't seem to have any trouble reading "afternoon."

J: No it just felt natural. It just sort of feels like I'm saying what I want to write and then you are writing it in the book that you're reading.

T: Did you think learning to read would be hard?

J: Yeah, cause I never read hardly anything before. Sometimes I did read some words that I knew. But I never knew "is" or "the" or "and" or anything like that. I just knew words like cat and dog, but I didn't know how to spell them. I guess sometimes you know how to read things but you don't know how to spell it. Like I can read afternoon,

but I couldn't spell it. The secret is that you know how to read most things you know how to write.

T: Do you think you can write most words that you can say?

J: Yes, that's just what I was going to explain. Like when you are little you know how to say almost every word but you don't know how to spell. Hey, if anyone knows about this I would like to know who it is and then I could know too.

Jason told me on another occasion that "he thought he had books in his head" because "when I go to write a story I just close my eyes and read what I want to write."

Jason did not understand the mystery of how he was learning to read but he saw himself as a reader who wanted to know what was happening. He was also unaware that just how children learn to read remains somewhat a mystery even to the experts. However, there are many things that teachers need to know about reading other than the intricacies of the reading process. We need to be reminded that reading is learned best by reading, by sharing, and by being immersed in the fullness of language. Reading is wanting to know the story, or as Jason said asking "what happens next." As Jason talked about his emerging knowledge of language, he was creating his own understanding and meaning for himself. He was learning about language by using it.

Jason shared many more stories with me throughout the year, a whole collection of personal narratives about the things of his world. His story telling about his experiences revealed not only his perspective but opened up a window on his world through which the adults in his life might better understand how to respond more sensitively to the kinds of things this child was trying to do.

It was home time on the last day of school before Spring break when Jason and I last talked.

"Are you planning anything special for the holidays?" I asked him.

"No, I have to go to Daycare while Mom and Dad are at work. Could I take my writing book with me and I could write some more stories while I'm there?"

He tucked his scribbler into his knapsack.

"Could we talk more after school starts again?" he asked.

"Yes, I'll want to hear your stories."

Jason was heading toward the door.

"I'd better go, the Daycare van will be here and I don't want to sit in the middle and get squished." "Bye," he called, "have a good break."

I waved, "Thanks Jason, Bye."

CHAPTER 7

CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES WITH LITERATURE: THE BRIDGE BETWEEN LITERATURE AND LITERACY

> The good author gives the children a credible secondary world to practise growing up in. The continuum from this to adult literacy is clear and direct. Literature is a mode of apprehending experience and language is its medium.
>
> Margaret Meek

This study about the nature of children's experiences with reading and writing literature has been a discovery for me in learning more about the interrelationship between literature and literacy. As I observed children learning to read and write while reading children's literature, I became increasingly aware of how language and the uses of language were connected to literacy. I related the things I had observed of the children's experiences with literature to what educators, psychologists, authors, and the media were saying about literacy and its meaning.

The words "literacy," "literate," and "illiterate" have become almost household words today. The public became aware of these when during the past decade when the media discovered that America was facing a "literacy crisis." The media's understanding of literacy was that reading standards were declining and that high school graduates were unable to write.

"Literacy," is a term open to many interpretations. The most widely accepted understanding of the term is the ability to handle written language for reading and writing. Most people would consider anyone literate who can read materials such as a newspaper or a menu in a restaurant or if they can read directions that accompany a do-it-yourself kit. And with writing it is generally accepted that a literate person can use print to write down information or communicate with another person by using written form. Whether a person who is called literate engages in critical thinking, or has the desire to read and write for reasons other than practical, is seldom considered. However, our lives are dominated by print, and so even the basic ability to read and write is essential in order to function in our society. Most teachers and parents are quite happy if children in primary grades display the ability to read through the authorized primers and if these children can carry out successfully the related pencil-and-paper tasks that go along with the reading.

The assumption is that children learn to read if they do the many things that the teacher has planned for them to do. The result is that most children do learn to read and write. But they may only learn to read and write for practical reasons within the classroom. They learn to read for information that is within the text in order to follow directions in a workbook or to understand the author's meaning in a textbook or in a story. When children are learning to write in school, they usually write down information or write a story in response to a task assigned by the teacher. Children are seldom given time or encouraged to read and write for pleasure and enjoyment. Thus in our society the main reason for reading and writing is to become

"functionally literate" or to be able to read and write to communicate information in written form. The purpose for becoming functionally literate is to be able to get jobs and to function as useful citizens in society.

Margaret Meek (1983) cautions teachers and parents about the dangers involved when teachers only present reading and writing for purely practical purposes. She warns us that, by only teaching children to read and write for practical reasons, we may be contributing to illiteracy and end up leading children toward becoming illiterate adults.

However, there are teachers and educators who do view literacy as meaning much more than the skills of reading and writing for practical reasons, although, as Robert Pattison (1982) points out, "these skills are an intimate part of any definition of literacy" (p. 6). Pattison in his well-documented study **On Literacy** says, "Literacy is something bigger and better than mechanical skills in reading and writing ... Literacy is a potent form of consciousness." According to Pattison, "Literacy is consciousness of the uses and problems of language," and that a literate person "must be able to express this consciousness in the ways evolved and sanctioned by the culture in which he lives" (p. 6).

In our Western culture today it is anticipated that people will be able to read and write. Because of this expectation the schools are seen as the institutions to accomplish a functionally literate society. Yet, I believe that literacy is something more than acquiring the skills of reading and writing for practical reasons. I agree with Pattison and Meek and other educators whose words reveal a

much broader understanding of what it means to be literate. Pattison's description of literacy as a "potent form of consciousness" strongly suggests the tremendous implications for the kind of power that can accompany literacy, as he says "literacy always has an aspect of power (Pattison, 1982, p. 61).

If a person of any age who can read and write engages in critical thinking about what he is reading and accompanies this thinking with reflection and action then his literacy can become a form of empowerment. Paulo Freire (1970) is well known for his view of literacy as critical consciousness and empowerment. He sees literacy as meaning "self expression and the right of world expression, of creating and recreating of deciding and choosing and ultimately participating in society's historical process" (p. 58). Although Freire's work has been mainly with illiterate adults in third world countries, the principles that underlie his view of literacy as a means of a liberating force also apply to people living in free democratic and technological societies as well.

Literacy as a liberating force is graphically described by Helen Keller in her autobiographical essay, **The World I Live In.** Pattison (1982) uses Helen Keller's experience to show she makes clear "that for her the acquisition of language is the beginning of consciousness, of thought, of humanity" (p. 11). For Helen Keller learning the language was the means by which she knew herself and the world when she wrote:

> Before my teacher came to me, I did not know that I am. I lived in a world that was a no-world ... Since I had no power of thought I did not compare one mental state with another. So I

> was not conscious of any change or process going on in my brain when my teacher began to instruct me ... When I learned the meaning of "I" and "me" and found I was something, I began to think. Then consciousness first existed for me ... Thought made me conscious of love, joy and all the emotions ... Groping, uncertain, I at last found my identity, and after seeing my thoughts and feelings repeated in others, I gradually constructed my world of men and of God. As I read and study, I find that this is what the rest of the race has done. Man looks within himself and in time finds the measure and meaning of the universe (p. 12).

Born into the world and lacking the ability to obtain the mechanical skills of reading and writing until she found a teacher who taught her language, Helen Keller would be classified as an illiterate. Her biographical essays reveal that when she used language beyond the functional use of words, she began to understand some of the things in the world and she was becoming a literate person.

Literacy implies empowerment. This study of children's experiences with reading and writing literature illustrates how even very young children "created and recreated" their worlds. The literature provided children in my classroom with the means of exploring the things in their world, for example, examining their values ("I don't think it's right to trick people, even a wolf"); to engage in problem solving ("I'd get an axe and chop down all the plants"); to build meaning ("that story reminds me of when I go to the doctor's office"); and to begin to understand some of the complexities

of human nature ("that's because we all have a different mind and a different imagination").

These examples and ancedotes, which illustrate how children were gaining self-confidence in linking ideas and issues within the stories to their own lives, represent only a few of the examples that I observed in the classroom. The conversations that took place between us after school and on the playground provided even more evidence that these children were beginning to think critically about many of the things that affected their lives both in and out of school. I think Jason provides us with a very good example of a six year old boy who has already acquired unusual insights into life and his school experiences.

The stories they were reading provided many opportunities for the children to think about their own experiences and to use language to clarify their own meaning of the world around them. It is obvious from the many examples of children's experiences with literature outlined in this study, that the children were sensing and exhibiting a sense of power in their thinking, discourse, and problem solving. They were obviously aware that they were going beyond the mechanical processes of using the text to develop the skills of reading and writing. They were discovering a more potent use of stories which was, as Helen Keller discovered, "the measure and meaning of the universe." It is not important that the children's "measure and meaning of the universe" is at a less developed level than that of the literate adult. What is important and what this study reveals is that the universe of children is as important to them as the universe of the adult is to us. How the children in my classroom begin to understand

their universe, and try to make sense of it through the use of literature and their uses of language in responding to the literature they are reading and writing, suggests the roots of literacy as empowerment. When children talk and write about the themes and issues embedded within the stories, the literature become a means of their learning language and exploring human behaviour and the things in their world. In other words, literacy grows out of the child's desire to discover and to create meaning.

So far within this chapter I have concentrated on discussing the notion of literacy, its meaning, and the place that literature holds in the development of the literacy learning of young children. Both terms, "literacy" and "literature," are somewhat problematic because they are open to a number of different interpretations and meanings. The meaning and interpretation of literacy and literature are closely intertwined with the times, the community, and the particular culture in which we live.

Selecting the Literature

When I speak of literature within my classroom, I am referring to all the storybooks, picture books, books of poetry, and the informational books that we find as part of the collection of books usually referred to as children's literature. These books cover a very wide scope of literature which has been written for children. Most of the books come from the school and public library and are included on the authorized lists of books recommended for children by teacher librarians and teacher educators. With children's literature,

it is generally agreed that distinctions are not made between story books, informational books, and biographies when it comes to using the term literature.

When I first began to use children's literature within the classroom, the primary purpose was to provide an enjoyable time together by reading stories aloud to children throughout the day. Gradually, the literature became a central focus within my entire curriculum. I put aside the basal readers, provided by the school for teaching reading and writing, and I surrounded the children with an abundance of both traditional and contemporary stories and [illegible]. Rather than attempt to define the term "literature," what it is and what it is not, I prefer instead to describe the qualities I look for in choosing and selecting books to read aloud to children and to have available for children to read independently in the classroom.

First, I look for variety because all the children who come into the class bring a diversity of interests, experiences, and levels of cognitive development. I also want to place children in touch with a broad range of experiences of people both from the past and in our present time. I know that some children love to hear stories about very ordinary things. When choosing stories about ordinary things, I look, too, for authors who tell about them in out of the ordinary ways.

When I pick up a book, it must "feel right." Like the children, I am influenced by the textual qualities of the paper and the beauty and colours of the illustrations. I consider the size and format of the book because I know I will probably be reading it to a large group of children at one time; and yet, I also value small-sized books which

can have the intimate and personal qualities so appealing for individual reading. When I read through the text, the style and tone and the way language is used become apparent and provide me with a sense of the author's craft of writing. I am attracted to books like Dr. Seuss because of the author's brilliant skill in making and manipulating language to create stories that flow and bounce with rhythm and rhyme. Books that hold very little appeal for me are books that have been written "to teach" children moral values or solve social and emotional problems within the guise of a story. I usually find that these kinds of books are not well written, and that they even suggest a kind of deceit to the reader who assumes the author's purpose for writing is to tell a good story.

There are many qualities I look for in choosing books for children, but I think the words of Charlotte Zolotow (1982), one of the children's favourite authors, describe best the way I feel about the qualities that go into a good book.

> There are many qualities that go into a good book - feeling, genuine emotion, integrity of purpose, beauty of language, a unique prose style ... Sometimes a writer uses humor, sometimes fantasy, sometimes reality but a good children's book leaves the child closer to understanding himself and other people, closer to some universal motif of which cats and dogs and trees, earth, ocean, sky, and human beings are all a part (p. 263).

Literature and Literacy

The place of literature in the relationship between literature and literacy begins with well-written stories for children to read. "Children's literature gives its readers their earliest experiences of literature, it also teaches them the reading lessons they need in order to become readers of this literature" (Meek, 1982, P. 289). The more we learn about children's experiences with literature and what happens during the transaction between the reader and the text the more we can learn about the theory of reading.

Research has confirmed the value of literature in the lives of children who are at the beginning stages of learning to read and write. But there are still many unanswered questions as to how children become more competent readers and writers by experiencing stories.

Among the educational theorists who are asking many of these questions there is a common belief that there is a strong relationship between the reading of literature aesthetically and our own use of narrative as a form of discourse. Barbara Hardy refers to narrative as "a primary act of mind," or in other words, narrative is very much a part of the way we think, dream, and communicate our thoughts to others. We all use narrative all our lives, but as we grow and mature we branch out into using different forms of discourse for different purposes. But for children who are at an earlier stage of cognitive development, narrative is crucial. In Moffett's words, "whereas adults differentiate their thoughts with specialized kinds of discourse such as narrative, generalization, and theory, children

must, for a long time make narrative do for all" (Cited in **The Cool Web**, p. 8).

One of the reasons that stories are so appealing to children is because of children's understanding and use of narrative as a primary form of discourse. Not all stories are found inside the covers of books, or not always in written form. Stories are handed down from one generation to the next through storytelling, and we tell stories of happenings and events in our lives through the use of narrative. As Harold Rosen suggests, "we must expect that narrative will always be there or thereabout, surfacing in the daily business of living and less obviously framed as text than **Alice in Wonderland** or **The Three Little Pigs**" (Rosen, p. 12). Because narrative is so much a part of the world of children and their mode of discourse, stories not only hold a great appeal for them, but stories and storying are the most appropriate means of their understanding their worlds and growing toward literacy. As Meek explains, "children use stories to organize their thinking so that in reading they confirm a habit of narrative that is already well established."

From stories children can learn the conventions and patterns of language that reveal the way the language is structured. But most importantly, stories can extend an awareness of self and the world in ways that primers and readers filled with contrived text can never do. Because reading literature holds this potential for learning about life and ourselves, it also holds the key to literacy learning, becoming more than learning the structure of language. It is the key to literacy becoming a means of empowerment and human growth.

Literature and literacy are undeniably linked. When children experience literature by reading and writing and talking about stories, they are engaged in the whole process of language learning. They have begun the journey along what Meek calls the "continuum from literature to adult literacy." Literacy learning evolves out of the child's search for meaning and the way language is used in thought and in expression. The kind of literacy that grows out of children's literary experiences is largely determined by the quality of these experiences, the way they are understood and acted upon by the children. It is when children have the opportunities to experience and to respond to literature personally, and to express these experiences through discussion and artistic endeavours that they will discover the bridge between literature and literacy.

CHAPTER 8

BUILDING A PEDAGOGY

> It seems reasonable to say that the ways in which we conceptualize or construct or articulate classroom reality ought (if we are thoughtful about them) to be congruent with our original understanding of learning and the world.
>
> Maxine Greene

In discussing the importance for teachers to take time to think about their teaching, Maxine Greene (1984) points out that "to reach back even for a moment, into our life stories may be to find the sources of our craft" (p. 58). In other words, if we think carefully about our teaching, we may discover that many of the things we do as teachers and the way we act with children are influenced to a great extent by our past experiences, the things we believe in, and the people we have met during our lifetime.

Some of the people who may have influenced us the most are the teachers who taught us when we were children in school and even later on when we were students in faculties of education, for it is believed that teachers teach the way they were taught. This probably applies particularly to beginning teachers who have very little first-hand experience and so "reach back" into their memories to find a model for their teaching. As beginning teachers most of us rely on these kinds

of memories, together with our life experiences and our common sense to serve as a pedagogic foundation for our teaching.

If we are to grow beyond teaching the way we were taught, we need to be receptive to new ideas, to read and reflect on the work of other people in the field, and to venture into trying new approaches in the classroom. We need to become learners within our own classrooms, to learn from children and from our own teaching, in other words to continue building our own pedagogy. The term pedagogy involves a number of things apart from a method of instruction or teaching. Pedagogy embraces our fundamental beliefs concerning children and learning, how we view life and the world, and the very way we are as persons with the children in our care. It involves our sensitivity to, and our awareness of, children and our trust and confidence in them. Building a pedagogy is a continuous and developing process of learning and discovery, where we as teachers are receptive to seeing new associations and relationships. We need to be consciously aware of what is actually going on around us--to be alert to the kinds of things that are "really" happening in the classroom and to ask ourselves "what do these things mean?" In other words, "it is a matter of attending to our lived situations in our classrooms with the aid of (or through the lens of) what we have come to know over time" (Greene, 1984, p. 59). This is one of the ways we can create the possibility of personal growth and change as a teacher.

Embedded within my study of children and their experiences with literature is my pedagogy of teaching that has grown with me over the years. My approach to teaching is child-centred. I encourage the

children to uncover many of the things they already know and to see these things and discover new knowledge in different ways.

What I have attempted to show in my study is how important the reading and writing of literature has been for children in their literacy development, especially during the early years. I have indicated throughout ways that teachers can use literature to make reading and writing both enjoyable and meaningful. What is to follow are some of the further implications for teaching within a literature and child-centred curriculum.

Understanding the Literary Experience

To use literature as a pedagogy based on human growth and personal response as well as to use it as a means for children to achieve literacy, then it is essential for us as teachers to understand as much as possible about the nature of the literary experience. One important aspect of children experiencing literature is to remember the distinction between the two kinds of reading stance. When we invite children to hear a story for enjoyment then it is important to avoid getting in the child's way of reading aesthetically. If we want children to read for specific information, then we should not expect imaginative and creative kinds of reading to go on, but simply the reading for facts that are within the text. It is important that both kinds of reading be allowed for and that the books that are selected are appropriate to the kind of reading we might suggest to the children. In the early years particularly, children need more time for aesthetic reading than for reading

efferently, or for information. Even when we decide ahead of time which purpose for reading we want to encourage at a particular time, we must remember that it is the reader who sets the purpose in the way the reading is approached.

It is much easier to understand the literary experience for children if we take time to think about our own experiences with reading and writing literature. What was the most recent novel or short story that we read and enjoyed? Why did it make an impact on us, or why not? While we were reading the story were we thinking about a similar experience in our own lives? Perhaps we understood how someone in the story felt and acted because we had experienced these same feelings at some time, or maybe we are feeling them now, while we are reading the book. If we did not particularly enjoy the book, was it because we could not relate to the people or the happenings inside the story?

The questions we ask ourselves concerning our own literary experiences can also be asked of children's experiences with reading and writing stories. In Chapter Four I described Stephen's strong identification with the baby bird that was separated from his mother. Stephen not only enjoyed this story but he entered into the situation because he understood the intense feelings that are involved when a child is separated from his mother.

If we think of our own experiences with writing, we should be reminded that writing comes much easier for us when we are writing about something we know about to someone we know. For example, writing a personal letter to a friend is usually an easier and more enjoyable task than writing a term paper at university. Carla's story

about "The Prince and the Princess" in Chapter Five, was written fairly easily by Carla, because she knew about the people in fairy tales and she knew her home situation. She wrote this story for herself, and not in response to a request made by the teacher, for the teacher.

How do Children Tell Us About Their Literary Experiences?

If we listen thoughtfully to children we will observe that they tell us the kind of meaning they give to their experiences with reading and writing literature in a number of different ways. First, we have to hear what they are saying. Sometimes, the things they are saying are only the tip of the iceberg of meaning that is embedded in their words. When Tina said to me, "I know what this story is about," after hearing the story **Somebody New**, I might have assumed that she was clear now about the author's intention and meaning in the words on the page. But to understand how Tina was creating or making her own meaning, I asked her to tell me more. And when children begin to "tell more," we must accept their way of telling us, and accept their language which may not always be our language. As teachers, who are observers, we need to be aware of many forms of language other than words. Sometimes the way children hunch their shoulders or avoid our eyes when they are talking tells us more about their words than the words themselves.

Another way that children often tell us about their feelings and response to stories is in the kinds of things they choose to talk or write about when we ask for their impression of a story they are

hearing or reading. For example, Carol's comments after hearing **Blueberries for Sal** centred on the print aspects of the book itself, whereas during the same story time another little girl's attention was caught by the mix-up of the mothers and their "children." Other children chose to retell the events in the story by ordering each happening sequentially and writing them down in their own stories. We may notice that some children's comments indicate a linking or making connections with the story and their own lives. Allan's stories about **Lyle Lyle the Crocodile** are examples of the way he was associating the house where Lyle lived with his own home.

It is very important to listen to the ways children are telling us about their literary experiences. It is only when we try to see the stories from the child's point of view that we can begin to understand how learning through the stories is working for them. When we recognize what children are trying to do in their response to literature we are in a better position to respond to, and to use these opportunities, in our teaching.

Children also tell us more about their experiences with literature by the things they do with the literary experience in the form of creative endeavours, such as art and drama. Children's expression of stories is revealed through their drawings and paintings. It we look carefully at a number of paintings about a particular story we will see that each child has chosen a different way of rendering his thoughts through the art. In Chapter Three I referred to the paintings and drawings that were on the wall that told about the story of **Sylvester and The Magic Pebble.** Stephen's painting revealed a large grey rock set in the middle of a green field, whereas

Carla's picture on the same wall portrayed the family reunion at the end of the story. She had painted all the members of the family standing in a row, and underneath the picture, she had printed "They all got together at the end."

In the same chapter, I described Carla and Ken who were telling the stories they had heard by retelling them in their own words through felt shapes at the flannel board. Ken was blending his personal experiences with his story experiences, as he became the King engaged in conversation with the Queen in a modern shopping centre.

Children tell us that a particular story caught their attention and imagination or impressed them in a certain way by the things they say in ordinary conversation. If we listen we sometimes can hear a reference to a person or situation in a story embedded in our casual conversations we have with children. I remember one little girl who was quite excited about a set of dolls she had received as a gift from her grandmother in Europe. "They're really really small," she said, "they're just like a lot of little 'Fingerlings'." When children tell us about their experiences with stories in all these different ways, they are inviting us to see a little part of their story experience. But in order to see what they are telling us, we must be able to recognize what we are seeing and to try to understand what these things mean.

Knowing Children

Knowing children's intentions and being able to recognize what they are trying to do comes about much more naturally if we really

know children as individual persons. If we want to know children as people instead of pupils and students, we need to try to go beyond the terms such as "individual needs" and "building a rapport." We need to begin to remove the "we" and "they" barrier or wall that we instinctively erect between us. Usually the teacher stands on one side of the wall and the children sit on the other side. As teachers we inadvertently build this wall, not just by placing a desk in between, but by our attitude toward children that tells them that we are the fountain of all knowledge and that they know very little.

Sometimes teachers are very explicit in the things they say in order to maintain this wall. When children are told "you are here to learn and I am here to teach you," the message is very clear; the child must match his intentions to those of the teacher. Removing the "we" and "they" attitude does not mean inviting chaos and lack of respect for each other in the classroom. It does mean that we are trying to build a kind of relationship of respect, of intimacy, and of trust in each other, so that we are all free to engage in thinking and creating our own ideas. When teachers free and release children to learn, they also release themselves to teach, rather that to instruct. Within a pedagogy of teaching, this point concerning the releasing of children so that they can learn how to learn, is an important one. It has great significance for the teacher and for the children. When we think seriously about what it means to free ourselves and children in this way, we realize that we are giving children the right of empowerment and control and by doing this we are empowering ourselves as teachers.

How can we build this kind of relationship between ourselves as teachers, and the children we teach? It may be helpful if we think about the way we build relationships with friends and those in our own families. When we want to know another person we usually do a lot of talking with each other. And when we are conversing, we try to find out how the other person is feeling about the things he is experiencing in his life and we respond to the things he is saying and the things he is asking about us. While these things might appear obvious and natural in our social situations outside of school, we somehow leave behind these modes of communication when we enter the classroom as teachers. Yet, our personal experiences in the way we interact with friends should provide us with the very clues that we can use in building relationships with children we live with inside the classroom.

If we stop to think about the way we use language when we are talking with our own friends, we will note that we are using expressive language. We use expressive language when we are sharing experiences and when we are speaking personally. Britton (1982) talks about expressive language as language that is concerned with the self, that is closest to us and expresses the attitudes and feelings of the speaker. Through expressive language we create meaning for ourselves.

We can build relationships with children through the use of expressive language when we are talking with them. This means speaking naturally and intimately, the way we would speak with a friend. I have seen the whole tone of the classroom change when a teacher shares a personal story with the children and tells them about something that happened to her at home with her family, or when she

was in a particular situation. Children's eyes sparkle and faces smile as they listen, not to a teacher telling, but to a person they know well, sharing something of herself. When children sense that this kind of talk is acceptable and welcome in the classroom, they will begin to open up and share something more of themselves. When this kind of trust and intimacy is present with teacher and children, it has a way of permeating into the very atmosphere and the environment for learning.

Creating the Learning Environment

A stimulating and receptive environment for learning will encourage children to feel free to accept the aesthetic stance to reading and to express their personal response to the literature. How we organize our classrooms, the way we plan for learning, and the materials we choose will largely determine the kinds of things that go on in the classroom. Before organizing our classroom we should first think carefully about just what we want to see happening within that room. Just as children tell us more about themselves by the things they do and the way they act, so we as teachers tell children more about us in the way we organize for learning.

We tell children in many ways what is important to us. I remember on the first day of school when the group of kindergarten children came into my Grade One for the first time. Mark looked around the room and exclaimed, "my goodness, you have a lot of books in this room," and as Jason told me later in the year, "I noticed all

those pens and paper at the writing centre when I saw the classroom for the first time."

In Chapter Three I described how I had organized my classroom into play-based learning centres. The children used these centres as a major means of their experiencing activities throughout the day. The centres were an integral part of the curriculum, not an "extra" or additional mode of learning that were used when they finished their "real work." What I was telling children by presenting these activities in this way was that I valued play as a learning medium and that concrete manipulative materials were important in my planning. I mentioned earlier that story books were displayed as attractively as possible and were placed in areas that were inviting and accessible to children at all times. Again, I was attempting to convey the message that books and stories are enjoyable and pleasurable experiences that are there for all of us to engage in while we are at school and not something that is instructional material for learning a difficult task.

Planning with children and allowing them to make suggestions and offer solutions to problems tell them that we value their input and experience. When Scott suggested we create a separate "poetry writing centre" and the other children agreed, it was important that I follow through with this suggestion and give recognition to the fact that it was their idea, not mine, and that it was a very good one. When we plan for children, we need to keep our planning open to change and flexibility so that we allow time "to capture the moment," to stop and seize the opportunity for learning. Some of the most successful

lessons are taught and learned when the teacher feels free to use spontaneity and creativity in her teaching.

We need to organize for learning in ways that will foster children's learning how to learn. We can do this by building on the learning experiences children bring to school. They are experienced learners, and they have been learning since birth by exploring and by experimenting and linking the things they already know with what they are now seeing for the first time. If we observe children playing we will see the way they solve problems and learn by interacting and watching each other. If we are aware of how children learn language at home, and watch how parents encourage and extend the language the child is already using, we can learn to be better teachers of language in school. Children need encouragement to draw on their own sense of what to do in situations in the classroom. They need to know that the things they are experiencing outside of school are valuable resources to use within the classroom learning environment, and not feel that these experiences should be left at the door with their coats and boots.

The kind of learning environment that we create for children goes beyond the physical arrangement of the centres and the desks. It goes beyond the published materials that we decide to use. The environment includes the kind of atmosphere that we create by our presence with children, the way we are as fellow human beings who come together as strangers and learn to live together as friends.

I mentioned earlier the importance for teachers to be reflective about their teaching. At times, it is very difficult to take time to pause and reflect and think about the things we are doing day by day

in a busy classroom. Everything seems to be happening so fast throughout the day and there are so many things that we perceive as getting in the way of our thinking and reflecting on our teaching. We get caught up in children's behaviours and parents' concerns and trying to account to others for what we are doing and achieving. It is easy to be discouraged when we cannot always see the achievements of our children immediately. As teachers we do not have the same advantage that an artist or a craftsman has in seeing immediately the satisfaction of "the finished product." Our satisfaction comes in the moments when we see a child's curiosity at work, when we hear questions being asked that tell us this child is thinking and trying to make sense of an idea or an experience. We also experience satisfaction when a child says, as Jason did, "I just hear you saying, what happened next? and then I write it down," or when Karen announced that "we've been authors for a long time." In other words, our feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction come to us through our interaction with the feelings and minds and expectations and knowing of the children.

This kind of satisfaction experienced by the teacher is part of what makes the pedagogy of teaching so personally rewarding. If we consider teaching as a craft, as suggested by Maxine Greene, then we must consider ourselves as artists in our work with children. As an artist we must take time to reflect on our teaching and to know the children we are learning with in the classroom. Knowing the children is the most important part of teaching, for all teaching starts from what is already known. And if we are willing to start from where

children are, our teaching can become more meaningful to us and to the children who are our future.

Theses

- In the early years of school children need more time for reading aesthetically than for reading efferently or for information.
- Reading efferently does not have to precede reading aesthetically.
- Children need opportunities to engage in dialogue--to interact with each other and to use language for learning.
- Children learn to read and write by engaging in the acts of reading and writing.
- The learning environment involves more than the physical space; it involves the people in the classroom and the way we are present with each other.
- Children need opportunities for choice and planning in the things they do.
- Teachers need to be aware of the content of children's lives, and to know the issues and concerns that are part of their fabric of life.
- Teachers need to understand the value of play as a learning medium.
- Children take risks more often to explore and experiment in an atmosphere of trust and security.
- Children need to be introduced to writing by using expressive language in order to use writing as a way of learning.

- We need to try to understand the kind of meaning that children give to their experiences.
- We need to open the classroom windows onto the children's world outside the classroom and to use these experiences.
- Teachers need to help children capture the moment for learning, and help them to learn how to learn.
- Teachers must be learners, inquirers, observers, and engage in reflection about their teaching.
- Teachers need to understand the importance of the integration and interrelationships of the language arts.
- Teachers need to take children from where they are and help them to grow toward what they could become.
- Teachers need to encourage children's questions--free their curiosity and create a classroom filled with a sense of wonder.
- When teachers free and release children to learn, they also free themselves to teach.

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