ENCOURAGING REFLECTIVE AND CRITICAL THINKING IN THE CONTEXT OF A LITERACY PROGRAM
An action-research exploration of teaching and learning in a primary classroom

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Abstract

Using act, reflect, and revise cycles of action research, this study explores ways of encouraging Grade 2/3 students to think about their thinking, their reading strategies, and their comprehension of the text while reading. Sentence starters, questions, and discussions guide their thinking as they read silently, aloud with partners, and with the teacher in groups as well as individually. As alterations were made to the learning opportunities provided to the students, they showed increasing awareness of their thinking while reading and of their use of strategies to comprehend text. This was reflected in the results of the province-wide testing of the Grade 3 students.

The study also explores the significance of developing a learning community in which teachers can engage in professional development. Within the context of such a learning community, action research is shown to provide a constructivist approach to teachers’ learning. The underlying message in this research is that taking responsibility for one’s own learning can lead to empowerment and improvement, for both teachers and students.
Acknowledgements

There are a number of people who have contributed greatly to the process and product of my thesis. My instructor and guide, Dr. Tom Russell, introduced me to action research in the course *The Improvement of Teaching* where I became aware of the power of studying my own practice. Tom has provided opportunities for me to engage in discussions and publish work, and as my thesis advisor, he has given me the advice, encouragement, and feedback so necessary to the completion of this research. Dr. Denise Stockley, as a committee member, has encouraged me at all times and has patiently edited my work.

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The Grade 2/3 students in my class played a crucial role in my professional development while I conducted this action research. Their unique personalities and creative responses to the learning opportunities I provided for them gave me greater insight into the teaching and learning process. I learned from them that children at this young age are capable of being reflective and critical in their thinking.

My mentor and sister, Janice Clark, has been a constant source of inspiration and encouragement. Her insight into transformative learning, the imagination, and academic writing has stretched my thinking, and her thoughtful recommendations of books and articles have expanded my ways of knowing and seeing.

I would like to express my immense gratitude to all these people, as well as to my wonderful and supportive family, for the various roles they have played on my journey to greater awareness and understanding of teaching and learning.
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Introduction and Overview

Action research is a powerful learning tool for professional learning. When the broad range of learning styles and intelligences is considered, it makes sense that teachers concerned with their own professional growth would approach learning from the very personal perspective of studying their own practice. Beginning with questions such as the following, teachers can take control of their own learning and make knowledgeable decisions about the direction of their own teaching:

• What are my beliefs about teaching and learning?
• How do these beliefs influence my actions in the classroom?
• In what areas would I like to improve my practice?
• Who else should I involve in my search for understanding?

My intended audience for this report on my action research is other educators and, in particular, those who may have an interest in the following: the primary division, reading comprehension, metacognition, or professional development. Whoever they are, I am inviting them into my classroom to spend some time in a real setting because context is crucial to understanding. What I choose to present, of course, is limited to my perspective and biases, but if these are made explicit, then the readers can use this information to build a more complete picture of the setting, characters, problems and potential solutions.

Engaging the reader in the text is my goal both with students in the classroom, and with you, the reader of this text. I become engaged in a text when it rings of authenticity, connects to my experiences, and challenges and extends my thinking. With this in mind, I begin by writing Chapter 1 as though I am talking to a teacher who has
come to visit my school and classroom. I do not impose a script on this teacher by filling in his or her side of the conversation; however, my conversation will imply questions that might be asked and will provide the descriptions and explanations necessary for a greater understanding of the snapshots I am presenting of a morning with my students. My focus is the literacy block, which is the hour and a half in the morning that is devoted to reading and writing.

Chapter 2 provides the reasoning for the use of action research. It is a research method I was introduced to a few years ago in a graduate course and it immediately caught my attention. For me, becoming an action researcher has been the most empowering professional development I have experienced. It fits in beautifully with a constructivist approach to learning, which is the model I strive to use in my classroom. Often outside pressures, like provincial testing and report cards, can cause a swing back to more traditional learning environments in which the teacher is the giver of information and the student the passive receiver, but being aware of and questioning one’s own practice and beliefs opens the door to change.

Chapter 3 introduces the question that is the basis of this action research. With a renewed emphasis on literacy development within educational circles, and my own belief in the value of reading and writing as a means of developing our multiple strengths and weaknesses, it was a natural step for me to want to see my students develop an appreciation of achieving greater understanding of both themselves and their world. This led to the question, “How can I encourage reflective and critical thinking in my students as they develop as readers in the primary grades?” Using past experience, conversations
with colleagues, exposure to workshops, and other professional resources, I planned some specific actions.

Chapter 4 presents some of the data I collected during my year of teaching a Grade 2/3 class. Over the course of this action research, I read students’ responses to assignments, listened to their voices and participated in discussions, had on-going conversations with my colleagues, communicated with parents, and spent time reflecting and writing about my experiences and thoughts. The influence all these things had on my actions is woven into the way I have chosen to present the data, partly as reconstructed dialogue with my students, and partly as a commentary.

Chapter 5 discusses my action research by providing further descriptions of events in order to explain and understand them. As well, I consider other factors that may have influenced the students’ responses, and I consider ideas and people that influenced me. For example, a model proposed by Webster, Beveridge and Reed (1996) examines the way in which teachers and pupils interact in terms of the involvement demonstrated by the teacher and the initiative demonstrated by the pupil. Of the four “teaching styles” identified, the one representing high adult involvement and high child initiative is the type of learning environment for which I strive. Holding this as an ideal gives me a lens to look through as I evaluate the results.

Finally, Chapter 6 draws conclusions, suggests future directions for my research, and summarizes the study. Since there are many factors that affect the development of my students, and I am just one small part of their lives, the only statements I can make with authority are those I make about myself and the impact this study has had on me. Woven throughout this narrative is the overriding theme that taking responsibility for
one’s own learning leads to empowerment and improvement, whether one is the teacher or student. The real value in this action research project is the process of the action research as opposed to the conclusions drawn about the driving question and its solution. The agenda behind my actions is encouraging everyone to be an action researcher.

After all was said and done, my colleagues were generous enough to read my thesis and respond with written comments. Some of their valuable insights and reflections have been included in a final section I have called After Words. I want their voices to blend with yours and mine as we continue to challenge our thinking and knowledge about teaching and learning. As well, the Grade 3 provincial test results for my students in the study were released and these are provided and discussed in this section.

This thesis is an exploration of learning. Exploring implies that new territory is being uncovered, new paths are being taken, and new insights are being gained. Exploring also implies that one has an open mind, is willing to encounter the unknown, and desires to see things from new perspectives. When teaching and learning are seen as explorations, there is suddenly a sense of freedom: the freedom to admit ignorance, the freedom to follow clues, the freedom to discover at one’s own pace, and the freedom to make sense of experiences. Within this paradigm, I invite you to add my perspective and discoveries to your experiences and knowledge, and become a fellow learner.
Chapter 1

Through the telling of our stories we can create landscapes for ourselves and our colleagues to live in, within which to imagine new possibilities and to give voice and life to stories of their own.

Mary Beattie (1995, p. 137)

Setting the Stage

An important aspect of action research is providing a detailed description of the context within which the study takes place. This chapter presents a snapshot of a typical morning in my classroom. As background for that snapshot, I begin by providing a broader view of the general approach to literacy in the school and define some terms that may be unfamiliar to the reader. The general approach to literacy is a reflection of the kind of curriculum the Board of Education is promoting and can be found in many schools in the district as well as across the province.

The current trend in early literacy is to offer the students *balanced instruction*. This involves direct instruction in reading and writing strategies as well as authentic experiences in reading and writing text of various genres and for various purposes. Instruction occurs in a variety of groupings, including the whole class gathered together for instruction in a specific topic, smaller groups formed on the basis of reading skill or shared interests, and one-to-one interactions for the purpose of assisting a student with a specific need. Some of the instruction techniques include *guided reading and writing*, in which strategies and skills are explicitly modelled and practiced, *shared reading and*
writing, in which the students actively participate in the process of reading and writing text, and conferencing, in which the teacher meets with small groups of students or individuals to discuss and assess reading and writing assignments. There are many resources available to teachers that suggest particular ways of scheduling activities and instruction throughout the literacy block, which is the period of time set aside each day for reading and writing. I mention these resources in Chapter 3.

There is also a movement towards assessing and extending students’ reading ability that involves the use of levelled texts. Fountas and Pinnell (2001) are two educators who have strongly influenced the development and use of levelled texts, and they in turn have been influenced by the contribution of many “great thinkers who have informed teachers and researchers” (p. iv). One particular psychologist, researcher, and educator who has contributed greatly to the understanding of the reading process is Marie Clay (1993). She is well known for the development of Reading Recovery, an individualised reading program for struggling readers in Grade 1. This program relies on the use of books that are “levelled” according to “gradient of difficulty” (p. 53). Many publishers of curriculum materials for reading instruction have adopted this concept. As well, assessment tools have been published that use levelled texts (Beaver, 1997; PM Benchmark kit, 2001), and the authors have supplied lists of equivalent levelling used by different publishers.

The ideas of providing a balance of instructional techniques and providing books for students that are levelled according to difficulty are recent developments in literacy instruction. These concepts are encouraged and promoted through workshops and resources that the Board of Education has financed. Because the ideas are fairly new,
many teachers are just beginning to implement the associated strategies and use the corresponding resources. As a result, there is little discussion or debate amongst teachers about the contributions that balanced instruction and levelled books are making towards students’ learning. In Chapter 5, I raise some questions about the strict use of levelled books but, for now, I have provided these details about the general approach to literacy to paint for the reader a broad picture of the context within which I work.

The remainder of this chapter provides a detailed account of a morning in my classroom. Because this thesis is an examination of my own professional practice, it is important to set the scene and provide connecting points for those who wish to become involved in understanding my thinking and actions. And so I begin as though you, the reader, are one of a group of teachers from another school who have come to spend the morning in the primary classrooms at the school at which I teach, to observe and to share experiences. The following account provides some background information about the school, describes the physical structure of my classroom, gives an overview of a typical morning agenda, introduces some of the students, and reveals some of my ways of thinking and knowing in the classroom.

*Within the Walls and Windows*

Good morning! Welcome to our school. Did you have any problem finding us? We aren’t far from the highway but you do have to wind your way through a few residential streets. Let’s get some coffee and head to the resource/book room where I can introduce you to the other members of the primary team and tell you a little about our school.
The school at which I teach is located in Eastern Ontario in a small city nestled against the shores of the St. Lawrence River. Our students come from residential and rural areas, mainly from middle class families, with a few students who are first generation Canadians. There are about 270 students from junior kindergarten to Grade 8 with class sizes ranging 22 to 28. This year, four educational assistants, a Reading Recovery teacher and the full time resource teacher provide specialised support to identified students and those with particular needs.

A few times this year, teachers from other schools in our Board of Education have come to visit us in order to observe our “balanced literacy” program and discuss the use of levelled books in the primary grades. These visits are a result of the strong leadership provided by the principal in the area of literacy, both in the school and throughout the Board of Education, and the commitment of the primary team to an improved literacy program that is based on our own observations and assessment of individual students, and our knowledge of current best practices.

The primary team consists of a kindergarten teacher, three primary teachers, a resource teacher and a half-time Reading Recovery teacher. We began discussing our reading programs a few years ago and discovered that there was a lack of continuity across teachers’ approaches to reading, and a lack of real understanding of the complexities of the reading process and our students’ strengths and weaknesses within our classrooms. In addition, the Reading Recovery teacher began to share the instruction and assessment practices that she was using, and the differences between the levels of difficulty in books. Shortly after we began our discussions, two events occurred that influenced our actions. The first event was the introduction of the provincial Grade 3 test
and the seemingly poor results in our school. The second event was the initiative led by another Reading Recovery teacher that encouraged the Board of Education to put money into early literacy resources and teacher training in order to improve the literacy levels of our primary students.

I believe the crucial factor that has allowed our primary team to work and grow together is that we began questioning our own practices and sought out solutions together, rather than being in the typical position of having someone else attempt to provide or impose answers to questions we did not ask. I will return to this issue when I discuss the value of action research in Chapter 2, but I mention it here as one explanation for the dynamic collaborative approach we take to improving our practice.

_Around the Tables and Chairs_

Let’s go down to my classroom, as it is almost time for the students to come in. You were wondering how the levelled books are set up so perhaps we can take a few minutes to see how things are arranged.

I work in a school that was built in the 1960s with the usual rectangular classrooms: windows along one wall, blackboards on two other walls, and cupboards along the fourth wall. In my classroom, there is a computer in one corner, a large rug in the opposite corner, and desks for the students, arranged in groups of four. Running along the edge of the carpet in the middle of the room is a long, low bookshelf that is full of books on a variety of topics. On the top of the shelf are a number of magazine holders that contain levelled books. It is from these containers that students choose books for their book bag, which is taken home every night and also used during silent reading time.
Around the room are various materials that are available to the students whenever they are needed: paper for writing and art work, coloured pencils, crayons, paints, scissors, glue, math manipulatives, math games, text books, reference books, tools for science, and slates and chalk. The bulletin boards around the room and in the hall are mainly used to display students’ work, usually artwork and poetry, and on one section of the blackboard is a “word wall” that is used mostly as a spelling resource.

On the blackboard near the door, I fill in the agenda for the day and on this particular day jot down some math problems for the students to do once they are settled in their seats. The task at the beginning of the day often varies, depending on what I feel needs to be emphasised or reviewed. After about 15 minutes, the students check their own work as it is discussed as a class. This is typically teacher-directed work.

My Fellow Explorers

There’s the bell and here come the children. I will give you a quick profile of some of my students as they enter the room, hang up their coats and backpacks, and begin working on the questions I put on the board. The names of the students are pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

Denise is a student who loves to read and write. Although she is quiet in class, she can be counted on to do her work well and stay focussed on the task. Her favourite book series right now is about the adventures of a set of twins, since she is a twin herself. Denise sometimes brings in writing that she has done at home to share with me.

Jack is a rough and tumble boy who is highly competitive. He loves math and getting right answers. He reads well but his written responses are usually brief and done
in the shortest time possible. His choice in reading materials includes joke books, mysteries and non-fiction.

Kristin is one of my Grade 2 students. She brings a lot of background knowledge with her, and she loves the challenge of solving problems. Kristen says she reads because it makes her feel happy.

Josh would much rather be out catching snakes and toads than sitting in a classroom. He learns primarily through visual and kinaesthetic channels. Josh is a very good decoder of words, and he loves reading and writing about very specific topics. His writing, however, indicates a need to stand outside of himself to try to see things from another perspective.

Robert is a student who was in the Reading Recovery program in Grade 1. He progressed nicely during the program but the progress was not sustained after he was discontinued from the program. This year his father has been reading with him most nights. Robert continues to read slowly as he decodes unfamiliar words, but he checks for meaning often, which is an excellent strategy he is using this year. He is one of those polite, organised students whom many teachers love to have in their class.

Jen loves to read and write about animals. She can decode words fairly well but her oral and written responses to text indicate that she needs to think more carefully about the meaning of the text. Perhaps she reads too quickly and assumes she understands the author’s message. It is this kind of student I find challenging to teach because she does not recognise this limited comprehension.

Anthony is in Grade 2. He is an excellent decoder of words, but his comprehension is limited to the knowledge he brings to the text, as it is with all readers.
Anthony has taught me the importance of providing rich discussions prior to reading in order to help students comprehend text with unfamiliar ideas and concepts.

I also have several students who struggle enough with decoding words that they are reading below their grade level. Because they require more individualised attention, they leave the classroom during guided reading time to work in small groups with either the resource teacher or an educational assistant.

*Setting a Course*

I must go now and have some students record their solutions to the math problems on the board. When we have discussed a few different approaches to the problems, it will be time for our guided reading session. Perhaps you would like to look at the story they are reading while you are waiting. It is called *More Than Anything Else* (Bradby, 1995).

*Guided reading.*

I have half an hour every morning to spend with the students in my class who are reading either at or above grade level. It is during this time that I am collecting some of the data for my action research. My main concern in teaching reading to this age group (7-9 years old) is to encourage reflective and critical thinking. These particular students can generally decode familiar words quickly and efficiently. What they need to do at this stage is develop a variety of strategies for comprehending the meaning and message of the text. In order to do this, they need to think reflectively about their understanding of the text, be critical about their use and development of skills that are modelled through mini-lessons, and be curious about the unknown. Their level of curiosity helps determine their motivation for the task and their willingness to consider alternate strategies for comprehending text and improving their skills (Bruner, 1966).
During the guided reading time, many of the texts I choose to use are from the Collections 3 (1998) series published by Prentice Hall Ginn, and from Tapestry 3 (Asseltine et al., 2000), a social studies text. A major factor in choosing these series is that class sets are available. They also have interesting stories, articles and poems that relate to each other as well as other curriculum areas, such as science. Within the series, the different components are written at a range of reading levels. However, since I am emphasising the development of thinking skills, I am not concerned that some text might be a little more or less challenging for some students than others.

We have already begun the reading process with More Than Anything Else (Bradby, 1995). The students have looked at the pictures, discussed what the story might be about, given predictions for what the main character may want more than anything else, looked at unfamiliar words in the text, and begun reading the story with a partner. After we gather on the carpet today, we will review what we know about the story, and have several students share their written thoughts from yesterday, and then they will continue to read with partners for about 15 minutes. Each student has a sheet on which to jot down thoughts as they occur during the reading. I have given this sheet the heading While I am Reading (see Appendix A). Each student takes a turn reading a paragraph or two out loud, and then the children stop to talk about their imaginings, feelings, predictions, and new information they have learned from the text. After discussing these things with their partners, they then take a minute to jot down their thoughts on the piece of paper before continuing with the reading.

Once the students have come to the carpet, I’m going to invite one of them to take turns reading with me and sharing thoughts with respect to the While I am Reading sheet.
I find this type of modelling reminds and inspires the students to really think about what
the text means to them and question things that don’t make sense. I always have willing
volunteers to be my partner. More detail of this modelling process will be provided in
Chapter 4 when I present my data.

As well as using the While I am Reading sheet, there are several copies around
the room of a message I continually emphasise with the students. The sign I created says:

Reading is: Thinking

Imagining

Feeling

Connecting

Predicting

Learning

When I am reading out loud to the class at other times in the day, I will stop and ask
children to share their thoughts and tell which of these things they are doing. Often,
students will spontaneously refer to the sign and describe their thoughts without being
asked.

Do you notice how engaged the students seem to be reading with their partner?
When the students first used this sheet to guide their thinking, some raced through the
text and I could tell very little was discussed or written down. As usual, I had to be very
specific about how much I expected to be written down because some students tend to
avoid writing anything. Feel free to join students and contribute to their conversations.
In about 15 minutes we will meet on the carpet to share and consolidate the learning that went on.

This debriefing time at the end of guided reading is kept short but the students seem eager to talk about what they accomplished, learned or questioned during the period. It also gives me valuable feedback about the children’s thinking and motivation. I often come up with ideas for tasks related to the reading from these discussions.

The *While I am Reading* sheet is a very crucial piece of paper with respect to my action research. I find that students often need to be prompted to get in touch with their thoughts and feelings while they are reading. Meek (1991, p. 210) suggests that “right from their earliest lessons children should be helped to reflect on what they have been doing and what they want to bring about.” I find that if the students are asked what they were thinking about after reading, the responses are very limited. However, if they are required to stop and think while reading, suddenly they have much more to say. As well, working with a partner stimulates a broader and deeper response than solitary reading. Chambers (1992, p. 161) recognised the need for sharing in order to make sense out of what we are reading:

> What all of us know is that meaning is not made in isolation but by negotiation with other people. We share what we think, we listen to what others have to say, we add to and modify each other’s perceptions, and move towards agreement.”

I also emphasise throughout the day the need to ask questions. Sometimes, when I am reading out loud to the group, I will tell them that I will be asking questions about things I think might be new to them. Their job is to ask me the question first. This prompts a flurry of hands when I come to the end of the page because no one wants to be
caught trying to answer a question they should have asked first. I believe this reinforces my underlying message that a reflective and critical thinker is a curious thinker, one who is in “the habit of freshly wondering” (Meek, 1991, p. 170).

Ah, the other groups are back. We need to turn to a writing task for the next half-hour. Please feel free to circulate and listen to students as they edit their adventure stories with a peer. I will be working with a small group of students who would like to read their stories out loud to the group and me and then discuss ways of improving them.

*Silent reading and reading assessment.*

After recess the students have about 20 minutes to silently read books from their levelled reading bag. I will be putting a question on the board that they will have to answer in their response journals at the end of the 20 minutes. While they are reading, I will be listening to individuals read and making notes about their reading strategies and comprehension of the text. If you wish, you may do a running record of a student as well. Let me show you one way to record their reading of a text.

Our supply of levelled books is growing continually. The process began when we received a copy of Fountas and Pinnell’s (1999) book, *Matching books to readers: A levelled book list for guided reading, K-3*. The primary teachers gathered together many of the books in their classrooms and the resource teacher organised older students and parent volunteers to find the books that were listed, and put a sticker on each one indicating its level. The following summer, the primary teachers got together one day to determine the level of the remaining books, of which there were many. These levelled books were placed in magazine holders and stored on shelves in our “book room” (some shelves at one end of the resource teacher’s room).
This process of levelling books proved to be very valuable professional development for the teachers. We looked at books that had already been levelled, read the guidelines for determining levels, and examined books for things like vocabulary, picture support, sentence structure, and words per page. As we shared our thoughts, we became more aware of the complexities of books and the different strategies and skills required to read them.

The Reading Recovery teacher also gave a workshop on keeping running records. This gave us more insight into the strategies and sources of information readers use to read accurately: visual, syntax, and meaning (Clay, 1991). After much observation and discussion the following year, we realised that with older readers we needed to be checking for comprehension as well as accuracy before deciding a child was ready to move to another level. This issue is addressed in Chapter 3.

It’s time for the students to respond to the task on the board and you were asking how I decide what question to ask. Since the students are reading a variety of fiction and non-fiction books, I need to really ask two questions. For example, if I ask them to describe the personality characteristics of the main character and give an example from the part read today, then for those reading non-fiction I ask them to describe the physical characteristics of the animal or object in their text, and if that still does not apply, then I tell the students to adapt the question as they see fit. As far as what the question or task is, it depends on what we have been talking about during shared and guided reading or writing. Shared reading or writing refers to short periods of time when I get together with either small groups or the whole class to introduce ideas or model strategies, skills and techniques in the process of reading or creating text in co-operation with the students.
The audience for the reading response journals is both the other students and myself. After about five minutes, I randomly choose five students to tell us what book they are reading and to then read their responses out loud. This way, students are exposed to other books and have a chance to hear a variety of responses. Most students are eager to be chosen because they like to tell about the books they are reading. Since I choose randomly and no one knows who may be called on, there is also pressure on everyone to get something written down. As I describe my action research in Chapter 4, the various iterations of this task will be examined.

It has been great having you in my classroom during our literacy block. I hope you gained some ideas for your classroom, but more importantly, I hope you question my purposes and the use of levelled books, and that you continue to learn more about assessing your students. There are so many ideas on how to use time during the literacy period and so many resources available, but I feel strongly that teachers need to approach literacy with a deep understanding of their own beliefs about teaching, learning, reading and writing, and with a knowledgeable assessment of their students’ interests, skills and developmental stages. When you base your curriculum on this assessment of your students, you can be selective about the materials and resources you will use.

The purpose of this chapter is to give you, the reader, a context in which to place me as I describe my action research and an opportunity to perhaps develop a sense of curiosity about the results. I am faced daily with the challenges of a wide range of students, a barrage of information, resources and techniques, a broad curriculum to cover, and all the unexpected events that occur in the constant interaction with people. Although this is only a snapshot of one particular day and only a few details are provided,
the following chapters focus in on my action research and provide an in depth look at my thinking, actions, and reactions in relation to encouraging intellectual growth through reflective and critical thinking.
Chapter 2

Once granted the ability to reflect upon their practice within a complex context, teachers can be expected to make their choices out of their own situations and to open themselves to descriptions of the whole.

Maxine Greene (1995, p. 12)

Action Research: A Vehicle for my Exploration

Chapter 1 offers a snapshot of a morning in my classroom. It provides a small picture for the reader of where I am currently in my practice with respect to teaching and learning about reading. In this chapter, I look back at the influences in my life that have brought me to this point and to the decision to use action research as the framework for this thesis. Examining where I have come from is a crucial part of understanding the present and planning for the future. Often this aspect of professional development is overlooked or glossed over in the attempt to have teachers conform to a particular way of thinking and acting. As the reader interacts with the text, it is my hope that connections will be made and the reader’s own beliefs and experiences will be identified and examined in relation to literacy teaching and professional development.

I am in my eighth year of teaching elementary school and my fourth year teaching Grade 3. The results of the provincial reading test caused me to examine my practice closely because only 50% of the Grade 3 students in the first two years of the test at my school achieved a level three or four. Because I had already begun the process of
becoming a teacher/researcher through action research prior to teaching Grade 3, I welcomed the test results as providing one more window on my practice. But the results were not only of interest to me. My school’s primary team of six teachers, including the kindergarten teacher, the Reading Recovery teacher, and the resource teacher, decided that a consistent, unified approach to literacy was needed throughout the whole division. Because I am not working in isolation, but rather with other professionals who play the role of critical friends, supporting, validating, questioning, and seeking solutions with me, I feel confident that examining and changing my practice through action research will yield insight into effective teaching practices.

This study looks inward to my beliefs, knowledge, and understanding of teaching and learning. It provides images of where I have come from and where I am now, and my imagination provides a look at the future. As the future unfolds, action research will provide a model for interpreting, analysing, modifying, evaluating and validating the changes to my practice.

This study also looks outward to the culture of a school and a group of teachers who willingly initiate their own professional development. It considers the impact my colleagues and working environment have on my growth and development, and includes the voices of those with whom I am in daily contact. As I tell my story, I consider current research and thinking, past experience, assessment of student work, and principles of teaching and learning. These considerations help me as an action researcher as I build knowledge and understanding about reading and the development of reflective, critical thinking of Grade 3 students and how best to facilitate their growth in this area.
Taking responsibility for my own learning, seeking to understand the way others learn, and expanding my ways of seeing, thinking and knowing by listening to and observing others are actions I value. When I was introduced to action research in a graduate course four years ago, I was exhilarated by the fact that knowing-in-action was acknowledged as a valued method of gaining and creating knowledge (Schön, 1987). It is empowering to be in control of my actions, to be free to be a learner at the same time as being a teacher, and to have the role of teacher/researcher named and recognised (Hannay, 1998). In order to justify the use of action research as a tool for studying change and a means of expanding current knowledge, I am taking an autobiographical stance and looking backwards in order to trace the path that has led to this study.

Looking Back Before Moving Forward

This is my autobiography. I am a mother, wife, teacher, sister, friend, daughter, learner. I make mistakes, I take risks, I am proactive, I am reactive. I am a story, one of billions. I am unique and yet also very similar to many others in my culture. The context in which I have lived and live now influences me greatly. I am a product of my upbringing, my education, my religion, my genes, my experiences, my culture. Who I am and where I come from, my preferences, my attitudes, my worldview, my learning styles, all have an impact on my approach in the classroom. In order to understand the direction I wish to take as a teacher researcher, I must understand where I have come from, what has influenced me, why I think the way I do and what I envision for myself, the students in my class, and society in general.
Limitations.

I have always liked to think that I am in control of myself. I make choices based on opportunities, past experience, values, critical analysis, intuition, and emotions, but I also base actions on coercion and habit, social pressure and traditions. Thinking that I am in complete control of myself is an illusion. I am part of a community and always have been. I have no choice in that and the communities of which I am part have shaped me. I live and work within a framework that had its basic structure long before I arrived in this world. Because of this framework or paradigm, I am not autonomous, I am not completely free to think any way I choose; my decisions are grounded in my exposure to a particular life style and way of thinking. However, the shape and size of that framework changes as I go to the edge and push, look beyond, withdraw, and invite others in with varying ways of seeing and knowing, thereby creating windows and extending boundaries.

Constructing knowledge.

During my second year of teaching, as I tried to make sense of the educational system and also make sense of my approaches, I became interested in pursuing a Master’s degree in Education. The following summer, as I began graduate studies, I was introduced to the concept of constructivism. The idea is “that reality and knowledge is created and constructed, not fixed and discovered” (Jungck, 1996, p. 171). In the novel, Sophie's World (Gaarder, 1996), Sophie and a philosopher explore the history of philosophy. The philosopher gives this example of constructivism.

We are partly instrumental in deciding what we perceive by selecting what is significant for us… Two people can be present in the same room and yet
experience it quite differently. This is because we contribute our own
meaning – or our own interests – when we perceive our surroundings. A
woman who is pregnant might think she sees other pregnant women
everywhere she looks. That is not because there were no pregnant women
before, but because now she is pregnant she sees the world through
different eyes. An escaped convict may see policemen everywhere (pp.
458-459).

As a teacher, being aware that people bring various meanings and understandings
to a situation calls for an open-minded approach, an appreciation for different
interpretations of events and stories. Dewey (1933, p.30) states that open-mindedness
“includes an active desire to listen to more sides than one; to give heed to facts from
whatever source they come; to give full attention to alternate possibilities; to recognise
the possibility of error even in the beliefs that are dearest to us.” Constructivism is also
about making connections: connecting what is known to new information; building new
learning on a foundation of knowledge.

In order to apply this theory of learning, I need to first understand what the
children are thinking and then present them with opportunities to expand their thinking.
In my third year of teaching and learning with a Grade 6 class, I became more conscious
of the students’ voices. I consulted them about topics they would like to pursue, asking
them to set their own goals after discussing expectations from the Common Curriculum
(Ontario. Ministry of Education, 1995), choosing whether to work with others or alone. I
continued to encourage the students to be responsible for their education, to ask
questions, suggest directions, help each other. I realised the value in students teaching other students because it forced clarification and deeper understanding.

During that first graduate course, John Dewey and Jerome Bruner were two names that became significant to me. I read with fascination Dewey’s (1943) descriptions in *The School and Society* of motivating, authentic learning situations, and experimental schools where life and school were clearly connected, where children had materials and resources to manipulate in labs as opposed to sitting at desks listening. I reflected on how I learn “in action”, how listening to others was only meaningful when I could make solid connections to my own experiences. As learning strategies were explored, I connected to Bruner’s (1985) comment on the need for a broad approach to learning:

In a word, the best approach to models of the learner is a reflective one that permits you to “go meta”, to inquire whether the script being imposed on the learner is there for the reason that was intended or for some other reason.

There is not one kind of learning. It was the vanity of a preceding generation to think that the battle over learning theories would eventuate in one winning over the others. Any learner has a host of learning strategies at command. The salvation is in learning how to go about learning before getting irreversibly beyond the point of no return (p. 8). Both these educator/philosophers helped me to focus on the students and their particular needs, listening to them, not relying strictly on outside experts for answers.
In the fall of my fourth year of teaching, I took a course that had a great deal of appeal to me because it pulled me in the direction I wished to go. I was introduced to action research and I began to have a new sense of freedom, an acknowledgement that my experience is valuable, that it is o.k. to be a learner and a teacher at the same time. One of the recommended books for the course was *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* by Stephen Brookfield (1995). The characteristics of Brookfield that really appealed to me were his willingness to be vulnerable, to take risks, to admit mistakes, to learn from experiences, and to involve his students in the process. Although he is a teacher of adults, I could relate much of what he said to my experiences as a teacher of children. In becoming critically reflective, Brookfield talks about identifying our beliefs, seeing ourselves and our practice as continually evolving, creating democratic classrooms, and discovering both our own and the students’ voices. The idea of valuing my voice had been coming to me in my personal life and now I was ready to listen to my voice in my professional life. Not that I had not been listening, but I was uncomfortable sharing my thoughts if they differed from the status quo and the “voices of authority.” The voices of authority have traditionally been those in science, conducting objective, quantitative experiments and pronouncing their findings under the philosophy of positivism or technical rationality, or those in university who, because of their higher education, must be authorities on the topics of which they spoke (Anderson & Herr, 1999).

To have those “in authority” acknowledge that the knowledge I gleaned from my personal experiences was worthwhile was emancipating (Wells, 1998). Many teachers
feel impotent because they are continually being told what to do as though they are pawns in a game. They feel devalued because their knowledge is brushed aside as the pendulum of pedagogy swings back and forth under political, social and academic pressures. I was discovering a way of thinking and seeing that gave me power and control over my professional decisions but at the same time, I was feeling vulnerable because reflecting critically involves honesty and sharing.

Throughout the course on *The Improvement of Teaching*, I became aware of the importance of identifying the reasons for my thinking and actions. In order to make changes, we must get to the root of a problem, otherwise the change is only superficial and we are not really evolving. It is like treating the symptoms rather than the cause. Identifying reasons for behaviour, especially if the behaviour has become a habit, is not an easy task. We are not typically taught to question cultural norms and values or the habits of our society. In fact, our educational system promotes conformity (Greene, 1995). Because of this, I struggle with deconstructing my frame of reference, with stating the very basic beliefs and values I hold, but once those beliefs and values are identified and questioned for their worth, then my actions can be analysed and I can ask: Are my actions a learned response? What are my beliefs and values, should they be changed, and are my actions truly based on them?

*Insights into research.*

As a result of my first step into action research, I became aware of the importance of the following needs in relation to my professional development:

1. support from a group of like-minded individuals,
2. a critical friend who will carry on a dialogue, giving opinions and asking questions,
3. observations and record keeping,
4. feedback from students,
5. becoming familiar with many ways of thinking through reading and dialogue, and
6. the power of researching my own practice.

McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (1996) support and expand upon the value of these findings, providing detailed information about how to carry out action research.

*The value of discovery.*

Before beginning my fifth year of teaching with a Grade 2/3, I took another graduate course on creative approaches to teaching mathematics. Although my focus is reading, there is a need to be knowledgeable in all subject areas in elementary school, and the description of the course caught my attention. Allowing children to construct their own understanding of mathematical concepts through hands-on, authentic projects was one of the approaches studied and experienced. Throughout the course, the idea of allowing children to discover for themselves was explored.

This idea of discovering for one’s self has been reinforced for me through my own process of learning. As all graduate students do, I have read many articles, studies and books. The knowledge of others only becomes my knowledge when I am able to make connections between what I know or believe and what is being presented. I am constructing my understanding through meaningful connections. Others’ ideas and thoughts may be floating around in the recesses of my mind, but they do not become part
of the foundation on which I build my personal knowledge, which influences my actions, until I have an experience that firmly connects them to my reality. I need to discover or know for myself through personal experience before an idea becomes a belief or part of who I am, before it moves from my head to my heart.

However, sometimes a learner needs more than the freedom to discover. A major criticism of the whole language movement was that children were left too much on their own to discover the ins and outs of reading. Not enough explicit instruction was provided, particularly in phonics, and some students floundered after not discovering some key strategies necessary for reading. The teacher’s role becomes very important in this area as they assess students and scaffold instruction and experiences to meet their needs, providing work in their “zone of proximal development” (Webster, Beveridge & Reed, 1996).

The pressures of testing.

Unfortunately, habits are hard to break and, in unfamiliar situations, it is easy to fall back on old ways of doing things. I found myself at times being the expert in math as I was trying to prepare the Grade 3 students for provincial testing. I felt the pressure of covering the curriculum and showing the children how to respond to math problems with words, pictures and numbers. I fully agree with the value of explaining one’s thinking as a means to deeper understanding, but I found myself doing a lot of the explaining instead of allowing discovery or “uncovering of concepts” by the students (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). Higher expectations, time constraints, conformity, and paper and pencil tasks all became issues that put me back into the role of teacher as expert, and I saw some children struggling to understand. By the end of the year, I had decided that my approach to
preparing the students for the provincial test was in conflict with the kind of learning situations I really wanted to set up in the classroom. I did not like the restrictions of the box into which I was trying to fit both the students and myself. Constructivist practices and building a humanistic learning community (Henderson, 1996) were taking a back seat to preparing students for testing. McFarland and Stansell (1993, p. 17) recognised this possibility:

Powerful groups in many nations are now at work on various educational reforms, including national curricula and national tests, which presume no need for further inquiry among teachers and which cast them as mere technicians who will have no role in building curricula from their research in the classroom.

Whitford and Jones (2000, p. 10), in their evaluation of the effects of reform efforts in Kentucky through student assessment and high-stakes accountability, also express concern that these measures are “forcing teachers to focus on whatever is thought to raise test scores rather than on instruction aimed at addressing individual student needs.”

My Teaching in 2001/2002

This brings me to my current year of teaching and a focus on this thesis. I made the decision that my thesis would be based on action research: studying and improving my practice in a particular area using feedback from and assessments of students, dialogue with colleagues, and current theories and best practices. This act, reflect, revise cycle is also suggested by Toomes, Stephens and Gillette (1990) as an important strategy.
to use in developing an effective literacy program. As I look back over the last few years of my teaching/learning experiences, there is a thread woven through my thinking and actions: taking responsibility for one’s learning by actively constructing knowledge through reflection and analysis. If I find reflective analysis crucial to my learning, would this not be an important frame of mind to help my students develop? As Bruner (1985, p. 5) suggests, there are many ways to learn, and in deciding which forms of learning to encourage, “there must be a value judgement about how the mind should be cultivated and to what end.” Learning how to learn leads to independence, and I believe that learning how to be a reflective and critical thinker leads to self-sufficiency and freedom from the confines that are inherent in our educational system.

It is at this point that I am beginning to see the bandwagon of “balanced literacy” passing by and groups of teachers being expected to hop on. Cambourne (2000/2001) studied the process of turning theory into classroom practice and developed a framework for this process. What should be noted from this study is the discussion that occurred over time among the teachers as they defined the teaching conditions they felt were needed for literacy learning and then discussed strategies that would implement the conditions. Cambourne’s data suggest “that there is another layer or level of debate that needs to occur before shared meanings begin to emerge. This level of debate typically involves the teachers who create and maintain a group culture that encourages open and frank examination of some deeper, more ideological values and beliefs” (p. 414). This important step is being missed as teachers are given practical ideas but not the opportunities to examine their own beliefs and critically reflect on current theories. Fortunately, members of the primary team at my school are open to the examination of
their ideologies and questioning of current theories and practices in relation to their own experiences and knowledge. As we continue to assess our practices and beliefs, and as we listen to and observe our students closely, our own reflective and analytical thinking is enhanced, and action research is in progress.

Over the past few years, our Board of Education has supported the goal of improved literacy levels by providing workshops for teachers on “current best practices” and money for resources and other professional development, such as teachers visiting schools to observe balanced literacy programs in progress. Teachers’ reactions vary from “This is what I have been doing all along,” to “I wonder what the next fad will be,” to “This looks interesting, tell me more,” to “How many more years do I have?” Teachers need to be empowered through a sense of control over their own professional development and practice by engaging in discussions that begin with beliefs, move to the questioning of their own teaching and learning practices, and result in informed decisions about changes they feel make sense in terms of their experiences, conversations and current research. I believe that if this were to happen, teachers would choose to alter and improve their teaching without coercion or complaining. Perhaps more than anything, that is the underlying message of this thesis.
Chapter 3

Bringing reading to a level of awareness so that a child can reflect on the process is a powerful teaching-learning experience.

Constance Weaver (1988, p. 257)

The Exploration

Chapter 2 provides a justification for the use of action research as a frame for examining my practice and developing understanding and knowledge about a particular subject. This chapter introduces the question that I wish to explore: How can I encourage my students to think reflectively and critically while they are reading? This question is a reflection of my beliefs, learning style and personality, and it is also a reflection of the thinking over the last few decades (Fogarty, 1994), as researchers, educators and philosophers have pondered “going meta” (Bruner, 1985). Of course, thinking about one’s thinking goes back even further in the last century, as this quotation from the novelist and existentialist Albert Camus (as cited in Fogarty, 1994, p. vii) suggests: “An intellect is someone whose mind watches itself.” Similarly, Dewey (1938, p. 87) states: “To reflect…is the heart of intellectual organization and of the disciplined mind.”

Why Reflective and Critical Thinking?

As I began to teach in the primary division, I was unhappy with the approach I was taking to reading. I lacked a clear direction and clear goals, and I did not feel I was assessing the students either specifically or broadly enough. There were many
opportunities for reading and discussions in my classroom, with written responses based on retell, relate and reflect, and creative writing spin-offs. My emphasis was on providing activities in which the students could construct meaning, with a concern for their level of motivation for completing the related tasks.

When the results of the Grade 3 test came back, it was clear that the students were not prepared for the types of questions asked on the test. The average mark of about 73% on the multiple-choice reading segment indicated that the students had reasonable decoding and comprehension skills, but the responses to open-ended questions indicated a significant inability to independently infer, reason, and justify answers in writing. Only 50% of the Grade 3 students had an overall level 3 or 4 on the reading portion of the test.

Although the Ministry of Education was requesting school plans for improving test scores, the desire to implement change to the literacy program came from the primary teachers who envisioned a literacy program that would provide continuity across the grades starting at kindergarten. They felt that assessment of individual students should drive the reading program, and the students should be given many opportunities to respond in writing to comprehension questions similar to ones they could expect to see on the provincial test.

Shortly after the primary teachers began their inquiry into their practices and the direction they wished to take, we were introduced to a group of teachers, principals and consultants in our board who were beginning an Early Literacy Initiative. The idea for this began when a Reading Recovery teacher attended a conference and heard about the work of Dr. Peter Hill (Crevola & Hill, 1998) in Australia. The teacher was impressed with the approach being taken to language arts in primary schools, using techniques and
ideas from the Reading Recovery Program initiated by Marie Clay in New Zealand (Clay, 1983). We attended a meeting to find out more about this initiative and became intrigued with the concept of blocks of time devoted exclusively to language arts, using such techniques as guided reading and running records, and using levelled books to provide a structured program. These ideas were concrete and practical, a place from which we could begin our journey.

A Balanced Literacy Approach

The idea of a balanced literacy program is not new. Strech (1995) describes it as essentially the same as a whole language approach with the added component of guided reading, in which students are placed in homogeneous ability groups. Explicit skill instruction and authentic texts are used, as well as several other components such as daily read aloud, shared book/poetry experiences, repeated readings, modelled/interactive writing, rich oral discourse experiences, and a home reading and writing program (Wiencek, Vazzano & Reizian, 1999). Two recommended resources we purchased are Guided Reading: Good first teaching for all children (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) and Teaching Children to Read and Write (Toronto District School Board, 2000).

A field trip for teachers.

To help us get a feel for how such a program would work, we travelled to a school in Scarborough that had implemented a balanced literacy program based on the results from the Early Literacy Research Project conducted by Hill (Hill & Rowe, 1998). This program uses a variety of approaches to reading and writing instruction, including ability grouping, continuous use of running records to assess the progress of the students, and a
formal assessment twice a year using the Developmental Reading Assessment (Beaver, 1997). A literacy co-ordinator organised a literacy room to allow teachers easy access to materials, including baskets of levelled books, assessment records and professional reading resources. Each classroom is also equipped with essential literacy materials such as levelled reading materials, classroom libraries, pocket charts, magnetic boards and letters, word walls, and computers.

After a morning of listening to, observing and interacting with the staff and students, we left with a sense of direction. We were made aware of the time-consuming nature of individualised assessment and the need for a highly organised system, preferably co-ordinated by a designated staff member. We were also reminded that children’s ability to read words does not necessarily mean comprehension of the text. Keeping these things in mind, we knew we needed to develop a program in our school that would address the particular needs of our students, using available resources, while also being aware of time and energy limitations. We have levelled many of the books in the classrooms, more books have been ordered that fit within the guided reading philosophy, and the teachers used the summer months to plan the organisation of their classrooms and instruction time. We attended workshops on using running records, and the Developmental Reading Assessment (Beaver, 1997) has been purchased and used as an indicator of children’s reading progress.

*Early literacy initiative.*

Since that time, the Board of Education has established a fund for an Early Literacy Initiative and a number of schools are implementing the balanced literacy approach as defined by Fountas and Pinnell (1996) and *Teaching Children to Read and*
Workshops conducted by Helen Depree from New Zealand and Joan Barrett from the Toronto and District School Board have been offered and well attended. These women base much of their understanding and practices on the work of Marie Clay (1983, 1991). The workshops have presented best practices in teaching children to read and write, but have also emphasised the need for teachers to align their beliefs and understandings about learning to read with the current theories underlying the aforementioned books.

A great deal of literature is being produced for teachers suggesting how to implement and manage a balanced literacy program (Freppon & Dahl, 1998). Cunningham, Hall and Sigman’s (1999) work on four block literacy, Fountas and Pinnell’s (1996) work on guided reading and levelling books, Crevola and Hill’s (1995) work on creating blocks of time, Depree & Iverson’s (1994) work on early literacy, and the Toronto District School Board’s (2000) publication of a literacy guide for teachers all contain practical ways for teachers to implement a literacy program based on current theories. It was my intention to become familiar with and implement many of these practical ideas. However, for this action and re-action research, my focus was on the effectiveness of the changes I made to my practice that promote critical and reflective thinking with respect to reading. This includes comprehension of the text as well as an understanding of one’s thinking processes and reading strategies.

Developing Thinking Skills

I chose this particular aspect of literacy instruction because I believe that learning to think reflectively and critically will promote within students improved self-awareness
and self-assessment, personal responsibility for their learning and, ultimately, better learning strategies. Howard Gardner (2000, p. 135) also expresses this belief:

> With knowledge changing so rapidly, students must become able – eager – to assume responsibility for their learning. To the extent that students can craft their own goals, keep track of their own accomplishments, reflect on their own thinking and learning – where it has improved, where it continues to fall short – they become partners in their own education.

Taking the time to reflect critically on the learning process as one expands skills and develops strategies, as well as taking the time to reflect critically on the content and context of the text and relate it to one’s own knowledge, may give students greater control and understanding of their education. By *reflective thinking*, I mean the ability of students to think about what they are reading, what they are doing while they are reading, and how they are constructing meaning, all of which involve not only thinking, but also thinking about their thinking. In other words, reflective thinking involves getting in touch with thoughts that come to mind while reading (see Appendix B for examples of thoughts), as well as being aware of mental processes and reading strategies that are used in tasks such as word identification and constructing meaning. By *critical thinking*, I mean the ability to evaluate and judge what has been read using such strategies as comparing and contrasting, analysing, and critiquing, as well as the ability to judge the effectiveness of reading strategies being used, both for those who are struggling with reading and those attempting to move beyond their current effective strategies and tackle more complex reading material.
Jones (1990, p. 49) suggests that “reading and writing are critical, reflective, personal processes and at the same time communicative and social experiences” and, therefore, must be grounded in social interactions. The role of the teacher becomes crucial in this context. It is through thoughtful dialogue and informed observations (Lindquist, 1990) that the teacher will be able to make decisions that will help students become reflective and critical thinkers. From my own experiences with students, I ponder the following questions.

- For students who struggle with decoding words, how can I help them become aware of effective reading strategies and learning behaviours so that they can stop and help themselves when they are stuck?
- For students who can decode but miss the intent of the text, how can I help them learn to stop and check for meaning?
- For students who are reading fluently and are reasonably comprehending the text, how can I help them analyse, synthesise, infer and summarise thoughtfully?

As Fountas and Pinnell (2001, p. 327) suggest, the teacher’s job is to bring the “students’ conscious attention to aspects of text that will help them access more of their own thinking or become more analytical.”

As I consider the reflective and analytical way of thinking that I would like to encourage in my students, I recall students who at times respond spontaneously and with little thought to words on a page, students who have difficulty attending to a literacy task, students whose motivation to do work is based on external rewards and punishments, and students who simply want to get a task done with as little effort as possible and move on
to more interesting things. I realise that there are a number of factors that will affect the success of my endeavours. However, these are the realities of a teacher’s life. Nothing is as simple as applying some technique or method to a subject area (Acker, 1999). As I come to see the importance, as a teacher and learner, of my beliefs, attitudes and ways of thinking, I see value in conveying that understanding to all the learners in my classroom. The challenge will be to reach those students who appear to have little internal control, self-motivation, or desire to think about what they are doing in terms of reading and writing.

I must also keep in mind that my reflective approach to life is not everyone’s preference. Many people prefer to approach things intuitively, finding that analysing too much interferes with either the enjoyment of the task or the creative process. An example of this is a comment made by an artist and author who said, on a CBC Radio One interview first aired on January 10, 2001, that when she is creating, as soon as she questions how or why, she stops creating whatever she is working on. There is a time and place for reflective and critical thinking, but there are also times for just being and allowing intuition, creativity and enjoyment to blossom. This balance must also be considered as I approach the teaching of reading.

I believe that it is my job as a teacher to provide a learning environment for my students that encourages them to become independent, lifelong learners. If students learn how to go about learning, then they are empowered to take control of their education and direction of their lives. That is the big picture I consider as I teach the children in my class to stop and think about their thinking and to consider ways to become more knowledgeable and skilled.
Chapter 4

New developments in the science of learning also emphasize the importance of helping people take control of their own learning. Since understanding is viewed as important, people must learn to recognize when they understand and when they need more information.

Bransford, Brown & Cocking (1999, Chapter 1, ¶ 26)

A Fact-Finding Mission

The previous chapter addresses the question that prompted this action research. Now, I will give examples and summarise the data I collected over a period of about eight months in my Grade 2/3 classroom. I implemented three actions that I felt would encourage reflective and critical thinking with respect to reading. All three actions went through changes, some more than others, as I reflected on the suitability of them, students’ reactions and responses to them, and the overall benefit with respect to my goal of encouraging reflective and critical thinking.

The actions and reactions are summarised in chart form. Also recorded on the chart are the expected results, my assumptions or beliefs, student materials and resources, students’ responses, my responses, and possible explanations for the results. The completed matrices are found in Appendices C, D and E: Appendix C provides details about the use of the While I am Reading sheet, Appendix D provides details about the variations changes to the reading response journal, and Appendix E gives details about actions taken to support the students’ self analysis of their reading strategies.
Along with this record, I also kept two journals. The first journal was divided into two columns: One column was for recording what actually happened in class, the second column was for recording my thoughts and reactions to the event in class. This data file relates directly to the matrices mentioned above, but also includes other teaching and learning events related to literacy. An example appears in Appendix F.

The second journal was a more general piece of writing in which I recorded my personal observations, reflections and insights into my practice. As Bullough and Pinnegar (2001, p. 20) suggest, “the aim of self-study research is to provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm or settle.” With this in mind, my reflective journal was an attempt to honestly examine critical events that occurred during the year, both positive and negative, revealing biases, uncovering beliefs and assumptions, and imagining other possibilities. In this journal are also my perceptions of the culture of the school and the contributions the primary team made towards this action research. Since the members of the primary team are my critical friends, they played a crucial role in supporting and validating my experiences and thoughts. Placing my action research within the whole context of my teaching and learning experiences gives the reader a greater opportunity to understand my point of view in order to examine the research critically. See Appendix G for a sample of an entry in this journal.

Using the data from the matrices and the two journals, plus examples of students’ work, I will now comment and expand upon the actions taken. Looking more closely at some of the events from Chapter 1, I will take you back into my classroom through the use of dialogue between the students and myself. The dialogue represents typical
exchanges, rather than an actual conversation that took place. I will also comment on the how and why of the actions.

This first dialogue is similar to one that occurred at the beginning of the guided reading session from Chapter 1. It demonstrates the use of the *While I am Reading* sheet (Appendix A) on which the students record their thoughts and feelings.

*While I am Reading*

In the following dialogue, I am the teacher (T) having a discussion with a group of students (S).

T: Yesterday, you were introduced to the story *More Than Anything Else* (Bradby, 1995). What did you think the white stuff was in the picture?

S1: Most of us thought it was snow.

S2: I thought it was rice.

S3: We found out when we started reading that it was salt.

T: What else surprised you so far in the story?

S4: I was surprised that the whole family had to work in the salt mines.

S5: I was surprised that they didn’t have any breakfast to eat.

S6: I wondered why they had to get up so early in the morning.

S7: I learned that the boy wanted to read more than anything else.

T: Yesterday, Taylor came up to read and think out loud with me in front of the group. Who would like to model today for the class? Robert, I’d love to read with you. Bring your book and sit down beside me. I’ll start with this paragraph and then after we talk about it, you can read the next paragraph. Remember that as we are reading, we need to
stop and talk about anything that doesn’t make sense, and at the end of the paragraph we can talk about our thoughts. Everyone else follow along in your texts. I’m starting at the top of the second page.

“We stop only to grab a bite – sweet potatoes and corn cakes that Papa has brought along in his coat pocket. As I eat every crumb of my meal, I stare at the white mountain. Salt is heavy and rough. The shiny white crys – crys talls – no – The shiny white crystals leave cuts on your hands, your arms, your legs, the soles of your feet.”

T: ‘Crystals’ was a little tricky to figure out but I remembered hearing about salt crystals before.

S8: I wonder what corn cakes taste like.

T: Have you ever seen the yellow grainy stuff on the bottom of pizza crusts? It’s called corn meal and that’s what is used to make corn cakes. I imagine if you were really hungry they would taste wonderful.

S8: I guess in the picture they are looking at the cuts in their hands. I thought they were holding something.

T: It does look like that. Let’s look at the picture on the previous page. I think it showed the mountains of salt. On my sheet I’m going to write how delicious the meal must taste when they are so hungry.

S8: I wrote, “I learned that the shiny white crystals leave cuts in their hands, arms, legs, and the soles of their feet.” (See Appendix H for this response as well as a number of other students’ written responses to this story). I’m going to read the next paragraph now.
“My arms ach – that’s not a word – My arms achee from lifting the shovel – My arms ache from lifting the shovel, but I do not think about the pain there. I think about the hunger still in my head – (I wonder how he can have hunger in his head) – reading. I have seen some people – young and old – do it. I am nine years old and I know, if I had a chance, I could do it, too.”

S8: I’m eight years old and I can read. I wonder why he can’t.

T: Maybe he can’t go to school because he works all day.

S8: The hunger in his head must mean he really wants to read. I’m going to write that down.

T: I’m going to write that this reminds me of another story I read about Jeremiah, an old man who couldn’t read.

T: (to the whole group) Okay, find your partner and start reading where you left off yesterday. Remember to stop after every paragraph or two and talk about your thoughts. Continue using your sheets from yesterday. Don’t rush. If you run out of room on your sheet, flip to the back. I’m going to be going around the room and joining different partners as they read and talk. We’ll meet back on the carpet in about twenty minutes to talk about the part of the story you read today.

(Twenty minutes later)

T: There were a few expressions used in the story that I heard some of you wondering about. Talk with your partner about what you think this sentence means: “I have found hope, and it is as brown as me.” Make sure you check the picture. Put your hand up when you are ready to share with the group.
I found that when I first introduced the *While I am Reading* sheets to the students, there were different reactions. Some students were very focused and wanted to be sure to complete all the sentence starters. Other students enjoyed the conversations with their partners but didn’t like the writing part. And a handful of students took turns reading but wanted to get through the story and had little conversation and few written responses.

My reaction to this was to give them a minimum number of written responses they had to get down by the end of the story. I find time and again that these external parameters need to be imposed in order to encourage the desired result. Regardless of how interested some students are in the topic, from a science investigation to a math problem to an engaging text, they have little desire to record or respond in writing. However, as soon as students are aware that they will be held accountable for the assignment, they produce the required work. This raises the issue of motivation and creating learning environments that engage students without the need for external rewards and punishments, but I will address that in Chapter 5.

I was also concerned that the constant process of stopping, talking and writing would take the enjoyment out of the reading of the text. For a few students, they did mention that having to stop caused them to lose their place, which was frustrating, and they just wanted to read the story right through. Since the intent of the process was to have the students think more deeply about the story by making connections, questioning unfamiliar ideas and concepts, and becoming cognisant of their thought processes, I felt the need to impose this structure upon them. However, as time went on, I was selective about when to use the sheets and I varied the type of text so the students could experience a variety of thinking responses. For example, fiction and non-fiction texts relating to the
science and social studies curriculum were used. I also gave them the option of working on their own or only using the sheets during part of a reading assignment. We usually got together afterwards as a group to share our thoughts, and even the students who found the sheet to be a bother always seemed eager to do this. Their comments revealed that a great deal of thinking went on and a number of questions were asked about the content of the text. I always had to end these sessions due to time constraints with some students still wanting to share.

To make the sheet seem less imposing, I eventually put all the sentence starters at the top of the page as suggestions and the students could then choose the most appropriate ones to finish rather than feeling that every sentence starter had to be completed (see Appendix I). I found with this format that some students took it as an opportunity to again write as little as possible, since the task was a little more open-ended. Next year, I will begin with the original format because I feel the more explicit expectation was encouraging the students to be reflective. From my own experience, I also believe that writing clarifies and stretches thinking and this activity provides that opportunity.

The depth of their responses in many other situations during class time revealed that they were getting in touch with their thinking. Often, when I would be reading out loud to the class, someone would raise a hand and say, “I have a connection” or “I would like to make a prediction” or “That makes me feel…” or “I just learned…” or “That reminds me of…” or “I have a question.” These reactions indicated to me that at least some of the students knew I wanted them to be thinking and questioning; they knew I valued their contributions to and extensions of the reading experience.
Silent Reading Time

The next chunk of time I will expand upon is our silent reading time after recess. I am a very goal-oriented person and always strive to use instructional time as a learning, reinforcing or consolidating opportunity. Since children have many hours outside of school to choose their activities and reading material, I see it as my job to direct their attention and efforts in ways that will allow them to grow as learners. As a consequence, I again impose certain parameters on silent reading time.

During this time, the students have to read books that are just right for them. That means the books are not too hard or too easy in terms of the vocabulary and concepts. This is where the boxes of levelled books are used consistently. In their book bags, which are large zip-lock bags, each student must have at least one selection from both fiction and non-fiction books. These books can be ones from the classroom library, the school library, home, or the levelled book boxes. As the year progressed, I found that as I went around checking books that had been chosen independently, the students were making more informed choices of books for their book bag. Some students would give reasons for their choice like: I already know something about this topic; I read a page and only had trouble with one word; this book has lots of pictures to help me understand; I have already read books from this series; I really want to learn about this; this looks easy because the printing is big; or this was a book you talked about in the library and it looks interesting. When I asked them to read a portion or tell me about the book, they appeared to understand the text.
Assigning a reading level.

Before getting to this point of being able to independently choose books at appropriate levels, the students are given a level at the end of the previous year based on one of two reading assessment tools: the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) (Beaver, 1997), or the PM Benchmark kit (2001). Both of these tools contain texts at incremental levels of difficulty, which are used to analyse a student’s skill and ability in decoding and comprehending. The students are asked to read a passage, which may be fiction or non-fiction, while the teacher records errors and self-corrections. The student is then asked to retell the story and answer comprehension questions. Some of the questions are of a factual nature and others are open-ended and require input from the student, or as Billmeyer and Barton (1998) put it, “right there, think and search, and on my own” questions. The assessor then calculates the number of errors made in relation to the number of words read. If the student has read with an accuracy rate of 95% or more, then the text is considered easy. As the student’s accuracy level decreases, and/or comprehension weakens, then those levels are considered instructional to difficult.

At the beginning of this year, those students who were with us last year were given a book bag with a variety of levelled books based on their June assessment. I instructed these students to give them a try and let me know if the books were too easy or too hard, at which time I would listen to them read and make a judgement myself as well. In the meantime, I used the DRA to assess the new students, and they were then able to choose some books from the boxes for their book bags.

Fairly early on in the year, I was able to identify those students who I considered fluent readers, that is, they were readers who had few problems with decoding words, and
generally read with intonation that indicated at least a general understanding of the text. After a few whole-class discussions about the difficulty of comprehending some books, even though one might be able to read all the words, and after providing several examples of books that required varying degrees of background knowledge in order to understand them, the fluent readers were given much more freedom to choose books beyond the boxes. If I saw books that I thought might be too difficult, I would simply ask the student to read a paragraph and then I would ask a few questions and either approve it for silent reading time or suggest that they take that book home to read with another person who would be able to help them with the vocabulary or new ideas.

The reason for imposing this kind of control on the students’ choices was twofold. One, there are some students who want to appear to be reading books that are quite beyond their level and consequently waste the silent reading time staring at a book they can’t read. This situation continues to be a dilemma for me and will be discussed in Chapter 5. And two, some students need encouragement to try different genres or series or topics in order to broaden their reading experience and challenge themselves. In the boxes of levelled books, there is an eclectic collection of both fiction and non-fiction text that exposes the students to books they might otherwise ignore.

*Writing a response.*

Another demand I made on the students was the request for a written response to whatever they were reading that day. Over the year, this request took different forms. It began with an idea I got from *Guiding Readers and Writers* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). I asked the children to write a letter to me that would be collected once a week. In the
letter, they could tell me about anything, as long as it was connected in some way to the text they were reading.

I began by modelling my own responses to a collection of short stories I was reading by Alistair MacLeod (2000) called Islands. I wrote a letter to the class on chart paper, adding a little more each day after reading. The letter contained some retell, some of my feelings or opinions, or something I was reminded about. We also brainstormed a number of questions the students could use to guide their responses. After several days of modelling, I moved on to listening to students read on an individual basis.

The students were placed into four groups and assigned a day of the week on which I would collect their letters and write a response. Their letters varied greatly between hardly being able to get the date down, to letters giving me lots of detail about the story or article. After about a month and a half, I started seeing a pattern in the responses. The students seemed to tell me the same kinds of things each time, and my letters back to them did not seem to be stretching their thinking. By this time, I think both the students and I were getting bored with the format, so I decided to give them something specific to talk about, and to only ask for a response a couple of times a week. I also found when requesting responses every day that the math period following silent reading was at times considerably shortened while the students tried to get their thoughts down.

Potential questions.

At a workshop I attended in Ottawa in early November, 2001, on Current Best Strategies to Strengthen Students’ Reading and Writing Skills (Grades 3-6) (Lindquist, 2000), I received a list of wonderful independent reading discussion questions (see
Appendix J for sample questions). These questions sparked my own thinking and I borrowed or created questions that I posed at silent reading time in order to encourage a broader range of thinking. The following is a sample of the kinds of questions I would put on the board at the beginning of the silent reading period so the students would know what they were expected to think about. In some instances, I put up two questions, one pertaining to fiction and the other to non-fiction text.

What are the personality traits of the main character? What actions show this trait?

If your text does not contain characters, describe an object and explain its importance.

Would you choose one of the characters as a friend? Why or why not?

If there are no characters, would you like to find out more about the topic? Why or why not?

What were you reminded of as you read today? Give lots of detail.

Describe the setting of your book.

Retell in thirty words what you read about today.

Pretend you are one of the characters or objects. Tell what you think you might do after school today.

For samples of students’ responses to two different assignments, see Appendix K and Appendix L.

Accountability.

I continued to read their responses but would often only put a check mark to indicate I had read them due to time constraints like writing report cards, marking other
work, and preparation time. I felt that this was not very encouraging for them as I saw them open their books upon receiving them back and look for a comment, so I made another change. At the end of the response time, I randomly chose five names out of my bucket of names (a cookie tin containing a clothespin for each student with his or her name on it). Those students were asked to read their response and add anything important they may not have had time to write down. This action provided a degree of accountability since the students did not want to be caught with nothing written down, and it provided an audience for their writing. Most students were anxious to share their responses, and often groaned when their name was not chosen. It also gave me an opportunity to ask them a question that would further their thinking, and it gave the class a glimpse of the book.

There were still a few students about whom I was concerned. These were the students who, for various reasons, seemed to really struggle to get much written. I decided to have them join me during silent reading time in groups of three. They would gather on the carpet with their book bags and response journals and begin to read. I would call one of them over to a table, have him or her read out loud to me, and then I would scribe his or her response to the question on the board. These three students varied depending on whom I thought could use that kind of support. This gave me the opportunity to monitor their reading and ask questions that would help them with their response if they were stuck. This scaffolding seemed to really boost their self-esteem. When it came time to read responses to the class, they were most anxious to be chosen because now they were confident in what they had to read. Previously, they were not comfortable with the random choosing of names and would be busy trying to make
something up on the spot if they were chosen. I had considered having other students in
the class take turns being scribes for these students but after discussing it with my critical
friends, I rejected that idea for two reasons: I felt the support I provided would be more
beneficial, and the comfort level of the struggling writers might be compromised. (This
communication with my colleagues is recorded later in the chapter.) Towards the end of
the year as I was doing individual reading assessments, silent reading was far less
structured and I no longer requested responses.

*Reading records.*

Prior to focussing on the students mentioned above, I used the golden opportunity
of having a quiet class to listen to students read to me individually. The struggling
readers got more of my attention, even though some of the best readers also liked this
kind of interaction. As students read to me, I followed a similar procedure to the formal
reading assessments, recording their errors and self-corrections, and making notes on
their fluency, expression, attention to punctuation, and comprehension based on retell and
answers to questions I asked. At this time, I also discussed with the students their
strategies and made suggestions on how they might improve, and asked them for their
assessment of their reading skill and understanding. We would agree together on whether
or not the student was ready to move to the next reading level. If they were, there was
always a sense of accomplishment and pride that I know was shared at home.

*A dialogue with a student.*

Join me as I recreate a scene of a typical 20 – 30 minute reading and response
time about the middle of the year. The students are coming in after recess. They know
they can have their snack while they read so they are getting their snack and book bags out of their backpacks, which hang on the backs of their chairs.

S1: Can you listen to me read today? I think I’m ready for a new level.

T: Sure, I’ll meet you at the table. Bring your book bag with you.

S2: Can I exchange my books? I finished all of them last night.

T: Remember to get at least one fiction and one non-fiction.

S3: My mom forgot to put my books in my backpack this morning. Can I get a book from the box?

T: Who forgot to put your book bag in your backpack? What will you do tonight after reading so you don’t forget it again?

S3: Put it in my bag right after I’m finished?

T: Good idea! Choose a few books so you don’t have to get up during silent reading.

T: Has everyone checked the board for the question? It says: “On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate this book? Give three reasons.” I would give this book a 7 (A Cam Janson novel by David Adler) because I like mysteries and the main character is unusual. She has a photographic memory. But I can always figure out the mystery before the end of the book, so it’s not very complicated. You might think it is a 9 or 10 because it keeps your interest the whole way through. Think carefully about your reasons and remember to have your personal dictionary (to record interesting words) and post-it notes (to mark unknown words or phrases) on your desk in case you need them. No talking for 20 minutes.

Reading records and self-analysis of reading skills.

T: Hi Sam, what book would you like to read to me?
S1: I’d like to read Sable (Hesse, 1994). I really liked this book because it was about a
dog.

T: What was the story about?

S1: A girl, her name is Tate, really wanted a dog but her mom didn’t want one. One day
she saw a dog on her back porch. It was skinny and hungry. Tate’s dad came along and
gave the dog some food and let it stay in his shop. After a while, the dog started stealing
stuff from other people’s places and Tate’s mom said the dog had to go. So one day,
Tate’s dad took her on a trip to someone’s house and they ended up leaving the dog there.
Tate was really sad and built a fence for the dog but when she went to get the dog he had
run away.

T: How did Tate feel about that?

S: She was really upset but one day a neighbour came into the yard and got the dog out
of his truck. He found the dog on the road and it was really skinny again but Tate’s mom
let her keep it and she was really happy.

(Normally, students at this grade level would not be so concise with their summary of the
main points. Much more unnecessary detail about characters and events would be
included in the retell. When this happens, I ask questions that move the story along.)

T: Choose a part of the story you liked and start reading there.

S1: I’m going to read the last chapter because that’s when the dog came back.

At this point, as the student reads, I take notes on their decoding skill, fluency, expression
and any comments they might make that gives me an idea of their level of understanding.

Any difficulty this student had with decoding was solved either with sounding
out, rereading, or asking for help. After the sentence, “Dad had started teaching me his
trade,” Sam asked what a trade was. However, she did not question “Mom had started balancing Mr. Cobb’s books, the way she balanced Pop’s” so I asked her what balancing books meant. She thought it must mean putting them on a shelf so they didn’t fall over.

Sam continued reading for about three pages. Near the end she read, “She had a braided twin collar” instead of “twine collar.” When I asked her what a twin collar was, she said it must be two collars together. It made sense to her so there was no need for her to question it. When I pointed out the “silent e” and asked how she thought the word might be pronounced, Sam tried the long “i” sound. She still was not familiar with the word so wasn’t sure she had decoded it properly. Since this kind of mistake does not compromise the overall understanding of the story, I do not consider it a serious problem.

T: I noticed that there were a few words you didn’t know. You stopped and asked about “trade,” which shows me you pay attention to things that don’t make sense. As you move into higher-level books there will be more and more words you might not know the meaning of. What will you do about that?

S: If my mom isn’t around, I can check a dictionary. Or if I’m reading during silent reading, I can mark the word with a post-it note and ask you later.

T: Those are two good ideas. You also said “twin” for “twine.” What was the problem there?

S1: I didn’t notice the “e” at the end. I thought twin sounded right. I guess I have to pay more attention to all the letters.

T: I like the way you pay attention to punctuation, and put expression into the conversation. You seemed to understand the story and really enjoyed it. Let’s find a level O book and see how you handle that. Choose a non-fiction one this time (student
chooses a book from the level O boxes). Why did you choose *Rain, Rivers, and Rain Again* (Walker, 1990)?

S1: There aren’t many words and there are a lot of pictures.

T: It looks like it would be an easy book to read but it’s about something you may not know much about. That means you are going to have to always be checking to see if everything makes sense to you. What things in this book are going to help you understand what the text is saying?

S1: The pictures –

T: It’s important to look at the pictures carefully before and while you are reading. Turn to page 10, look at the pictures, read the text out loud and then I’m going to ask you some questions.

S1: “Have you ever seen a cloud on the ground? Fog is like a cloud on the ground. If we walk through fog, we can feel the cloud drop – drop lets – on our skin. We feel damp from the tiny cloud drop lets.”

T: What did you think about while you were reading?

S1: I remember walking to school one day when it was foggy. It was hard to see.

T: That’s a good connection. Say the word that you were having trouble with but try to run the two words together to make one word.

S1: Droplets – oh – what are droplets?

T: They are very tiny drops of water. I’m glad you asked. That is what you should do whenever you come across a word that doesn’t make sense. Do you think you are ready to read at level O?

S1: Most of the words are pretty easy. I’ll ask my mom if I can’t figure something out.
T: Excellent! Choose a fiction book from the level O box to add to your bag. Would you like to take this book about the water cycle or choose another non-fiction?

S: This book looks good. I like the pictures of the clouds. They have long names!

T: Have fun reading your new books tonight.

T: (to class) It’s time to write your response to the question on the board. I’ll be choosing names in about five minutes.

In the next five minutes, most of the students are busy writing their response. Some finish quickly, and a couple of students aren’t sure what to put down (they are staring into space). I talk to these two students about what they like or don’t like about their books and make some suggestions for a response.

Final Data Collection

Student interviews.

At the end of the year, I decided to interview all the students in order to get their views on reading and the literacy activities to which they had been exposed. Following is a cross-section of their responses that I scribed for them, using their language.

1. Why do you read?
   - To learn how to do my job
   - To help myself understand
   - To learn about the book
   - I read to learn stuff. You can learn about stuff in school like the whale project.
   - It makes me feel happy. I read when I am sad or angry.
   - Sometimes it can be educational. Some books I get funny jokes from.
• I like reading. Sometimes I have to read – every one or two days.
• It’s fun and makes me learn things.
• It’s fun. I can learn more things.
• I like reading.
• I like finding out stuff so I might get better at it.
• I read when I’m bored and there’s nothing better to do. I like to finish a book to see what happens.
• I like to read because I like to see what happens. I can go back and check things.
• It makes me smarter. It helps me with writing. I learn a lot of words, so I can read harder books in other levels.

2. What kind of books do you read?
• Adventure and mystery stories
• Comics
• Animal books
• Picture books
• Novels
• Encyclopaedia of animals
• Joke books
• Non-fiction books
• Scooby-doo
• Levelled books
• Two-of-a kind
• Stuff from science and technology
• Goosebumps
• Junie B. Jones
• Pony Pals
• Roald Dahl
• David McCauley
• Poetry
• Island books (Gordon Korman, 2001)
• My Father’s Dragon
• Dictionaries
• Harry Potter
• Enid Blyton

3. What makes a book easy to read?
• Some pictures
• Small words
• Not too many words
• Not hard words
• Big print
• When people help me read it
• Lots of describing words
• Not very long
• Captions
• Juicy words
• When I can sound out the words
• Glossary at the end
• Written for kids
• Titles
• When it interests me
• Picture books
• Big, bold words
• When I read the back cover
• When I have heard the words before

4. What makes a book hard to read?
• The printing is small
• No bold words
• No pictures
• A lot of pages
• Words I don’t understand
• Some words I can’t sound out
• Lots of words
• Words I have never heard before
• Long
• Lots of description
• Silent letters in words
• Not much conversation
• A whole bunch of chapters

5. What do you do when something you are reading doesn’t make sense?
• Read ahead and go back to the spot and try again
• Look at the pictures
• I read the words around it
• Look in the dictionary
• Sound out words
• Sound out the word in chunks
• Read it over again slowly
• Ask someone else
• Ask my mom
• Think of words that rhyme
• Go back to the beginning of the sentence
• Break a word into syllables
• Read the caption
• I usually go to a grown-up
• Look for small words in the big word
• Check the glossary
• Go ahead and see if something talks about that word
• Skip the word, read on, and then read the sentence again
• Look at the words after and before

6. In school, what things happened this year that made you a better reader?
• Someone writes something down, I read it and learn
• Write an answer, then write the answer on the board
• Someone reads to me then I start practising
• Levels
• Choosing books that are good for you
• Acting out the story in Collections
• The While I was Reading sheet
• The teacher explaining things
• The questions you asked
• Starting out in easy books and working my way up
• People listened to me
• Word searches
• Any stuff that I read helps
• Some people helped me read
• Reading every day
• Reading a lot helps me become a better reader
• Words around the classroom
• The Reading Is sheet – I do those things while I am reading because it is right beside my desk
• Having to read something in a certain time
• Book baggies – time set aside to read books at home
• Chapter books – the more I read the better I got
• Sticky notes – I got help when I was stuck
• Word wall – I would look for similar words to help me pronounce the word
• I started at level P then started reading harder books
• Reading more challenging books – reading words in chunks – levelled books
• I stopped and thought
• I read out loud
• I got better when I read harder books and levelled books – there was a mix of hard and easy words
• Looking at new words in stories while I read books
• Explaining things in my own words
• Learning combinations of letters that make different sounds
• Lots of books in the classroom to read and in the library
• Reading books at the right difficulty
• Reading some books over again
• Learning how to read script

7. Did you find the *While I am Reading* sheet helpful?
• Yes – you don’t just read through the story. You are thinking about it before you go on.
• Yes – I jot ideas down and when we were asked questions we would know what to say.
• Yes – it makes you think a lot. It helps you understand the story more.

• Yes – when you wrote it down, you like remember what happened and you can refer to that sheet.

• Yes – I don’t forget what happened.

• Yes – if I didn’t write it down I might forget

• Yes – it made you stop and think so you got more out of the story.

• Yes – we would have to think more about the story and we would try and get more out of the story.

• Yes – ‘cause if I wanted it to keep it in my head I could remember it by writing it down. It was easier to understand as I filled out more of the sheet.

• It was useful. I would remember the thing I learned. They were on a piece of paper so I wouldn’t forget.

• Yes – it asked questions like who, what, when. It helped me remember the story better than knowing it by heart and reading through only once.

• Yes – I sort of thought about it a little more

• Yes – it helped me learn stuff. It helped me get it into my head.

• Yes – it helped me remember what I read but it was annoying because I lost track of where I was.

• Yes – it made me write and read the text again to see if it made sense.

• No – when you write things down you forget where you are.

• Sometimes – I can keep track of what I want. It made me stop and think a lot. I usually predicted and connected.
8. Did the reading response journal make you think more about what you read?

- If I just started the book it helped me think more.
- Sort of. You really thought about the question and tried to get ideas about the story.
- A little. Not that much. I already stop and think a lot. I make pictures in my head. I stop and stare then reread.
- Yes – we would read the story and try to think of the answer. It made us think more about the story.
- Yes – I got to write a lot. Sometimes I read what you wrote back.
- Yes – on the weekend I would read the journal to help me remember what I had read.
- Yes – you think more about the things you read because you had to write it down. If someone just asks you, you might say ‘I don’t know’.
- Yes – it helped me by making me concentrate on stuff.
- Sort of – not really – it just asked questions.
- Yes – when you asked a question, I figured out what the question meant and then I would read it again so I wouldn’t miss a part.
- It helped sometimes because it was asking questions I had to answer.
  Brandon (a volunteer) wrote down the answer after we talked about it.
- Yes – I got to write things down and explain to other people what I read.
- Kind of – it made me discouraged because I didn’t know how to answer all the questions.
• When you asked a question, I could just answer it. I didn’t have to think of my own response.

• It was helpful. I would look back in the book to answer the question and would remember more.

• It didn’t really help.

• Yes – it made you think back and try to remember what you read. It made you pay more attention to the book.

• Yes – it helped me learn more because it juices my brain up.

I find that students are quite willing to be honest and as I dialogued with them, their responses seemed genuine. In other words, I did not feel that their responses were aimed at pleasing me. The interview took between five and ten minutes, and in some instances was conducted immediately after the end-of-the-year reading assessment.

*Parent questionnaire.*

On the second to last day of school I sent home a questionnaire for parents. I find that when parents are given a week or so to return something like this, often the sheet is lost or just not returned. With just one night to complete the sheet, I was hoping some of them would get it done quickly and return it the next day. I also promised a treat to any student who returned the sheet. I was pleased that 15 of the 24 students in my class brought back the questionnaire (see Appendix M). In the letter to the parents, I explained that I would alternate between using “him” and “her” in the questions.

Following are the questions and a summary of the responses.

What events and activities happened this year, both at home and/or school, that you feel have helped your child become a better reader? Please keep in mind that
reading involves both decoding words as well as understanding the author’s message or concepts being presented in the text.

- Books that caught their interest
- Following recipes
- Step-by-step craft guides
- Levelled books
- Literacy nights for parents
- Comprehension questions (the independent reading questions were sent home with parents at the first interview)
- Reading every night
- Competitive nature of reading levels
- Letters to parents that the students had to write every week – the students had to write so it made sense
- Being read to
- Talking to people about what she reads
- Encouragement and positive feedback.

What strategies have you observed your child using that have helped him become a better reader? I am particularly interested in knowing about your child’s desire to understand the text, perhaps by asking questions about difficult words or ideas, retelling or explaining or discussing what he has read, reading other books about the same topic, rereading the text when it didn’t make sense, and other strategies you observed him using while reading.

- Rereading
• Asking for help
• Looking for the little word in the big word
• Rereading the same story several times to become comfortable with it
• Retelling
• Asking a lot of questions about what was read
• Discussing story
• Sounding out words
• A desire to understand the story and its main points
• Slowing down and trying to understand the text
• Reading ahead and if that doesn’t help, ask for clarification
• Puzzles out difficult words using root words.

How does your child choose books and are they at her reading level, that is, the books are not too easy or too hard for her to understand? In other words, is your child more aware of her own reading abilities and does she make choices based on this awareness?

• Quite aware of his skill level
• Likes reading books that challenge her a bit
• Chooses books that look interesting without thinking about level of difficulty but is getting better at choosing books he can read the whole way through
• Chooses appropriate books at the public library
• Quite conscious of choosing books within or just above his reading level
• Levelled books are challenging as each level increases but not too much
• She is aware and does tend to choose books at her level
• Alternates between easy and more challenging books
• Reads part of a book to see if it is the right level
• If text is challenging, then my child will share the reading with me.

My main message to the students this year was to stop and think. I wanted them to reflect on their understanding of the text and question things they didn’t understand. Have you observed any reading behaviours in your child that would indicate he is reflective and critical about his reading?

• A very critical thinker – engages us in lengthy analysis of things he has read
• She takes more time reading her books
• Does not read ahead if he does not understand something that really interests him - when he has to read something, there is very little discussion
• Writing the mystery story made him much more aware of how to make things clear
• Will often retell stories
• Questions the validity of far fetched stories
• Could improve some
• Asks many questions as she reads
• Will often stop and say ‘this does not make sense’
• Consistently going back to seek clarification in what was read.

Do you have any suggestions for teachers or the school that you feel would help your child become or remain a terrific reader?

• Hooked on reading through the Goosebumps series – grab their attention
• The more discussion or stop and think that was done, the less he enjoyed the reading – he needs to precipitate the discussion

• Read material they understand and enjoy

• More books on topics the students are interested in – animals, favourite television characters

• Let him go after more difficult challenges as he sees fit

• Continue the levelled books – it gives parents an idea of what books are at the child’s level.

The responses to the questionnaire are examples of the value of parental input. Parents see their children in more unstructured environments in which reading is usually a choice. They observe the kinds of reading material children choose, and they also have a sense of the level of enjoyment their children derive from reading. Parents’ voices need to be heard and they need to hear the teacher’s voice in order to develop a shared vision of possibilities for their children as learners.
Chapter 5

Contingency – the timing of assistance without being too obtrusive or managerial – is arguably the most important quality for teachers to have in enabling children to take control of their own learning.

Webster et al. (1996, p. 151)

Standing Back

In the previous chapter, my actions, reactions and students’ responses are reported. In this chapter, I discuss the results by considering the various factors that may have influenced the students and me as we journeyed through the year. I begin with a brief overview of my perceptions of the learning community in order to create the context once again, and then I focus on my observation of the students and their responses to varying situations. This discussion goes on to include: other factors that may have influenced the results, the role of my colleagues, and an analysis of my ability to create the learning-centred environment I envisioned. Throughout the chapter, I highlight three critical incidents that caused a shift in my thinking.

The Learning Community

The people within the four walls of my classroom are central to this action research. The results cannot be discussed without taking into consideration the personalities and learning preferences of the individual students, as well as their habits, interests, and attitudes that together help to form the community of learners. I am then thrown into the mix: guiding, coercing, imposing, modelling, judging, encouraging,
demanding, and interacting. As the year progresses, this community grows together, forming expectations of each other, settling into patterns of behaviour, and developing relationships that influence each person’s sense of security, trust and self-image. Within this context, I make decisions based on my experiences and knowledge, which are intended to make learning how to learn of paramount importance.

When I implemented the changes to my practice as reported in the previous chapter, I was always very explicit with the students about why I was doing something or what I was expecting from them. We talked about getting in touch with our thoughts and feelings, which can often be fleeting and difficult to identify after the fact, in order to create a richer experience with the text. I emphasised the clarity that discussion and writing can bring to one’s understanding of issues and concepts. And I was constantly encouraging the students to be responsible for themselves: their belongings, behaviour, and learning.

*Imagining*

We not only bring our past experiences and our present ways of knowing and seeing with us into a situation, we also bring our imagination with us. Our imaginings contain pictures of what we think our future should or will be like. My imagination was influenced in a large degree by a book with the subtitle, *how schools can become communities of readers and writers* (Webster et al., 1996). I found this particular book in a university library as I was browsing through the education section. As I flipped through the book, my attention was caught by a description of the kind of teacher-student interaction that supports my beliefs about the ideal learning community. Following is the
descriptor for the learning-driven model of interaction for which I strive. (See Appendix N for the complete model.)

- Adults and pupils decide together how to pursue a task
- Teachers guide and negotiate
- Children are seen as active partners
- Learning arises from joint problem-solving
- Activities provide opportunities for dialogue
- Pupils work collaboratively
- Context is made explicit
- Learning processes are highlighted
- Readers reflect and review
- Writers compose and redraft.

Taking this model of what I imagine I would like my classroom to be like, and considering the dynamics of a learning community, I am going to discuss the effectiveness of my actions by commenting upon my observations of different students, the work the students produced, and the responses of the students in various situations. I will come back to this model at the end of the chapter to compare my actions to the theory.

_My Observations_

Many spontaneous decisions I make in the classroom are based on my interpretations of the students’ responses and behaviour. I notice their engagement with the task, their questions, the focus of their interactions with their peers, and the feedback
they provide to me when queried about their understanding of a concept. Based on these interpretations, I develop a sense of and respond to the emotional and intellectual climate of the class, which fluctuates throughout the day. Because I am typically engaged with the students at some level, it is not often that I am able to stand back and simply observe for any length of time. However, the week in May during which the students are writing the Grade 3 test is a time for extended observation of their ability to work individually on reading, writing, and problem-solving tasks.

*Testing time.*

I will begin with my observations of the students during the Grade 3 provincial test. This is a situation in which the students must work independently. There are introductions to the different portions of the test, but most of the time the students are working quietly at their desks, answering questions that are testing their ability to reason, infer, gather information, analyse, and connect to personal experience. There are also sets of multiple-choice questions. It is my assumption that if the students are encouraged to make sense of what they read by reflecting on their understanding of the text at the word, sentence and paragraph level, then their answers to the questions should reveal a reasonable comprehension of the text.

As I went around the classroom reading answers, I noticed the students using strategies that had been discussed and used during the year. They were rereading portions of the text when answering questions that required detail or specific information. They were using words from the question to begin their answers to be sure they were in fact answering the question asked. They were providing reasons and detail to help explain their thinking. Their answers also indicated that they were connecting to
previous experiences and knowledge. Considering the strengths, weaknesses and personality of each student, I felt they all, with the exception of one student, put forth a good effort and demonstrated an ability to make sense out of the text to the best of their ability.

*Two personalities: An entity theorist and an incremental theorist.*

Two students stood out during the testing time. One of the students would fit the description of the learner who is an entity theorist.

Children who are entity theorists tend to hold performance goals in learning situations; they strive to perform well or appear to perform well, attain positive judgements of their competence, and avoid assessments. They avoid challenges that will reflect them in poor light. They show little persistence in the face of failure. Their aim is to perform well. (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999, Chapter four, ¶ 68)

Pat wants to appear to be as competent as the other students in the class, but unfortunately struggles with the reading process. During the test, Pat raced through the multiple-choice section, rarely getting the correct answer, and announcing how easy it was. When answering the questions requiring written responses, Pat had obviously not understood some crucial aspects of the text, but made an attempt at answering them. I noticed that Pat was one of the first students to close the booklet, so I explained once more to this student that as much time as was needed could be taken, even if it meant going beyond the set time. (Pat was identified earlier in the year as a student who would benefit from extra time during tests.) During the next reading test, I spent a lot of time standing next to Pat’s desk as a reminder to slow down and think. This time, I noticed a
greater effort on his part to reread parts of the text, understand the question that was asked, and look back at the text when answering questions. Pat’s answers showed a reasonable comprehension of the text. However, when the testing time was almost up and there were still a few questions to answer, Pat raced through them in order to be finished when everyone else was.

Critical Incident

This experience highlighted for me both the internal and external pressures that students feel in the classroom, and how these can adversely influence learning. Even though this student spent several months in my class, being encouraged to stop and think and make sense of text, the overriding motivation in the end was to appear to perform well, and perhaps also to avoid a challenge under pressure that only produced feelings of frustration and incompetence.

The other student that I observed during the Grade 3 test was someone who would fit the description of an incremental theorist: “They believe that intelligence can be improved by effort and will. They regard their own increasing competence as their goal. They seek challenges and show high persistence” (Bransford et al., 1999, Chapter four, ¶ 68). This student took all the time he wanted, answering questions in great detail, providing lovely sketches alongside the answer, but not at all concerned with completing the test in the given time. This student also did not feel that the While I am Reading sheet was beneficial because he said he already stops and thinks, and the sheet just interfered with his enjoyment of the story because he would lose his place. Performing for others
was not a priority for this student, but understanding was very important. These two students represent opposite ends of a continuum.

It is clear that children's theories about learning affect how they learn and how they think about learning. Although most children probably fall on the continuum between the two theories and may simultaneously be incremental theorists in mathematics and entity theorists in art, the motivational factors affect their persistence, learning goals, sense of failure, and striving for success. (Bransford et al., 1999, Chapter 4, ¶ 68)

The “While I am Reading” assignment.

When I consider all the students in the light of their own theories, it brings another perspective into the picture, which I had not considered before. As a learner, what motivates each student? Did the tasks I give them cause them to be truly reflective? Some students may have responded to the While I am Reading sheet as a piece of paper that needed to be filled out for the sake of filling it out, others may have seen it as an opportunity to improve their understanding of the text, some may have simply enjoyed the collaborative nature of the task, while others may have (I hope) found the examination of their thought processes interesting and worthwhile. In any case, without considering the children’s point of view, it appeared as though all were intellectually engaged in the task in the way I intended. For me, the important questions, regardless of the motivation, are “Did the students become more aware of their thinking?” and “Did this transfer to other situations?”

Looking more broadly at the students in a variety of learning situations, my general impression was that, even if they were coerced or perhaps performed for the
purpose of pleasing the teacher, they did benefit from the exercise of digging deeper into the text and reflecting on their thinking. This statement is based on the comments students made or questions they asked in whole-class discussions when I asked for feedback, either about something they had read, or about something I was reading to them. The students’ comments indicated that they made many connections to the text by bringing their experiences and background knowledge to a conscious level. The interview at the end of the year also confirmed this. With the exception of a couple of students who I know already read to learn and question their own understanding continually, the rest of the students indicated that they did stop and think and remember more when using the sheet. I should mention that Pat and three other students were out of the room during guided reading, getting specific help in small-group settings, and therefore were not exposed to the *While I am Reading* sheet.

As a teacher, I find I tend to apply my thinking universally, that is, I don’t stop to consider the impact my practice/instruction/methods will have on the varying students in my class. I generally expect the group I am working with to respond in similar fashion to the learning opportunity. The reading I have done in connection to this research is slowly opening my eyes to the thinking/beliefs/theories of my students. Since it would be unlikely that my students could identify these things for me, I must be observant, but as well I must know what to look for. When considering the strategies I model and the expectations I have of the students, I need to be more aware and accepting of the fact that not all students will respond the way I think they should. Dole, Brown and Trathen (1996, p. 82) present research that suggests some readers may be hindered by some kinds of strategy instruction, and suggest that “students benefit more from becoming
metacognitive about the strategies they already use, rather than from learning different strategies.” The purpose of the While I am Reading sheets was to encourage the students to be more reflective both about their thoughts while reading and their understanding of the text, but from my observations and students’ comments, not all of them needed that.

Reading response journals.

Throughout the year, reading and writing were strongly connected in the classroom. Often in response to something read, the children wrote poetry, letters, an adventure story, a mystery, reports on investigations, explanations, and answers to questions. As I read books to the class, we discussed characters, settings, problems and solutions, features of the text that helped the reader get the message or understand the concept, meanings of words and expressions, and other literary concepts which they in turn had the opportunity to incorporate into their own writing. With the final rendering of the response journals, which involved answering specific questions about the text, my intention was to have the students look at the books they were reading in the light of previous classroom experiences and apply this knowledge as they answered the questions. It was my hope that the students would examine characters, form opinions, compare, describe settings, consider important points, and in this process of reflective and critical thinking, learn not only about themselves and books, but about writing as well.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the change in my practice from having the students write letters to me about their own choice of topic, to having them answer specific questions that they shared with the class, I looked at and listened to their responses, and also asked for their opinion during the end-of-the-year interviews. When I
look back at some of the letters from the beginning of the year and recall the anticipation some students had at receiving my response, the activity appeared to be a motivating and authentic experience for a particular group of students. These were the students who enjoyed writing and could get their thoughts down with relative ease. But there was also a group of students who had difficulty getting much written at all, and over a period of weeks showed little progress in expressing themselves in writing. Their responses were often limited to getting down the date, telling the name of the book and the author, and writing perhaps one brief comment. In retrospect, it may have been worthwhile to continue with the letter writing with the competent writers and adapt the response to a more suitable format for the rest of the class. Or better yet, give every student the option of a myriad of responses. I will address this later.

Scribing.

I believe one of the most effective things I did was to scribe for those students who were having trouble getting their thoughts down on paper. These students seemed to appreciate the opportunity to verbalise their thinking to an attentive audience and then see their thoughts on paper without having the challenge of printing, spelling, and forming sentences that made sense.

It is through social interaction with the more mature that pupils are guided towards more systematic organization and independence in learning. In other words, children’s thinking develops as a result of borrowing ways of speaking, acting, and problem-solving, which are first encountered in collaboration with adults or more capable peers. This borrowing or appropriation works both ways, in that teachers have to think about children’s prior experiences, ideas and starting
points, in order to adjust their interactions with individuals and plan appropriate challenges to move them on in their understanding. (Webster et al., 1996, p. 69)

With this in mind, I would like to once again focus on a particular student who was an excellent decoder and speller of words and loved reading yet had a very difficult time writing. At the beginning of the year, if he managed to get the date written in 10 minutes, then that would be an accomplishment. By the end of the year, he could, under pressure, get several sentences written, but he just glowed when someone would scribe for him. He showed the ability to think about his thoughts by making connections, asking questions, giving his opinion, and supporting his answers by referring to the text. By scaffolding the situation differently for him, I provided him an opportunity to express himself. Hopefully, over time, and if his responses continue to be modelled in writing, he will begin to take over that task himself with more confidence and motivation.

**Critical Incident**

*When I try to imagine what a child is experiencing, particularly feelings of frustration, it prompts me to turn my focus from my agenda to the needs of the individual. However, viewing things from another’s perspective is not an easy stance to take, even when I say that I value that action. My agenda and my beliefs determine my actions, and it took me several months, and the writing of this, to really make an attempt to step into the shoes of some of my students and I am left with questions that I should have been asking all along. Is my belief that writing causes reflection and clarification of thoughts appropriate at this time for this student, and others like him? Is my approach too narrow in that it does not take into consideration the needs of all the students?*
Cognition and metacognition.

I must keep coming back to my overriding goal: encouraging reflective and critical thinking in the context of a reading program. This really involves both cognition and metacognition, or thinking about the text as well as thinking about one’s thinking. Fogarty (1994, p. viii) supplies this definition of metacognition:

A reader who reads and reads and reads and doesn’t know that he doesn’t know is not using metacognition. The key to metacognitive behaviour is this self-awareness of one’s own thinking and learning… So metacognition is awareness and control over your own thinking behaviour.

Upon reflection, what I was doing with the reading response action was asking questions that would cause the students to stop and think about aspects of the text or their response to it that they might otherwise not consciously think about or be aware of. In answering the question posed for them, the students would have to recognise whether or not they could answer it using their knowledge of the text after one reading or if they needed to go back for more information or deeper understanding. Posing the question at the beginning of the reading time allowed them the opportunity to look for or think about the text and their thoughts. In this situation, the students had to be both metacognitive and cognitive as they assessed their own understanding and then thought about what they needed to know to answer the question. In this sense, I believe I was encouraging reflective and critical thinking. The part of the task that may have been discouraging and frustrating for some was the task of writing their thoughts on paper.

During the end-of-the-year interview, most students expressed a positive attitude towards the reading response task. They felt that it did make them think more about the
text, and some children saw value in writing down their answers. A few were ambivalent about the task helping them to think more. Again, these were the students whom I would call “incremental theorists.” They learn for their own sake, not for others.

Motivation.

Motivation is a major factor in learning. When I began with the letter writing between the students and myself, they were keen to get their books back and read my letter to them. It was a new experience to communicate in this way. When the novelty wore off and I didn’t see any particular progress in the depth or breadth of students’ letters, it was time to move on. Eventually, the motivation to write in their reading response journals was accountability through random checks and the pleasure of sharing with other students. This seemed to provoke thoughtful responses. In reflection, I feel the task still lacked authenticity for some students, even though it may have stretched their thinking. As soon as a task is done due to external pressure as opposed to internal desire, the student is probably unaware of the value of the task in terms of beneficial growth. If it is possible to alter a situation so that the learner enjoys doing it for his or her own sake, then that is a better situation than the learner performing solely for the benefit of others.

When I consider using journals in a future year, I may have the students exchange letters once a week with a partner. During the week, the students would have the opportunity to ask a parent, for example, to scribe the letter, or they could send it through e-mail at computer time, or choose another type of response that would reveal something of the book to their partner. Giving choices beyond writing would perhaps spawn creativity and motivation for the task. I was interested to note that as I read over some of
my colleagues’ responses asking for their feedback on my proposed changes to the reading response journals (discussed later in the chapter), some suggested just such a broader approach to student responses.

Looking inward as I write this, I see myself pondering a dilemma and thinking about an issue from a totally different perspective than I did during the year. Why did I limit the students to the tasks I gave them? The answer to this question can be found partially in my response to external forces. Providing authentic motivating tasks sometimes takes a back seat to preparing children to perform within our educational system and the demands it makes. Regardless of my opinion of the Grade 3 test, it is there, and it is used to judge schools and teachers. Having administered the test for three years and having marked a math portion one summer, I feel pressured to prepare the students for the task of writing the test, using whatever means it takes to accomplish that. My constructivist, open-ended, creative approach to literacy that I took when I began teaching Grade 3 did little to prepare the students for this type of evaluation. I believe it is this test-taking pressure that drives me to think of tasks in traditional terms, that is, answering questions in written form. The changes to my practice have led to more students attaining a level 3 on the provincial test, and so my task is to find a balance between developing the ability to communicate in writing, especially for those who struggle with it, and providing opportunities for other avenues of expression, both of which encourage reflective and critical thinking.

McCombs and Pope discuss the issue of motivation (1994, p. 215). As well as being concerned with the activities offered to students, they consider the climate of the
classroom and how that can encourage the emergence of the students’ natural motivation to learn. The strategies they suggest are:

- finding ways to help students take increasing responsibility for their own learning and meeting the need for self-determination through student choice and control;
- helping students become academic risk-takers through modeling, skill training, and self-assessment strategies; and
- understanding yourself and how these qualities relate to establishing a positive climate for learning.

In the final analysis, the most important ingredients for reaching hard to motivate students are a commitment to the growth of each learner and a commitment to personal growth.

This perspective on motivation emphasises the need for the teacher to go beyond methods and truly get to know both the students and one’s self in terms of understandings and knowledge. From this base, curricular decisions can be made and students’ needs considered. In order to accomplish this, the teacher needs time and support to stand back from situations and reflect on the big picture, evaluate pressures, and move beyond traditional expectations of students.

Reading records and self-assessment.

Classroom activities during guided reading and individual assessments of students’ reading appeared to result in the kinds of behaviours I was encouraging. The evidence indicates that the students did become more aware of their reading strategies and were able to be more selective about the types of text that were appropriate for their decoding and comprehension levels. As students thought about their reading abilities,
they would often ask me to listen to them read because they felt they were ready to move
to the next reading level. As mentioned in the last chapter, some students who were
fluent readers were entrusted to choose their own books, although together we still
determined what their top level might be according to Fountas and Pinnell (1996). It was
through these fluent readers, who could decode most words, that I realised the importance
of background knowledge to comprehension of the text.

**Critical Incident**

*This insight was also demonstrated through the reading of an article, Caves and
Caverns (Gibbons, 1998, during guided reading time. The students had a difficult time
visualising the text, even though there were a number of illustrations, for two main
reasons: some of the vocabulary was new to them, and very few of them had actually
been in a cave. When they were asked to explain with a partner how a particular cave
was formed using their own words and illustrations, the results indicated a limited
understanding of the concepts. This was an excellent example for them and me of how
complex a text can be, even though it may look simple and have many pictures. We
discussed as a group some activities that might aid comprehension, such as building a
model, visiting a cave, watching a documentary, and stopping and talking after each
sentence to make a picture in their heads. Events like this opened the eyes of the fluent
readers to the fact that reading goes far beyond the decoding of words. Syzmusiak and
Sibberson (2001, p. 53) validate this with their comment:

*If readers are going to move toward independence, they need opportunities to
think about their reading experiences and reflect on their strengths and*
challenges. Reading workshop provides many opportunities for students to talk with others about the reading process and think about the books they are reading. As they interact with other readers in the classroom, they can think about their own reading lives.

Struggling Readers

The time I set aside for listening to individual students read was spent more with struggling readers because I believe that “learning depends more on the teacher’s dialogue with individuals and groups than on the transfer of information in the form of ‘true’ statements made by the teacher and remembered by pupils” (Webster et al., 1996, p. 28). These readers were mostly those who left the room during guided reading for small-group instruction with another teacher, plus a few from my group who still struggled with either decoding or checking for comprehension. The example of a reading assessment session provided in Chapter 4 was of a student I would consider to be an average reader for Grade 3, but it indicated the kinds of comments that I might make to any student. For the lower readers, often their struggles relate to problems with remembering sounds of letters, particularly vowels, and recognising frequently used words. They can get hung up on sounding out words, which often proves to be an inefficient strategy for them when used exclusively (Garner, 1987). These readers need encouragement to also use context clues such as pictures, and predict what would make sense and sound right within the context of the sentence and story.

As I worked with these students over the year, I noticed them using strategies such as: stopping when a word didn’t make sense, instead of continuing to read;
rereading a sentence, covering up all but the initial letters of a word, and guessing what the word might be using syntax and meaning; checking the pictures before and during reading; looking for small known chunks within a larger word to help them decode it; and asking for help when nothing else worked. As Bruner (1966, p. 43) suggests, “Since learning and problem solving depend upon the exploration of alternatives, instruction must facilitate and regulate the exploration of alternatives on the part of the learner.” These learners were exploring alternatives by critically thinking about their usual strategies of sounding out and applying other helpful strategies to make sense of words and the whole text. Since all of these strategies are introduced and reinforced beginning in Grade 1, what these particular students require is continued practice with an adult who monitors their progress and encourages them to reflect on their own processes as well. The key to enabling children to take control of their learning is contingency: “the timing of assistance without being too obtrusive or managerial” (Webster et al., 1996, p. 151).

Topics for Debate

*The use of teachers’ time.*

Something that is often suggested for teachers during silent reading time is reading their own books in order to model enjoyment of reading for the students. Many times at workshops or staff meetings, presenters or administrators would acknowledge that doing other things during this time is tempting, but we as teachers should nevertheless stop and read just like we expect our students to do. As has been demonstrated through my actions, I do not agree that this is how I should spend my time. I believe that many times during the day I demonstrate my love of books and the value I
place on reading when I read out loud to the students, or when I wander about totally
ingrossed in some piece of text I have in my hand. I feel that using this quiet, focussed
time to work one-on-one with a student is a much more valuable use of my time. I
mention this now just in case some readers might question my practice from that
perspective.

*The use of levelled books.*

Another issue that is the topic of many debates is the use of levelled books in the
classroom. One major concern that teachers express is the impact this has on students
who are reading below grade level. I have mentioned one student who was very
concerned that he appears to be reading the same level of books as his peers, and he was
not the only one who felt this way. Two other students in my class were reading
significantly below their expected reading level for their age. At the beginning of the
year, one of these students would take out his library books, which were quite beyond his
ability, instead of getting his levelled books out, which were really written for six-to-
seven year olds. I could see his discomfort at having to read books for “little kids.” The
difficulty with this situation is the lack of books written for a beginning reader who is
eight or nine years old. By this age, interests are changing and background knowledge is
growing, so the content, layout, pictures and diagrams need to be different than in books
written for six-year-olds. With the influx of non-fiction books, the situation is improving,
but at this point, most of the books available are too immature.

Students’ self-image is very important and I tried to deal with this in different
ways. A few times during the year, I would have whole class sessions in which we
would talk about multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993) and individual differences. I
would stress the value of each individual, regardless of his or her strengths and weaknesses. The students would supply examples of situations in which they felt good or bad about themselves and analyse the impact of negative comments either about oneself or others. Regardless of these discussions, however, some students still have a way of conveying disdain for students they consider different in some way. Another approach I used was to have conversations with individual students in which I encouraged them to be proud of their accomplishments and to become self-advocates, a current term used in special education. I would have them talk about their interests and abilities, recognise the progress they had made, and be specific about how they learn best. But this still does not take the sting out of feeling belittled by others.

This is an issue that needs to be addressed by the primary team. Perhaps we need to make a concerted effort to purchase appropriate books and, instead of labelling them with a level, simply place them in containers that are available to all students and inform the struggling readers which books would be good choices. This would lead to creating containers based on topics, rather than levels, and teaching students how to evaluate the level of difficulty in order to choose books based on their skill level. Using this approach may alleviate for some students the issue of being self-conscious.

Other People in the Students’ Lives

The students’ progress this year in terms of their reflective and critical thinking while reading was not influenced solely by the particular actions I took within the confines of this action research. The resource teacher, educational assistants and volunteers who work closely with some students contribute to the development of reading
and thinking skills. Since the team of educators works together to accomplish similar goals, discuss students’ progress, and agree upon effective strategies, we all are able to help students become more aware of themselves as learners.

Parents also play a major role in their child’s development. The parents of my students were made aware of my action research early in the year and were invited to participate in my attempts to encourage reflective and critical thinking. At the first interview in November, I gave the parents a copy of the independent reading discussion questions (Lindquist, 2000 - see Appendix J), and encouraged them to ask these kinds of questions when reading with their child every night. In bi-monthly newsletters I sent home, I reminded and encouraged parents to take an active role in their child’s reading time and informed them of the different topics being explored in class so they could provide additional information or discuss concepts and ideas with their child. As well, the school held three “literacy nights” for parents in order to help them help their children. Reading strategies for understanding both fiction and non-fiction books and the use of graphic organisers to aid comprehension were demonstrated. Parents and students attended these sessions that were offered at both the primary and junior levels.

These interactions with other adults, as well as all the other experiences in children’s lives, contribute to their growth as learners and thinkers. It is hard to judge the actual contribution my actions as a teacher played in helping the students develop. What I can say for sure is that my development as a teacher has been strongly influenced by this action research. Being responsible for my learning by using feedback from students, parents and colleagues, by considering past and current research, and by seeking out
professional resources has led me to be more informed about both the reading process and the subtle influences of a myriad of factors in the teaching and learning process.

My Critical Friends

I turn next to the part that my critical friends played in the development of this project. My colleagues have played a crucial role in this research, but not in the way I envisioned. I had in mind that I would meet regularly with this group and discuss the actions I was taking, provide examples of student’ responses, and ask their opinion on the direction I was taking. However, I found that I sought their support in a more general way. I was often discussing, either with individual teachers, in small groups, or at team meetings, the goals of our literacy teaching and the particular activities we were doing to achieve those goals. We would share ideas, recommend resources, discuss the progress of individual students, and support each other as we struggled with implementing different strategies. Underlying all of this was a common understanding that we were striving to work with students in such a way that they would become independent learners through questioning, exploring, practising, and doing. We also understood that each of us has a different personality and that our approaches are based not on some predefined method imposed upon us, but on our informed responses to the needs of individual students. We all believe that assessment should drive our actions in the classroom. Because of these shared beliefs, we trust each other in terms of the daily decisions we make in our classrooms and we do not depend on each other to approve or disapprove. We seek advice, but make our own decisions in the end. Consequently, my critical friends validated what I was doing in a philosophical sense.
However, there were times that I consulted my colleagues about specific actions, and one way I did this was through e-mail. At the beginning of this action research, we all agreed that sending e-messages would be a way to share our thoughts and could be done at convenient times for each person. Although this did not occur frequently, following are messages that will give the reader a glimpse of the valuable feedback my colleagues provided. This particular set of communications deals with my decision to scribe reading responses for some students. These e-mails are in the senders’ original text, and blank spaces indicated by underlines are in place of names in order to protect identities.

Feb. 26/02 (my message to the group)

Hi Everyone,

I really appreciated all the sharing that took place during our team meeting today. It is interesting how we seem to be on the same wavelength about the importance of comprehension and how we are all doing things that are encouraging students to be more reflective about their reading.

I read the students' journal entries today that we talked about in the meeting. What struck me was that the good writers had a lot to say and the poor writers (those who are slow or have difficulty spelling or difficulty expressing themselves in writing) had very little written down. It made me realise that I need to make accommodations for those students so they have an equal opportunity to express their reflections. I am thinking that once a week during silent reading I will pair the poor writers with the good writers and have the good writers scribe for them. They (the good writers who are also good readers) could also listen to the
struggling writers read which means some lessons on being good tutors might be in order. No, __________, I don't expect you to do that but perhaps I could provide some tutoring sessions at recess and then give some kind of reward for those students giving their time as reading tutors and scribes. Just as an aside, I really like what ________ is doing with the whole tutoring thing.

As my critical friends, what do you think about my suggested change to my practice?

Jennifer

Replies:

Jen, I like your modification. I think reluctance to write is a much bigger factor than we sometimes think. I often try to put myself in their position by comparing it to something I do and I think we avoid or are minimal with things we don’t like or find hard. Would "word webs" or graphics be another alternative, where they can demonstrate comprehension without so much pen-to-paper, especially a couple of times a week because they do need to push themselves to strengthen the skill? It might be a deal: Show me all you know using this format today e.g. word web; but tomorrow you have to use sentence/journal approach to show me??

(Resource teacher)

Jennifer, that sounds like a great idea. Would it be possible for the weaker students to make jot notes or use graphics (cues to organize their thoughts) to express themselves instead of the usual writing and then share verbally using their
notes (or tape themselves if you need a record)? I'm thinking that their weaknesses might not even be a lack of ability but rather these are students that learn better using a different intelligence. We always seem to feature and test the verbal/linguistic intelligence. You could feature a different intelligence each week. Here are a few ideas:

- Musical/Rhythmic: make a rap
- Verbal/Linguistic: create a book mark
- Interpersonal: Think-Pair-Square (class booklet- one page from each group of four)
- Bodily/Kinesthetic: plan, act out/ mime, props
- Visual/Spatial: sketches, pictures
- Logical/Mathematical: computer generated sheet/ design a game to show what they learned.

Groups could be made up of a mixture of students with various strengths that compliment each other. Does any of this make sense? This would probably be too hard to do - delete.

Chat later, (Grade 1 teacher)

Hi Jennifer, it always amazes me that the same things that the kids (and teachers) are struggling with at your grade are also problematic for the older kids. It seems a shame that those who are natural writers (and I think, speakers) just get better and better, while those who are not, remain that way. I suppose, however, that it is no different for the artists, musicians, athletes, who love what they can innately
do easily. They tend to do more and more and get better and better. One thing that stands out with my kids is that those who have little to say in writing (e.g. our monthly book report assignments where the kids have to relate and reflect on what they read) cannot seem to carry over from one "compartment" of their lives into another easily. It seems so easy to me and the others who have no difficulty with this to ramble at length about how a certain passage makes you feel or think about other things in your life that relate somehow to the topic at hand. These connections are SO HARD for some kids. A few of mine have lots to say but just can't write it down. These kids use a tape recorder for these sections of their book reports and have no trouble having a conversation with me on tape. (These are invariably the kids with atrocious spelling, run on sentences, and a poor view of how language works.) But there are others who, in spite of lengthy conversations about every possible connection that your brain can come up with, still have nothing to write about! (Only some of these kids have severe limitations when writing.) Are their environments that lacking in experiences? I don't really think so. For some reason, they just can't figure out how to get anything relevant to put down. I think there's lots of stuff in there, but why can't they access it? I am going to be really interested to see if you come up with the same kind of split when you institute your buddy/tutor system. This sounds like a grand idea, and I look forward to seeing what you learn about learning! Good luck!

Keep me posted! (Grade 8 teacher)
Hi Jen, I appreciate your consideration for the students in your class who do not excel in reading and writing. You are a good teacher, Jen, for recognizing their value and their need to share. I would like to suggest a different approach, however, as an alternative, once you've tried your own ideas. Work only with this group; do not include the better students; take lots and lots of time; no hurry; no rush; no pressure; everyone relaxed, and then set forth to achieve quality discussions with them, reflections from voices that ARE SELDOM EXPRESSED AND SELDOM HEARD. (Sorry about the caps, I didn't mean to push the Caps lock button, but now that I glance up and see it, perhaps it's better left emphasized.) (Kindergarten teacher)

Jennifer, that’s a good idea. I was hoping to have someone scribe for ____ in my room. Let me know how it works!!! (Grade 2 teacher)

(My response)

Hi Everyone,

Thank you for your comments on my idea to use some students as scribes for other students. After considering all your comments and my purpose of encouraging the communication of their thinking and reflecting, I decided that I needed to be the scribe. There were two reasons for this - time and scaffolding. I felt that if I chose a small group of students to join me at a table, I could monitor their reading by listening to individuals read one at a time, and then I could ask questions that would encourage them to: check their understanding of both
vocabulary and content, make personal connections, and infer. As they share
their thinking, I could very quickly jot down their thoughts. Given this kind of
support, I felt that everyone would have something to share and his or her reading
experience would be much richer. I could not expect a fellow student to provide
this kind of help. I have done this several times since writing to you. The
students I asked to join me were those who often would not be focussed on their
reading when I scanned the class and/or those who got very little written down in
their response journals. I find the students are quite willing to share their thoughts
with me and are always pleased to read what I have written down for them to the
class if their name is called. I also am discovering that some of these students do
not stop to question things that are unfamiliar to them. They will use a variety of
strategies to decode a word but if they do not know the meaning of a word, they
do not stop to ask. They need an adult who will monitor their reading and who
will supply background information or bring their lack of understanding to their
attention through questioning.

You may be wondering why some students are not focussed on their reading
when they are all supposed to be reading at their level from their book bags.
What I have noticed about the really low readers is that the books that are at their
level may be readable but are not very motivating to read since the concepts are
fairly simple. Neither _____ nor ______ become absorbed in their books - after
all, the plot is not exactly exciting. ______ also wants to read books that contain
interesting plots, and also wants to appear to be reading such books. I think that
silent reading for these kinds of students is not a really productive time. Since I
have _____ (a volunteer) and ______ (a co-op student from the college) for a few
days a week during silent reading, I have asked them to take particular students
under their wing and give them the attention they need, while I work with the
remaining needy students.

Another change I have made is to my expectations for the response journal. I
started out giving the students their choice of response. I modelled and discussed
the different kinds of thoughts and connections they could put down and was
hoping to broaden their responses by writing letters back to the students on a
weekly basis, commenting on their comments and asking further questions. I
noticed that the prolific writers continued to be prolific and those who got very
little written down perhaps improved a bit but their responses were getting to look
the same. I decided that I needed to give them a specific task at the beginning of
silent reading that would guide their response. For example, I ask them to
describe the main character or the setting, or tell why or why not they would like
to have a character as a friend, or ask them to tell about the time that had passed
in the story and summarise what had happened etc. At the end of a 5-minute
period of writing, I then randomly choose names from a bucket and have those
students share their responses. This brings immediate accountability as well as
providing students with a variety of models.

I have found that these changes seem to have helped the students who are at their
desk focus more on their reading. The students who were not attending to their
reading are working with me and cannot distract the others, and they know ahead
of time what kind of response is expected.
In case you think I am a bit of a slave driver (and you would be right), I do let the students read their library books on Friday and there are rare occasions on which there is some free time and the students can look at any book of their choice without being held accountable.

I'm not sure what my next step will be. I will continue with this format for silent reading time and see if the students who work with me are able to start taking over some of my tasks by themselves. I would like to see them stop and ask me questions, offer their own reflections and do some writing on their own. If what I am doing is helpful, that is, supporting the students at the point where they are being challenged, then they should require less scaffolding as they become more independent. I will keep you informed and if you have some thoughts, I would love to hear from you. Jennifer

(A response to the above letter)

Good evening, Jen. After reading your letter tonight I find that I agree with you, as you know, by you being the scribe for the kids who need you rather than their more capable peers. Also, I really like the way you modified their program by giving them a PURPOSE for reading (even silent reading). Finally, I was happy to see you are planning to turn your job over to them. I once read that the object of teaching a child is to enable him to get along without his teacher.

(Kindergarten teacher)
It is clear from these messages that as teachers we each bring our own perspective to a situation, and in the end, we make our own decisions. The stimulating discussions, either orally or written, were crucial to my act, reflect, and revise cycles. And eventually, when I am able to stand back from a situation, as I am now, I am ready to move once again beyond my current thinking and grow.

*The Learning-Driven Model of Teacher-Student Interactions*

How successful was I in creating an environment in which the students take responsibility for their learning and develop thinking skills? Were the students and I empowered by the actions I took and the changes I made to my practice? At this point I am going to come back to the model developed by Webster et al. (1996) and analyse my research in terms of the conditions outlined in the model.

- **Adults and pupils decide together how to pursue a task:**
  
  Most of the actions I took were teacher-directed. I chose the stories and articles the students would read for guided reading sessions, and I developed the *While I am Reading* sheet. I determined the questions to be answered in response to the student’s choice of book during silent reading. And during the reading assessment, I typically led the conversations about the students’ reading skills, although together we agreed upon an appropriate reading level.

- **Teachers guide and negotiate:**
  
  Guiding was done through modelling of behaviours I wished to encourage while working with individual students, small groups, and the whole class, in all three situations researched. During these times, thinking skills and reading strategies
were made explicit. In the area of negotiation, I asked for and considered feedback from the students, but I feel I am still influenced a great deal by traditional expectations and the pressure to have the students perform well according to external standards. My concern for internal motivation and a positive self-image will continue to prompt me to examine my practice and negotiate more with individual students.

- Children are seen as active partners:
  Allowing for more negotiation and a broader range of responses would involve the children more as active partners. Perhaps what is important here is that the students perceive themselves as in control of their learning and progress. Discussing their reading level with them and giving them control of book choices based on an increasing awareness of their own skill does involve the students as active partners. They may not see themselves as active partners, however, when certain activities are imposed upon them. I suppose my philosophy is that in certain situations, teacher knows best. However, the way this belief is acted upon needs to be examined.

- Learning arises from joint problem-solving:
  This is a situation that involves a careful analysis of the students’ conceptions, misconceptions and skills. Based on this analysis, it is my job to ask questions and model approaches to problem solving that will allow the students to take the next step on their own. During the reading assessment, I was able to model strategies and ask questions that prompted the students to begin to solve decoding or comprehension problems themselves. Students also learn from each other as
they solve problems together. During guided reading, because the students worked with partners, they were able to discuss questions that may have arisen while reading.

- Activities provide opportunities for dialogue:
  The activity that provided the least amount of dialogue was the reading response journal. At the beginning, the dialogue was in written form, and at the end it was in the form of discussions following the reading out loud of the responses to the class. The most beneficial dialogue was with the struggling readers and writers who spent time with me for reading and scribing purposes.

- Pupils work collaboratively:
  Although there were many times throughout the year that students worked collaboratively on investigations and problems, the three actions taken for this research were not aimed at collaboration as much as at sharing of thoughts and strengthening of thinking skills.

- Context is made explicit:
  As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, I always made attempts to explain my actions and tell the students the purpose of learning activities. The students were made aware that: The *While I am Reading* sheets were to be used as a means of making their thoughts and feelings explicit, and their understanding of the text deeper; the reading response journals were to used to make them think about aspects of the text and reading they might otherwise not think about; and reading assessments were opportunities to reflect on reading skills and plan for growth.
At least, these were things I assume the students understood since I made them explicit, but I say more about such assumptions in Chapter 6.

- **Learning processes are highlighted:**

  In school, we learn in part by questioning what doesn’t make sense, investigating the unknown, and being open to different ways of seeing and understanding. Learners need to acknowledge first, however, that their skills and understanding are limited, and then strive to develop a variety of strategies for learning. The *While I am Reading* sheet encouraged the students to think more deeply and broadly by suggesting different ways of thinking about the text: Does it remind me of something? How does it make me feel? Do I know about this? What does that mean? What will happen next? What pictures do I imagine? Through these reflections, the students’ learning processes are highlighted. Answering the reading response questions helped the students focus on aspects of the text and their thoughts that they otherwise may not have. Through closer examination, the students’ learning processes are highlighted. Assessing reading strategies with the teacher encouraged the students to critically analyse their skills. Through planning for improvement, the students’ learning processes are highlighted.

- **Readers reflect and review:**

  All three activities required the students to reflect upon and review their understanding, and the end-of-the-year interview was a formal time for them to express their opinions and contemplate their growth as readers.

- **Writers compose and redraft:**
Although this was not a focus for this research, the students did spend many hours composing and editing, both with their peers and adults. At this point, they are beginning apprentices in the revising and editing process.

This analysis of my actions provides a fairly clear indication of some of my beliefs. I believe that dialogue is necessary for expanding one’s ways of seeing, thinking and knowing; I believe that students need guidance and prodding in order to grow in ways that are deemed necessary by our society (represented by our educational system); and I believe that questions, posed both by the students and myself, are important tools for learning in the classroom. I think of myself as a teacher in the process of creating the following conditions.

Whatever else schools do in relation to developing good practice…, we feel it is also highly important for teachers to consider factors within the teaching context. For example, we have identified the teacher’s scaffolding of interactions as highly influential in children’s learning, including aspects such as the teacher’s visiting, contingency, pacing and pitching of challenges, the degree and nature of the child’s print contacts, how teaching is organized so that pupils are assisted to construct their own writing and reading accounts, utilizing a wide range of formats and genres, fostering involvement in and control over their own learning. All of these factors suggest ways in which teaching conditions may be modified by all teachers, as part of a combined effort to overcome the learning obstacles which some children experience. (Webster et al., 1996, p. 158)

In my mind, I keep coming back to the necessity of getting to know students as individuals and accepting them as valued beings, regardless of how well they fit my
notion of a learner. What theories and beliefs do they bring with them? What obstacles are they experiencing? Am I ultimately just trying to turn my students into replicas of myself?

Transitional Readers

At the end of the year, one of my colleagues purchased Beyond Leveled Books (Syzmusiak & Sibberson, 2001, p. 6). The authors talk about transitional readers, that is, those readers who:

- Can recognize many words, even those considered “difficult” or content-related;
- Integrate meaning, syntax, and phonics fairly consistently;
- Have a variety of ways to figure out unfamiliar words;
- Can generally read independent level text with fluency, expression, and proper phrasing;
- Are beginning to handle longer, more complex text with short chapters and more interesting characters;
- Can summarize texts they’ve read;
- Are growing more aware of story and text structures.

This describes the majority of the readers in my class, and the suggestions in the book on how best to teach these students are consistent with my actions and perspectives in this study. For example, the authors suggest that “rather than guiding students through the book, our role is to help them become more thoughtful readers who are able to comprehend more complex text. As teachers, we need to look carefully at our students’
needs and find books that provide the right supports for them” (Syzmusiak & Sibberson, 2001, p.65). They also state that:

Conversations about the reading process in classrooms make the difference. Drawing children into conversations about their own reading helps them clarify the way they construct meaning. The conversations they have with other readers, both adult and peers, propel them toward independence. We need to become architects of classroom cultures that support focused conversations about reading and provide children with a variety of experiences that draw them back into the world of reading with new skills and better understanding of how texts work. We need to facilitate discussions that help our young readers move towards independence. (Syzmusiak & Sibberson, 2001, p. 76)

Webster et al. (1996, p. 77) corroborate this: “Helping children to externalize their thinking requires reflection with children during the task. Time has to be found for listening to accounts made by children of their own learning.”

Not only do my colleagues as critical friends support my thinking and actions, but the above-mentioned authors also support my practice. Although I still have questions and conflicts within my practice, the process of action research empowers me to continue learning and changing, and as a result the learners who are in my care should benefit from my further understanding of them and should feel validated as learners, regardless of whether or not they fit within the box marked “good student.”
Balanced Instruction

Ffreppon and Dahl (1998, p. 248) add another dimension to “balanced” instruction that validates this action research and the overriding theme that taking responsibility for one’s own learning leads to empowerment and improvement, whether one is the teacher or student.

The journey towards exemplary teaching requires time and hard work. An emphasis focused only on implementing reading programs falls short of providing sufficient understanding for this journey. A recent study reported in *The Elementary School Journal* (Au & Carroll, 1997) provided insights about supporting teachers’ work in schools and improving children’s achievement. This study found that a dual model – one focused on teachers’ knowledge and skills and one on empowerment and professional growth – promotes the kind of complex teaching called for in balanced instruction.

The more I examine my goal of encouraging reflective and critical thinking, and the more I learn about learners, the more complex balanced instruction becomes. Hick and Villaume (2001, p. 410) suggest that “the concept of balance is more powerful when it is applied to children’s literacy progress and engagement rather than to instruction.”

It is so important that the basis of teaching is not methods but understandings. But to get started, methods are needed because understandings develop over time and with experience. Just as my students don’t learn because I “told” them, I also don’t learn just because I read or heard something. My learning takes place in the context of my past experience, present actions, discussions, reflective and critical thinking, and imagining how the future might be, all of which are important elements of action research.
Chapter 6

As important as methods may be, the most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside us as we do it.

Parker Palmer (1998, p. 5)

Destinations and Beyond

Woven throughout this narrative is the overriding theme that taking responsibility for one’s own learning leads to empowerment and improvement, whether one is the teacher or student. I encourage reflective and critical thinking in the context of reading, not only to improve comprehension of the text, but also to give students more awareness of and control over their learning. I want them to learn how to learn and, in the process, I hope that they will be critical about the depth of their thinking, their use of different strategies, and their understanding of the text.

Conclusions

One of my concerns as I began the action research cycle was that I would be expecting too much from Grade 2/3 students. Would they be able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their current reading strategies and make informed changes? Would they be able to stop and think about whether or not they are making sense out of the text, and whether or not they are reconstructing the author’s message as it was intended? I found the key to helping the students accomplish this was my ability to scaffold the situation. Some students required more support than others, but when given
the appropriate opportunities, all students could engage in discussions with me that indicated a reflective stance. If they had relied mostly on sounding out words, I saw them attempting to use context by rereading, looking at pictures, and using other strategies such as finding familiar sequences of letters in an unknown word. I saw them stop when something didn’t make sense and seek help if necessary. I heard them make comments in class discussions that reflected their understanding that reading is about thinking, imagining, feeling, connecting, predicting and learning. A statement by Seymour Papert (cited in Billmeyer and Barton, 1998, p. 62) emphasises the importance of these learning opportunities: “Better learning will not come about from finding better ways for the teacher to instruct but from giving the learner better opportunities to construct.”

Constructing is about building. The students built up their knowledge about themselves and the intricacies of reading. I built up my knowledge about the reading process, the difficulties some students encounter while reading, the folly of making assumptions, the importance of motivation and accountability, the continuing limitations on my ways of seeing and thinking and, in the end, the overriding need for compassion and joy as demonstrated at the end of this chapter.

Outside the classroom, many other people played important roles in this construction of personal knowledge. My colleagues, who are open-minded, creative, questioning professionals, provided on-going dialogue about our literacy program in general and my action research in particular. I believe strongly that if we did not take control of our professional development by being reflective and critical thinkers and by seeking answers to our own questions, then our understanding of our practices and the changes we made would not have occurred. Costa and Kallick (2000, p. 15), in Habits of
Mind, offer this comment about reflection that applies well to us as a team of critical friends:

Reflection has many facets. For example, reflecting on work enhances its meaning, reflecting on experiences encourages insight and complex learning. We foster our own growth when we control our learning, so some reflection is best done alone. Reflection is also enhanced, however, when we ponder our learning with others.

Another group that influenced my thinking is the educators who write and talk about their experiences, ideas and beliefs, allowing me to connect, analyse, and stretch my thinking. Sometimes my actions and beliefs are confirmed and consolidated, at other times they are questioned, but rich descriptions and authentic stories that inspire me to keep thinking and growing always draw me in. The following statements sustain my actions:

We must become more flexible, less focused on making our way through a mandated body of material and more focused on addressing the specific needs of each of our students. (Bouchard & Sutton, 2001, p. 58)

It must be made clear that the heart of language ability and, therefore, the language program is comprehension. All the activities used to help children decode words are important but they will amount to very little if the children do not understand what they read. (Hewitt, 2000, p. 3)
We need to consider reading instruction and design strategies that will help transitional readers move toward independence. Some of these children think that reading is an activity one does at school, something that makes their teacher happy and their parents proud. For them, reading becomes mechanical, constructing meaning becomes less important, and as a result reading no longer offers the excitement it once had. (Szymusiak & Sibberson, 2001, p. 5)

The following quotations inspire reflection:

We try to do too much and, in doing so, end up unable to do justice to what I view as our most important task – helping our children become effective, passionate, lifelong readers. (Bouchard & Sutton, 2001, p. 62)

When students’ reading diet is exclusively a levelled one, their purpose for reading disappears. They read for us. They become eager to reach the next level, instead of being eager to learn more from what they are reading. In our haste to put skill instruction back into reading programs, we may have forgotten what we know about teaching children to read. We have abandoned the important lessons we learned about real reading, real books, and real children. (Szymusiak & Sibberson, 2001, p. 15)

What I find fascinating about my action research and the question I have explored is that the ideas or concepts or principles I “discovered” are far from new. It doesn’t seem to matter what book I pick up about reading, whether current or from a decade ago
Everyone agrees that meaning making is the point of reading, background knowledge is crucial to understanding, and good readers are aware of and monitor their thoughts and understanding of the text. Perhaps I perceive that everyone is talking about these issues because that is my focus. Those are the words that pop off the page when I read because they connect solidly to my current interests. What intrigues me is that even though my growing understanding of the reading process has been written about and discussed, perhaps from the time language was converted to print, I still need to discover the importance of these things for myself. I am not capable of simply absorbing all of the knowledge I have read or been “taught.” The basis for my understanding is my experiences and my attempts at making sense of them.

This insight into myself as a learner affects me as a teacher. Because I value this process of action research, I in turn want to see my students as action researchers. In fact, McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (1996, p. 73) suggest that this may be the action researcher’s “hidden agenda”: I impose my theory of learning upon them. But I fear this is too narrow an approach. When I came across How People Learn (Bransford et al., 1999) on the internet and read about the theories that children might bring with them to school, I realised that there is much more I need to understand about others’ ways of seeing, learning and knowing. I need to truly value the individual and think far beyond the confines of the structure of the educational system within which I work and within which I was a student. When I can understand and appreciate individual differences, then I can begin to create learning environments that foster growth in all students.
Perhaps it was these developing thoughts that attracted me to Alfie Kohn’s presentation at Queen’s University in April 2002 and prompted me to buy his book *The Schools Our Children Deserve* (Kohn, 2000). I agree with much of what Kohn suggests, and I become overwhelmed with sorrow when I think about students who struggle to learn, develop negative attitudes towards school, and become “behaviour problems” for the simple reason that the learning opportunities we offer in our classes are so limited in scope and suitability for some learners. How do I address this issue when I know that our system is not even close to being on the verge of changing? Standardised tests, less money for special education, and renewed emphasis on marks all put pressure on teachers to maintain the status quo and try to fit their students into predetermined boxes.

*What next?*

Where does this action research lead me? Not only do I need to be more aware of what is happening inside me as I work, as is suggested in the quotation at the beginning of the chapter, but also I need to gain insight into what is happening inside my students. What are their theories, beliefs, motivations, perceptions, misconceptions, interests, desires, strengths and weaknesses? In order to know my students well, I need to be constantly aware of the assumptions I make and question them, I need to know what to look for by learning more about individual differences, and I need to view education in non-traditional ways in order to be an architect of a classroom culture that fosters self-awareness and self-motivation.

Where might others be led as a result of this research? By embracing the idea of action research as an empowering way of seeing, thinking and knowing, teachers can
become experts on teaching and learning, making informed decisions based on an understanding of their students instead of being pulled this way and that as new methods come and go. Reflective and critical thinking in the context of collaboration and dialogue is just as important for teachers as it is for the students in their classes. In as much as reading is thinking, imagining, feeling, connecting, predicting, and learning, so is teaching.

*A synopsis*

The exploration of reflective and critical thinking began with my first action research project as I began studying and revising my own practice based on purposeful observations of my students. As the sense of empowerment and freedom grew in the context of my professional development and action research, I began to see the value of all learners taking responsibility for their own growth. When I started teaching in the primary division, I wondered at first if it was reasonable to expect seven and eight-year-old students to think about their understanding and grasp of ideas, concepts and skills, and then be able to participate in the process of strengthening their reflective and critical thinking.

The opportunity to both study my own practice and encourage metacognitive behaviour in my students came at a time when literacy skills were being evaluated closely by my colleagues and myself through collaboration, by the Board of Education through early literacy initiatives, and by the Ministry of Education through the implementation of province-wide testing at the Grade 3 and 6 levels. As I contemplated information from a variety of sources that included assessment of my students, professional resources, test
results, and shared experiences, I decided to make changes to my literacy program in my Grade 2/3 class.

The intent of the changes was to have my students improve their comprehension of text by offering them tools that would help them stop and think about their understanding, and also lead to improved reading strategies. In a guided reading group, I modelled a “stop and think” strategy that involved reading with a partner and completing the following sentence starters after every few paragraphs: I wonder…, I imagine…, I feel…, I predict…, This reminds me of…, I learned…, and I think…. As well, when I read out loud to the class, I would stop frequently and allow the students to share their thoughts based on the signs I had around the room that said “Reading is…thinking, feeling, predicting, wondering, imagining.” As the students shared with each other and with me, they discovered that there is more going on in their minds while they read than they realise, and that stopping to question words, phrases, ideas and information in texts reveals much more of the author’s message than they take from the text when reading it alone and without reflecting on their understanding.

Other activities that took place in the class involved the students using a response journal in different ways throughout the year and reading out loud to me in order to discuss their progress and consider strategies that would improve their reading. These actions proved to be effective for different readers at different times as I reflected upon and revised the activities. I found that the struggling readers benefited most from individualised instruction and attention, while the fluent readers appeared to be stretched most by guiding questions and accountability.
As a follow up to these literacy activities, I conducted interviews with each student at the end of the year and sent home a questionnaire for parents to allow them to give me feedback as well. Throughout the year I was also involved in frequent discussions with my colleagues about literacy and our practices, and I read many different professional texts, including journal articles, teacher guide books for commercially produced classroom resources, and textbooks. At the end of the year, as I assessed my students and reflected on the successes and failures, I was pleased with most students’ level of engagement with texts when reading, at least when I asked for verbal or written responses. I believe some students were in the process of discovering how “the text of a book can enter the text of their lives” (Meek, 1991, p. xvii) as they thought reflectively and critically.

However, the most valuable aspect of this study has been the continued opportunity it provides for the development of my own learning and thinking about teaching and literacy. It provides a narrative of learning in action that should be explored not only by those outside the classroom, such as politicians, administrators and educational researchers who wish to effect true change, but also by those inside the classroom who feel disempowered and defeated by the barrage of demands and changes being imposed from without.

My beliefs about teaching and learning

To further summarise and to allow fellow educators to easily compare and contrast their situations and understandings with mine, I offer a concise description of the readers
I was working with, of the actions I took, of the beliefs that guided those actions, and of my vision of teachers as learners.

Fountas and Pinnell (2001) define transitional readers as those who:

- Read silently most of the time;
- Have a large core of known words that are recognized automatically;
- Use multiple sources of information while reading for meaning;
- Integrate sources of information such as letter-sound relationships, meaning, and language structure;
- Consistently check to be sure all sources of information fit;
- Do not rely on illustrations but notice them to gain additional meaning;
- Understand, interpret and use illustrations in informational text;
- Know how to read differently in some different genres;
- Have flexible ways of problem-solving words, including analysis of letter-sound relationships and visual patterns;
- Read with phrasing and fluency at appropriate levels.

Primary grade children who have reached this stage of reading or have moved beyond to become self-extending readers (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001) are the kinds of readers with whom I worked in my Grade 2/3 classroom.

The actions I took to enhance their ability to comprehend text, learn about themselves as learners, and take control of their learning were:

1. Providing explicit teaching and modelling of reflective thinking;
2. Providing opportunities for students to read out loud with a partner and share thoughts during and after reading;
3. Holding the students accountable during silent reading time by asking questions that bring their attention to various aspects of the text;

4. In collaboration with students, assessing their reading strategies and providing opportunities for one-to-one discussions about strengths, weaknesses and actions for improvement; and

5. Creating a learning environment that values inquiry and understanding.

None of the above actions required the purchasing or implementation of a published literacy program. Instead, through the use of fiction and non-fiction texts that supported all areas of the curriculum, I involved students as active participants in their own learning as they read for a purpose.

The assumptions underlying my actions that were intended to encourage my students to be reflective and critical thinkers while they were reading include these:

- Learning with others increases awareness and a sense of what is possible,
- Children are capable of reflective and critical thinking,
- Meaning is constructed through connections made to existing knowledge and through imagination,
- Accountability pulls students in directions they might otherwise not take, and
- The type of learning environment a teacher creates has an impact on the way students view themselves as learners.

Bransford, Brown and Cocking (1999, chapter 1, ¶27), in discussing what they call the new science of learning, suggest that “teaching practices congruent with a metacognitive approach to learning include those that focus on sense-making, self-assessment, and reflection on what worked and what needs improving. These practices
have been shown to increase the degree to which students transfer their learning to new settings and events." If learners are provided opportunities such as the ones I have suggested above, they could become aware of their thinking processes and learn to recognise when they understand and when they need more information. This sense of responsibility for one’s own knowing *and* an inviting learning environment in which students “can reflect together without fear” (Senge et al., 2000, p. 369) could have the potential of turning students’ perception of education from something that is imposed on them into something in which they are actively engaged.

The challenge to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning through reflective and critical thinking is engaging teachers in a reflective practice as well. “If you want students to think, then teachers have to think. If you want children to learn, then teachers have to be engaged in learning” (A. Alvarado, cited in Senge et al., 2000, p. 395). Chase (2000) perceives the need for educational institutions to have a major shift in orientation from being teaching organisations to being learning organisations. Based on my interactions with many different teachers over the last several years, there is a concern about what and how students are learning. Yet there has been less time given to teachers to engage in truly reflective practices and there has been more pressure on teachers to have their students perform on standardised tests. Perhaps, if some of the funds used to support the Education Quality and Accountability Office were used to support teachers as action researchers and contributors to knowledge about teaching and learning, then the shift in orientation from teaching organisations to learning communities might have a chance to succeed.
Critical Incident

To bring the readers’ attention back to the context of my action research and the importance of responding to students’ individual needs, I close with a final critical incident that occurred in my classroom on the last day of school. It relates to my continuing professional development as well as my concern for struggling students who are often “behaviour problems.” My students constantly challenge my limited perspective, causing me to step back from the curriculum and my glorious intentions and consider each one as a complete human being.

I had a profound experience on the last day of school. It does not cast me in a good light, but it is an experience that I hope has permanently altered my way of thinking about my role as teacher. I had been away at a meeting the previous week and had left the students an art project. They were to create a mobile using a summertime theme of their choosing. I saw this as an opportunity for them to learn more about balance, as well as to express their creativity as they thought about the upcoming summer holidays. A student in my class was not really interested in doing the mobile, refused to co-operate with the supply teacher, and became a “behaviour problem”, which was typical of this student with supply teachers. When I returned the next day, there was a note on my desk explaining the situation and I decided that this student was going to complete the mobile, whether he wanted to or not, because he was not going to get away with this non-compliant behaviour.

The last day of school arrived and a few children were still finishing up their mobiles. Most of them were hanging from a branch I have in the classroom, looking
quite beautiful and creative. The student in question was still resisting. He was ripping up pieces he had made because they “weren’t good enough,” so I sent a student over to help him out. His response was to put his head between his knees and ignore the world. His friends tried to talk to him but he had withdrawn. Recess arrived and everyone headed outside, leaving the “reluctant artist” at his desk. As I looked over at him, I realised that all I was doing was engaging in a power struggle with this student and I wanted to be the winner. When I thought about what this struggle was over – a simple mobile that was not at all important in the whole scheme of this student’s experience – I went over to him, rubbed his back, told him that the mobile was not important at all and school should be a place where he feels happy, suggested he take some time to pull himself together, head out for recess, and do whatever he wanted with the mobile. That simple act of caring and empathy transformed this student into the most helpful, generous person he could have been that day. He spent the rest of the day, including every recess, helping to clean the room by doing things like sweeping and handing back art work I was taking off the walls. During the afternoon recess, I took him and the two students who were working with him down to the kitchen to give them some left over ice cream treats. He chose the last chocolate one, and when another student looked disappointed, he immediately gave it to her and took another flavour. As I reflected on this experience, I realised that my understanding of teaching and being a teacher is a dynamic process that continually provides many lessons, some of which have to be repeated many times. It makes me wonder how many times in a day I impose on others my limited view of “how things should be.” My action research continues.
After Words

Reflection needs to happen in community, in interaction with others, and it requires attitudes that value personal and intellectual growth of oneself and of others. The community also serves as a testing ground for an individual’s understanding as it moves from the realm of the personal to the public.

Rodgers (2002, ¶ 9)

Inquiring communities are at the heart of learning. We need to continue to develop, within our educational systems, attitudes that respect and embrace a desire for understanding. When students and teachers walk through the doors of their classrooms, a sense of mutual inquiry into the mysteries of our world should be the guiding force behind the teaching and learning that take place, inquiry that fosters reflection and promotes growth. A mystery is something that is not fully understood or has not been discovered yet, and together the community of learners begins to unravel what it does not yet comprehend fully. In the case of this thesis, the mysteries I am attempting to unravel are general questions about teaching and learning and specific questions about encouraging children to read and to think reflectively and critically within an inquiring community.

My colleagues and I also form an inquiring community, and each of my colleagues has most generously read my thesis drafts and provided comments and insights into my questions and discoveries. As I read their responses, I become even
more keenly aware of the need for many voices, perspectives, understandings, and experiences in order to have our beliefs, principles, and current knowledge about teaching and learning challenged or supported in the testing grounds of a learning community. Here I pick and choose a few comments from each of my colleagues’ responses to illustrate the value of this inquiring community, even though the depth and breadth of their responses are worthy of much more. Their comments are categorised under the following headings: personal reflections and connections, musings, and confirming and supporting comments. After each section, I relate the comments back to my action research and to the importance of inquiring communities. My colleagues include a principal, a resource teacher, an intermediate teacher, a Grade 1 teacher, and a kindergarten teacher.

**Personal reflections and connections**

I remember working with a group of Grade 6 boys on a Gary Paulsen novel – too difficult for them to read independently but they all loved it, our discussion was rich, they could hardly wait for the next chapter. One mom questioned the difficulty of the reading level. I remember making guilty justifications for using the book even though I knew it was “right” for them and encouraged their love of reading and story. The terrible stilted books, which are sometimes written in the name of “high interest and low vocabulary,” would turn anyone off reading! I used to be amazed at what children could read when they wanted to and/or knew the context. (Principal)
In your Feb, 2/02 entry, I felt so comforted when I read your closing line, “Let’s keep things in perspective!!” Sometime I feel so frustrated and pressured to produce readers, yet I have students coming to me who are pushing, hitting, tripping, shoving each other… and I know I have other things to teach them besides literacy. (Kindergarten teacher)

When I read this (the quote from Webster et al., 1996, p. 69, from Chapter 5 of the thesis), it reminded me of an “aha” of mine when I discovered how to teach art. The current educational wisdom at the time was “let every child do their own thing in art or you will stifle their creativity.” After a few years of very mediocre results and not much learning, I started to examine how I learned my art skills. I copied and practised particular skills I wanted to get better at. I took lessons (to get direct teaching). I was frustrated and learned little with teachers who let me “do my own thing” and experiment with the media. I learned a lot with teachers who said, “Here’s how I do it, try this.” So now I teach art in a structured step-by-step manner. I let kids copy, trace, and do whatever they need to do to get more confidence. Once they have the confidence, they soar and off they go on their own. (Grade 8 teacher)

When I did my Master’s degree, my Prof. continually told me teachers have great knowledge from their experiences, but they either don’t think they do (i.e. recognise it) or have the confidence to share or publish it. I think the fact that for the most part teachers feel overwhelmed by the job from September to June and
then just feel they have to “veg” out over the summer might also have something to do with it. (Resource teacher)

I like to keep a journal. I really like your idea of the two parts: actual events/thoughts and reactions. I will incorporate this into my practices. This also brings to mind the fact that reflection is so important. I found this out through my personal diaries years ago. Through my responses in my journals I realised things (connections, ideas, etc.) that I couldn’t see until I saw them in print. I think emotions play a big part in this and come out more clearly in print. (Grade 1 teacher)

These personal reflections provide examples of how each of us relates to what we read in unique ways that are grounded firmly in our own experiences: reading a challenging novel with Grade 6 boys and noting the importance of engagement with the text, teaching important classroom social skills before being able to focus on literacy, discovering how to teach art through the process of reflecting and revising, connecting to the issue of teacher confidence by remembering a similar discussion from years ago (how little has changed!), and relating to the value of keeping a journal (i.e., seeing thoughts in writing, making connections and generating ideas). These reflections enrich the reading experience and make it so much more personal, opening the door to musings and thoughtfulness. When they are also made public within an inquiring community, others can benefit from being exposed to a broad range of experiences, and understandings can be tested. It is this process of relating to the text and becoming consciously aware of
one’s thoughts that I was trying to encourage in my students as they read silently and as
they read with partners.

Musings

“We try to do too much… and lose sight of the main goal.” I’m always mindful
of this when we are given more and more tasks and add-ons. I’ve started to say
no in the last year or so to certain things that I know I can’t do or expect of my
class at this time. (Grade 1 teacher)

Your description of freedom! “To discover at one’s own pace.” Oh how I wish
this were a gift (luxury) I could give my own students! We’re all caught up in the
incredibly fast pace of curriculum delivery – students are rarely allowed to
discover at their own pace in my room, I fear, unless their pace is faster than my
own (and some are). My poor students who digest things more slowly! (Grade 8
teacher)

Children as active partners – I fear for times past when in the name of “being
responsible for their own learning” kids were allowed to spin in circles. I feel it’s
our role as the expert to create structure and know the destination of where we
should be going but many routes could get us there. Exploring different routes,
even though it takes more time, can lead to greater learning. (Principal)
One statement you made … was that you learn “in action” by making “solid connections to your own experiences.” I wonder if we should allow more time for our students to make these same personal connections to the story and its characters. By giving the students opportunities to discuss these things in small groups, this would likely promote increased interest and ownership in the story and its characters. The thing is to give the time, because it is time well spent if making this connection between their own lives and the story is to be realised. Once this extra meaning is added to the equation, it ought to equal an enhanced interest in reading on! (Kindergarten teacher)

“Improve teaching…without coercion or complaining.” Part of this is bringing people along slowly (something the government has not done) and also developing confidence in the self, that what one senses and believes is valid – if not necessarily the final answer – a valuable step in evolving one’s teaching practices – how does one come to believe/embrace this??? (Resource teacher)

A common thread runs through each of these musings: time. Each person has either directly or indirectly commented on the need to spend time in pursuit of learning and growth: time to do the necessary things well, time for students to discover for themselves, time to explore different routes to destinations, time to spend making connections, and time for teachers to examine their beliefs and practices in order to improve their teaching. We need to trust ourselves and use our voices, first in the testing grounds of our inquiring communities and then, more publicly, as we strive to create true
learning environments within our classrooms, places where students sense the goal is understanding, not just performing. If we feel more time is required for understanding, then we need to be speaking up on behalf of ourselves as learners and on behalf of our students who struggle to survive in today’s educational system.

We are finding our voices when we feel free to express our thoughts as these educators have done. It is often in response to somebody else’s musings that we begin to clarify our thoughts and opinions and when we do that we are then in a position to begin to analyse the beliefs that underlie our thinking. This deeper thinking about our teaching practices might then produce environments that promote greater learning in our classrooms and staff rooms.

**Confirming and Supporting Comments**

How fortunate to have a “critical mass” of primary teachers and a principal with an ongoing love of teaching reading! We have a special group of teachers here. The others must be really excited by your research, as undoubtedly the discoveries you make will help everyone… Jennifer, what a lot of thinking you have been doing! Thank you so much for sharing it with me. I have really enjoyed our conversations through the years about education. I hope they will continue. (Grade 8 teacher)

I really enjoyed reading your thesis Jennifer. I like your style of writing – it was easy for me to read, probably because the topic is of great interest to me. Lots of interesting information and references to some books I would like to read after
you mentioned them in your thesis. You’ve made me think and reflect on my practice – that’s terrific! I love to learn and I will definitely try to use some of your ideas in my classroom. (Grade 1 teacher)

It strikes me that the parents became very aware of our levelled books and your strategies for helping students become better readers. You have brought the parents more actively into the reading skill acquisition process. Fifteen out of twenty-four responses I think is wonderful! I’m impressed with the connections you encouraged between students, parents and teacher regarding your reading program…. Your thesis has given me the opportunity to reflect on my own practices. Thank you for letting me be a part of the process. (Resource teacher)

Our children may not get that environment where all children are provided rich learning opportunities and appropriate, effective scaffolding which enable every child to develop positively in their own way, in their own time, but teachers like yourself who reflect on what they are doing wrong, not on what the child is refusing to do or doing wrong – will help more and hurt less, than those who have only one method, one yard stick, one agenda. I don’t think you realise how unique you are, Jen! (Principal)

Jen, I certainly see that you have been working diligently on teaching your students to be reflective and critical thinkers. You have modelled many, many learning strategies, stopping and discussing each one with your students. Whether
you are teaching Grade 6 or Grade 3, your voice has always encouraged your children to be “thinking about their thinking.” (Kindergarten teacher)

As I collated these responses, which are just a few of many, I could not help but think that they would provide the reader with some insight into the value of our inquiring community. Action research provided a basis from which to examine my practice, share my thoughts, develop a greater understanding about teaching and learning, and be part of a dynamic group of fellow explorers. This invigorating and empowering experience leads me to want to examine even more closely the roots of our current educational system and to imagine changes that could take place that would ensure a brighter future for our students and teachers, one in which they feel valued, nurtured, happy, and inquisitive while stretching themselves as whole beings.

*Grade 3 Test Results – Spring, 2002*

At the beginning of December 2002, our school was given the results from the provincial testing in May 2002 (see Table below).

Table 1

*Percentage of Students Obtaining Levels 3 or 4 on Grade 3 Provincial Tests*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Method</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Mathematics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Method 1: All students included</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method 2: Exempted students excluded</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As already noted, I was very happy with the performance of the students in my class while they were writing the weeklong test. I saw them actually using the strategies that I had modelled and encouraged, both in reading and math. Although I have questions about the way the test results are used publicly, and about the way teachers are encouraged to prepare their students for the test, I had a feeling of satisfaction when I examined the results of my students.

In my Grade 2/3 class, I had 20 Grade 3 students in May (two students had moved away just prior to this time). Of these 20 students, one was exempted from the testing because his personal circumstances disrupted his learning and prevented him from being at school for most of the year. Another student who had significant difficulty with reading and writing was exempted from those two portions of the test. On the math portion, an educational assistant read the questions and scribed his answers. He received a level 3 in math. Three other students in the class struggled with academic work in general and received literacy support from the resource teacher in a small group setting for half an hour a day. Two of the three students performed at a level 2 on all portions of the test. The third student, previously described as an “entity theorist,” received a level 1 in the reading portion (in which he put little effort except when encouraged to do so), a level 2 in the writing portion, and a level 3 in the math portion. The remaining 15 students, I felt, had the ability to meet the expectations of the Grade 3 curriculum. All of these students performed at a level 3 or 4 on all portions of the test, with the exception of one student who received a level 2 on the writing portion. The reason for being specific about the results is to point out that those who had the ability to do the Grade 3 curriculum were able to meet the provincial standards.
I would like to offer an explanation of the results, and by doing so open my interpretation to scrutiny and discussion. To begin, I believe that the students who entered my class at the beginning of the year were well prepared for the Grade 3 curriculum. According to the reading assessments done in September, most were reading at what is considered a high Grade 2 level or beyond. This means that although some students were still developing reading strategies in terms of quickly and efficiently decoding words, I was able to make reading for meaning the main focus of the literacy program. The emphasis on encouraging reflective and critical thinking was also extended into all areas of the curriculum, including math. When I realised that my literacy practices in fact encompassed all areas of learning, I felt justified in bringing math concepts and problem solving into what had been considered the sacred two-hour literacy block. During math, the students were encouraged to discuss and demonstrate understandings, problems, and solutions, both in small groups and whole class lessons.

In retrospect, and with relation to the quote from Rodgers at the beginning of the chapter, the concept of inquiring communities was permeating the learning environment and the students were developing their thinking skills as they moved from the private to the public domain by sharing thoughts and ideas, explaining and demonstrating, and being held accountable. Perhaps this further quote from Rodgers (2002, ¶ 11) adds validity to my thinking:

> The process of reflection requires teachers to confront the complexity of teaching and learning. Any action the teacher takes will therefore be a considered one rather than an impulsive one. In like fashion, once teachers learn to think reflectively, they can teach their students to do the
same, for teachers teach best what they understand deeply from their own experience. From there they can encourage their students to confront thoughtfully the phenomena of their world.

The involvement of parents must also be acknowledged in the learning lives of students. Some school work was done at home, and parents who attended the Literacy Workshops in order to learn how to effectively offer guidance to their children, who read the newsletters sent home with suggestions on how to help with homework, and who used their own wisdom must also be given credit for the growth of their children’s skills and knowledge.

Looking beyond the classroom, home, and school, to the actions of the Ministry of Education in implementing province-wide testing and to the response of the Board of Education to the test results, I see other inquiring communities gathering to explore more deeply the teaching and learning that occur in classrooms. The success of these inquiring communities, however, depends upon the role they see teachers playing in the process of improvement. Teachers need to be considered as competent professionals who have much to offer based on their experience and inquiries. And for any inquiring community to be successful, allowing time to question and explore is necessary. As mentioned earlier, time is not only a precious commodity in our economically driven society, but a crucial factor in any process of growth and development.

Inquiring Communities

My critical friends, the results of the Grade 3 test, and current professional literature all give me confidence in the direction I am taking with my practice. The
concept of the inquiring community within which to learn and grow has provided the basis for the relationships I have with my students, colleagues and myself. Suddenly, the world of learning is much less threatening and much more inviting as the emphasis shifts from intimidating people with demands for performances based on criteria imposed from without, to empowering people by allowing them to ask questions, search for answers in social contexts, and develop ways of thinking that encourage understanding instead of rote responses. I believe that if inquiring communities are encouraged to develop and flourish in schools and classrooms and beyond, then over time we will see changes in our educational system that generate confident learners who embrace the unknown rather than fear it. My question is: What steps need to be taken in order to accomplish this?
References


Billmeyer, R., & Barton, M. (1998). *Teaching reading in the content areas: If not me, then who?* Aurora, CO: McREL


Appendix A: “While I am Reading” Sheet

While I am reading

Title _______________________
Name _______________________
Date _______________________
Partner _____________________

I wonder

I feel

I imagine

I predict

This reminds me

I learned

I think
Appendix B: Thoughts That Might Come to Mind While Reading


- That word looks familiar.
- What does that word mean?
- How do you say that word?
- I think the word is ____or means____
- I'm confused.
- That's not right.
- Oh, that's what it means.
- I get this.
- I don't get this.
- I see that.
- That's important.
- I didn't know that.
- That's interesting.
- I wonder if...
- Oh, no!
- I want to know...
- What is going to happen?
- I know what's going to happen.
- This is easy reading.
- I need to look for [information].
- How would this sound to the listener?
- That reminds me of [people, places, and other books].
- I'd like to do [see] that.
- I know somebody like that.
- I've felt like that before.
- I've seen [heard, smelled] that.
- I've felt what it's like.
- This story is like [another text].
- I've read something like this before.
- That's so funny.
- This is like...
- Why did [character] do that?
- How sad... or wonderful!
- I think he'll turn out to be...
- She must feel...
- I'd feel... I felt just like that.
- I can just picture [hear, feel, smell] that.
- Laughing, crying, shuddering...
- I get it.
- I'm confused.
- The important things I learned are...
- What's the point here?
- Let me think about what I now understand.
- I understand this in a new way.
- These ideas are really interesting.
- That must be one of the reasons it [historical or political event] happened.
- I see the [historical event] more clearly after reading this.
- Now, I understand [group] better.
- Her characters are so well developed.
- What a complex plot!
- That's the style of this writer.
- What makes everyone like this book?
- I'm figuring out the mystery.
- I like the way this author makes you feel as if you are there.
- The use of language is skillful.
- This is unlikely.
- People wouldn't act that way.
- I don't believe this.
- What wonderful language!
- Should I keep reading this?
- That's not the way a fantasy is supposed to work.
- This biography is not authentic.
- Some important information is missing here.
- This shows the attitude of the author.
- This is wonderful writing.
## Appendix C: “While I am Reading” Reflection Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Expected result</th>
<th>Assumption/belief</th>
<th>Professional resources</th>
<th>Student materials and resources</th>
<th>Students’ responses/Results of assessment</th>
<th>My response</th>
<th>Explanation for results</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action 1</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>During guided reading, discuss and model thought processes that could occur while reading</td>
<td>Students will become more aware of their thoughts while reading</td>
<td>Reading is more than decoding words – it is also constructing meaning</td>
<td>Teaching Children to Read and Write (2000)</td>
<td>Collections 3 (1998)</td>
<td>Students had many more responses than others</td>
<td>Students need a structured response sheet to encourage a variety of responses</td>
<td>Some students don’t like writing</td>
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<td>Post signs that say: Reading is Thinking</td>
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<td>Some students aren’t really thinking about their thoughts</td>
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<td><strong>Action 2</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Create a ‘While I am Reading’ sheet (see Appendix A) using sentence starters</td>
<td>Students will have more responses and a greater variety of responses</td>
<td>Making reading a social activity will generate more thoughts</td>
<td>Response sheet was my idea</td>
<td>Collections 3 (1998)</td>
<td>Students had more responses but the goal of some partners seemed to be to get through the story as quickly as possible</td>
<td>I need to do something to make them slow down and really think about their thinking instead of seeing who can be finished reading first</td>
<td>Some students still do not want to take the time to either think more deeply about the story or write down their thoughts</td>
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<td>With a partner in front of the group, model how to stop after each paragraph and discuss one of the possible responses</td>
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<td>Students take turns reading paragraphs out loud to each other</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students jot down thoughts under the appropriate heading on response sheet</td>
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## Appendix C: “While I am Reading” Reflection Matrix (continued)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action 3</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Require the students to write down at least one response after each paragraph or two.</td>
<td>More discussions and responses</td>
<td>Accountability produces results</td>
<td>Same as action 2</td>
<td>Students much more focussed and engaged</td>
<td>It took a long time so I wouldn’t do this with every assignment</td>
<td>Accountability does make a difference in terms of output</td>
<td>Students are discovering how to think more broadly and deeply about text</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Deeper thinking</td>
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<td><strong>Action 4</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Have students read alone and fill in ‘While I am Reading’ response sheet</td>
<td>Students will continue to think about their thoughts and feelings but will get through the story faster</td>
<td>After practice with a partner, students will be able to apply understanding of reading to an independent tasks</td>
<td>Managing the Literacy Curriculum (Webster, Beveridge and Reed, 1996)</td>
<td>Collections</td>
<td>Fewer responses</td>
<td>I think it would be worthwhile to go back to action 3 once in a while, particularly when the story or article may be more difficult to comprehend</td>
<td>The students will only think more deeply when they are required to do so.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change sheet so sentence starters are at top and students don’t feel compelled to fill in every section (see Appendix I)</td>
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<td>Newly formatted response sheet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Actions</td>
<td>Expected result</td>
<td>Assumption/belief</td>
<td>Professional resources</td>
<td>Student materials and resources</td>
<td>My response</td>
<td>Explanations for results</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action 1</strong></td>
<td>Students would write thoughtful letters on a variety of topics.</td>
<td>The authentic experience of writing a letter and receiving a response would motivate the students to be creative and thoughtful.</td>
<td>Guiding Readers and Writers (Fountas and Pinnell, 2000)</td>
<td>Levelled books of own choice Reading response journal</td>
<td>For the amount of time given to the students to write the letters and the effort and time I was putting into answering the letters, I did not feel the results justified continuing with this format.</td>
<td>The modelling was not effective. Some students need more guidance and structure. Some students don't like writing. Some students take a long time to get their thoughts down.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After silent reading from levelled book, students wrote a letter to me about their book</td>
<td>Students' responses would reflect growth as I modelled letter writing for them and asked questions.</td>
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<td>Whole class brainstormed potential responses</td>
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<td>I also read silently and modelled responses on chart paper</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students were divided into 4 groups and assigned a different day of the week on which I collected their journals and wrote a letter back to the students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students were requested to write a minimum of 30 words</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Action 2</strong></td>
<td>Students would have to think about a variety of responses to their reading and reflect more on the text.</td>
<td>Providing structure, guidance and expectations are necessary for some students to produce written work.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Same as action 1.</td>
<td>I know that all the students have something to say about the task because they enjoy sharing orally. Perhaps a scribe would be helpful for some.</td>
<td>The students seem to appreciate the direction given to them through the task. Only allowing written and visual responses is too restrictive.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the beginning of silent reading, I wrote a question or task on the board to which the students were to respond during or after reading.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Illustrations were encouraged if they would enhance the written response.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Throughout these actions, explaining, and giving detail and reasons were constantly emphasised.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix D: Reading Response Matrix (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Expected result</th>
<th>Assumption/belief</th>
<th>Professional resources</th>
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<th>My response</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action 3</strong></td>
<td>(Invite 3 students to my table during silent reading time and take turns scribing their responses. Choose students who have difficulty with written responses.)</td>
<td>The task of responding will become more enjoyable and reflective for these students since I can also ask further questions to draw their responses out.</td>
<td>Tasks are motivating when they are scaffolded appropriately.</td>
<td>Levelled books</td>
<td>The students invited to the table were more focussed on their reading. They enjoyed responding orally and had a lot to say.</td>
<td>I felt good about offering an alternative to these students who previously saw the task as onerous. It did cut in to my time for listening to students read out loud to me for the purpose of assessment. However, by this time many students were making their own decisions about the level of book that was appropriate for them.</td>
<td>These students need more support and guidance. Sitting with me and having to answer questions motivated them and focussed their attention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action 4</strong></td>
<td>(Randomly choose 5 students to share their responses out loud. They can also add anything they did not get written down.)</td>
<td>Accountability will motivate the students to write more. Students will be more conscious of clarity in their responses since the whole class will be listening</td>
<td>Since choosing students is random, and the audience is the class, there is a greater sense of accountability</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
<td>Students were more focussed during the response time. After the five students were randomly chosen, several students still wanted to share their responses. The students for whom I scribed were eager to share their responses for a change.</td>
<td>This is the least time consuming and most effective action I have taken. Over time, the students have become much quicker at responding and enjoy sharing with the class. They also are getting ideas from each other, which has improved the variety and depth of their responses.</td>
<td>Routine, practice and modelling are beginning to take effect. The students would probably still benefit from a greater variety of response options.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix E: Self-analysis of Reading Skills Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Expected result</th>
<th>Assumption/belief</th>
<th>Professional resources</th>
<th>Student materials and resources</th>
<th>Students’ responses/Results of assessment</th>
<th>My response</th>
<th>Explanations for results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Students will become aware of the strategies they use, and become aware of the strategies they could be using.</td>
<td>Some students need to have reading strategies explicitly modelled and reinforced since they are not intuitively using a variety of good strategies.</td>
<td>Guided Reading (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996)</td>
<td>A choice of books at a particular level</td>
<td>Some students with decoding difficulties are demonstrating some of the strategies modelled in mini lessons or previous running record sessions – for example – reading ahead, rereading, looking for small words in big words, sounding out, guessing using context. Some students are still viewing reading as the ability to say the words, and not as a meaning-making activity. They do not stop to question things that don’t make sense, or are unknown to them. Lack of attending to punctuation also indicates a lack of reading for meaning.</td>
<td>Too much emphasis with beginning reading is on naming words. Struggling decoders are trying to read text that is frustrating them and so they don’t even try to make sense of it. Students have the impression that they should already know ‘stuff’ and therefore think asking questions is a sign of weakness.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E: Self-analysis of Reading Skills Matrix (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Expected result</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action 2</td>
<td>Use the reading record time as an opportunity to help students develop comprehension skills. Teach students to always ask themselves if the text they just read makes sense. Discuss aspects of books that make the text more comprehensible so students can choose books that are just right for them.</td>
<td>Students will stop and think when something doesn’t make sense. Students will choose books in the library that are appropriate reading levels</td>
<td>Students need to become knowledgeable about choosing books that are not too easy or too difficult</td>
<td>Boxes of levelled books in classroom Unlevelled books in classroom and library</td>
<td>Over time, struggling readers began to question the unknown and use various strategies to understand the text, usually sentence by sentence. They would check the picture, reread, ask, etc.</td>
<td>I have learned to only move students on to the next level when I see them reading for meaning, even if decoding is no longer an issue. There are still some students, who want to appear to be reading texts like their peers and so choose books in the library, for example, that I know they can’t read on their own and sit and stare at them when they have extra time to read in class.</td>
<td>Some students may simply not be developmentally ready to tackle reading in a sophisticated way. I wonder sometimes if we would wait until some students were a little older then they would be ready to read and consequently experience a lot less frustration in school.</td>
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</table>
### Appendix E: Self-analysis of Reading Skills Matrix (continued)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Actions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action 3</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>During independent reading time, have the students use post-it notes to mark words or parts of the text that they don’t understand.</td>
<td>Students will take this opportunity to ask for help</td>
<td>When students are reading on their own they will often gloss over things that don’t make sense because help is not available. This does not promote the idea of always questioning and being curious.</td>
<td>Books</td>
<td>Post-it notes</td>
<td>When the idea was novel and I reminded them to use their dictionary and post-it notes, the students responded with a lot of questions and words in their dictionary. However, as soon as the novelty wore off and I forgot to mention these strategies, the students also forgot about them.</td>
<td>I come up with good ideas but sometimes the momentum is lost as other things take priority. I rarely saw the students using their dictionaries during writing assignments.</td>
<td>Novelty and change are important to keeping interest up. The trick is to find teaching and learning strategies that are worth the time and effort for both teacher and student.</td>
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<tr>
<td>My Actions</td>
<td>My Thoughts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oct. 28/01</td>
<td>The students seem to like to be given a focus. At this point in time, many of them need direction and flounder when left on their own. In their last entry, I asked them to tell me if the level of book they were reading was easy, just right, or a little hard and give me their reason. I also asked them to choose one book from the library that was at their level and I went around during USSR and checked their books. For the most part, they have a pretty good idea of their level. I noticed however that one student in Grade 2 who can decode fairly well picked up a book appropriate for teenagers and read the first paragraph. The content was over his head and I intend to talk to the students about that issue. One of my goals is to have them explain their strengths and weaknesses and choose appropriate books. So far I am doing more modelling and suggesting than they are explaining their reading.</td>
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</table>

I have changed my idea about the reading responses from the students. My original idea was to have them write me a letter about the book from which they were reading during silent reading (USSR). I found their responses very limited in scope. About all they wrote down was the name of the book and perhaps something they had read about or something that had happened in the story. I didn’t feel that this was valuable enough to continue. Instead each day I am asking them to do something in particular from their text, for example, tell about the setting, describe one of the characters, use 3 big words from the text in sentences, use 3 unusual or hard to pronounce words in sentences etc. This gives me more insight into their understanding and it also makes them look back into the text for information. |
Today I had a discussion with the class about choosing appropriate topics in novels. I had noticed last Friday in the library that a Grade 2 student had picked up a book to read to me that was meant for teenagers. He read the first 2 paragraphs but had no idea what the book was going to be about because he had no experience with the topic – eating disorders. I used that book as an example with the students. I read the same two paragraphs to them and asked them what they thought the girls problem was. Mostly they thought that the problem was her parents because they were arguing about whose fault it was (the girl’s problem). After several guesses, I told the students what the problem was (anorexia) and how I had inferred that from the text. I then read the back of the novel, which gave the same information and we looked at the picture on the front, which showed a teenaged girl. The point of the discussion was to emphasise that just because a student can read the words in a text does not mean they will understand the story. I talked about the importance of thinking while you are reading and understanding what you are reading. I asked them to tell me back how they would know a book was

This discussion was prompted by my desire to have the children independently choose books at their level. In their letters to me about their reading, they will often comment that the books are getting easy and could they move to the next level. Usually I write back and tell them I will listen to them read. However I would prefer to see them make that choice themselves. The difficulty is that they don’t always know that they are not getting the meaning of the story. They are really only superficially reading it. This was made evident when I asked them to fill in a story map for a story from the Collections 3 (1998) series. They were instructed to read it several times, get together with a partner and discuss the problem, solution and main events, and then fill in the story map. When I read their outlines, many of them did not identify the solution clearly. The solution to the problem was often just one of the events, and not a summary of how the story ended. This made me realise that even though a child may sound like a good reader because they read with expression and do not have difficulty with the vocabulary, it does not mean they are able to make inferences or summarise or
a good level for them and several students told me back just what we had discussed. identify the main elements of the story. Much modelling is required – once is never enough! Carol also mentioned that she had done an interactive writing lesson with her students and felt they had responded well and demonstrated understanding during the lesson. However, when the students were asked to apply this to their own writing, she was very disappointed. I see this all the time.
Appendix G: Sample of my Personal Journal

Feb.2/02

It was a P.A. day yesterday and we had some interesting meetings. In the morning we met with other schools to come up with ideas on how to move kids from a level 2 to a level 3. As we examined level 2 booklets from last year, I thought that the answers given were quite adequate for a Grade 3 student. The answers to me showed an understanding of the text at a reasonable level. We were focusing on communication and reasoning. The only thing I could see was that the answers could have been more specific, using words right out of the text. The facilitator mentioned that recent brain research indicates that strong reasoning abilities do not appear until the age of 14, bringing into question the reasonableness of the expectations.

In the afternoon, we met as a team to make monthly plans with respect to testing. We received a booklet with suggested ideas for each month. Once again, I was not happy that we were being asked to make new plans as though what we are currently doing is not sufficient. I feel that we have had enough new material and resources sent our way to keep us busy. We are not given any chance to practice changes we make and then reflect on the results. If we are truly using assessment to guide our actions, then we need to plan on a week-to-week basis. Certainly we need to see the big picture and know what direction we are headed, but the actions in our classrooms need to be based on sound principles of learning. We need to be constantly modelling, encouraging and assessing habits of mind and specific skills we want the students to be gaining. If the students are becoming independent learners by developing attitudes such as those listed in the Habits
of Mind (Costa & Kallick, 2000), then they are going to benefit much more from the opportunities for learning that we offer them. The students also need time to practice and if we insist upon presenting concept after concept in order to boost our average on the testing across the board, we are not using sound principles of teaching. I suppose the argument can be made that if some school or some board can produce high numbers of level 3 students, then we can too if only we do the right thing. However, the situation is much more complex than that. There are so many variables in each situation that it is impossible and invalid to try to make direct comparisons. I believe that our teaching practices need to be constantly reflected upon and changes made as we assess the results of our teaching and I also believe that our primary team is doing just that. We need time and space to breathe. The students also need to be considered. I do not believe the world is going to be a better place if we could only boost the EQAO scores. We want to produce thoughtful, compassionate, independent thinking students who know how to go about learning. That is what we need to keep in mind as we go about our daily activities. Let’s keep things in perspective!!

Feb. 5/02
I had a wonderful conversation with Beth yesterday after school. She was responding to my e-mail and wanted to share her thoughts. Much of our discussion centred on those students who do not fit neatly into the box we call school. We lamented the lack of resources and opportunities for those students who have a hard time sitting still and completing paper and pencil tasks. We talked about individual differences and the need to honour and encourage those. We agreed that children are born with characteristics and
natural tendencies and we spend a lot of time only teaching to certain strengths. Beth is known as a very kind teacher and that also came through and reminded me that getting upset is not a productive action. I need to remember the soul of the child, just as I suggested in my proposal. We talked about how different teachers bring different perspectives to the classroom. I realised that my reflective personality is played out as I encourage reflective thinking. Beth is very artistic and empathetic so art and caring are important in her classroom. We bring our passions with us and so each year the students are exposed to different ways of seeing things.

I find it so beneficial to broaden my ways of seeing through deep conversations. I need to listen to others. I need to be reminded to value uniqueness. We also talked about the negative aspects of EQAO and how the pressures we are placing on both students and teachers are probably unnecessary in the whole scheme of things. Although the results help us focus on certain aspects of literacy and numeracy, we are perhaps expecting too much at too young an age. If we are born with natural tendencies, do we really do anything to change the course of one’s life through testing? Beth also felt that it would be unfair to emphasis all the habits of mind with all the students because some simply are not born with the capacity to perform at some levels. For example, how do you teach humour? I also mention that in my proposal. Thinking about thinking is a skill that comes more naturally to some than others. I don’t feel it is wrong to promote the habits of mind, but perhaps evaluating them would not be fair, although we do that on the learning skills part of the report card. I think what we were really saying is that it is not fair to try to bend people against the grain. We should be working with people to use
their strengths. However, we also talked about the necessity for a lot of practice in order to improve weak areas. If much practice in reading, for example, increases the connections in our brains and causes improvement, then perhaps the same can be said for practising habits of mind.

Feb. 7/02

We have been working on our postcards. The students needed to finish colouring them and putting the message on. They also started typing their colour poems using Corel. Their experiences with computers at home are very valuable. Molly is away today so I had her group. They need help understanding dialogue. I will have the whole class fill in speech bubbles and then create written dialogue. A lot of the students don’t quite get what goes inside quotation marks. The whole reflection thing is taking a back seat to other concerns. That is part of the way things work at school though. We will focus more on reflection when we start meeting in small groups to discuss the mystery novels. I need to think of a good way to model constructive discussion independently.
Appendix H: Students’ Responses to “More Than Anything Else”

**While I am reading**

**Title** More Than Any Thing Else

**Name**

**Date**

**Partner**

I wonder where the Kanawha River is.

I feel happy because Booker found what he was looking for.

I imagine shoveling salt on the ground all day.

I predict that they are not liking to shovel salt.

This reminds me of the creek in my backyard.

I learned who you are a grown-up.

I think Booker is really happy because he found the brown face of hope.
Title: More Than Anything Else

Name: [Blank]

Date: Thursday Dec. 6 2001

Partner: [Blank]

I wonder how much food they get. I feel sad for the people because they get nothing to play with. I imagine that I am working for two hours non-stop. I predict that all slaves would read. It reminds me of a TV show I watch because it was about slaves. I learned that the slaves only ate potatoes.
While I am reading

Title More They Anything Else
Name __________________________
Date Dec 6/01 __________________
Partner ________________________

I wonder if they are slaves.

I feel sad if they are slaves.

I imagine of the winter because of the snow.

I predict that he wants to read more then everything.

This reminds me of the time Mrs. Webster told us about the slaves.

I learned that the shining white crystals leave cuts there hands and arms, legs and the soles of feet.

I think that he really wants to read.
While I am reading

Title More Than Anything Else

Date Name Tuesday, December 12

Partner No partner

I wonder what he wants to do

I feel

I imagine

I predict that he wants to do something that he is going to read the alphabet.

This reminds me

I learned that there should be salt.

I think there should be snow.
While I am reading

Title

Name

Date

Partner

I wonder what salt works are. What B-l-o-o-k-e-r spells.

I feel sad if they are all slaves.

I imagine the mountain.

I predict his dad is the Booker.

This reminds me of crystals.

I learned how to spell mountain.

I think salt works are where lots of salt falls.
While I am reading

Title More Than Anything Else

Name ____________________________

Date Dec. 6, 2004

Partner no body

I wonder if they are slaves. If he really is going to teach them how to read.

I feel cool that they walk in bare feet happy that he looked everywhere for the newspaper man.

I imagine they get hungry that papa tapped him on the shoulder for a raison.

I predict that the little boy wants to be the best reader in the country.

This reminds me of a story of slaves.

I learned that the stuff on the group is salt works that he didn't know.

I think they are pore.
While I am reading

Title: More Than What They See

Date: Dec. 11 2001

I wonder what the right stuff on the 
grown.

I feel sad because the little boy has
to go to work.

I imagine right stuff on the grown.

I predict that he will learn how to
read.

This reminds me of show.

I learned that people have rise on the
grown.

I think realy want to read.
While I am reading
Title More Than One Thing Ele
Name ____________________________
Date That Dec 6, 2006
Partner ________________________
I wonder why that white stuff is on the ground.
I feel sorry for them because they don't have a meal.
I imagine having to shovel all day.
I predict that he is going to make a wish for Christmas.
This reminds me of the book M is for Maple.
I learned that that stuff is salt.
I think that he is going to learn how to read.
While I am reading
Title More Than Anything Else
Name __________________________
Date Dec 6 _____________________
Partner __________________________

I wonder why children go to work at the age of nine.
I feel it was still to miss breakfast.

I imagine it is boring to shovel salt all day.
I predict he wants to read more than everything else in this world.

This reminds me when I was learning the Alphabet,
I learned that he wants to read,
That the word coopers make bare
I think that salt is very heavy
While I am reading

I wonder what the boy wants more than anything. What it would be like if you didn't have a mom mean that the whole store

I feel sad that they don't get to eat more meals.

I imagine being a slave.

I predict the white store is salt.

This reminds me

I learned the white store is it.

I think the white store is ice cream.
While I am reading
Title More Than Anything Else
Name ____________________
Date Thursday, Dec. 6
Partner ____________________
I wonder if these men are slaves?

I feel sorry for them because they did not have a morning meal and they had to shovel barrels and barrels of salt. I imagine that while shoveling salt, they would get very cold.

I predict that the writer would have been hard and being free would be hard.

This reminds me about the slavery book. I'm really glad when my mom and dad got there first and when they worked or lived there. I learned that they worked and lived in the mountains. I learned that I think it would hurt to have white crystals give you cuts on your arms, legs, and hands.
While I am reading

Title More than anything else

Name

Date Dec 10 2001

Partner

I wonder how the place they live in is?

I feel getting all the cuts

I imagine carrying all the salt.

I predict he will read.

This reminds me when I tried to read

I learned what the boy's name is.

I think he really wants to read
While I am reading

Title More Than Anything Else
Name ____________________________
Date Dec 6
Partner ____________________________

I wonder What is the Kanawha river? Why he wants to to read?

I feel Sad for Booker Tilby boy

I imagine shoveling the salt, not knowing how to read

I predict a family can’t read

This reminds me When I couldn’t read

I learned there Not slaves

I think They are slaves
While I am reading

Title More Than Anything Else
Name ____________________
Date Dec 6 ___________
Partner __________________

I wonder what he wants more than anything. What is different where they live.

I feel sorry for the little boy since he has to work and he looks young.

I imagine shoveling salt and getting cuts.

I predict that they are poor salt.

This reminds me when I was on a trip and I had to get up early.

I learned he wants to learn how to read more than anything else. That the boy who wants to read is nine years old.

I think he would want to get cuts from shoveling snow.
While I am reading

Title More Than Anything Else
Name __________________________
Date Dec. 6
Partner X [Signature]

I wonder if a frog taste good to them? I wonder what I see myself the man means.
I feel sad that kids had to work.

I imagine how hard that would be to go to work even in the winter. I imagine how much the kids would work. I imagine how much I would hate to read.

This reminds me of slavery.

I learned that the stuff on the ground is not snow, it's salt. I learned the thing he wanted more than anything else is to read. I think it would be hard to travel day
While I am reading

Title More Than Anything Else

Name

Date Thursday, December 6, 2001

Partner

I wonder where they work.
why he really wants to read.
how he holds a thought in his hands.
how they make money.

I feel ache on my shoulders sometimes.

I imagine holding a frog in my hand.
feeling so hungry.

I predict he doesn't eat much.

This reminds me of when I shoveled snow.

I learned that he read his name.

I think he wrote in the dirt because they had no paper
**While I am reading**

Title  more than anything else

Name

Date Dec 14, 2005

Partner

I wonder what ridge means? Why someone would want to read most? what Soles means? how he can draw on the floor? I feel like they are prisoners because salt wouldn't atomically appear on the ground!

I imagine shoveling salt all day! eating sweet potatoes for a snack. not knowing how to read?

I predict that he will learn to read.

This reminds me of other story's I read. of a library

I learned that ridge means a bump.

I think they are prisoners!
While I am reading

Title  More Than Anything Else  
Name  
Date  Thursday, December 6, 2001  
Partner  

I wonder what the boy wanted more than anything else.

I feel sorry that they didn't have a morning meal.

I imagine they would be hungry by the time back then.

I predict that the spicay stuff might be a kind of salt.

This reminds me of when I read books like this.

I learned what he wanted to do, he wanted to learn how to read.

I think the people that have to shov the salt might be slaves.
While I am reading

Title More Than Anything Else

Name _______________________

Date _______________________

Partner _____________________

I wonder how they feel about no food if it is shovel salt.

I feel sorry for the little boy because he has to go to work. Sorry for all of them because they don't get any meals.

I imagine what it would be to shovel salt.

I predict that the little boy will learn to read.

This reminds me of when I wanted to learn how to read.

I learned the white stuff is salt, not snow.

I think the white stuff is snow because they are shoveling white stuff that looks like snow. It is the little boy who doesn't know how to read.
While I am reading...

I wonder what headed means.

I feel...

I imagine how to work that big hours.

I predict...

This reminds me of my old school taught me to read.

I learned...

I think...
Appendix I: Revised “While I am Reading” Sheet

While I am reading

Title _______________________
Name _______________________
Date _______________________
Partner _____________________

Sentence starters:

I wonder...                I feel...
I imagine...               I predict...
This reminds me...         I learned...
I think...
Appendix J: A Sample of Independent Reading Questions from Lindquist (2000)

Character:
1. Who is (are) the main character(s) in the story?
2. Describe the physical appearance of the main character.
3. What are the personality traits of the main character(s)?
4. Would you choose the main character as a friend? Why or why not?
5. In what ways are you most like the main character?
6. Does the main character change in the book? Describe this change.

Setting:
1. Where does the story take place?
2. When does the story occur?
3. What is the time span of the action from start to finish?

Plot:
1. Summarize in a few sentences how the plot begins.
2. Describe the climax of the book.
3. If this book had a sequel, what do you think it would be about?

Evaluation:
1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate this book? Why?
2. For whom would you recommend this book?

More difficult questions:
1. In one sentence tell what this book is about.
2. What are some of the themes explored in this novel?
3. Did this book remind you of another you have read? Describe the similarities.

Comprehension:
1. Relate in your own words an incident in the story.
2. Name three other characters in the book and describe the main character's relationship with each one.

Application:
1. If you were to design a new cover for this book, what would it look like?
2. Pretend you are the main character and relate what you did today.

Evaluation:
1. Think of a choice the main character made. Do you think he/she made the right decision? Why or why not?
2. Would you choose the main character as a friend? Why or why not?
Appendix K: Samples of Students’ Reading Responses – Diary Entry

Following are reading response samples to the assignment: Pretend you are the main character. Write a diary entry for today.

1. I decorated the tree.
   I got the lights and Christmas balls out.
   I got my mom and dad Christmas presents.
   This morning I woke up and opened my presents at 5:30.

   (This was scribed.)

2. Dear Mrs. Webster,
   Today I took off my hat for the roge king but he says take of your so I had to
   stand at the end of they castle and someone shot my hats of 154 times.
   Sincerely, Bitholemu

3. Dear Diary,
   Today I spent my time with my grandfather I went for a hike and was talking
   about stars htat is my grandfathers favourite thing stass
   From lora

4. Dear Diary,
   Today was the wrose day of my life. Well that’s what I thought and way. It first
   happened when I could not find my cat, Mittens. I looked all over for her. Then I
   called my friends and they helped my look for her. Then mom asked me to go up
   to the adic and I found her with three little kittens. I could mot belive it Mittens
   had kittens.
   From, Greta

5. today I discovered a new spider. I’ts brain, stomach, venom, is all in the head.
   Then I found out that the hunting spider can only run for a fu min.

6. I am dracula
   I sat in a dark corner.
   Blood is my favorite.
   I hate bright lights.

7. Dear Diary
   Today I got to drive a train. Found a dimond necklace with a ruby. I had to cut a
   tree so we could keep going.
   Benny
8. Dear Diray,
   Today I just got sent to the offic. Because I said I saw a walking banna. I just mist the movie about egles and the kids in my class were beating me up.

   Sincery, ZOE

9. Today I sailed the seven seas. I took out one of my six pistols and shot one of my partners because he wasn’t obating the tules. The other one is still alive hidding in the ship. When I find him he will suffer the consaqences and the consaquences are walking the plank or my usuwill shooting him.

   BLACKBEARD 1758

10. Dear Diary, Hi My name is Wodney Wat.
    In the middle of the stowy I was the leader of are favwate game. Every body thought that Amelia would now every the I said but we were all wong she didn’t now any thing I skeaked Every body laghed.
    Sincerely,
    Wodney

11. The Royal Raven
    I was just captured by the princess.
    I just got bannished because it flew arund the dinner table.
    I plucked all my feathers off for fread.

12. Day 1
    I was painting a picture at school but my paintbrush didn’t have any bristles. Then my teacher came over and put a F on my art.
    Day 2
    Then grandfather looked in his old suitcase and found a paintbrush and it is magic. When I paint a picture it became real so now we will be rich.
    Sincerely
    Steve
Appendix L: Samples of Students’ Reading Responses – Rating a Book

Following are 15 samples of reading responses to the question: How enjoyable do you find your book? Give it a rating between one and ten and explain your decision.

1. Five Creepy Creatures – 8
   1. Funny little stories
   2. I liked the coffin chasing the kids. I like monster stories.
   3. I watch scary movies so I like scary books.

(The above response was scribed.)

2. Hippo from Another Planet
   I’d give my book a ten.
   1. because hippo thinks another hippo is from another planet
   2. He also landed in the tomatoes. He had to pick them up.

3. to Mrs. W.
   5 I liked the middle but the rest I didn’t. I liked the part where they found the necklace in the mattress.

4. Liar liar pants on fire
   I would give it a level 10 because it is a funny storie and it has lotes of detale and nice pichures.

5. I give the book called The Twits a level 7 because it’s funny and gros.

6. What a plant
   I would rate this book an 8 because most of the pictures are real photograf taken and the print is nice and BIG for me to read,

7. 10 – Excellent because Dracula are cool and I like lemonade

8. Dear, Mrs. W,
   What makes this an interesting book is it is about giant’s and giants that mix up there words and espetialy whene all the BFG dose is talk
9. I think this book is the best bear book I have read.
   I also like it because it is about animals.
   The part I don’t like it because it eat ather animals.
   Level 5

10. Dear Mrs. W,
    I thin this book is rated 10 because George Beard and Harold Hutchins alwas do
        something funny. Sometimes they make mistake that they say.

11. Dear Mrs. Webster
    I am reading The Key To The Playhouse. It’s a great book. There are 11
        chapters. I am at Chapter 9. The stroy about two little girls and they have a
        playhouse. They go to their playhouse everyday. I like the story a lot you should
        read it. Now I am at Chapter 11. I read a strag word hartney. I am done the book
        now. It took me a week to read 11 chapters. It’s a great book to read when your
        board. They got a key for it. My favorite part was when they got their key. They
        have tea party a lot. Their names are Alice ann and Magen. There is a girl named
        Cissie. Magen and Alice-Ann don’t let her in the playhouse. They are both mean
        to Cissis. Cissie has a little brother named Roale.

12. Dear Mrs. Webster
    No a princess din’t kiss the frog she throw the pore frog agens a brik wall. Yes I
    do like fairytales. Do you like fairy tales? I don’t now how rate the story but I
    liked it.

13. I gave my book a level 7 because I like Horses and Unicorns looked alitall like
    them. And because it uses good words.
    The land without Unicorns (illustration included)

14. Dog Days

    I would give this a level 7.
    I think the pictures are pretty good.
    It is not too hard to read.
    I like the expressions used in the book.

    (This was scribed)

15. hi, my book is called on Silent Wings. I will give it a 9 because it has lots of detial
    and pictures and adds stuff to the song O Canada. I like it because each pro vents
    of canada draw a picture and tell what pro vents its from.
Appendix M: Parent Questionnaire

June 24, 2002

Dear Parents,

It has been a pleasure teaching your children this year. They have all been interested learners and have progressed well in all subjects. I am also a learner as well as a teacher, so I am always trying to understand and explain things from many perspectives. Since many valuable things happen at home as well as at school that help your children develop skills, I would really appreciate you taking a few minutes to jot down your thoughts on the following questions. Please be honest. This is not a test; I am simply interested in your observations. (I will alternate between using him or her when referring to your child.)

What events and activities happened this year, both at home and/or school, that you feel have helped your child become a better reader? Please keep in mind that reading involves both decoding words as well as understanding the author’s message or concepts being presented in the text.

What strategies have you observed your child using that have helped him become a better reader? I am particularly interested in knowing about your child’s desire to understand the text, perhaps by asking questions about difficult words or ideas, retelling or explaining or discussing what he has read, reading other books about the same topic, rereading the text when it didn’t make sense, and other strategies you observed him using while reading.
How does your child choose books and are they at her reading level, that is, the books are not too easy or too hard for her to understand? In other words, is your child more aware of her own reading abilities and does she make choices based on this awareness?

My main message to the students this year was to stop and think. I wanted them to reflect on their understanding of the text and question things they didn’t understand. Have you observed any reading behaviours in your child that would indicate they are reflective and critical about their reading?

Do you have any suggestions for teachers or the school that you feel would help your child become or remain a terrific reader?

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions. If you don’t have a few minutes this evening, you could drop your responses off at the school on Wednesday or Thursday. You have been terrific parents. I can tell by the students' progress that you have spent a lot of time reading with them at home. You play a very important role in your children's education. Have a wonderful summer!

Sincerely,
Jennifer Webster
Appendix N: A Model of Adult-Child Proximation

This examination of the way in which teachers and pupils interact during a lesson selects the degree of involvement (mediation) demonstrated by the teacher and sets it against the degree of initiative (initiation) demonstrated by the pupil.

A  teacher-driven

- Adult-structured with frequent reinforcement
- Teachers find opportunities to rehearse rules
- Children do as others require them
- Learning through prescribed steps
- Activities are not negotiable
- Pupils’ task is to absorb
- Context is irrelevant
- Learning is managed for pupils by the teacher
- Literacy is a set of skills to be handed over

B  resource-driven

- Adult relies on set resources to structure learning
- Teachers monitor pupils' progress on set task
- Children follow the demands of the task/resources
- Learning is to be occupied
- Activities are for their own sake
- Pupils work unassisted
- Context is implicit to the task
- Learning is managed for pupils by resources
- Literacy is used to occupy

C  pupil-driven

- Pupils decide how to organize their learning
- Teachers assist with advice and resources on request
- Children pursue their interest
- Learning is exploration and discovery
- Activities are tailored to the individual/group
- Pupils are expected to motivate themselves
- Context is personal
- Learning is managed mainly by pupils for themselves
- Reading requires active construction of meaning from text
- Writing requires active generation of ideas into text

D  learning-driven

- Adults and pupils decide together how to pursue a task
- Teachers guide and negotiate
- Children are seen as active partners
- Learning arises from joint problem-solving
- Activities provide opportunities for dialogue
- Pupils work collaboratively
- Context is made explicit
- Learning processes are highlighted
- Readers reflect and review
- Writers compose and redraft

Webster et al., 1996, p. 177
VITA

Jennifer A. Webster

Education:

University of Waterloo, 1973-1977, B.A. (Honours, Psychology)

Ontario Teacher Education College, McMaster University, 1977-1978, B. Ed.

Basic Qualifications: Primary, Junior & Intermediate Divisions

Additional Qualification: Special Education, Specialist

Queen’s University, 2003, M. Ed.

Professional Experience:

Upper Canada District School Board (formerly Leeds and Grenville Board of Education)

Adult Basic Education Instructor, 1989 - 1994

Elementary Teacher, Grades 1 - 8, 1994 – 2002

Reading Recovery Teacher and Special Education Resource Teacher, 2002 - 2003

Publication:

Webster, J. (2000). Action research as a strategy for improving literacy levels in the primary division. The Ontario Action Researcher, 3(3).

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