

REPORT ON
ST. BONIFACE
LITERACY INTERVENTION PROJECT

BUILDING SUPPORTIVE CLASSROOMS

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REPORT ON ST. BONIFACE LITERACY INTERVENTION PROJECT: BUILDING SUPPORTIVE CLASSROOMS

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PART 1 RATIONALE

The issue of literacy has been at the forefront of recent public discussions since it affects both educational systems and adult literacy proficiency. Within the parameters of schooling, it has become clear that teachers need help understanding more about how children develop as language users so that they are better able to support children in a classroom learning environment. Public input has targeted the need to develop students who read more effectively and efficiently, who write more proficiently, and who do mathematics at a level that allows them to meet a variety of societal needs. The need to support teachers in developing and understanding literacy is especially pressing with regard to reading instruction, where misconceptions and uncertainties about how children learn to read have resulted in tension between teachers and parents.

This past academic year we (University of Manitoba and St. Boniface School Division) began a literacy intervention initiative in an effort to extend teacher knowledge about literacy. In particular, the focus of this initiative was to help teachers become better aware of particular students' learning in order to develop a more supportive learning context for them.

PART 2 ASSUMPTIONS

Our literacy project was based on some fundamental assumptions:

1. Our goal is to enhance teachers' knowledge of literacy learning—with an emphasis on providing appropriate instruction for at-risk students.
2. We intend staff development to be long-term, supporting teachers as they refine their classroom practices to meet the needs of all children more effectively.
3. Teams of teachers within a school involved in the project and across those same schools support one another in on-going inquiry, reflection, and planning.
4. Support personnel are necessary for initiating and sustaining the learning, reflecting, planning process for teachers by:
 - working directly with the whole group to enhance knowledge about literacy learning;
 - supporting teachers at the school level through regular classroom observations, journal review, and conversation;
 - assisting teachers in locating professional research literature relevant to their on-going case study and discussions about literacy.

PART 3 FRAMEWORK 1994-95

- During the 1994-95 school year, the project has involved **six classroom teachers (K-4)**—two each from three elementary schools (Frontenac, General Vanier, Howden), **three resource teachers** (from the same schools), and the **principal** of the school, to explore literacy instruction in their classrooms, particularly for at-risk students.
- The approach has been **problem-based** in that teachers have been focusing their inquiry on supporting the literacy learning of an at-risk student within the classroom setting.
- The group of nine teachers and three principals have come together regularly to share, discuss, and problem-solve. Central to the discussions has been their ongoing work with their case study students (journal accounts, feedback from classroom observations, as well as hypotheses and instructional activities). This group time has been devoted to exploring recent developments in literacy learning and has focused on discussing various aspects of literacy instruction.
- There has been a support team made up of the following people: **Dr. Judith Newman** (Dean, Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba), **Jean Chaput** (Director of Student Services, St. Boniface School Division), and **Lucille Phaneuf** (Co-ordinator of French Programming, St. Boniface School Division). Judith, Jean, and Lucille have supported the learning, reflecting,

and planning process with regular weekly classroom observations and reflective conferences with the teachers, by responding to journal entries, by providing professional readings relevant to the various case-studies, and by facilitating and instructing at the group sessions.

- The full team met for two days at the beginning of the school year and has come together for a half-day once a month throughout the year. A member of the support team has met with the teachers in their schools once a week to discuss and respond to journals, to participate and observe in the classroom, to assist the teachers in reflecting on the classroom experience for their at-risk target students, as well as other students in the classroom. **To make it possible for the teachers to work with their case study students and for consultation, one substitute teacher in each school has been shared between the two classroom teachers for a half-day week.** This added support has provided an opportunity for the project teachers to engage in some one-to-one instruction as well as time for the support team to consult with the teachers. The classroom observations, journal entries, and readings have been central to both the weekly school conversations and the monthly team discussions.

PART 4 OBSERVATIONS 1994-95

The project began with discussion of two resources: *What Matters: A Primer for Teaching Reading* (Stephens, Heinemann Educational Books, 1990) and *The Supportive Classroom: Literacy for All* (Church: Department of Education, Nova Scotia, 1992). The intention was to raise two concerns:

- what matters with regard to literacy instruction—what should we be looking for, how can we learn from the at-risk student;
- how to create a supportive classroom by the judicious use of individualized, small group and large group instruction as well as an exploration of what constitutes support.

The point of the project has been to help teachers understand that their responsibility is not to **fix** the at-risk child but to learn, through observation and activity with the child, what learning and literacy strategies the child is actually using and how to use the instructional situation (individual, small group, and large group) to discover what instructional tactics supported their particular learner and facilitates this student's literacy development.

At the April monthly meeting the group discussion produced the following synopsis of "What have we learned so far?"

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED SO FAR?

OBSERVATION

Our focus on learning about the children through close and systematic observation has helped the teachers become much more aware of the children's avoidance and anxiety behaviours and to intervene more quickly in supportive ways. Their increased focus on observation has raised the need for developing new record-keeping strategies which in turn has raised questions about instructional strategies in general.

- The behaviour of our at-risk students demonstrates a high level of anxiety and avoidance. This anxiety/avoidance takes many forms: withdrawal, acting out, inattention, defensiveness, dependence. Sometimes a child demonstrates a predominant anxiety/avoidance behavior, sometimes a range. We've become more adept at noticing and identifying these behaviours. We've begun to develop a list of such behaviours.
- Being able to observe and identify the children's anxiety/avoidance has made it possible to engage in instruction that seeks first to diminish and subsequently to eliminate the anxiety. We have explored a range of ways of providing instructional support to discover what works with each individual child. **Different strategies are needed for different children.**
- We have observed the children's anxiety/avoidance behaviours in one-to-one settings, in small groups, and in whole group instruction. The teachers have discovered that the opportunity to work with the child individually has enhanced their own ability to pick up on anxiety/avoidance behaviours in the classroom and, rather than attempt to deal with that behaviour directly, they are now becoming more adept at providing support which allows the child to engage. They have learned that **not every child needs the same support.**

- Since the beginning of the project (in late September) the teachers have identified a marked decrease in the children's dependence. The children are all now much more able to initiate literacy activities and to sustain engagement.
- By changing their focus from "fixing the child" to "learning from the child" the teachers have discovered how to respond to the individual child's needs in ways that lead to less avoidance and more engagement on the part of the child.
- The teachers' observations of their individual case study children has proved beneficial with all children in the classroom. The teachers have learned to be more observant of all their students and are now more knowledgeable about their individual strengths and their learning strategies.
- We've discovered it's important to record behaviours that are no longer happening as well as new ones that are emerging. The absence of anxiety/avoidance behaviours is as strong an indicator of engagement as the development of strengthened learning strategies.

SUPPORT

The teachers have been exploring ways of putting the learner in control of the learning. They've learned to start with the children's vulnerabilities, finding out what they are and ways of compensating for them. What they've found is that this sort of support has relaxed the children to an extent that all of their parents have commented on it and the children are demonstrating considerably increased engagement with and success in literacy activities.

- We have worked to discover exactly what the case study children are capable of doing independently. Being able to identify their independence level is crucial because it provides an indication of what engagement looks like for a particular child. It offers a baseline against which to assess their anxiety/avoidance behaviour.
- Once we've located what the child can do independently, we have explored increasing the complexity of the literacy task with an eye to providing just enough support to help the child sustain his/her engagement. We've discovered various ways of keeping the child going in one-to-one instructional situations and then attempted similar strategies in small group and whole class situations. We're learning that judicious attention to what the children are attempting to do and offering support as quickly as possible has allowed the children to function more independently for longer in the classroom.
- We've extended our exploration to situations which are beyond the students' current level of functioning in order to discover ways of helping the children participate and learn from complex literacy activities although they are yet incapable of engaging in them on their own.
- We've explored ways of creating a balance, both for the individual case study children, as well as for the classroom as a whole, between activities which the children can engage in independently and those which require some or a great deal of support.
- We've begun to identify and describe various kinds of support:
 - working at a task together—shared reading, shared writing, working collaboratively, then offering the child an opportunity to attempt the task independently (being ready to 'share' again if it should be needed)
 - providing practice within a group context and for a real audience (not just teacher as examiner); i.e., readers theatre creates a situation requiring repeated readings of a difficult text in a group context as well as for subsequent performance for a real audience
 - asking the learner if help is needed, then asking the learner to identify what help would be useful
 - asking questions
 - to help the learner analyze the task situation
 - to help the learner verbalize the strategies they're using
 - to help the learner verbalize other potential strategies
 - to find out "How did you do this?"
 - providing the learner with some choices for the outcome of what they're doing
 - making it legitimate and encouraging the children to work with partners
 - demonstrating and verbalizing our own strategies, talking about how we engage with reading and writing

- providing the children with exemplars and a range of printed resources
- pointing out when the children are successful

LEARNING

The teachers have learned a great deal about learning and teaching. They've learned to slow down, to give the child time, to take their lead from the children at the same time not losing sight of the complex tasks they want them to be able to handle independently. Most important, they've begun to learn from the individual instruction how to keep the child in the classroom and to learn in small group and whole group situations.

- We've learned to shift our gaze from teaching to LEARNING. Our emphasis on learning to observe, on making inferences and interpretations from our observation, serve as a basis for instructional decisions and has shifted our attention to learning from the learner.
- We've discovered that the children have a range of productive learning strategies at their disposal but that our instructional activities haven't always permitted the children to use them. We're learning to make openings for the children to use and extend their strategies.
- We've found that **growth can be very uneven**. Gains can be made in one aspect of literacy and not with others at a particular time. Growth in reading may not be mirrored by growth in writing; and the converse—growth in writing can outstrip growth in reading.
- There is **no one path to literacy proficiency**. Some of the children have engaged with reading more easily; others have taken off with writing.
- We've explored ways of more closely integrating reading and writing activities. We've found the children become more independent readers/writers when the reading is supported with writing and the writing supported by books.
- We've learned the importance of **not lowering the goals** for the at-risk children. We've learned not to be afraid of keeping them in challenging situations but to find ways of supporting them so they can be successful.

PART 5 TEACHERS' ACCOUNTS

The following accounts are written by the project participants themselves. In them, each participant examines his or her assumptions and explores the learning that occurred as a result of working closely with an individual child.

I have organized the accounts by school—that is, the writing of the teachers and principal from each of the three schools is kept together so that we can see the connections that emerged within the team.

SHIFTING MOMENTS

*Roger Gadsdon
General Vanier*

The scene opens, the stage is set. September is the start - another year begins. As the curtain rises on a heterogeneous group of students, a spotlight closes its beam of light across the stage. The observation by the audience brings its focus upon the few and then one.

The project. The initial frame was one of observing a student in a variety of environments and interactions. The premise was that more effective observation on the part of the teacher would draw out data with which to analyze, hypothesize, and test a possible direction for the student's learning.

Where were we at with Kristyn during the fall term? Kristyn is a 12 year old special needs student with ADD and moderate to high hearing loss requiring use of 2 hearing aids. She is about 4 years below grade level in LA and math. Kristyn did not see herself as a capable learner. She lacked confidence in most areas. Her self-esteem was extremely low. It was a great effort for her to attempt learning tasks without continual direct adult support. She avoided learning tasks and was highly anxious.

What did I observe Kristyn avoid? Kristyn avoided attempts to:

Read - for meaning, information, direction, safety, and interest

Write - complete or copy any sentences or phrases (even 3 words unassisted), phrases or sentences with meaning, thoughts and feelings

Spell - personal information, record or chart information, her last name, address, invent spelling of words

Kristyn came with a barrier to spelling—the expectation from home was to spell correctly. Consequently, she refused to spell words because she knew she could not do it correctly. In the fall Kristyn would work on her spelling word list sentences, first having them scripted for spelling, then she would copy them. Kristyn has a highly developed set of avoidance strategies. She has convinced adults she needs adults to script all her written work first before she copies it down. She has also convinced adults that she must be closely monitored all the time or she will sit and do nothing. In my opinion, Kristyn had successfully learned to be helpless for her learning and we adults have been successful in supporting this learned helplessness.

To further illustrate Kristyn's learned helplessness and her frustrations regarding learning, the following lists outline Kristyn's Avoidance Strategies and Anxiety Signs.

AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES

- Huh!
- I didn't hear you
- I can't
- I don't understand
- I don't know
- hands over face
- I'm stupid
- This is too hard for me
- Can I go to the bathroom?
- Talk about an unrelated topic
- Put her head down
- Watch others
- Easily distracted
- Creates a distraction
- Body stance withdrawn
- Eyes looking towards the floor
- Shoulders lowered & inward
- Crying - quiet sniffling
- Not attending to the situation intentionally

ANXIETY SIGNS

- sighs
- whine in voice
- almost a whisper when speaking
- facial indicators
- hands on top of head

At the outset, Kristyn found it extremely difficult to describe and discuss her feelings and emotions other than "happy and sad". What did we (myself and instructional assistant) start to do to assist Kristyn to do things differently, build self-confidence, and have her view herself as a capable learner with her literacy skills and beyond? The following are a few areas to illustrate what occurred:

From observing her lack of routines with literacy and her work habits, we set in place a series of simple, routine writing and reading tasks to establish both consistent expectations and develop basic habits upon which to build and expand her reading and writing. One example of this was to set up a daily journal pattern activity for her to complete four sentences (Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow, Feelings). After three months, the shift was made to a written conversation between Kristyn and an adult to expand these four focal points and explore other topics of interest daily.

From observing her hesitation with reading both aloud and silently, we developed a collection of reading materials to serve a variety of purposes. Strategies were shared with Kristyn, initially with a high degree of support and decreasing the support. In reading aloud with simple stories having 2-4 line per page Kristyn improved her confidence and was able to read with greater fluency. This also assisted her with story comprehension. Silent reading of a chapter book was initiated in April after having supported her in reading 3 chapter books with a periodic 1 to 1 check-in period (moving from high level of support to minimal).

From observing her choosing not-to-risk spelling, we supported her in sounding out words, finding words, asking peers for spelling. From observing her avoiding to write her thoughts and information, we created mini-projects from which we could have rough drafts with invented spelling, phrases, and mixed ideas which later would be edited with an adult, reorganized, and then typed into a good copy for Kristyn to read and share among other students.

The following two quotes from Kristyn are a testament to her literacy learning:

Kristyn's comments to me on April 6 (PM) while using Creative Writer software program to write a letter to her home tutor:

"I knew that you didn't need to help"

"I'll let you know if I need help"

Kristyn taught me, as teachers, we must hone our observational skills to identify the patterns of avoidance/anxiety behavior. As educators we find ourselves battling anxiety and avoidance behavior strategies developed and used by students to cope with academic challenges. Kids work with and go through learning challenges utilizing their filters of their learned patterns of avoidance and anxiety behaviors. I now personally approach situations with a "BIG TIME" stepping back to actively listen to behavioral and academic information and observe the social/emotional/academic dynamics of the student and those with whom the student interacts. This is one of the most substantial learnings for me in the project to date.

I learned, there may not always to be a logical sequence in support required to move from highly supportive to independent stance by the student. Support needs to shift as students become more confident.

ACTIVELY ENGAGED

Low anxiety & high motivation
to learn; engaged in learning

Low Anxiety

High Anxiety

ACTIVELY AVOIDING

Highly anxious; low motivation
to engage in learning

Actively engaged

Actively avoiding

Kristyn's literacy fluency has improved noticeably through the support offered through the literacy project. As her teacher, I have gained a number of skills and strategies which I have transferred to other students and staff in a variety of settings. This is only a start to a different view to literacy. I am excited to follow through on some of my explorations next year. The collegial and upper level support at all levels has continued to be a strength.

LEARNING FROM JUSTIN

Ken Pearse

General Vanier School

Target Student: Justin Palmer

Before the school year began I had some idea about the problems I might encounter with Justin in Grade 3. Therefore, it was no surprise to me when, after conducting the first writing lesson, Justin asked if he could do his at home because he couldn't spell and he didn't know how to write. It was as if Justin was waving a red flag saying, "I am not a risk taker," and "I refuse to even try." To make him feel less anxious about the assignment, I worked with him. He told me the three things about his summer vacation that he wanted to share with the class. I printed the sentences down for him. Justin copied them over for his final draft and illustrated the one idea he chose on his own. Justin seemed quite pleased with his finished product. He practiced reading his three sentences before they were read aloud to the class. I was hoping to accomplish three things by doing this:

1. Establish a positive working relationship with Justin
2. Show Justin he is capable of being successful in Grade 3
3. Have Justin feel good about himself

Since Justin had a strong dislike for any reading or writing tasks, a plan of action was developed. The resource teacher, the instructional assistant and I each had an integral role to play in moving Justin ahead in these areas. Even though Justin worked with two other students for the most part, he was seen on a one-to-one basis at first.

Various reading/writing strategies were introduced slowly to Justin. We worked on until he showed a good level of achievement. Following are some of the strategies used:

1. Making predictions/analyzing illustrations. Much time was spent having Justin look carefully at the illustrations to make some predictions about the story. After reading the story, he would be given ample opportunity to respond to his predictions, to his feelings and to the story in general. A writing activity followed for each story read. He would fill

- in blanks with endings to show his understanding of the cumulative sequence found in the story. These writings were always read aloud to someone.
2. Strengthen predictions/understand the patterns. Predictable pattern books were used such as "Just For You" by Mercer Mayer. Multiple readings, plenty of oral discussions and story frames formed the basis of these sections. Justin was constantly encouraged to see if his own sentences made sense. It started to become apparent that some of Justin's avoidance behaviours were lessening. He was more willing to try to take a risk. He even assisted the classroom teacher with a poetry lesson from this book.
 3. Analyze illustrations for story understanding. Wordless picture books were used to encourage Justin to see that illustrations can tell a story by themselves. He was expected to retell the story, having a scribe write it down. Justin was starting to have a degree of success. He was more willing to do his reading group, and at times even appeared very happy.
 4. Continued practice/leaving out strategy. Other books, such as "Teeny Tiny Woman," were used to reinforce the strategies of finding patterns, filling in story frames and retelling in his own words. He was introduced to leaving out the word, finishing the sentence and going back to see what makes sense. Justin seemed to be getting a slight handle on some of his reading. However, much review and practice was vital for any success.
 5. Making comparisons/beginning-middle-ending. With the use of fairy tales Justin reviewed his ability to predict and practiced his leaving out strategy when reading. Comparisons were made with such stories as "Cinderella" and "Prince Cinders." He was introduced to the Venn Diagram. Periodically, a taped reading of a piece he had really practiced was done. He began to write his own ideas for the beginning / middle / ending of a story. When doing any writing, Justin was always encouraged to try the spelling of a difficult word. He has difficulty writing down any word he can not spell.

Justin was becoming less tense with his reading/writing. The small group setting was an ideal situation for him to experience success and to feel good about what he had done. Ideas and spellings started to come more easily. All his writing pieces were shared with his small group and the entire class only when he felt ready. Justin was becoming proud of his work. He had become a bit of a risk taker after all. What a change in overall attitude!

Spelling still remains a stumbling block for Justin. He is able to get many consonant sounds with a little help, but confuses the vowels often.

6. Reader's theatre. Justin's small group performed a reader's theatre on "Where the Wild Things Are" by Maurice Sendak. This activity was specifically targeted to give him a purpose to reread again and again. We also wanted him to follow the print rather than memorize the words. He enthusiastically created a costume for his character. The group was video taped to assess their performance before performing for the entire class. After much guidance, Justin did manage to follow and to read his parts well.

Justin continues to work with the two other students in a small group for his reading and spelling. We have found he has difficulty transferring his knowledge to other areas of the curriculum. This is something that is being encouraged.

Summary:

This project has been most beneficial to Justin and to me. Justin has become more independent in the large group setting. He will ask for help when he feels he needs it. He displays enjoyment for reading his pieces aloud to an audience. Now Justin shows some positive emotional reaction to his achievements. This has only come about due to a more positive working relationship developed being the two of us, resulting from the opportunity to work in an intensive small group setting.

I, on the other hand, have gained insight into some reading strategies that could be beneficial for other students in the larger group. I have also become better at reading avoidance

behaviours and adjusting accordingly. As well, I have been exposed to many forms of literature and multiple ways of using them successfully with children.

BUILDING ON WHAT YOU KNOW

*Sheena Braun
General Vanier School*

September 13, 1994

Literacy learning involves bringing what you know to print and creating images and ideas in your head based on what you already know. As I became more aware of what was involved in reading I realized that I was using numerous strategies, although I had never formally been instructed in these ideas. When I teach reading, I emphasize the connection to my personal experiences and explain to students what I am thinking and doing, showing them how I attack reading. This personal explanation of the reading process effects my reflections. The sharing of these ideas with students can enhance their literacy learning.

I have shared my likes and dislikes of genre, my excitement or abandonment of a novel, thus I have tried creating a literacy environment that is stimulating and as real world as possible. I believe that all children are able to read and the process is as important as the product. Good literature is the key.

January 17, 1995

This literacy project has opened my eyes to numerous ideas.

Initially I viewed this project as an opportunity to work with a student to improve his reading. Actually I wanted him to become a reader! had no preconceived plan how I would do this and I kept waiting for someone (anyone) to give me direction as to the project's expectations, goals and intended outcomes. I kept waiting and finally was presented with the idea there was no established agenda. I was extremely frustrated. Surely we had a goal. Thus I began roaming around. I worked with Kevin daily. I wrote down what he (we) had accomplished for that day and proceeded on. Gradually I became unsettled. Why? I think because I observed "little things." For example, Kevin began to use illustrations to help him figure out text, he began to self-correct (he knew what he said didn't make sense and he was listening to himself), he still had difficulty with distinguishing the difference between a word and a letter. But now I needed to use these observations to help him move on. In reflecting I view the last 3-4 months as a time where I have done 3-4 weeks of roaming around to establish a focus of where we are headed. As a result of this wandering, definite questions have emerged.

1. Does Kevin work better with chunks of meaning rather than sounds in isolation? i.e.. - McCracken Spelling Through Phonics as opposed to word family instruction. Glass Analysis Approach in spelling?
2. What is the role of memory in reading and what specific interventions/strategies can I teach him to use to be a more effective reader?
3. The role of language experience and its enhancement of prior knowledge. Were the gains with this approach more significant than what I was using previously?
4. The role of self-esteem. How does the teacher help the student see himself as a learner? How much impact does this have on reading?
5. How do I get Kevin to experience the same success in the classroom as he does in a one-on-one situation? How can I facilitate this?

As well, within my main questions more questions arose.

I find this project has made me more aware of my observations and the need for reflection. Behaviours are the results of specific events. A careful observer can display tolerance and acceptance if this is taken into account.

May 24, 1995

After a year of participating in the literacy project I found myself faced with the same difficulty I began with: Where Do I Start? I was annoyed. I felt I had grown professionally, why then was I stuck on the same question. After some reflection, I came to the conclusion that good educators will continually be faced with this dilemma. This question forms the basis of meaningful instruction, observation and reflection. I have learned so much that it is difficult to decide what is

important to share. I asked myself What do I want Judith to know about this experience? And with this beginning, these two themes have come to mind:

General Learnings:

My initial perception of the project—effective strategies for at risk readers—has expanded to include the notion that all students benefit from the training we have been involved in. Much of our acquired knowledge has been sound teaching practice and appropriate for all learning.

This training has been two-fold. First, intensive instruction in reading/writing process, methodology and connections with on-site practicum, and collaboration. Critical for me was the idea of the support. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development: This discovery has been paramount in my curriculum design since that moment. Just like the child who finally puts all the reading ideas together - everything "clicked" for me. More importantly, because I formed questions around my observations I felt I was an active participant, and understanding had meaning.

Second, the project participants have become teacher researchers. This instruction has allowed me to actively explore ways of observing and recording data—avoidance behaviours, self-talk and body language. More importantly, the identification of the critical moment has had a heightened awareness: it leads me to generate possible solutions to my always arising question - Where do I begin? As well, it provides an encouragement, a desire to continue in learning which at times seems like an impossible task for both learners and teachers.

I have learned that critical moments may go unnoticed, or be deemed insignificant but to the teacher-researcher in training they are the backbone of "the beginning;" each moment in itself becoming part of the big picture. Imbedded within this critical moment idea is the changing of attitudes. I have watched Ken Pearse move from a teacher who wanted all his students meeting Manitoba curriculum and grade level standards evolve into a teacher who is constantly kid-watching, making hypothesis, and generating questions, sharing all his students' critical moments, and risk-taking about his own professional growth.

My change in attitude is reflected in our team approach by the project participants. Sharing instruction with individual students as well as a whole class has allowed the students to be winners. They have benefited from the variety of "experts" and range of ideas. A special moment was when Ken asked me if we could work together on a novel study for the entire Grade 3 class. I really valued that invitation.

The student Ken and I focused on was Kevin. Together we observed, discussed, taught in an effort to understand Kevin's learning better. What follows is a synopsis of my case-study on Kevin.

Kevin's Critical Moments:

Kevin has had numerous critical moments, however the following have been highlighted.

November 17, 1994: The Dressing Up Box - Recognized three words on his own: the, box, up. This is the first time he has recognized any words in a title without prompting. He self-corrects when he uses his finger.

When there wasn't a match he knew instinctively and went back to try to fix it. Kevin noticed "A little dot. That means the end of a sentence."

November 22, 1994: Small World - Previewed pictures with print covered up. Not able to determine if he had read the book before or if he really knew that much about insects. Made semantic map of what he knew. Unable to guide me to the appropriate group. Not attending to circles. He was extremely jumpy, kept banging his legs and repeating what I said. The text followed a pattern of questions with clues followed by an answer. Kevin randomly guessed at words and did not focus on initial consonants. He did not use finger pointing. Three words were selected. He identified them all as yes. He did not see that they were different. And he kept shrugging his shoulders.

December 14, 1994: For the first time Kevin began using sound/letter correspondence. T says T. All the way through the text this occurred with random words. A new strategy? Self-esteem is good. "My book box is going to burst."

February 11, 1995: Buzz Said The Bee - Looked at pictures on his own and then told me as he pointed to them. He knew two words. He talked about the pictures and that bees sting. He looked at the expression of the animals and knew why. Knew z and what sound it made. We read the text together. At times he read on his own and when I felt he needed support I chimed

in. He finger pointed when he read. He managed the text with some support in the first reading. Several more reads should put it at a level where it will be independently read.

May 10, 1995: Kevin became part of the small group today. The group was preparing to write a skeleton story. Reading was required to be done from a chart paper. Kevin volunteered to start the reading. "One day I met a boy called..." He continued to volunteer and experience much success.

In evaluating the project's progress student growth has been observed. But the benefits have not remained isolated. Parents have become involved through various volunteer activities. Literacy learning has become a focus in many classrooms and other colleagues hope to become involved in the project next year.

Personally, this opportunity has provided me with a hands-on literacy focused experience with expert facilitators who have guided me to seek the answers to the questions that make a difference to students.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS OF THE LITERACY PROJECT

*Karen Stewart
Principal, General Vanier*

Although Reading Recovery programs are highly rated, I feel they are not cost-effective for Public School Systems. The successes to date of the St. Boniface Literacy Project supports this statement. To date the teachers involved in the Project have enhanced their observations skills through working with targeted students and are applying their new learnings with all students in their classrooms.

My involvement in the Project has, at times, been peripheral due to the ever-increasing demands of running a school. However, I have continued to provide unconditional support to the three teachers involved. I have discussed their successes and their students' successes with other staff and parents as well. I've encouraged them to share their new learnings at Staff Meetings and Divisional Meetings. A presentation to our Parent Council was a preamble for our request for PTA funds to enhance classroom libraries.

Effective schools require "reflective practitioners". The three teachers involved in the Project are "leading the parade at General Vanier" and sharing their learnings with others. They've assisted me in supporting a schoolwide vision - focusing on LEARNING and REFLECTING.

Often children referred to the Principal's Office for behavioral concerns are indeed the children who are struggling academically in the classroom. With continued staff development in strengthening their observation skills, learning from the child, and creating a supportive classroom environment - all children will benefit.

It is my goal to develop a school culture that is student-centered and based on norms of interaction with students that are supportive and positive; while discipline is maintained, it is obviously to serve the interests of learning rather than merely an end in its own right. General Vanier's involvement in the Project is clearly supporting this goal.

REFLECTIVE THINKING = REFLECTIVE WRITING

*Jacqueline LaBossière
Howden*

Reflective thinking necessarily incorporates written notes, anecdotes and observations. I quickly learned through this project that mental notes have a way of getting lost within the millions of other thoughts that cross a teacher's mind. Being a creative person, I spent a great deal of time and energy finding and trying various ways of reflective writings or musings. Time to write or jot down or checkmark just doesn't come easily to me.

Because there is an angel taking care of me, this project fell into a year where our school as a whole was investigating portfolios and therefore a plethora of forms, ideas and solutions have crossed my desk.

I have collected forms, lists, rating scales, questionnaires, auto-evaluations for my students with parent comments and a drawerful of post-it notes of every size, color and shape. I have not yet perfected my record-keeping but have decided that it is critical for my students and myself. I found, for example, that for writing evaluations a cumulative checklist is my style. With some modifications to allow post-it notes to be attached, these checklists are time-saving and quick to read.

Reflective thinking also impacts on my teaching aide. By using a scribbler, I have been able to communicate quickly what she was to accomplish with each student and asked her to comment where applicable. I would sometimes leave her a checklist to use or include her post-it notes on a child's file.

* A daily entry looked like this:

May 30th day 5

9:15 finish research work on an individual basis - note those who couldn't find the right book for their question:

Teaira

Chantal

12:30 reread draft copies prior to conference with me.
Dale needs help with punctuation.

One concern I have other than the amount of paper I have consumed, is what do I do with this wealth of information I have accumulated on each child? Do I hand it over to their next year's teacher? Do I shred it? Do I frame it as a testimony to my discovery - reflective thinking deserves the time for reflective writing.



Yesterday was ordinary and routine until 1:30 p.m. Then the extraordinary and unpredictable happened.

Dale (*Jacqueline's case-study child*) sat quietly writing a draft copy of a story on an endangered animal, the giant panda. He sat totally immersed in his work. There was no fidgeting, no pencil dropping, no social conversations, no visits to my table, no reminders needed and certainly no frowns on his face.

Dale reminded himself out loud to skip a line for easier "fixing up" as he calls editing.

He smiled, a wonderful smile while he filled one page and began another. Dale refused to put his pencil down when recess was announced. He loudly called me over to his table.

"Madame, look what I did. Can I read it to you?"

And so he proudly read his draft copy:

The Giant Panda

The giant panda wans lived in the jungle. One day he wite to cie his frand. Wen he kam bac he saw all the hrese (trees) war gon and he was sade and he wint too telle his frands and his frands war verry sad and his frands Kam to see all the hreses war gon and thei wint to the big hre and thei war garding it for thr life. The and

I pointed out what I liked about his story—the beginning and the middle with a problem for the panda to solve. I wondered aloud if he story was really over.

"No. I wrote the end so I would know where I stopped today. I'll erase it tomorrow and finish my story."

And so today he did. He giggled at one part of his story. He read the finished draft to others and he worked on his capitals and punctuation.

His father arrived at 3h20 to pick Dale up. He asked Dale if he had had a good day.

"No. Great!"

I explained how pleased Dale was with his story. Dale was rummaging through the pile of writing books until he found his.

"Do you want to hear my story, Dad?"

I reminded Dale not to show his dad the draft copy but to just read it to him.

Dale held his draft copy away from his dad and read it confidently.

"And they grew old, and old and old and old and old. And Now they have grandsons and they have to let go of the house.

But they kept shopping the houses down.
The end."

Dale asked his dad if he got the message in his story. His dad stammered then explained how the panda's home is being taken away and how important it is to protect them.

"How did you know Dad?"

"Well, Dale, your story says it."

"Yea! I guess it does!"

It's embarrassing to admit how excited I was. I corralled my principal, who has been working with Dale and had him listen to a story. He listened politely but failed to identify the mystery writer.

I literally jumped with joy as I revealed that our Dale was the author. I showed him the draft copy and I knew in my heart of teaching hearts that Dale was on his way! There are only 38 teaching days left. Time was running out for Dale. I never gave up hope. I knew he could produce a piece of writing on his own and he proved me right.



Do I remember what it was like in the fall? Dale hated writing, couldn't get started and certainly could never complete a written assignment without adult help. He couldn't make a pre-writing plan nor discuss orally with his peers what he wanted to write. Revisions were impossible. Functional spelling reflected nothing that had been taught. Dale couldn't reread what he had written even when it was in a published form. Dale's avoidance techniques were repeated daily and the worse for me was that this little boy disliked school.

So what brought about the change? There certainly isn't just one factor but a list:

- daily writing in class
- parent-teacher communication focusing on Dale's successes
- early intervention of problems interfering with performance
- pre-talk to writing
- acting as a secretary in the early stages
- questions leading Dale to solve his own problems
- publishing of his stories
- praise
- patience
- firm encouraging to write more than he had
- dialogue of what he liked and disliked
- extra time needed even if it was recess time
- choosing his own format
- reading-writing connections that were part of his whole day
- prayer
- luck

All of these elements, I believe, led Dale and me to discovering the potential he held.

A footnote to Dale's giant panda story.

When Dale sat to conference for publishing he was amazed to see how he had written trees and proceeded to correct it throughout. He also added small details to clarify his story. Here is the revised, edited story:

The Giant Panda

The giant panda once lived in the jungle. One day he went to see his friend. When he came back, he saw that all the trees were gone but one big tree. He was sad. He went to tell his friends. His friends were very sad and his friends came to see all the trees that were gone.

They went to the big tree and they guarded it for their life. They grew old and older and older and older and older. Now they had grandsons and they had to let go of the trees. But the tree cutters still keep chopping the trees down.



Reflection: January 17, 1995

A dream class would consist of half the students being independent readers so that they could be paired with the developing or beginning readers that made up the second half of the class. These same independent readers would easily transfer their skills to writing and be willing and able to share their expertise with the other students. My role as teacher would be as observer, facilitator and evaluator. A project such as this literacy project would flow as calmly as the Red River.

I don't have a dream class and from the onset of this project I had too many potential candidates. The selection of one student became my nightmare. No matter whom I chose, I was still left with the onerous task of planning for a substitute on a weekly basis for the time involved in the project, relaying all pertinent information that I already had on the candidate to the other members of the team, selecting activities that would help the team confirm or deny my inferences, sharing control, not easy for me, of the direction we would take with the candidate. I was one frustrated lady. The lack of communication between the team members was not only due to my inexperience in such a project but also to the lack of definition as to what our specific roles would be. Another frustrating factor was our seemingly philosophical differences in approaching reading and writing in my Grade Two classroom. I lean towards an integrated curriculum where all reading and writing are part of a theme. Other team members wished to focus on repetitive readings of big books unrelated to my themes. Every week was unrelated to the prior one because we were unfocused. WHOA! Crisis time. I wanted out. I was beyond frustrated. A very honest and direct meeting with all team players dealt with all these frustrations:

One: What was each of our roles?

Two: Who ultimately made the decisions about the direction to take with my student?

Three: Could we have a schedule predetermined as to dates/times?

Four: Could our discussions be recorded?

Our team now knows our individual roles. I, as the homeroom teacher, direct (with suggestions from the team) activities for my candidate. Sometimes I am observer, sometimes I am facilitator. I know ahead of time what we are focusing, when the team is meeting, who is substituting in my classroom, what my role each session will be. We as a team are now record-keeping - questions, strategies and possibilities.

Jan 1995 -> I am feeling positive now in regard to this project. I see a direction that the team is taking. I can use my inferences to help other students. I have linked reading to writing in a truly honest, fulfilling way for my students and the team.

A dream project would be 6 weeks (intense) every day rather than once a week with daily discussions and questions. But who would plan for the substitute?

REALISTIC GOALS

Julie Pelletier

Ecole Howden

Throughout the literacy project, I have noticed that there is always room for improvement within yourself, with the students and with your colleagues.

September to December

In the month of September, I noticed that this child, Cody, could not and would not speak French. I tried introducing him to the vocabulary of the chosen theme so that he would be able to participate in the classroom. He was very inactive in the classroom in either languages spoken. My colleagues and I made inferences as to why he was content with nothing. He was always very tired. At school, he was introduced to structure in the class routines. It took him 8 weeks to understand that the calendar is done every morning after the bell. His library books were always late, memos not handed to his mom, forgotten gym clothes, etc.

As the teacher, I had to make sure Cody was always on task especially in the routines. I learned that structure can be frustrating and I had to make Cody understand and have fun doing the routines.

Patience has always been my strong point but I had to improve on the waiting time when asking questions even if he never answered.

Cody also was never listening to the concept taught but was always focused on counting things in the classroom. I had to learn to integrate Math in the vocabulary to make sure he was interested in the book.

With my colleagues, I learned that Cody acted the same way when they were teaching.

January to February

We decided that Cody needed some instruction with his peers. We pulled out 4 students instead of only him.

We have seen success with the three other participants and Cody participate when directed. We always have to alert Cody that his turn to answer will soon follow, and that he better have an answer. Now he might answer or repeat what has already been said, but it is a start and I am pleased with this accomplishment. It seems the wait time has decreased when Cody decides to answer which shows me that he is more confident.

March -->

Cody is finally using French in his sentences. He attempts to write stories in French and in English. I could understand what he has written which is a great improvement from last month. Cody is able to use his reading skills to read books in both languages! He has difficulty recalling words seen in the class vocabulary. Books that have been re-read many times seem to give Cody a feeling of accomplishment.

April - May

Cody is comfortable with his life at school. He is following routines, he is more organized and on task. His wait time for question and answer is still longer than others but at least I will get an answer from him. Cody will attempt to read things on his own with success for his level of reading. At this present time words that he doesn't know are a challenge for him so he skips them. He gives up too easily.

In class, we are currently doing an Ocean theme. Cody is very knowledgeable and shares many interesting facts with his friends. He brings books and wildlife cards from home to share with his friends. He always has his nose in a book when he has a moment.

I have seen a great improvement in Cody this year. He is very happy and willing to come to school. At first, he wouldn't read, write or speak. Now, we have a boy who speaks in more complete sentences, reads at a developing level and writes stories about his family. Cody was taught to pick up after himself and follow routines. He told me he put him and his mom on a schedule in the morning.

I have learned that anyone can accomplish a task if you have a realistic goal. This project helped me give more time to follow through with a student. Overall, all my students benefitted from the techniques I used with Cody, especially the wait time after a question. I hope to continue learning techniques from my students. They encourage me to learn from them, and I am always willing to try something new.

REDUCING ANXIETY

*Jacqueline Gosselin
Ecole Howden*

As resource teacher in an elementary immersion school, my role is an important one. Teachers as well as parents are anxious to see children's growth in reading in a second language. I have worked with a number of small groups within and outside of the classroom. Very able teachers in my school have a great deal of success in teaching their young students to listen, understand, speak, read and write in French as a second language. They however encounter difficulties in assisting all children to progress at the same rate as their peers. There is usually a small group of students (three or four) who do not connect at the same time as their

peers. As a result, we begin to feel anxious about that small group of children who do not appear to be progressing. I, as resource teacher, am one of the adults experiencing anxiety about these children.

Where does my anxiety come from? In our school, I work with a group of teachers who are extremely competent. They provide their students with a literacy rich environment in which topics that are of interest to their students are offered to them. I feel that I am faced with a great challenge of trying to discover what I can do to assist both children and teachers to help the children embark on the road to reading independently.

When Cody was identified as the student who would be participating in the Early Literacy Project, I was somewhat fearful but inspired by my readings. I was most impressed by the idea that professionals assisting children must believe that they are capable of becoming readers. That belief must be conveyed to the children so that they may also believe that they are capable of becoming readers. I was thus determined to provide Cody and the two other children in his group with an enabling learning environment. My objective was to create a happy, non-threatening, holistic reading experience. I approached our reading period together as a time to read. I carefully selected small, simple books that were highly illustrated with text directly reflecting the pictures. I spread out the twenty or so books on the table and told the children to select the books that they liked and to read them to themselves, to their friend next to them and to me. I provided direct support in a natural way as I listened to them read to me. These books were becoming part of their reading repertoire. The children were very happy and positive in regards to their reading experience.

What was happening? How was this experience different from others in the past where it was so difficult to get the children engaged in the reading process? Where did that level of engagement and positive attitude to reading come from? Cody was reacting very positively to the individualized attention that he received within the small group. He was given time to read to me. Time was given to try to read on his own. He was given support when HE asked for it. Praise and encouragement were given during and after the reading. We would discuss the strategies that he was using to read. He was slowly beginning to focus on the print. He would share his observations with me. It was my cue to continue to help him focus on print. In choosing these selected reading materials to Cody and his group, I was providing them with books that were at their proximal level of development. The pictures provided them with plenty of meaningful context so that it was easy to read the text. Cody was learning to make connections between the pictures and the words. He was also making connections amongst the books. He began recognizing words that he had encountered in other known books from his repertoire. He was building on successes.

Had I succeeded in reducing my anxiety and that of Cody and his mates? I think that I had. The children were frequently asking their teacher when I would be coming to read with them. As individuals within the group, each one was competing for time to read to me. Other students in the classroom were curious and wishing to join the group. Most of all, Cody developed a positive attitude to reading; he believes in himself; he views himself as a reading person.

What have I learned from Cody? To be an effective teacher, I must select the appropriate materials. But there is another factor of great importance. I must create an atmosphere that is conducive to learning. It must be stress free, welcoming, positive, and enjoyable. I must learn to observe the child to seek indicators of what motivates him. It might be a smile, a gesture, or the appropriate words to provide praise and encouragement. But it must be meaningful to the child. The teacher and the child must connect.

SUPPORT

*Lucille Phaneuf
St, Boniface School Division*

Providing appropriate support is essential for all students but is most crucial for students who require more time to develop as readers and writers.

Cody, a year 2 student, is an example of how support is essential in order for him to become engaged in activities literacy. The reading activity often leads to a writing experience. Since the choice of books had an impact on his interest and motivation, the teacher attempted to choose books that were highly predictable with repetitive patterns. The many repetitions would help

Cody to understand the story and to learn vocabulary. On many occasions Cody had a choice of selecting his own texts in order to encourage him to take personal responsibility for his learning. He often selected books that had counting involved, as he feels comfortable with numbers.

Before the reading task, the teacher would explore the book by discussing the title, helping him to make predictions about the events in the story by asking him -

- What do you think the story is about?
- How do you know?
- Look at the pictures; does that help you?

Cody could then predict part of the content by using the title, picture, clues. The teacher lead him page by page, through observations, questions, discussions, i.e. "What do you think the print will say?" Thus guided, at times Cody was able to verbalize the story content. The teacher would fill in the missing parts and usually provided him with the needed oral vocabulary.

To help him predict, the teacher would prompt him by saying—

- What do you think will happen next?
- Read to find out if your prediction is accurate
- What sentence in your story tells you that ...

Often Cody encountered difficulty with unknown words and much support was needed to continue the task. The teacher would help him by saying -

- Read to the end of the sentence
- What do you think the word is?
- Does it make sense?
- Have a look at the beginning sounds

For children in immersion, semantic clues and phonetic clues are useful, but syntactic clues are very difficult to use, until students have a better understanding of the language. With continued help, at times Cody could self-correct, and in other instances, the teacher provided the vocabulary. "Wait time" was also used, but through observations it was noted that time was not a factor as much as a lack of vocabulary which impeded him from verbalizing his thoughts and from reading.

The teacher often attempted to relate the text to personal experiences -

- Have you done this before?
- Does it remind you of anything?

Cody has much difficulty verbalizing and expressing his ideas. Immediate feedback was given and this often acted as a catalyst to make him pursue the task.

- I like the way that you read ... or that you went back to check in the story...

It appeared that Cody was motivated when he was engaged in moderately challenging tasks that led him to make new discoveries. With a lot of support he was able to succeed. Often, the goals and the difficulty of the task needed to be adjusted so that he would gain confidence and persevere in the task.

After observations and discussions, it is felt that both the demands of reading and writing need to be analyzed to identify the language processing skills needed to complete them successfully. Furthermore continued daily support is still very much needed for Cody to become a risk taker to continue to use some of the strategies that he has learned and to view himself as a reader and a writer.

REFLECTIONS

*Gerald Gagnon
Principal
Ecole Howden*

- A. The importance of appropriate and predictable text for beginning readers really hit home in the group session where Judith presented us with texts in a made up alphabet. Even though I had heard, read about, and believed it, a reinforcing "AHA!" resulted from that session. The alphabet, by itself really had no significance to me. Even when text was put together and read, it was frustrating to try and read, that is until we came to a familiar story. Suddenly, it became somewhat easier and small successes at recognizing words was very motivating. The attempt at writing which followed was also a challenge, but one where there was a good chance of success. It confirmed my conviction that learning should present a challenge in order to be interesting and motivating, but a challenge which is within the realm of the possible; an element of risk where the learner sees a chance of succeeding.
- B. At the outset, our group's participation in the project proved to be a frustrating experience. What we were attempting to achieve was not at all clear in our minds. How were we to make use of the time and resources put at our disposal and to what end? What relationship did any of this have with our regular teaching assignments? It took us a few months of muddling about and trying different things which somehow didn't seem to be connected with each other that much. We were doing an exercise simply because we were expected to do it. It wasn't until we decided that we would carry out the project not so much for purposes "out there" but for our own objectives that the effort began to have some meaning for us. It seems to me important that early on, participants take the time to tailor their project so that it clearly ties in with their own priorities and goals at school. For the experience to have any value and meaning, there needs to be a clearly articulated unity of purpose between the project and what I do in my classroom on a daily basis. I think that conviction and effort were lacking at the outset because that link was not clear in our minds.

LEARNING FROM THE LEARNERS

*Marlene Mortimer
Frontenac School*

Eight-year old Kim transferred to Frontenac School, from B.C., in the fall of '94. Cumulative file records indicated she was reading at a grade 1 level. Observations during an early September classroom experience with independent reading indicated a high level of anxiety and avoidance. Kim was fidgety and had difficulty staying in her seat. She said she couldn't find a book to read on her own because "I can't read the words." The classroom theme was friendship and many books at various reading levels had been made available for the children to choose from. I sat down beside Kim to read with her from the book she had chosen, titled Making Friends. She immediately began to tackle the print and it was soon evident that her strategy for reading was to "sound out" the letters in the words. She experienced very little success, with frequent miscues, and once again expressed that she couldn't read the words. It was then that I encouraged her to tell the story by the pictures. With me directing her reading by questioning her (What is happening? What will happen next? How do you think ... etc.?), Kim was able to predict what the story was about but could not transfer this to the printed words. Small group instruction during the month of September provided me with similar observations. However, it was noted that she had even more difficulty staying focused.

Reflecting on these incidents led me to infer that Kim:

- lacked confidence as a reader and did not find reading enjoyable
- read very little on her own
- had difficulty choosing an appropriate book to read
- did not see reading as meaningful
- could use decoding as a strategy
- could use pictures to tell a story

Frequent opportunities to support Kim on a one-to-one basis were provided with the goal, at first, being to lessen her anxiety about reading. Several predictable books were offered for her to choose from. She chose ones that seemed familiar to her. Support began with Kim and I doing shared reading, I carried most of the load at first and Kim echoing. Kim was very comfortable with this support and soon became actively involved in the reading. She made comments such as "I like this story." With repeated readings, Kim was given the opportunity to read independently. As she became more familiar with the story, her reading became more fluent. Next I noticed she began using picture clues more independently. Kim was still attempting to "sound out" words but these were becoming more accurate as it appeared she was using context more.

By the beginning of November I felt that Kim needed another audience to read to other than me. We entered into a discussion after Kim successfully read a familiar story, One Dark Night (with virtually no teacher support). I invited Kim to prepare the story to read to a grade one student. She felt she could do this because "I know the story." Upon her return to the classroom Kim expressed enjoyment and pride in her successful task as a reader. Arrangements were made with a grade one teacher for Kim to read on a once-a-week basis to one of her students. Kim now viewed herself as a reader and has taken many risks with familiar and unfamiliar texts. She has learned to choose books that are appropriate and interest her and "loves to read." She has even been known to help other individuals with their reading.

Continued support is provided for Kim, as well as her classmates, through partner reading, choral readings, and most specifically asking questions that help them verbalize strategies that good readers (and writers) use. Many opportunities for reading for a variety of purposes are offered throughout the day. Kim has learned that reading is meaningful. Her most recent choice for independent reading is a junior novel, Busybody Nora. Kim uses a variety of reading strategies. She uses context as she rereads to self-correct. Decoding is a much more efficient task now that she reads for meaning.

It has become evident to me over the last few months that providing for an independence level requires a variety of supports put in place. Even more important is helping the children to recognize where the supports they need can come from. Kim has made considerable growth this year in all areas because of this. She is a much more involved learner who can stay in her seat and on task for appropriate lengths of time. She is much more of a risk taker and often attempts to make things meaningful to her on her own. I feel she is well on her way to becoming a life-long learner. Our goal should be to help support her to continue this growth through celebration of her accomplishments and continued examination of the reading and writing strategies she uses.

BUILDING CONFIDENCE

*Connie Bagrie
Frontenac School*

As she knelt on her knees, peering out the window of the transit bus she turned around with her face lit up. Mrs. Bagrie, that word has two little words in it (off and ice), it spelled office. Misty sat down on her seat and smiled pleasingly. I acknowledged her accomplishment and smiled back. This was an AHA! moment for me.

Misty was the student that I had chosen for the Literacy Project. Who would ever think a person's name could describe their outer shell so closely? She was a child who continued to mystify me throughout the project.

Misty was in her 4th year of the Early Years Program when she came to my class. She came to Grade Three with very little knowledge of how reading and writing worked. She showed little to no enthusiasm and seemed to arrive at school with her thoughts a million miles away. She also had no close friends and showed no interest in playing with others.

It wasn't until I began observing her more closely, that I discovered this was how she had learned to behave in order to survive. This was a child who had no self esteem and no confidence in herself as a reader and writer.

One of the biggest hurdles I had to overcome was to look at what Misty could do. At first I saw her as a child who didn't understand word boundaries when she wrote, was having trouble with number and letter formations, one who chose text that was far too difficult, no awareness of

reading strategies, did not like reading and writing, couldn't recognize end sounds or hear letters in words. I had to pull back the reins, stop, watch and learn from Misty.

Misty's lack of confidence in herself was her biggest stumbling block. When Misty's anxiety level was at its highest she could not even think straight. She did however, learn strategies to avoid doing any reading or writing activities.

An avoidance strategy that was very clear was her ability to get off topic and talking about something traumatic in her life. Such topics included: her brother's apartment was on fire, there was a rapier in the neighbourhood, someone stole something, my ferret was abused, etc. She would have anyone who was working with her off topic. Anyone's natural reaction would be to stop and ask questions about the incident because we felt it was truly upsetting Misty. Not until I began talking about this did I realize she did this with others.

Misty would also chew on her sleeve when not sure of the correct response or would come to tears very easily. The resource teacher and my instructional assistant often report she constantly yawned or was hungry.

Misty often appeared to not be paying attention when there was a large group discussion. She was either playing with little things or hiding behind her hair with her head tilted slightly. Yet while I observed her she did take odd glances up to see what was going on.

By observing Misty's avoidance behaviors, I realized that my main goal for Misty and for other at-risk children in the classroom was to find ways to build self-esteem and give support in the classroom. I had to focus in on her strengths. It was at this point that I realized one of the greatest gifts I can give a child is making them aware of their strengths so that they can feel competent and successful.

I began working on Misty's self-esteem by creating opportunities to build up her sense of security.

I attempted to build her confidence by assisting her to choose books at her level where she could find some success in what she was doing. We began by choosing books that were predictable, one with lots of pictures and one that followed a pattern. The first strategy that I made Misty aware of was picture clues to help her get meaning from the story and help her identify words. We worked on this strategy endlessly until she began internalizing it herself.

She also picked up a book for 25¢ at a garage sale. This book was a basal reader which she loved because of the repetitive words in the stories. She often read it over and over again which built her fluency as well as her confidence.

I also had a listening center set up. I wanted Misty to hear stories read fluently as well as help her with identifying words. I didn't want her to be the only one at the center, so I worked it on a rotating basis, where different students used the center. This though didn't allow for Misty or my other weaker students to use the center every day. I then purchased walkmans and more tapes and books. Misty had her own walkman, which I encouraged her to bring to school. She was very proud of having her own walkman and she didn't feel singled out because everyone wanted to use it.

I also used the walkman and tapes for home reading. I knew Misty wasn't doing any reading at home and, if she was, it wasn't a pleasant experience. So by taking the tapes home I knew she enjoyed the reading and was hearing stories read to her.

I then worked on decoding strategies. Misty wasn't attending to print when she was reading. This also showed up in her writing. She had a great deal of difficulty getting anything down. What helped her in the beginning was when I drew lines on the page to represent the number of letters in a word. We worked on beginning sounds and end sounds and I mostly assisted her with vowels.

I then provided her with a picture dictionary which became her security blanket. Even though she couldn't always find the words she wanted she would come up to me with the correct starting place in the dictionary. I would either show her the word or get her to pick between two words.

I noticed an increase of confidence in her asking me for assistance. I constantly encouraged all children in the room to use whatever it was they needed to spell a word. They could read the walls, read books or ask each other. This allowed Misty to take that risk and ask for help.

One great support for Misty was finding the correct partner or should I say learning buddy. It seemed like months of trying different partners until I found the perfect one for Misty. This partner was a girl who truly enjoyed working with Misty and because a real support and friend to her. They read the morning message, shared reading and shared ideas together.

At the beginning of the year I mostly acted as scribe for Misty. She would then read back to me what I had written. This support was beneficial to her because half her time wasn't spent trying to orchestrate the rules of the written language and she truly felt competent reading her dictation.

This then mushroomed into an excitement to write stories. Misty wrote an eight sentence story on Penguins. It was typed and put into a book for our class library. Before being placed in the library Misty insisted that she read her book to the class. When she did, she read it smoothly and waited with anticipation for comments the class would make about the book.

Hands shot up and Misty began asking then what they thought of the book. Responses were: You read very fluently, You're a great reader, I liked your book, I liked your pictures, etc.

I only wish I had a camera at that moment and captured the look of pride and happiness on Misty's face. At that moment I said AHA! this is one of Misty's strengths. She could write stories about her own experiences and read and share them with her classmates. From this, Misty worked independently in the classroom working on her writing folder like everyone else was. She had built enough confidence in herself to ask her learning buddy to help her find a word in her dictionary.

I also had a vowel chart with pictures on her desk to help her with vowels. She was getting stronger and stronger at attempting spelling and would check in with me or her learning buddy if unsure of the vowels.

We continued to build Misty's independence by assisting her with meaningful activities. Misty loved to cook so we read and made an assortment of recipes from different cook books. Misty enjoyed sharing things she baked like cakes, muffins, apple fritters, etc. with the class.

Our class also had pen pals and this gave an added encouragement for Misty to work at her writing and reading letters sent to her. Misty also worked on surveys and graphs.

It became increasingly clear that keeping Misty in the classroom to learn from others was her biggest benefit. She had begun to feel success and her self-esteem was lifting. Once Misty could start to see success this made her want to try harder.

When I asked her "How did you get that word when you're reading?" or "How did you know all those letters in this word?" she would give me an answer and feel proud with herself because she internalized some strategies we've worked on throughout the year and did it on her own.



From all of this observing I have discovered the importance of learning from a child—finding her strengths and then finding ways of supporting her in the classroom. Asking lots of questions or just watching for a child's anxiety level can tell me when to keep going or pull back the reins.

Seeing Misty writing stories in front of the class, sharing her stories, asking for help, working with others, shows me this child feels confident and is engaged in learning.

I have also looked at ways of providing a supportive classroom. A classroom needs a balance of independent and non-independent workers. So my focus of grouping students has changed so that I can group students who can sustain themselves at a task which allows me to work with those children that are having trouble staying focused in a small group setting. I also want to put a child who isn't an independent worker with one who is, when doing large group work.

This project has allowed me the time to collaborate, make inferences about students and act on those inferences. It helped me look at students' strengths and capitalize on those, to allow the at-risk child to feel success and feel competent in the classroom.

BECOMING AN OBSERVER

*Carol O'Keefe
Frontenac School*

As I consider this year's work with Misty, and the two target students from the other grade three class, and what I have learned from working with them, I don't really know where to begin. In trying to shift my attention from teaching to LEARNING, I have tried to become a better observer, interpreter, and inference maker, in order to make better instructional decisions.

By becoming a closer observer of these students, the hope was that I be better able to capitalize on their individual strengths and to help them use what they already know in order that they can understand text or decode unknown words. To help them become risk takers and strategic learners, I had to be aware of the conditions under which they would choose to read and/or write and take risks.

In the case of Misty, I have tried to be more aware of her body language and what this is telling me about her willingness to approach different tasks.

Misty presents as a very anxious little girl when asked to attempt a reading or writing task. She engages in numerous avoidance behaviours in individual, small group, and whole class instruction. These behaviours include such things as sitting way back in her chair, playing with articles from her desk (such as an eraser, pencil, barrette, earring, or anything at hand), laying her head down on the desk, yawning, covering her head with her arms, changing the topic, etc.

The thought was that if Misty's anxiety level was decreased and minimized, we would be more able to know what strategies she was making use of when it came to reading and writing and then to plan literacy activities which would allow her to engage more fully.

In order to accomplish this, different strategies were considered and tried: to make Misty feel a part of the class, it was necessary that she not be singled out more than the other students. It was very important that Misty not be made to feel 'dumb' or to look 'dumb' in the eyes of her classmates. It was noticed that Misty's avoidance techniques increased if she was singled out and pulled to the back table, especially if she was to be observed by other adults at the same time. To avoid this as much as possible, Misty was worked with at her own desk (with only one adult), or she was taken from the room to be worked with. Other students were also worked with individually at their desks and on a pull out basis. These alternatives seemed to lessen the amount of avoidance and Misty usually worked well with the one-on-one support. This type of support was not seen as an unusual occurrence. The avoidance was not completely gone after this one kind of consideration, however.

I discovered that Misty really loved to be given extrinsic rewards such as stickers. Therefore, stickers and stamps were given to Misty for tasks completed or extra reading and writing that was done at home. She often would find her own writing tasks to do at home, just to receive the sticker and teacher attention.

Misty was given jobs to do in the classroom, as were the other students. She usually was able to complete these tasks well and seemed to like being up in front of the class doing her part. It was felt that if she was given jobs with which she was familiar and could perform well, she could come across in a successful light and this would build her confidence. It seemed that Misty usually performed well when the task was familiar and verbal. She did well presenting her science project. She had a good knowledge base and felt secure in presenting.

Misty was given a partner to work beside who would willingly help her and not put her down. This seemed to work well and it was observed that she would readily ask her partner for help when it was needed. This was seen as a big step for Misty, who usually would sit and wait for support to come to her. She has learned to find answers to her questions from others in the room or from charts or books. She no longer runs to the teacher or just sits when she doesn't have the answer herself.

Misty was very involved with her penpal letters. She was eager to receive and to respond. Another area of interest was recipes. Because of the interest in these areas it was felt that the more meaningful the task the more Misty would be involved. More meaningful reading and writing tasks were attempted. When asked to reread a book which she was to read to a Grade One student Misty was more engaged in the practice than if she was just practicing "to better her reading".

Misty showed her interest in reading and writing for a purpose through her involvement in story writing to be published and presented to the class. She becomes very engaged in this type of activity and her oral reading is greatly improved when she reads from something she has written herself. She seems to do well when she is the expert and working from her knowledge. This story writing and oral reading was encouraged.

Misty enthusiastically brought her own book from home from which she was eager to read. This is the material that was used during the period of interest. Finding that teachable moment and using materials when interest is high is very important. Helping students make their own discoveries is much easier when their interest is high.

Misty willingly works on a task together and does this with much less avoidance than if asked to begin the same task on her own.

It was found that Misty responds well to being given choices as to what to read and/or write and becomes more engaged if she has been given the choice.

Although much of the anxiety remains, and many of the avoidance behaviours still occur, Misty has shown a decreased dependence on the teacher and a willingness to take more risks as she now asks classmates for the support she requires and makes more attempts to read and write.

What I am learning is that, by being a better observer of the child, by asking questions to help the learner verbalize the strategies he/she is using and what other strategies could be used, by providing choices and encouragement, I can learn from the child and make better judgments about what may be the best way to help this child learn, too.

REFLECTIONS

Jean Chaput

St. Boniface School Division

In reflecting upon literacy through my observations that took place both at General Vanier and Frontenac School during the year, I found myself amazed at the number of literacy rich mini-activities constantly taking place in the classroom. It was most interesting to note how Connie and Marlene took advantage of whatever situation to emphasize the ideas and strategies they wanted to put in place to help Misty, Brian and Kim. The issue of creating an independent learner became an opportunity to look at means of developing an independent reader.

A reflection on literacy brings one to understand that bringing a child to read and write is both simple and complex. The students in the project did not learn and do not learn at the same pace, have different interests that greatly affect their involvement in the literacy activities, have different strengths and weaknesses and do not always jump on board when the adults create what seems to be a most appropriate learning condition. The teachers in the project understood the importance of allowing the children to see the value of what they do. If one doesn't read well, it doesn't mean that he or she won't like to read well. Sometimes it is hard to determine whether the self-concept is affected by reading or if reading is strongly affected by self-concept. For that reason, the process or the act of reading or writing is most often as important as the final product.

The most complex student in the project was Misty. I believe the concern that all of us had relates to the fact that she will be in Grade 4 as of September, 1995. The slow pace of progress gave me a sense that what has occurred positively or negatively would seem to be at times out of the realm of our control. Having made this reflection, it is obvious that Misty has progressed enormously since September. The rapport she has created with Connie has enabled her to find success in reading and writing - but at her own pace. In my observations, I found it very difficult on some days to have her focus on the activity at hand. On the other hand, as Connie developed a survey activity specifically meant to address Misty's need to find significance in what she undertakes, she completed the task with pride and confidence.

In reflecting on Brian and Kim in Marlene's room, the intricacies of the reading/writing connection come to mind. We have all witnessed interesting progress in both students throughout the year. The students themselves seem to show more interest in either writing or reading. It's difficult to determine if the interest or strength is related to the difficulties encountered in either writing or reading, or if the task itself provides them with more immediate purpose and feedback. The advantage in being able to observe Brian and Kim lies in the fact that the strength observed provides a working framework for addressing some of the difficulties. It would seem that for both students, patience on the part of all of us, may be essential at this time. It will be interesting to observe their progress in both reading and writing as we move on to year 5.

The independence developed in both students has served them well. Observation becomes a most important tool when it gives us the opportunity to reflect back upon the progress accomplished by students. We all have a tendency to forget the great strides that children undertake during the school year. Independence sometimes seems to be clouded, but can provide a re-focus when we understand that the tasks themselves become more and more difficult as we move along.

Reflections pertaining to General Vanier School touch upon the importance of dialogue that seems to have been established in the early months of the project. As all participants, Sheena, Ken, Karen, Roger, and I encountered some anxiety as we attempted to define the literacy project. What was most beneficial to me within that context was the continuous conversation that took place about children and about literacy. In thinking back, it provided a much needed examination of process and probing. When I speak of conversations on literacy and interventions, I speak of everyday conversations that become part in what we do in thinking about students and learning. The openness of Ken, Sheena and Roger at a time when we were all tripping over long-term objectives that were having to be established enabled us to start looking at all students in the project. The time one takes to observe and to tease out those messages that are being provided by the students themselves seems to be the key in establishing an ongoing dialogue, an ongoing process for trying specific strategies.

In thinking back at the whole project, the time factor seems to be an issue that continues to impact on our ability to move ahead. The most valuable aspect of the project would certainly seem to be the consciousness level of all those who participated as classroom and resource teachers. The students identified for the purpose of the project benefited immensely from the care and intense focus throughout the year.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

*Judith M. Newman
University of Manitoba*

During this year there have been a number of significant moments with children and teachers that have raised questions for me concerning the children's learning as well as the teachers as learners. Let me begin with a critical incident involving a child.

Critical Incident #1

It was my last visit to Frontenac School before Christmas. Several children in Marlene's class were setting off to read to their Grade One reading buddies and Kim, especially, wanted me to accompany them. Kim had rehearsed some book or other to read to her partner; however, the class took a quick trip to the library just before the children were to read to their buddies. While in the library, Kim came across Ezra Jack Keats' book **The Snowy Day** and decided that was the book she wanted read instead. As far as I, and the other teachers knew, this was an unfamiliar book. We suggested she postpone reading it, but Kim would have none of that—she was insistent, **The Snowy Day** was the book she would read.

I should have heeded her body language but I was too busy being concerned about her having taken on more than she could handle that I didn't notice the way she held herself, her comfortable stride. When we settled in the hallway with her reading buddy I sat close, ready to help out if needed but willing to sit back and watch.

Without rehearsal, Kim settled herself comfortably on the floor against the wall, her buddy by her side. She read the cover and the title page, then she began reading the story as fluently as any other third grader—no hint of the difficulty she's demonstrated all fall. She came to the page *He climbed a heaping mountain of snow,* paused ever so slight, turned to me and said *I'll just say 'humungus'* before continuing *He climbed a humungus mountain of snow...* all without waiting for any confirmation from me.

I was both surprised and delighted. Here was a solid demonstration of fluent reading in action. Kim was monitoring the sense of the story, the flow of the language, picture cues, graphophonic cues and orchestrating the whole in such a way that meaning was maintained. That was the moment when I registered her posture—leaning against the wall comfortably, head high, book loosely held in her lap—the very picture of a confident reader. What was clear to me was that in this situation Kim believed she could read—the first time I had witnessed her confidence. I knew she was on her way. Afterward I asked her how she had been able to read so well. She couldn't explain—I hadn't really expect she could, most kids do as Kim did, they shrug when they've got it together, "It's really nothing" they imply nonchalantly. I was wondering whether she had learned the book earlier but she said she hadn't when I probed further. It was clear to me, as

I watched her handle the book, that I wasn't witnessing a memorized reading—Kim was REALLY reading.

The lesson for me was a powerful one. I had been helping Marlene and Carol build supports for Kim. We'd done considerable shared reading with her and a small group of other students. We'd written stories and helped her transcribe hers, helped her prepare for reading to her Grade One buddy. So concerned about building a supportive environment, we'd forgotten we had to leave room for challenge from time to time. Fortunately for us, Kim herself knew when it was time to stretch and in hindsight I could recognize the signals. The incident was a clear indication from Kim that she didn't need quite so much support any longer. We pulled back.

Critical Incident #2

I was observing a lesson between Marlene and Brian (another at-risk reader). Marlene was attempting an independent reading with him, the book a bit beyond anything Brian could, or would, attempt on his own. She was offering him useful strategies, pointing out picture clues, prompting him to articulate various strategies he could use to figure out what the text was about and how he might figure out unfamiliar words.

I could see Brian backing away from the task, folding his arms against his body, the tempo of his feet swinging back and forth under the table increasing. His escalating tension was very evident but Marlene seems unaware of it. Afterward, I asked her for her observations—she commented on Brian's anxiety. I found that interesting—so why, I wondered to myself, did she persist? Why didn't she step back and provide more support by reducing the complexity of the task? Why didn't she just invite him into a shared reading? I asked Marlene and her response changed my understanding of the constraints under which teachers perceive themselves to be working.

Marlene had observed Brian's rigid body, she knew what it meant; she provided what in other situations might have been useful reading strategies but in this instance her support was doing little to reduce Brian's anxiety—if anything it was increasing it. She was reading Brian's response accurately but unable to respond to it appropriately because, as she explained to me, *I feel guilty providing that amount of support.*

She had, she said, already read the book with him twice. She felt, at this point, he ought to be able to read it more independently. Her judgement call was based on her sense of what her other third graders were able to handle. I hadn't anticipated the impact Marlene's normative sense was having on her instructional decisions. In spite of Brian's obviously escalating anxiety in the situation, Marlene was unable to pull back and provide a different kind of support because having done a shared reading twice she felt this third grader ought then to be able to read independently.

We talked about external pressures which impact on the classroom and affect our decision-making, sometimes to the child's detriment. We talked about GUILT and how the only significant input which should determine our instructional judgements is that which we receive from the learner.



I had begun this Literacy Intervention project with the intention of helping the teachers learn to observe the children in their classrooms, particularly the at-risk children, more accurately and sensitively. We started off exploring literacy and "What Matters?" in an effort to help the teachers become more attuned to the complex orchestration of cues required to develop proficiency with reading and writing. We explored the notion of support—within a whole class lesson, in small groups, in one-to-one situations. What I hadn't anticipated, hadn't articulated for myself, was what specifically that support consisted of.

During the fall I found myself bringing Vygotsky's concept of the **Zone of Proximal Development** to the group—discussing the fundamental idea that learning is a social construction. Learning is achieved through personal engagement with others who already possess the knowledge and skill. Initially, children require support before they can engage independently. Our responsibility as teachers is to help the learner feel in control in the shared situation so that subsequently she can take control for herself. After the incident with Brian, I was better able to open discussion about support, about what observations I was making, about how I was interpreting the children's behaviour and how that was affecting my instructional decision-making. Misty was the child, for example, who helped me realize that anxiety prevents learning,

that what I had to figure out was how to reduce her anxiety so she could engage and orchestrate for herself. The incident with Brian helped me articulate for the teachers why following the children's lead was crucial in spite of what outsiders (principals, other teachers, parents, the 'public') expected of students. This was the juncture at which I was able to say unequivocally that our responsibility wasn't to FIX the children but to learn from them how to help them learn. Our interactions as a group, it seems to me, began changing after that. The teachers began to appreciate, I think, that I wasn't there to FIX them either but to discover from them how best to create learning opportunities which would help them help their students.

Through the winter we have discussed a variety of issues and concerns. We've talked about the significance of creating routines and structure, about parental support and ways of building parent involvement in their children's learning, various kinds of record keeping, and a range of instructional tactics that help children to move from viewing themselves as non-learners to seeing themselves more in control. As Jacqueline LaBossiere so succinctly put it at our last meeting this spring—

**WE'RE NOT TEACHING THE CHILD TO READ
BUT LEARNING TO READ THE CHILD.**