ST. BONIFACE
LITERACY INTERVENTION PROJECT

YEAR 2
END OF YEAR REPORT
1995/96

BUILDING SUPPORTIVE CLASSROOMS

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PART 1 RATIONALE

We began the St. Boniface Literacy Intervention Project in 1994/95 with the intention of helping a few teachers become better aware of particular students' learning in order to help them develop a more supportive learning context for them. The focus of the project was on developing teachers' ability to observe students and to make informed instructional decisions not only for at-risk students (students having difficulty making sense of reading and writing) but also for the other students in their classrooms.

Our focus for the second year of the project remained the same—that is we continued working on observing learners and exploring instructional alternatives that would support both the less successful students and those able to learn comfortably in the classroom setting.

PART 2 ASSUMPTIONS

We continued to operate on the same assumptions as in 1994/95:

1. Our goal was to enhance teachers' knowledge of literacy learning—with an emphasis on providing appropriate instruction for at-risk students.
2. We intended 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 supported one another in on-going inquiry, reflection, and planning.
4. Support personnel (Dr. Judith Newman, University of Manitoba and Karen Botting, St. Boniface School Division) initiated and sustained 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 1995-96

- During the 1994-95 school year, the project 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. In 1995/96 **six** teachers (two classroom teachers and a resource teacher each from Frontenac and General Vanier) continued with the project (the Francophone teachers elected to withdraw).
- The approach continued to be **problem-based** in that teachers engaged in inquiry by selecting one or more at-risk students to observe and to explore literacy learning activities for that/those learners.
- The group of six met regularly to share, discuss, and problem-solve. Central to the discussions was their ongoing work with their case study students. This group time was devoted to exploring recent developments in literacy learning and focused on discussing various aspects of literacy instruction for the target children as well as for the rest of the class.
- Support was provided by Dr. Judith Newman (Dean, Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba) and Karen Botting (Director of Student Services, St. Boniface School Division. Judith and Karen supported the learning, reflecting, and planning process with regular weekly classroom observations and reflective conferences with the and by facilitating and instructing at the group sessions.

- The full team met at the beginning of the school year and met for an afternoon approximately once a month throughout the year. Either Judith or Karen met with the teachers in their schools once a week 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 was shared between the two classroom teachers. This added support 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 were central to both the weekly school conversations and the monthly team discussions.

PART 4 OBSERVATIONS 1994-95

Our work involved three major questions:

- what matters with regard to literacy instruction—what should we be looking for, how can we learn from the at-risk student;
- what individualized, small group and large group instruction is helpful; and
- what constitutes support.

The point of the project continued to be to help the teachers understand that their responsibility was 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.

PART 5 TEACHERS' ACCOUNTS

The following accounts are written by the teachers themselves. In them, the teachers examine his or her assumptions and explore the learning that occurred as a result of working closely with an individual child or small group of children.

EARLY LITERACY PROJECT

Barb Cape

The Early Literacy Project has played a significant role in my feeling successful as a term teacher at Frontenac School.

Room 20 is a grade three classroom of twenty-nine children. Having begun the term position to replace Connie Bagrie on January 12th, I found myself quickly immersed in the challenges of transitioning the children to a new teacher, finishing work that Connie and another substitute teacher had begun, as well as the challenge any beginning teacher faces in dealing with new curriculum and the many different abilities, both academic and social which exist in a classroom of this number of students. There were many days during that first six weeks when I questioned my ability to ever feel “on top” of the situation.

The Early Literacy Project proved to be a wonderful support to me. The half day a week where I was supported by a substitute in the classroom as well as the rest of the project team allowed me some time and breathing room to work with the target children and to develop a much clearer understanding of their abilities as readers and writers and to try some strategies to support these children in their progress.

I have a personal belief that children have to care about what they are doing, it must appeal to them emotionally, and they have to want to make an investment in their learning. None of us learns if we don't want to.

Because of discussions that the project team had concerning children in Marlene Mortimer's class and the objective Marlene had for her children to develop a collection of books where her target children were successful as readers, this too became my first objective. In searching through books in the resource room, I found a collection of books that appealed to me. Although

the print was rather large for grade three students, I thought the subjects were quite original and appealing ("Michael's New Haircut", "One Sister for Sale - Cheap!", "I'd Rather Have a Spanking than Go to the Doctor's"). I met with the target children, Chris, Bobby, and Daniel, individually and asked them to read with me, "Michael's New Haircut".

When I began the term in this classroom, Bobby was a very reluctant reader. He saw himself as a non-reader and often used the excuse, "but I don't know how to read", when confronted with having to read as part of a classroom assignment. His writing skills were also very weak. He could barely write a short sentence with invented spelling.

Daniel was also a very weak reader, very immature in attitude and behaviour and his coping strategy in dealing with grade three work has been to act the "big shot" and put other children down.

Chris was the strongest reader in the group, but he wasn't consistent in his performance or cooperation in reading or writing. When threatened, Chris would become very disruptive in the classroom and often needed to be removed. He was difficult to even assess accurately what his ability was and his refusal to cooperate often lead to most adults working with him to just give-up. In any power struggle that erupted, Chris was perfectly prepared to take it to the nth degree and often the administration would have to intervene to bring him under control. An intervention plan developed to deal with Chris helped to some degree, but there were days when I felt I had spent the entire 5 1/2 hours just trying to "keep the lid on" Chris's behaviour.

I have focused these summary reflections on Chris and Bobby as their impact on me has been the most significant.

Although the children were able to read "Michael's New Haircut", with different levels of support, they all wanted to learn to read it. They were also quite enthusiastic about my suggestion that they learn to read it and share their reading with the kindergarten children. This has proven to be the highlight of their day. They never let me forget this activity. I also spent one "Project" day teaching the children how to read to younger children. They were very keen, took me seriously and have put the strategies into practice in their daily sessions. They have internalized that pictures are an important support in telling the story and that questions and asking for predictions help keep their listeners engaged. I have observed them all using these strategies with the younger "listeners".

Bobby, who was the weakest reader in the group, surprised me one day by announcing to me that he could read the whole book without looking at it. I suggested he show me and sure enough, word for word, he had the entire book memorized. This gave me an important clue to a great strength of Bobby's. I need to develop more ways to capitalize on this talent in Bobby's program.

Because of the children's enjoyment of reading to the kindergarten children, I developed a language arts unit for the entire class around the "Franklin" books. As a class we used the books to examine how the stories were structured and why they would appeal to younger children. At the same time, the "target" children were also learning to read these books to add to their collection.

We began this part of the unit on a "Literacy" day, so each of the target children had adult support as they tackled the books for the first time. The children found the books very challenging to say the least. After that morning, I was questioning whether I had led the children into a "no-win" situation and whether I was setting them up to be frustrated and unsuccessful. We kept going however because the children were so enthusiastic about reading these books.

I was encouraged to continue when I heard from the children during a session of shared reading where I read the page first and then a child would read it after me, their own amazement and delight at their progress. During D.E.A.R. time, they were eager to practice their reading. Chris began asking every adult he could find, if he could read to them and at recess time I found him all over the building, reading to people. Because of Chris's behaviour challenges, when he asked Neill Johnson if he could read to him, this was one of the first "positive" experiences they had shared. Neill told me afterward that this had allowed him to see Chris in a very different light.

Recently, I observed the children reading with the kindergarten children. Bobby was reading a "Franklin" book to a child without looking at the book or the child, but in the opposite direction! Yes, he had this one now memorized too, and after I recognized this accomplishment, I showed him how he could use the book and the words as cues to telling the story. I explained to him that this too was reading. Afterwards, I show him how his "memorization" was in fact helping him

learn to read words and that this transferred to other books. We began another "Franklin" book, and he seemed amazed that it wasn't such a struggle.

The most rewarding thing for me has been to watch the confidence in these children just grow and grow. Their eyes just sparkle when they come back from the kindergarten room and Bobby even walks differently. He has even articulated how pleased he is to now be able to read. He sees himself as a reader. When he occasionally slips back into expressing "but I can't read", I challenge him on it, we go over the words, and laugh together at how he forgets that he can read!

As part of the language arts unit, the class is now writing stories for the kindergarten children. Bobby has used one of the Franklin books as a model (all on his own) and he showed me his story yesterday. From a boy who was reluctant to put even one sentence on a page, Bobby showed me 3/4 of a page of foolscap of writing. His spelling has improved and the sense of story was very clear and evident. We talked about his progress and I explained the relationship between reading and writing. He just beamed.

Although I have felt satisfied with the target children's progress, Chris's behaviour continued to frustrate me and too often he was diverted from his academic work by a refusal to cooperate. It became clear to me that we were engaged in a power struggle and he was determined to be in control.

I very much believe that ultimately the children are in control of both their learning and their behaviour and its by some "magic" that children allow teachers to direct them. The moment a power struggle becomes part of the relationship then everyone loses and the focus becomes distorted and nonproductive. "Fear" might work for a time, but at some point students figure out that adults truly have little if any power over them. It is my objective to empower students to use their own resources to make good decisions that serve them. They need to know and feel "in charge" of what happens to them.

The issue of power and Chris's behaviour became a serious issue in the classroom. He didn't want to go out for recess. He continually wanted to work on the computer. He would cry if he didn't go for his "speech" support at the usual time. He refused to go to music. On one particular day, his behaviour was so contrary, that he was sent home.

He arrived back at school with the explanation that his mother had told him that he had two choices, he could either cooperate and work or he would have to go back home. He chose to come back to school and work. We later learned that he had never arrived at home but walked part way and then returned with his story. Although there was some concern about his elegant lying to both myself and Neill Johnson, it was pretty evident that Chris saw school as a good place to be. This was a good thing!

I found myself challenged by the dilemma of how could I give Chris the power he needed without "caving in" to his tyrannical behaviour? How could I get out of the power struggle that I didn't want to be in, that Chris continually created? Another clue for me came when Chris told me one day that he didn't want to go to music and if he was forced to go, he would misbehave so that he was sent out of the room. It occurred to me that he had it all figured out. He knew exactly how he could get what he wanted. This led me to spend a lot of time reflecting on the issue of power and the meaning of being "in control" versus "out of control". It seemed to me that Chris had it all figured out ... he was "in control". He knew what he was doing. He got the results he wanted. It occurred to me that I was the one who wasn't so sure or effective.

I then approached my problem-solving from the assumption that Chris was behaving in a way that served him. He was attempting to get his needs met. Was I helping him in this cause, or was I being a barrier? With the help of the administration, student support staff, and school psychologist, we began to deal with Chris differently. We attempted to use the perspective that his behaviour was telling us about his needs; let's use what we know to help him.

He didn't want to go out for recess. Why would he not want to go out for recess? Was it because he didn't cope well with the noise and activity? Was he making a good choice for himself in not wanting to go outside (his behaviour often caused him difficulty)? We arranged for him to help out in the library during recess. I made a contract with him that if his work was done, then he was free to make the choice of staying in or going outside. If his work was not done, then he stayed in like the other children to finish.

This worked like magic to keep him on task and he began to finish the work I assigned albeit in the quickest and not the most thorough way. He lost the privilege two weeks ago when he "erupted" in class and needed to go to the office for a time-out. With the help of the school psychologist, we had created some puzzles for him to do when this happens, to help him refocus

and get back in charge of his feelings. He really liked doing the puzzle and came back to class able to settle in. He was very upset however at missing his time in the library. The next day he purposely caused a disturbance and then looked for another puzzle to do. I was able to distract him so that he would not be rewarded for a bad choice, but again he showed me that he is bright, thinking and knows what to do to get what he wants.

After that incident, I had a talk with him, sharing my observations about his abilities and how bright he was. I also pointed out to him that I wasn't going to allow him to waste his intelligence. I told him that I was going to expect a lot more from him and that he wasn't going to fool me any longer. I then let him know exactly what I expected from the assignments and told him as soon as he was finished to my satisfaction, he could have time on the computer. There has been some trial and error in learning how far I can push him without triggering his frustration, but he is beginning to work and demonstrate his learning.

The other day he even remained on a task, that he could have completed quickly, right until recess without going on the computer. When I examined his work, he had put both thought and effort into his writing.

In Math, Chris had been working on an independent program, but when we started multiplication, I had him begin too with the class. He is being successful. In the afternoon, we have "read aloud" where I read a novel to the children and then Math until recess. The first thing he asks me now in the afternoon is what will be the math assignment and he begins to work during read aloud. I know that he wants to finish the assignment to buy computer time, but I have also noticed that he is listening to the story as well.

In going over some of the math questions he had completed, I was amazed at his accuracy with multiplication facts that we had just begun to learn as a class. I asked him to show me how he arrived at the answer. He pointed to his calendar on his desk and told me that he figured out "3x7" by going to the "7" and adding "7" two more times for a total of three. I was impressed. He is a very thinking little boy.

I have the children make entries weekly in a "Thinking Journal". I am trying to encourage the children to use this journal to free write and record their thoughts as they occur. I want them to become familiar with thinking about their thinking. This week I asked the children to think about four questions:

1. What do they like about our classroom?
2. What do they dislike about our classroom?
3. What have they learned so far in grade three?
4. What do they want to learn before grade three is over?

I found Chris's entry to be particularly revealing and affirming. He likes "when Mrs. Cape reads aloud", "working on the computer" and "Mrs. Cape". He dislikes Math. He has learned "to do hard work", and he wants to "do all his printing in handwriting" by the end of the year". Chris seems to have let the power struggle go and he is now a learner. He is calm in class and is eager to work on and finish assignments. Today Chris participated on his own in front of the class, an oral drill of multiplication facts. He did very well. One could see the pride he felt. He has come such a long way.

Bobby's entry states that he is "now a reader". He likes the story that he has written. Today he brought to me questions that the class was working on in Health. Although I think he had originally wanted me to read them to him, he proceeded to read them out to me one by one. He needed very little assistance and knew all of the answers instantly. He returned to his desk eager to write the answers on his paper. What a different little boy!

What I have learned:

These children have taught me a great deal about both teaching and learning. I have been reminded so often of "facts" that I knew at a theoretical level, but needed to experience myself to fully understand and believe. These include:

1. That emotional needs have to be satisfied in order for cognitive processes to be engaged.
2. No one can make anyone do anything they don't want to.
3. Children only learn what they want to learn.
4. External power has limited impact; it is internal power that makes a positive difference.
5. The key to what children need is found in the children themselves.
6. Listening, observing, reflecting, are very powerful teaching/learning tools.

7. Solutions are never to be found at the same level of thinking that created them.
8. Children's views of themselves as learners will determine how they learn. As teachers, our job is to convince them that they are learners and that they can be successful.

I believe that the Literacy Project was of tremendous benefit to the target children in my classroom and to me as a teacher. With the support of the release time, the encouragement and support of the project team, I have been able to create a much more supportive learning environment for all students in my class. What the target children have given me is a wonderful opportunity to clarify, refine and discover what I believe to be crucial understandings of the teaching/learning process. Because of the project, I have grown immeasurably as a teacher. I am very appreciative of this opportunity.

SSENSSELPLEH DENRAEL
LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Roger Gadsdon

In the spring of l994, I was invited to be a participant in a joint venture between the school division and Dr. Judith Newman, Dean of the Faculty of Education. It began as a one year exploration in developing supportive classroom environments for learning. Dr. Newman's expertise on literacy and her action research stance of reflective practitioner framed the two major components of our exploration.

The teachers involved in the Literacy Project, as it became known, were from three elementary schools. We each selected one or two students to focus upon. These students were identified as being significantly behind in the reading and writing. I chose Sandra, who had just been transferred to special education from the resource program, as my target student. She was in a regular grade 6 classroom. Her file indicated a literacy level of between grade 2 and3.

In the literacy project, we were encouraged to become better observers. The three facilitators, lead by Judith, challenged us to look differently at our assumptions and interpretations of our observations, not only of the students, but of ourselves. We teachers were supported in our efforts to engage openly in conversations with project colleagues about challenges and contexts and to just try a range of alternate ways of attending to the learning needs of the target students.

After initial discussions about the project and my early observations of Sandra in her classroom, I chose to change her learning environment. I met with her parents, and I began to find ways to shift the responsibility and control for learning from others to Sandra.

At the close of the first year of the project each teacher was asked to reflect on an aspect of the work with our target student. In my reflection, I chose to discuss the wide array of avoidance strategies and the varying degrees of anxiety exhibited by Sandra that frequently

pre-empted her learning. During the course of the year and in my project reflection, I spoke of my sense that Sandra had somehow learned to be a helpless learner.

This past fall, I chose to take the Action Research course offered by Judith to further my understanding of action research while continuing a second year of the Literacy Project. I remained intrigued and committed to exploring this notion of learned helplessness and to find ways of reversing it.

THEN AND THERE

At the start of school last year, Sandra was transferred to my special education caseload from the resource program. She was in a grade six classroom working at a grade two level. Her previous teachers believed Sandra needed to have an instructional assistant beside her doing her work with her. Hearing impaired, she couldn't keep up academically and she lacked motivation to work independently. She was extremely dependent upon adults to direct each step of her lessons. Frequently, during those first few weeks, I would find Sandra copying what the instructional assistant had produced on scrap paper. If the instructional assistant went on a break, so did Sandra. If the instructional assistant was helping another child, Sandra would sit passively and wait until redirected.

This was the second year Sandra was with the same classroom teacher. Her classmates were polite to her. They seldom associated with her at recess time and rarely would any see her socially outside of school.

When I sat and worked with Sandra, she frequently stalled-out on learning tasks and criticized herself. She used negative body language to support her helpless stance. She'd shrug her shoulders, or look around the room, stare blankly, or place her hands in the air and shake her head, indicating she was giving up. Sandra was not in charge of her learning. She had little or no ownership for what was to be learned. However, she had learned to con others into doing tasks for her. Her passive approach and procrastination lead others to be sufficiently frustrated to do her work for her or to leave her alone and not expect much from her cognitively, socially, or emotionally. Sandra, and those who worked with her, seemed to be locked into an unhealthy pattern of learned helplessness.

Seeing what was not working in the regular class and from the current traditional instructional perspective, I chose to create a different. Instructionally, I needed to change the materials, format of delivery, and the way in which supports were provided. After moving Sandra to a smaller group environment, Mary, my full time instructional assistant, and I set up routine writing and reading activities. One of the first things we both noticed when we began was how difficult it was for Sandra to sustain routines or activity patterns on a daily basis.

At first, each day seemed like a new experience for her. She made comments like: What do I do, I don't know, I don't get it, I'm stupid. Almost daily her head would sink and her shoulders would droop until she would meld into the desk and hope that both she and her inattentiveness would blend into the woodwork and we would not challenge her to produce or to be responsible for her learning. Asking Sandra to 'just try' and know it was okay to make mistakes seemed beyond her trust and comprehension..

With shifts in environment, interactions, and the different ways supports were provided, things gradually began to change. A shift from being learned helpless to being an engaged learner was now in motion.

HERE AND NOW

Sandra had just set all her science experiment materials out on the work table. Mary, her instructional assistant, was sitting ready to provide a minimum level of support if needed. Sandra took charge, pouring 250 ml. of soda pop into a glass beaker. She watched intently and commented on all of the bubbles. She carefully opened a tiny box of raisins, removed four and placed them in the beaker. She leaned over the beaker with her chin nearly touching the table, closely watching the bubbles work upon the raisins. With her face fixed, her lips formed a smirk which grew quickly into a smile.

After watching these proceedings, I looked down to resume my work. I thought to myself, yes, Sandra is certainly engaged in her science experiment this year. Last year, I provided major support for every little part of the project. She is risking more, proud of herself, and interested in doing things more on her own.

All of a sudden the silence was broken by a loud giggle and laughter. Sandra shouted excitedly, "Look at that one raisin. It's jumping up and down." Mary and I both smiled and watched this animated child continue to talk about her observations during the five minute experiment. Her face was radiant with a glow of confidence seldom seen in the months previous.

Mary helped her Sandra record her observations and then Sandra repeated the experiment four more times with different liquids. Each time she attended diligently. For me, what mattered most in the doing of this experiment was that Sandra took charge and did it for herself. From the look of happy curiosity in her eyes, she enjoyed it too.

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It was the second last day before the March Break. The bell rang. O Canada came over the P.A. The announcements were short. A few minutes later Sandra came to my classroom from her homeroom class. I sensed she was agitated. "Mr. G., Gary just said to me that I was deaf." She looked puzzled as if to ask, What do I do?

I smiled and shook my head. "You know Sandra," I said, "he was trying to make you upset. He is correct; that is why you have two hearing aids." I rehearsed a script with her— "Sandra, when he

comes in and you get a chance to talk to him you may want to tell him, 'Yes, you are right, I am deaf. That is why I wear these hearing aids.' That way you can turn around his negative comment." She smiled and realized she didn't have to feel bad for being hearing impaired. In fact, by using her hearing aids she knew she could hear quite well.

A few minutes later, Gary came in with the other students. We sat for our morning meeting. After a few brief comments I informed Gary that Sandra had something to say to him about his earlier remark. Sandra made her statement with confidence and a little smile as she finished. When I looked his way, he was staring down at the floor.

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A couple of weeks before the spring break, Sandra's dad stopped by. He shared an event that had happened on the weekend.

The family had gone to the swimming pool with Sandra, her brother and cousin. Sandra finally decided she wanted to go in the deep pool. The lifeguard told her she would have to swim a lap to get an L on her arm which was to let people know she could swim in the deep pool. Her brother and cousin walked along side the pool edge giving her words of encouragement as she did her lap. Sandra got her L. She went to the diving board and jumped off - for the first time. She went down the big slide—for the first time. Afterwards she came up and said, "Dad, It was easy. I don't know why I didn't try this sooner."

Two Glimpses of Getting from the Then and There to the Here and Now

During daily work Sandra, the instructional assistants and I attempted to approach the learning from a child-centered perspective, consciously monitoring ownership issues for Sandra's learning. Also our participation in the Literacy Project provided one morning per week to involve other educators to observe, interact with, and discuss Sandra's learning. The following two critical incidents illustrate our just try approach.

In late October of the first year, Sandra was sitting in a cluster arrangement with the Director of Student Services, the Principal, and myself. We were all engaged in a conversation about the similarities between stories in books, videos, and TV shows. We chatted about stories being somewhat predictable, having one major problem, and that there is a trying of solutions to hopefully resolve the problem.

This was a powerful moment. It resonated for me that this conversation was not contrived. It was spontaneous, informative, and the first time I saw Sandra contributing actively in a literacy learning activity. Sandra's contributions and expressed understandings were the cues we used to guide us in adjusting our conversations to stretch Sandra's experiences. When Sandra offered a direction in the discussion, we followed the tangent to the end and would refocus ourselves back to the main discussion.

All four of us were engaged in the collective conversation which lasted fifteen to twenty minutes. Sandra, I believe, realized she was an equal contributor and that her voice was valued. When she began to be overwhelmed and anxious, her avoidance pattern of disengaging from the conversation kicked in. Sandra's head and eyes lowered. One of us immediately read the behavior and jumped in, not to rescue, but more importantly to redirect the conversation and dignify her re-connection to her being an active participant. It was excellent!

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The second glimpse follows after three months of encouraging Sandra to respond in writing regularly. Sandra had a limited set of skills and strategies in dealing with work habits and classroom routines. Attempting to support her development of these areas we put in place a series of simple procedures, routines, and provided opportunities for Sandra.

One such daily ritual was for Sandra to respond to four questions at the start of every morning. These responses were recorded in a journal used used only for that purpose. The questions were: What did I do last night?, What am I going to do today?, What am I going to do tonight?, and How do I feel? It took three months to see consistent daily effort to respond.

The main intention of these questions was to encourage a commitment to the daily routine. They also served as starting points for other purposes. Sandra kept responding to these questions until after Christmas at which point the responses werestock and Sandra would not elaborate and extend her responses.

Early in January, I was frustrated with not moving further in stretching Sandra's responses. I shared Sandra's responses in the journal with Judith and my block as to how to move beyond. We explored some alternatives and I chose to just try the concept of having Sandra engage in written conversation with the instructional assistants and myself. After exploring what it would look like, Sandra was willing to just try too.

So each morning, Sandra would come into class and read and respond to a question written in her journal. Afterwards, she would ask us to respond or she would rise and carry her journal over to where we were and wait for us to read her conversation and respond to her questions.

This new routine not only extended her responses to four questions, but it moved us into a written conversation between Sandra and others. We gradually went from the safe and predictable answers to standard questions to a wider range of questions and answers with Sandra also risking to ask others questions in a written forum.

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HOW DID I GO ABOUT PROVIDING A SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT TO SUPPORT SANDRA IN REVERSING HER LEARNED HELPLESS STANCE?

I considered the point that human beings apply resistant strategies in certain situations. In my role of teacher, I focused on forms of resistance to learning. In Sandra's case, learned helplessness. I wanted to discover and understand her reasons and identify her learned helpless strategies. This I hoped would lead me to discover and provide strategies to counter with positive and supportive interventions.

- I observed and attempted some interactions to find and reach a basic understanding of her resistance patterns to learning in general, and specifically to literacy.
- I met with her parents to seek an understanding of past efforts and their perspectives on her learning.
- I became familiar with the research literature related to learned helplessness to prove or disprove my assumptions.

A process of ongoing, cyclical reflection became paramount. I constantly rethought how to approach matters of learning and support for Sandra differently. The challenge remained one of providing appropriate strategies and skills for self-control and responsibility for learning and simultaneously dismantling her use of learned helpless strategies while still pursuing her literacy and academic learning.

In my initial observations and interactions I noted the behaviors she exhibited around others. Sandra's inability to perform at an academic level comparable to her caused her to her shut down —she would appear lethargic, her head would lower toward the desktop, she would stare blankly at whatever book she was trying to read. If anyone asked her to respond she would mumble inaudibly, or simply refuse to reply. She would hope that the adults would become sufficiently frustrated, that they would do the task for her, or simply leave her alone. Sandra was never a behavior problem. She would just sit there passively.

Once Sandra was away from the grade six classroom, I was able to provide a supportive environment with only a few other students for her to interact with. In this protected situation I was more available to directly monitor what she was doing and to create challenges I thought she could handle.

In the beginning, all I wanted was for her to try. She would sit and stall. Sandra persisted with her learned helpless patterns and comments. Julia, an instructional assistant and myself responded to her putting herself down with, "Just do your best." I sat with her and prompted her to do what she could. Julia and I praised whatever small attempts Sandra made.

Writing for Sandra was difficult. The differences between her verbal and written language was quite striking. In writing, her thoughts were disjointed and she was unwilling to put even partial words or thoughts on paper. Yet in conversation, on the same topics, Sandra could express her thoughts in a reasonably comprehensible way. The challenge for me was to bring her conversation

to print. I did that by having her write three/four patterned sentences using simple words. Some of the words were taken from a spelling list, other words were developed from contexts about which she had some knowledge or from her own experiences.

Slowly, over time, I expected Sandra to do more on her own with greater independence and a lighter degree of support. The tasks were not drastically different. However, I made it clear that I expected her to make an attempt by herself. I started placing more demands on her. I began expecting more than just an attempt; I started looking for more than a a few words. I expected her to write simple sentences and to read them back getting her to check whether what she had written made sense.

Now, at the close of a second year with Sandra in this action research process of reflection-in-action I have observed a gradual shifting of control, responsibility, and ownership for learning from outside influences and forces to Sandra, the learner, herself.

When we began, Sandra was an example of a learned helplessness individual; a student relying almost totally on someone else to initiate and sustain a learning activity. After we had worked for a few months, she started to initiate tasks on her own and began to sustain herself at an activity for a short interval before needing to be prompted again.

After nearly two years of observing and attending carefully to different just try approaches, I found significant growth for myself as an educator. Sandra can now attend to and complete a number of tasks after receiving the initial directions and a minimum of monitoring from a distance. I can now attend to observing student and adult interactions with greater understanding and insight. The behavioral cues speak loudly as indicators for the ways we need to reflect on the needs and possible interactions differently.

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In mid September of the first, I visited Sandra's home to discuss Sandra's Individualized Educational Plan with her parents. I was greeted at the door and taken to the dining room table and offered coffee or tea. I sat on the broad side of the dining table and her parents sat on the other. Sandra nervously milled about curiously wondering what we were about to say to each other. After a few pleasantries, Sandra and her brother went to their rooms and we began.

The conversation that took place over the next two and a half hours was both emotional and passionate. Sandra's parents shared health difficulties at birth and the late identification of her hearing impairment. I shared what I knew from her files, the I.E.P. plan, and my own observations of Sandra after the opening weeks of school. Her parents were very sincere and open to considering some different approaches. I informed them of the Literacy Project and that Sandra was the student I would like to focus on. They were supportive. We discussed the importance of open communication, an eclectic approach, and the need to be a team to support Sandra's learning efforts. Her parents continued to hope for a thread that would make things start to hold the fragments of her learning together and weave for Sandra at least a functional level of literacy leading towards some degree of independence in her adult life. As I left the dining table that evening I was inspired. They had provided meaningful background information and had helped me to understand their perspective, tensions, and perseverance at advocating their daughter's need for help.

What I realized after reflecting on this information was that help did not necessarily mean more or direct adult intervention. It meant I would need to redefine what that help would look like. Yes, her parents were keenly interested in making sure everything that could be done was being done. My job was to determine how best to do it. The help must be supportive and proactive.

Over the two year period Sandra's parents and I have continued to work as a team. We have realized the importance of maintaining open communication and the need to support each other. The differences of the just try approaches, and our mutual desire to make the messages between home and school congruent, forced not only fundamental changes for myself, but also for the parents with regardto issues of perceptions, expectation, ownership, and control for the learning.

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The reading of the research literature took on a different meaning and purpose when working in the action research framework. Instead of looking to what experts write first and then searching to find it in my situation, the action research frame has supported first recording the evidence of my situation through observing critical incidents, reflections, and conversations with others. From the common threads that emerged over time, I then began to go to the literature that spoke to the emergent themes; in this case learned helplessness as a form of passive resistance. I used the literature to guide my inquiry, to affirm or challenge some of the choices I made, and to provoke me into reframing my own practice. Reading became an important part of the reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983).

In considering the notion of learned helplessness, I was drawn to a review of literature ranging from John Dewey's **Experience and Education** (1938) through to Steven Covey's popular book on the **Seven Habits of Highly Effective People** (1989). I reviewed material on learned helplessness (Slusky, 1994; Oelwein, 1995), procrastination (Fiore, 1989), on not-learning (Kohl, 1994), on codependency (Beattie, 1989, 1992; Bradshaw, 1988), critical reflection on learning and teaching (Newman, 1991), a study on reading instruction (Garcia et al, 1995), and **Multiple Intelligences** (Gardner, 1993).

Dewey was convinced that basing education upon personal experience may mean more multiplied and more intimate contacts between the mature and the immature than ever existed in the traditional school (p. 21). The relationship which developed between Sandra and me over the past year and one-half has illustrated his belief in action. I believe it is through the exploration together of the instructional challenges that dramatically shifted my ways of dealing with Sandra's specific learning needs and her ways of perceiving herself as a capable learner. As we improved the quality of her learning experiences we also demonstrated what Dewey refers to as continuity and interaction. He stated that the two principles of continuity and interaction are not separate from each other. They interact and unite. They are the longitudinal and lateral aspects of experience (p. 44). A third point that was significant for me was Dewey's identification of the marginalized student. These students, when they come to school, are already victims of injurious conditions outside of the school and have become so passive and unduly docile that they fail to contribute (p. 56). Sandra's medical history and late identification of hearing loss were significant factors to be considered in her having developed this passive and docile stance.

One final statement of Dewey's that speaks to the reflection-in-action and collaborative nature of the enterprise is that development occurs through reciprocal give-and-take, the teacher taking but not being afraid also to give. The essential point is that the purpose grow and take shape through the process of social intelligence (p. 67). In our interactions, I would attempt to set expectations a little above Sandra's horizons. Some days it worked, other days not. Mostly on-the-fly, I would reassess and adjust as needed. At times even adjusting didn't work. Those were the moments that cast me as the learner and Sandra, the teacher. I was seeking to understand and learn in order to better understand Sandra.

Dr. Alan Slusky, a postdoctoral fellow in clinical neuropsychology, presented a paper at the 28th annual conference of the Council for Exceptional Children in Winnipeg in 1994. In his paper he covered several learned helplessness topics. He began by citing Robert Ziegler's three stages of children's reactions (Ziegler, 1981).

Stage 1 The initial reaction to learning difficulties may be through intrapunitive or extra—punitive behavior. The quiet child may be easier to ignore yet it is equally important to detect the reaction of withdrawal.

Stage 2 The disengagement reaction demonstrates that the avoidance of materials is more intense. It is more difficult to engage the student in learning tasks. The student develops an I don't care attitude which shuts off communication, exchange, and learning.

Stage 3 The defensiveness reaction encrusts the I don't care attitude. Denial and negativism are acute, and from the teacher's perspective these students accept little or no responsibility. These students expend a great deal of energy to show that school, teachers, and the 'good' kids actually are the dumb ones.

Sandra was solidly at stage 2.

Next, Slusky listed the main characteristics of learned helplessness:

- slow to start a project or assignment
- gives nonverbal signs of defeat

- frequently requires teacher prompting
- quick to give up at first obstacle
- does not ask for assistance
- may be destructive or withdrawn
- exhibits little pride in his/her work

Slusky describes the passive learner as one who constantly relies on others, blames others, and requires both extrinsic motivation and reinforcement. In contrast, he describes the active learner as one who constantly controls his or her own behavior, is independent, is responsible for outcomes, has intrinsic motivation, and has self-control techniques.

To Sandra, extrinsic rewards meant little. It took intrinsic moments which came from smiles and positive self comments such as "I did good and I know that" to start her toward self-reliant learning.

Kohl, nn "I Will Not Learn From You" (1994) looks at resistance to learning through socially and culturally constructed beliefs and values. While for Sandra this was not a conscious act, her lived beliefs demonstrated that she too responded to her learning with resistance and a type of control of others.

Oelwein (1995) found in her research that some down syndrome students develop behaviors to avoid learning situations. By distracting their teacher, refusing to cooperate, or by introducing a different agenda, these students have learned ways of avoiding failure and not have to complete tasks asked of them.

The book, **The Now Habit** (Fiore 1989) is dedicated to identifying and exploring ways of dealing with procrastination. In it he explains that procrastination is a symptom rather than a problem. He contends

> we procrastinate when we fear a threat to our sense of worth and independence. We only act lazy when our natural drive for fruitful activity is threatened or suppressed … the deep inner fears that cause us to seek such unproductive forms of relief are suggested to be the fear of failure, the fear of being imperfect, perfectionism, and the fear of impossible expectations, of being overwhelmed. These fears prevent us from working on and attaining possible goals and relationships (p. 5-6).

This description fits Sandra well. Through her, I have come to realize that fear is not always overtly detectable.

Newman discussed 'Berlin Wall' as someone who has built solid defenses behind which to hide, or someone who insists on playing 'make me' (p. 85) At the outset, Sandra presented very high, silent, and thick Berlin Walls. Over a long period of time our combined efforts wore away parts of these walls. Now we can hurdle them.

With her belief that students control what they learn (p. 89) Newman explains that for the learner it is their willingness to 'just try' [that] makes all the difference (p. 90). I found that for Sandra I would frequently let her know it is okay to make mistakes. "Just try your best. We learn from our mistakes." After many brief attempts at just trying, Sandra began to extend the try's and felt good about her successes.

The findings of a qualitative literacy study Garcia et al. (1995) at the seventh grade level drew some parallels with Sandra's situation. While all of the nine participating teachers in this study believed they were operating their classrooms in a child-centered manner, the researchers contended that the classrooms were teacher-centered and content driven. The average and under-achievers were more teacher-directed than the high-achievers. Teachers tended to have different expectations. The weaker students were expected to orally read content areas in class, rarely permitted to silently read in class, and not given homework because the teachers believed they likely couldn't get work done without their assistance. The weaker students' learning was highly controlled by the teachers with little chance of ownership by the students themselves.

The findings revealed that researcher perceptions differed from teacher perceptions. In the researchers' view the average and under-achievers were in an environment of teacher-centered and content mindsets that significantly altered the intended learning outcomes and actually removed rather than promoted a child-centered approach that would lead to a healthy growth of self -power, control, and responsibility. Thus, teachers were promoting the antithesis of what they said they wanted; they were setting conditions leading to learned helplessness not only in literacy learning but all learning.

Gardner's seven intelligences theory presents a helpful model from which to view facets of intellect development. He contends that there are at least seven identifiable intelligences. He also expressed his belief that there are still other intelligences yet to be identified. What particularly caught my attention with regard to learned helplessness were the intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences.

Gardner describes intrapersonal intelligence as the knowledge of the internal aspects of a person: access to one's own feeling life, one's range of emotions, the capacity to effect discriminations among these emotions and eventually to label them and to draw upon them as a means of understanding and guiding one's own behavior. A person with good intrapersonal intelligence has a viable and effective model of himself or herself. Since this intelligence is the most private, it requires evidence from language, music, or some other more expressive form of intelligence if the observer is to detect it at work (p. 24-25).

Interpersonal intelligence builds on a core capacity to notice distinctions among others; in particular, contrasts in their moods, temperaments, motivations, and intentions. In more advanced forms, this intelligence permits a skilled adult to read the intentions of others, even when these have been hidden (p. 23).

To merge these two areas one finds that interpersonal intelligence allows one to understand and work with others; intrapersonal intelligence allows one to understand and work with oneself. In the individual's sense of self, one encounters a melding of inter -and intra-personal components (p. 25).

With Sandra, the growth in literacy learning was preceded by growth in her intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence. It is through a self realization that she successfully became a risk-taker. Personally taking charge has allowed Sandra to exercise greater power, control, and responsibility for her learning choices. It really comes down to the student developing positive beliefs and values about themselves and the world around them.

Steven Covey (1989) stresses a proactive process by which people can become more effective and move beyond learning strategies and skills that were identified in the codependency literature of John Bradshaw (1988) and Beattie (1989, 1992) as unhealthy. Like Bradshaw and Beattie, Covey speaks to the rescripting of the beliefs, values, and dysfunctional aspects imbedded into our birth through adulthood relationships. He advocates helping adults confront their co-dependancy and developing new strategies. Sandra now considers that she has a voice. She is now starting to exercise healthier strategies and new found skills to discover, clarify, and reassess her earlier beliefs and values with regard to herself and those around.

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As I reflect, I think about that puppy-dog look at the start. Sandra's words and body language repeatedly shouted out "Help me, I can't help myself." Then I think my own growth. I've become better at watching for that look in the past year and a half and in the process, I've become better at watching, questioning, and reflecting on my own teaching practice. Working with Sandra and supporting her to meet challenges has cast me in a very different role—that of a proactive reflection-in-action researcher/learner/teacher. I realized we needed to work in very different ways. At the outset, that meant a change in environment, a change in methods, attending to Sandra's social and emotional states throughout the day and getting a reading on the home environment/support.

After getting a handle on her anxiety/avoidance, we adopted a just try approach. It worked very well indeed. People involved in the literacy project would sometimes see Sandra in the small group setting and at other times by herself. After these sessions we adults would meet to discuss our observations and discuss some strategies to test out. This feedback became very important for me in helping me rethink instruction. I needed to understand learned helplessness in order to set up learning situations which might foster more independence and self-reliance.

I believed at the start I was looking at literacy issues. A child-centered approach in the smaller setting on a daily basis with others offering outside perspectives once per week did on the surface look at literacy learning. Coming to explore the notion of Sandra appearing to be learned helpless forced me to rethink even more.

Literacy learning would either come after or in a companion process as her resistance avoidance and anxiety) was the main area that fundamentally needed to be addressed. The literacy

became the curriculum content that allowed us to explore ways of attending to the issues of self - power, control, and responsibility.

For me this meant as an educator I must look at students differently. I must be a better observer, particularly of the students who struggle rather than label their actions and behaviors as that of learning disabled children. I need to know these students more directly and continue to respond rather than react immediately to the cues provided by the students. That requires me to take a "detective' investigative stance rather than an imparter of knowledge stance.

In looking at the whole child in the environments of home and schooling, I found myself more sensitive to the child's inner tensions. For me to realize Sandra's tensions of self -power, control, and responsibility and her responses to the stimuli in her world was a fundamental hurdle to be bridged. We developed our working relationship towards supported learning. The literacy learning focus provided her with language to better express herself. The curriculum content for literacy learning could not be taught in isolation from the issues of learned helplessness she held with regard to her self.

In making the observations as to her levels of anxiousness and the variety of avoidance strategies Sandra exhibited, I realized my own learnings. Not only was I attending to her by becoming a better observer, I began to be more aware of observing what I was doing to support or stall the learning momentum during her tasks.

Suddenly, I became acutely aware of how I had begun to watch the other students in the room and started to more carefully monitor their avoidance strategies and states of anxiousness. Almost instinctively, I started to shift how I was working with them. I more consciously reminded them of their choices, responsibilities, and that my expectation for them to just try their best. It became clear to everyone that to do nothing or be helpless were no longer choices.

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ST. BONIFACE LITERACY INTERVENTION PROJECT – YEAR 2

Marlene Mortimer

Room 22, grade 3, at Frontenac School is a literacy classroom, providing many and varied opportunities for reading and writing. Planning for the literacy learning environment is an ongoing process that requires constant reflection and decision-making to create the appropriate supports for all the learners in the classroom.

To ensure literacy growth.....

learners need to:

- have confidence in themselves as learners (readers and writers)
- feel they have control over their own learning
- take responsibility for their own learning
- learn to take risks
- learn a range of strategies they can use independently classroom teachers need to:
- discover and build on what the learners already know
- focus on the process of learning
- take cues from the learners
- provide acceptance, encouragement, praise and support
- provide consistency (in routines, timetables, frameworks for reading and writing strategies)

REFLECTIONS

What have I done to provide or build a supportive classroom that promotes literacy learning?

1. Surrounded the classroom with written language: charts, poems, children's writing, library books, magazines, etc.
2. Set up small activity corners for subjects of interest and provided blank research journals.
3. Established heterogenous table groups to promote an "Ask 3 before me" support system when individuals need help with a problem.
4. Established classroom responsibilities that each child shares on a rotating basis.
5. Structured task sheets (organizers) to record daily agendas.
6. Provided large blocks of time (Readers Workshop, Writers Workshop) allowing the children to engage in reading and writing tasks with guidance and assistance.
7. Incorporated sharing time into both workshops to allow the children to tell about their accomplishments.
8. Provided process charts such as:
   How can we find correct spelling?
   a."Try It" books. (letter/sound relationships)
   b.Look around the room or in a book. (frequently used words are posted)
   c.Use a dictionary. (each child has a frequently used spelling dictionary)
   d.Ask an "expert"
9. Scribed for individuals.
10. Made teacher "rounds" during times children were actively engaged (independently or with a partner) in reading and writing tasks.
11. Provided one-to-one, small group, or whole class strategy lessons.
12. Set up a record keeping system for all involved in providing supports.
13. Established an organizer for paraprofessionals to use when reading with individuals. (It provides the strategies, as sequenced prompts, that we have developed from our observations of the target children for the project.)
14. Student led conferences.

A few "critical moments" that encourage me to continue exploring ways to provide a supportive classroom environment:

1. After working on the reading strategy of "Put in a word that makes sense" with Vivian, it was appropriate for her to share her book "One Hundred Hugs" with the class. She was very excited to do this and decided to take the book home for an extra practice session. She would share the next day. The next morning, in share time of Readers Workshop, Vivian confidently stood at the front of the class and got her audience's attention. She introduced her book and read fluently to the end. Responses from her audience demonstrated clear understanding of what she had shared. It was only after everyone started getting ready for lunch that Vivian came up to me to tell me that she had trouble with one of the words as she read to the class. "But I did like you said, Ms. Mortimer. I put in a word that made sense and kept on reading." (confident, responsible, in control, taking a risk, using known strategy)
2. While scribing a retell for Stephen, he took control of the writing piece by indicating he knew how to spell the word "ghost". I turned the writing piece over to him. When he spelled "gost", I commented that he was using the sounds he heard very well. I showed him the word had five letters ... g_ost ... and the missing letter was a silent consonant. He immediately knew it was the letter h and confidently wrote it in the space. Then he eagerly wanted to write the next sentence of the retell on his own. He continued using letter sounds to the best of his ability and accepted support with the vowels.
3. During an informal meeting with Vivian's father, she wanted to tell him how she could help herself with spelling an unknown word. She used the posted chart in the classroom that gave her hints for finding correct spelling.
4. While reading a science piece with Angel, I was giving her considerable wait time with what appeared to be little success. I turned to monitor the rest of the class and when I returned to provide assistance for Angel she said, "Okay, I've got it now." Then she successfully read the sentence with good understanding. She needed time to use her decoding strategy.
5. Avery had a very successful student led conference during the March reporting session. With her parents on either side of her, providing encouraging feedback, she was able to say how she had met her reading goal and indicate she needed to make a goal to work on her spelling for the next term. She was able to tell her parents and me where she could get the support to self-correct spelling errors. While working on a storywriting project to share with General Vanier School's grade 3s, Avery demonstrated the supports she had shared during her conference. She knew which words she was unsure of and proceeded to self-correct.

Of the five children targeted for this year's literacy intervention project, Avery has gained the most confidence. She has taken control of her learning and uses many of the supports provided for her on her own initiative. She has confirmed for me that providing a safe, supportive environment where children are encouraged to take risks can only lead to more successes.

EARLY LITERACY PROJECT

Carole O'Keefe

What is it I have learned during this past year?

Throughout this year, as with last, I realized just how very important careful observation is. By observing the child we learn about his strengths and what it is he relies on to help him along. We also are able to notice what strategies are not being used and could perhaps be developed. Most importantly we are able to pick up on the signals the child is sending. For example: "This is much too hard", "This is boring" or I need help". Being more aware of the body language and avoidance techniques has continued to be an area of importance to me. But, observation is just the start and reflecting on what has been observed is also an important part of the parcel. Being a more careful observer and reflector will allow me to support the student with what he is really needing and asking for help with. I must e careful to slow down the process. I find myself trying out hypotheses without really putting into words what it is I have observed and what I am trying to do.

I believe we must be very careful "to turn" on our young students to literature before we "turn them off". Observing, reflecting and providing acceptance, encouragement, and appropriate support for developing readers and writers is imperative if we want them to engage in literacy activities.

Working with five grade 3 students in room 20 has shown me again how very important it is to make reading practice meaningful. When given a chance to practice reading a book over and over in order to read it to a kindergarten student, these students became eager and enthusiastic. Reading to the kindergarten students took away much of the pressure and the experience was very positive. Bobby even practiced his book so often that he was able to read the book word for word without even looking at the print. Confidence grew as the reading practice was given purpose and lots of opportunity to read this easier material was put in place. The group of children were able to notice improvement in their own and each other's reading and comments like: "I didn't know you could read so well, Chris" and "I'm really glad I can read now!" were heard.

Choice is another important issue. Books were chosen for interest, predictability and reading level. From these, students could then make a choice. When the students were given the choice of what they were going to practice, with whom, and how often, they took ownership for their practicing and learning thus helping them to remain motivated and enthusiastic.

Letting the students choose how much support is needed is important. It is next to impossible to help the child who is refusing to be helped. Working with Chris has been a real learning experience. At times everything that was requested was challenged. Most of the time it was felt that Chris would be able to do the assignment with a minimum of support, but getting Chris engaged was another matter. Chris did have some wonderful work days but more often than not there was refusal to work. Just getting him to try was an issue. Learning to step back and allow Chris choices of how he was going to proceed was very difficult. One day in the resource room Chris refused to write more than a few words regarding a fairy tale we were studying. I really wanted him to put down some of the details as he earlier had expressed orally some very interesting ideas. Would it do any good to try and force the issue or give him an ultimatum? I thought not and decided to let the issue rest. Chris did no more on his paper. The next day the group would share what they had written. When Chris came in the next morning, he sat right down and wrote a foolscap full of ideas about the fairy tale without my even mentioning it. The work got done, but in Chris's time.

Meetings with Barb Cape, Chris's teacher, have been very beneficial to me. By discussing our frustrations, Chris's refusals, and the constant power struggle, we began to question what Chris was telling us by his behaviour. We wondered if perhaps some of his refusals were wise choices and that he was telling us of his needs. For example, Chris did not want to go out for recess. Could this be because during recess he became over stimulated and was always getting himself into trouble? We decided to give Chris some choices about going out for recess. We took away the power struggle. Chris could stay in at recess and play on the computer if he wished, but his work had to be completed before computer time. This worked very well. As Chris was very eager

to have computer time, he made sure his work was completed on time. Chris, by staying in at recess, no longer was always in trouble with other students and staff - another bonus.

There have been other issues with Chris throughout the year and by stepping back and looking at why Chris was behaving as he was, we were able, as a team (teacher, psychologist, principal, resource teacher), to recognize that Chris was giving us signals and telling us of his needs. Being able to read what he was trying to tell us by his actions was not easy, but it is a must that we learn to do so. Luckily, Chris was often able to express what the problem was but by stepping back from the power struggle we have been able to have a better understanding of Chris and what his needs are. By working with Chris and seeing his needs, instead of maintaining an attitude of "I am the boss and you must do what I say now", the classroom teacher has read Chris well and managed to connect. This has been a real learning experience for me. Now we must consider what supports will be in place for Chris next year?

Working with Stephen, a grade 3 student from room 22, has also been a learning experience. Stephen is a developing reader and writer. He has a speech problem which has hindered his ability to put his ideas down on paper accurately. Stephen is very eager to begin to read chapter books. Often he would take a book for D.E.A.R. time that was much too difficult for him and be unable to read. He was asked if the book he had chosen was an Easy to Read Book. His response was no. He was shown the five finger test and encouraged to use this to help him to choose his books for D.E.A.R. time. He demonstrated his ability to find an Easy to Read Book by going to the class library and choosing a book. Stephen has continued to choose books that are too difficult for him for D.E.A.R. time and has had to be reminded about Easy to Read Books. So that the chapter books were not considered completely outlawed, Stephen has been given the opportunity to read chapter books when he has someone available to help him. For the most part, however, he has been practicing easy reading materials during D.E.A.R. time. Practicing and rereading was made meaningful by providing the opportunity for Stephen to read books to many different individuals including younger students. Stephen has remained motivated and reading miscues have shown a marked decrease. Comprehension of stories read is usually good.

Writing skills are developing but a little more slowly. In October Stephen was unable to get more than one or two words down. He often added extra letters to words and didn't have letter order. He had some knowledge of beginning and final consonants and of word length. He had some visual recall but this was not efficient. When asked to write about a story, he would immediately turn to the book and want to copy some of the sentences. To help him get going, his ideas were often transcribed for him with much discussion of letter sounds, words families and his input as to what should be put down next. Stephen was encouraged to look at a whole word or several letters of the word before copying. Copying is no longer letter by letter. Sometimes, Stephen will take over and continue the writing with support. Throughout the year we also worked on letter sounds and how they felt in the mouth. Stephen became much better at explaining what the feeling was.

There have been many gains and Stephen is now more independently applying the reading and writing strategies which have been emphasized. Still reminders are needed. He still has difficulty getting started, does not always focus on print while others are reading and has a difficult time getting his ideas down. Stephen has not yet taken control of his own learning.

What I am learning from Stephen is to be more watchful and provide extra support and encouragement when it is really needed. Throughout the year I found myself questioning how to encourage Stephen without doing too much. We want Stephen, and all the other students, to view themselves as readers and writers and we much learn when to help out and when to encourage an independent attempt. By being a careful observer, by reflecting, and by carefully planning for development the appropriate amount of support can be given.

GENERAL VANIER SCHOOL
LITERACY PROJECT

Ken Pearse

As the 1995-96 year got underway, my thoughts turned to the Literacy Project. What to do? How to do it? These were some questions that helped create an atmosphere of confusion for me. Do I pinpoint "target" students as in the past year? After much indecision, I chose to work on my "questioning techniques". This allowed me a break from intensive work with individuals, and to try to get all students to have success with their responses. Because of my novel-based reading program, discussions played a vital role in the learning process. Unfortunately, a small number of the most proficient readers wanted to respond to everything. Therefore, the less able readers learned quickly not to respond at all. My dilemma was how to word each question in such a way that any student would feel comfortable responding to it. Thus, questioning technique was of the utmost importance. However, my choice proved to be more of a challenge than I had anticipated. Even though I had not specifically identified "target" students, three girls worried me to the point of feeling this was an absolutely necessary activity if they were going to achieve some success in literature.

Some rules were established at the beginning so everyone could feel comfortable with our novel studies:

1. Everyone must have an equal opportunity to respond to our readings.
2. Everyone must respect what others have to say.
3. Everyone must feel free to share their feelings/opinions about our readings.

With these rules repeated often to the entire class, our novel study began. The class had to get used to the fact that there was not always a right or a wrong answer. Many children were rather suspicious of this fact. They had been trained to believe there is always a right or a wrong answer. However, the group overcame this hurdle after being drilled on this point over and over and over.

On November 21, 1995, Karen Botting observed my questioning the group on a section of the novel **The Chocolate Fever** by Robert Kimmel Smith after having read it orally. When the questions were analyzed, it did not surprise me too greatly to discover most questions fell into the lower two level categories; knowledge and comprehension. This was a starting point. In this lesson I was also trying to incorporate the Lion's Quest issue on "feelings".

On December 5, 1995, I observed the substitute, V. Beatty, conduct a novel study lesson on **Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears** by Verna Aardema. My main thrust this time was to see how fairly the responses were distributed throughout the group. One observation was very evident. Indeed, the weaker reader became more active in the discussion, offering answers, giving opinions and making predictions. More questions on application and analysis started to creep into the discussions. Students were beginning to justify their responses by starting evidence from the selection. We were progressing in the kinds of questions being asked, as well as the kinds of responses being given.

On February 13, 1996, I conducted an introduction of our next novel, **The Legend of the Bluebonnet** by Tomie de Paola. V. Beatty recorded questions asked and who responded. When the observations were analyzed, it was easy to see just how comfortable the group had become in responding to all types of questions. Most everyone was offering responses; some piggy-backing off others. No longer were the lower level questions dominating. Finally, all six levels of questions were being asked and responded to with ease and confidence. Predictions, judgments and opinions were no longer foreign to the group. All students were capably responding to these. The three girls I was closely following from the start were less afraid to say what they thought. It appeared the "fear" factor was slowly disappearing. This progress continued as we worked on the novel. On February 27, 1996, more evidence was seen as to the maturity in my questioning techniques as V. Beatty observed/recorded another lesson. The group generally was having no problem answering the higher level thinking questions. The ease with which they responded illustrated their confidence levels had grown with continued practice. We have continued in such a manner in all other novels to date.

Over the year I've discovered my less able readers are very capable of responding successfully to questions like:

1. What do you think?
2. What if ....?
3. What do you predict?
4. What is the significance of ....?
5. What can you add to ....?

The key to their success, as well as the others, is to build a positive environment in which risk-taking is encouraged. Continuously reinforcing their strengths helps nurture a caring environment and a sense of worth. Once everyone feels his/her opinions are accepted by the rest of the group, discussions become a pleasant experience. I was hoping to have all students see reading as an enjoyable experience. We are heading in the right direction. It has taken us the entire year, but we are achieving this goal.

Taking a closer look at my questioning techniques has certainly enabled me to improve them, not just in reading, but in all other areas. Consistency must be worked on so all students are being equally challenged.

The one negative aspect this year was record keeping. I found it rather difficult deciding what data was appropriate to keep or to discard. Keying on a "target" student is much easier to keep records on and to see a difference in over a period of time.