Teacher Conceptualizations and Con(texts) of Language and Literacy

by

Michelle Yeo
B.Ed, University of Calgary, 1993
M.A., University of Calgary, 1997

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

There is a conceptual world surrounding literacy in schools, and we are conditioned to a particular language about literacy. This study seeks to interrogate the term "literacy" at the level of the classroom: to ask what is meant when it is invoked and what it means to the teachers who teach it. The central question of this inquiry is: *How do teachers conceptualize literacy, and how are those conceptualizations socially and historically situated?* I worked with one staff of teachers to explore their articulations of literacy, through a lunch hour discussion group and one-on-one interviews. Methodologically I looked to Caputo's radical hermeneutics as a way to understand the interpretations teachers were making of literacy both in the context of their lives and within a broader socio-historical context. Caputo's radicalization of hermeneutics allows the introduction of post-modern flux into the interpretive process. Through the data, I found a wide-ranging diversity in teachers' conceptualizations of literacy, and was surprised by the extent to which their conceptualizations were embedded in their own childhood experiences, rather than their social context, the curriculum, their teacher education, or professional development. Most teachers considered literacy to be mainly about reading and writing, with a strong emphasis on the reading aspect. With a few exceptions, there was little interest or awareness in what might be termed "new literacies", or a commitment or even interest in alternative texts or digital media. These findings have important implications for the field of language and literacy, for teacher education, for the professional development of teachers, and for the future of schooling.

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FIGURES

In this text, I have made an intentional effort to disrupt traditional text forms with images and "other" texts in the margins. The intent here is to create a sub-text, to disrupt my own voice and that of the participants and to provide opportunity for a more active process in the reader. Thus, I have purposefully not labeled many of the Figures, as they are intended to be "read" playfully rather than "explained" as is conventional in academic texts.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by acknowledging the incredible support and mentorship I have received from my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Kathy Sanford. She has tirelessly been there to challenge and support my efforts, guide my program, teach, read, edit, push, encourage, and ensure that I simply kept going. Whether she was encouraging my writing, hiring me for work, or helping me find child care, Dr. Sanford has been both a rigorous and compassionate supervisor. It is difficult enough to find one of those qualities in a mentor, rarer still to find both together. She seems to know exactly when to intervene, and when to make space.

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Walter and Sharon Yeo, who taught me to love books from my earliest memory.

We don't want purity, but complexity, the relationship of cause and effect, means and end. Our model of the cosmos must be as inexhaustible as the cosmos. A complexity that includes not only duration but creation, not only being but becoming, not only geometry but ethics. It is not the answer we are after, only how to ask the question. . .

--Ursula LeGuin, *The Dispossessed*

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Emergence of the question

This project represents an inquiry into literacy: what teachers understand it to be and how those understandings are socially and historically situated. How this question came to be begins in my own history of literacy, in my early love of literacy and in my later questioning of its purposes and meanings. I became a teacher for a number of reasons, but significantly, I wanted to share my love of literature with children; I wanted to invite them into the world of literacy so they could find the pleasure and challenge I had found, and so they could learn to express themselves through writing and feel confident in themselves and their abilities. As an undergraduate, I devoured my courses on whole language, the prevalent theory at the time, and my courses on children's literature. I loved teaching kindergarten, and without a doubt the focus of my teaching was on reading children's literature, having the children draw and write, providing the children with as many kinds of literacy experiences as I could. I was confident that the socio-linguistic orientation I had been exposed to during my teacher education really was the way children learned to read and write. At the beginning of the day, and at the end of playtime, the children in my class waiting on the carpet were expected to look at books, and I was sure that this practice would support their literacy learning, as it had for me at my mother's kitchen table. I began a large collection of second hand picture books for the children in my classroom.

Any time I saw an idle child I would put a book in their hands. What surprises me most now, as I look back, was the confidence with which I did this, the certainty.

I began graduate work, and it was only then that I began to question my safe, middle class assumptions about literacy. For the first time it occurred to me that young children not only had varied experiences of early literacy, but that in fact the middle class value of surrounding a child with books was exactly that: a value, not a given. I remember reading a study entitled "Social Class and School Knowledge" that had an enormous impact on my thinking (Anyon, 1981). I realized that children of different classes indeed may receive different educations. Anyon concludes,

> Despite similarities in some curriculum topics and materials, there are profound differences in the curriculum and the curriculum-in-use in the sample of schools in this study. What counts as knowledge in the schools differs along dimensions of structure and content. (p. 31)

For the very first time I realized that this world of literacy I so loved might not be equally accessible for everyone, and indeed common literacy practices might position some children at the margins. I had always believed in education as a great equalizer, giving everyone opportunity. It was a great shock to think that education was complicit in perpetuating oppressive social practices, and that it accomplishes this in large part through literacy practices (Stuckey, 1991). It is, indeed, as Smith (1986) points out, a "club" with an implicit message of "mutual acceptance" (p. 37). I began to seriously consider what it meant to be "out" of the literacy club, who tends to get either included in or excluded from this club, and whether my cheerful imposition of middle class literacy practices on the children in my classroom was really ethically sustainable.

As a doctoral student then, these ideas were far from new to me. I had by this time been working with student teachers for a number of years, and had taught several early literacy courses. I was not surprised that the cultural practices of literacy varied enormously and served to franchise some and disenfranchise others. However, through my doctoral course work, I began to notice a kind of strangeness in the use of the term literacy, and began to wonder about its meaning. Literacy is an everyday term that seems given and obvious, while at the same time is used in myriad ways to innumerable purposes and agendas: personal, social, and political. Its desirability in society is not up for discussion. What we mean when we say "literacy" is rarely questioned in the public discourse, and generally not open to deconstruction. Lankshear (1987) writes:

> There is a pervasive folk wisdom about literacy. Surely we *all* know what it is and why it is so valuable and important. The crucial significance of reading and writing, for individual and social betterment alike, has been a largely unquestioned assumption in the West. . . . Conventional wisdom assumes the necessity and value of literacy for social and economic development, for advancing and maintaining democratic institutions, and for individual betterment. What literacy is, and what it means to be literate (or illiterate) are likewise widely regarded as unproblematic. (p. 38)

Caputo (2006) warns us to beware anything that appears resistant to deconstruction (Lecture, April 21, University of Victoria). Literacy is an institution thoroughly pervasive in schools and highly resistant to disruption. The absence of critical dialogue in relation to literacy goals in schools is telling: discourse tends to be

around questions of means rather than ends. The name of literacy is sacred, and to question it a form of heresy. There are many examples of literacy practices which seem to have purposes related to tradition rather than the anticipated needs of students in the world they will be living as adults; I will explore these purposes further in this project and consider what might be behind the persistence of these practices and what role they serve.

In the academic literature, it is current to speak of "multiliteracies" (Hagood, 2000) or "new literacies" (Willinsky, 1990) and to understand literacy in a plural fashion. This was the perspective I had encountered in my graduate coursework in relation to literacy. Michaels and O'Conner (1990) argue:

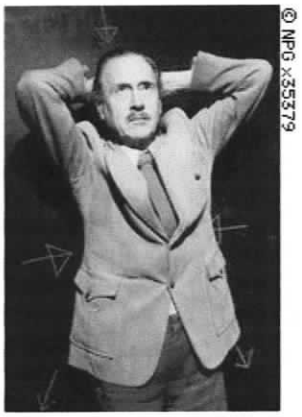
> Literacy . . . is an inherently plural notion. We each have, and indeed fail to have, many different literacies. Each of these literacies is an integration of ways of thinking, talking, interacting, and valuing, in addition to reading and writing . . . Literacy then is less about reading and writing per se, and is rather about ways of being in the world and ways of making meaning with and around text. (Cited by Disinger and Roth, 2003, ¶ 5).

I was struck by the growing divide between this notion, and what I seemed to encounter in schools where I worked as a field supervisor, where traditional forms of literacy as reading and writing appeared to flourish. Gadamer (1999/1960) writes, "the conceptual world in which philosophizing develops has already captivated us in the same way that the language in which we live conditions us" (p. xxv). There is a conceptual world surrounding literacy in schools and we are conditioned to a particular language about literacy. As Wittgenstein explains, "A *picture* held us captive. And we

could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably" (Monk, 1990, p. 365).

It was my suspicion that the underlying philosophies and conceptualizations of language and literacy change little despite outward appearances of change. I wondered about the apparent disconnect between academic theory and teacher's practices. (Although disconnect is perhaps too mild a term – more like the chasm identified by McLuhan below.) It is easy to fall into the trap of assuming that teachers are simply not keeping up or are resistant to thinking critically. But I wondered if there might be more at play if I looked deeper. Rarely is the term "literacy" interrogated at the level of the classroom: to ask what is meant when it is invoked and what it means to the teachers who teach it. Rarely do we uncover its history and socio-cultural situatedness, and ask whether these notions hold true or have become calcified. Marshall McLuhan argued in 1961 that education tends to look backwards rather than forwards:

> Education, which should be helping youth to understand and adapt to their revolutionary new environments, is instead being used merely as an instrument of cultural aggression, imposing upon retribalized youth the obsolescent visual values of the dying literate age. Our entire educational system is reactionary, oriented to past values and past technologies, and will likely continue so until the old generation relinquishes power. The generation gap is actually a chasm, separating not two age groups but two vastly divergent cultures. I can understand the ferment in our schools, because our educational system is totally rearview mirror. (McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995, p. 249)



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I was curious as to what kinds of ideas surrounding literacy were held by classroom teachers. It seems intuitively correct that whatever conceptualizations are held will prescribe classroom practice. But is this really the case? How would teachers articulate their understandings of literacy? Where do those understandings come from? Are the threads of historical notions of literacy, their ebb and flow, evident in the teachers' conceptualizations? How are they connected to curriculum documents and educational theory? How did they see their role in relation to the teaching of literacy? The central question of this inquiry became: *How do teachers conceptualize literacy, and how are those conceptualizations socially and historically situated?*

€ Permission to use this image of Marshall McLuhan pending from the National Portrait Gallery, London.

Significance of the Research

There is a broadly perceived "crisis" of literacy education in the public eye (Gee, 2001, p. 9), largely fueled by media, whereby the "reality of current accountability and standardization movements" makes "understanding the emergence and consequences of the commodification of literacy crucial" (Larson, 2001, p. 1). What we are experiencing can indeed be characterized as a crisis, but a crisis of meaning rather than the crisis of achievement reported by the media. It may be seen less as a failure of teachers to teach and students to learn literacy properly, but rather the kind of crisis involved in large-scale social change where reified notions of language and literacy are cracking in the face of rapidly shifting social contexts. In response, governmental and social reaction is often to call for "back to the basics" as a means of maintaining known, understood and remembered traditional literacy forms. However, because these social contexts are changing so rapidly, there has been little time to pause and consider their repercussions. Stuckey (1991) argues, "It is safe to say that no one yet realizes the full extent of the change, perhaps because the change is neither complete nor evenly paced. Also, those who usually study such shifts have little experience with literacy as a concept" (p. 12). Kress (2003) notes,

> The world of communication is not standing still. The communicational world of children now in school is both utterly unremarkable to them and yet it looks entirely different to that which the school still imagines and for which it still, hesitantly and ever more insecurely, attempts to prepare them. All of us already inhabit that new world. Some of us still use the older forms of communication and at the same time have become comfortable enough with many of the

> possibilities of the newer forms of communicating on paper or on the screen – not fully realizing and yet at the same time uncomfortably aware of the profound changes that are taking place around us. (p. 16)

The teachers I spoke to in this study seemed anything but hesitant or insecure about literacy. They were very clear about the forms and practices of literacy they enact and their purposes. But the disconnect between the school practices and societal practices crept into the cracks and crevices of the interviews, often creating a sense of juxtaposition and paradox. It is these ruptures which are, in part, the focus of this study. In 1987, Lawn and Grace noted that "we still know comparatively little about how teachers experience and organize their work situation. We know little about their ideological and pedagogical commitments, how these are influenced and formed and what effects they have upon teachers' work in schools" (p. viii). They also note the frequent lack of an "appropriate socio-historical framework" in educational research. While the situation has improved somewhat since then, there is still relatively little attention paid to the dynamics of how teachers understand curricular ideas. This study attempts to fill in some of this picture, creating a context for teachers' conceptualizations.

Literacy rates as measured by high-stakes tests are commonly employed markers of the success or failure of a school or school system. It is widely recognized that a child's individual success or failure in school is rooted in his or her facility with reading and writing. Governments frequently prioritize literacy programs with their funding initiatives. The perceived crisis in literacy makes teachers and school districts vulnerable to "the recent trend toward quick-fix literacy programs in which

commodified literacy is peddled by entrepreneurs" (Larson, 2001, p. 1), despite current theory in literacy education which points away from the quick-fix and towards complex, contextually situated processes. Literacy is a contentious practice continually in flux; Luke (2003) argues that, "Educational policies are bids to centrally regulate and govern flows of discourse" (p. 132). Competing perspectives and methods in literacy approaches, such as the "war" between whole language philosophy and phonics instruction, may appear to provide alternatives in practice but in fact leave underlying beliefs untouched and "fail to take into account the many influences outside the classroom which affect teaching and learning" (Larson, 2001, p. 2). In her important work, *The Violence of Literacy* (1991), Stuckey demonstrates how literacy is anything but neutral, is used for specific purposes to specific ends, and not with the benign and helpful result suggested by the conventional wisdom in our everyday consciousness. The massive shifts in the forms of literacy practices have called into question both their purposes and uses.

It is crucial to investigate what cultural beliefs with respect to language and literacy are lived out in the classroom: where these beliefs come from, and how they are practiced by teachers. This becomes an increasingly pressing concern as society becomes more diverse within broad matrices of interlocking change. Traditional notions of language and literacy exclude children on many levels including along gender, race, and class lines. These notions are invested in keeping current class structures intact (Lankshear & Knoebel, 1998; Stuckey, 1998). There is a growing body of literature showing literacy to be a cultural practice rather than an individual

skill (Larson, 2001; Lankshear & Knoebel, 1997; Heath,1983; Gee, 2001; and Luke, 2003). Christie and Misson (1998) write of the theoretical shift in recent decades:

> Whereas language and literacy had previously been seen as being produced from an essential private self, the very existence of a self outside language and society was now being questioned. This stemmed from a much fuller theory of how language and texts operate to position people in a certain ideology and way of seeing the world. . . Our very identity, it appeared, might be made up of the language we used, the texts we produced and read. (p. 6)

If this is the case, then teachers are significant enactors of this cultural practice. Teachers are those negotiating all of the complex social histories and projections of literacy at the level of the classroom: this is one of many contexts where understandings of literacy are lived out in concrete, particular ways. It is they whose interpretation of what literacy *is* determines, to a large extent, what children experience in schools in relation to literacy. The discourse of school literacy, and its congruence with both the early discourses of an individual's home life and the larger societal discourses are crucial to explore as sweeping cultural change may require different modes of literacy learning (Kress, 2003).

Direction of the Inquiry

Literacy is ubiquitous to formal schooling. A primary purpose of education is to produce a literate citizenry. As Stuckey (1991) writes, "We believe the key to achievement is education, and we believe the heart of education is literacy" (p. vii). What exactly is meant by "literacy" is part of this inquiry (and of course there is no

one, exact meaning, but rather multiple, shifting meanings). Traditionally, however, this term has been used to mean, simply, the ability to read and to write, and this is still a common meaning found in everyday contexts. Christie and Misson (1998) point out that until quite recently educators and theorists spoke of "reading" and "writing" rather than of "literacy". These two skills were seen as separate and the emphasis was on the reading aspect (pp. 1-2).

Formal schooling as such did not exist prior to reading and writing; indeed its whole existence may in fact be dependent upon the very fact of literacy. Arguably, in Western culture, in the dynamic historical gap between Socrates, who taught orally, and Plato, who wrote things down, the very potential for formal schooling was born. Without a written down language, it is very difficult to learn about things in the world abstracted from the concrete particulars of that world: within the four walls of the classroom, rather than engaged concretely in the activities or phenomena being taught or in direct pedagogical dialogue. Literacy in the traditional sense makes schooling possible, whereby established knowledge can be read "about" and absorbed, and then regurgitated by the student in writing. There is a story told by Plato which illuminates how writing changed what had previously been conceived of as learning and teaching:

Once Upon A Time

According to Plato's Phaedrus, the god Thoth, inventor of geometry, mathematics, astronomy, and writing, brought writing as a gift to the Egyptian king, Thamus, for his people. Thoth tried to sell this new technology, claiming, "This discipline, my King, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories: my invention is a recipe for both memory and wisdom" (Plato, cited by Stephens, 1997, p. 18). Thamus is not convinced:

"This invention will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it," the king began by arguing. "They will not need to exercise their memories, being able to rely on what is written." Thamus's second complaint is that written words, since they come "without benefit of a teacher's instruction," will produce only "a semblance" of "wisdom," not "truth," not "real judgment." (Stephens, p. 23)

Reading and writing fundamentally changed the fabric of what it meant to be an educated individual. These fears about what may be lost are currently being echoed in response to new technologies and their fundamental alteration of literacy practices.

Traditionally in schools, reading and writing reading and writing themselves were one of the central tasks of schooling, and not merely the vehicle of accumulating knowledge, encompassing two of the three "R's", they represent the "basics". Given the amount of time spent on literacy and literacy related tasks in schools, what we mean by literacy, and in particular, what teachers mean by literacy seems a critical question, but one rarely asked. If how we think about something determines what we do about it, then how teachers think about such a persistent, monumental institution such as literacy must direct their practice and thus is deserving of investigation. At least, this is the assumption with which I began this inquiry.

I began this project with an idea of what I wanted to show, that there are multiple historical orientations to literacy. In the next chapter I will explore these more fully, but in brief, I identify four overarching orientations to literacy as the following:

1. **Traditional** – a text centred approach, influenced by Christian religious perspectives on reading, specifically Protestant.
2. **Subjective Individual** – a meaning centred orientation, focused on the individual's response to the text.
3. **Critical** – a socially aware orientation, that does not take the text at face value but rather views it in the broader social context and in relation to questions of power, control, and influence.
4. **Post-Structural / Postmodern** – views all text as deconstructable and unstable, avoids placing any one element of the text-reader-author-context relationship at the centre, focuses on the flux and the spaces between these elements.

I expected that teachers likely subscribe more or less to one of these orientations, whether or not they are articulated or even conscious. The particulars of these orientations, I thought, were the subject of my inquiry. I wanted to show how a staff of teachers may be working at cross purposes in terms of the literacy orientations they embody in the classroom. However, the story of this inquiry became a different story, one that understands the roots of literacy conceptualizations as not being prescribed by social context, but rather a more dynamic, hermeneutic relation between self and context. I began with the idea that theoretical ideas underpin practice. I wanted to know what teachers think literacy *is*, and where those ideas come from in a broader socio-historical context. This study will explore these questions thoroughly. However, what I did not expect was the deeply personal relationship teachers had with literacy inside their contexts, and the significance of those relationships to their teaching. Confirmation of this idea can be found in the teacher education literature. Borko and Putnam (1996) argue:

> Research on learning to teach shows that teachers' existing knowledge and beliefs are critical in shaping what and how they learn from teacher education experiences. . . . research on teachers' learning suggests that for knowledge to be useful for teaching, it must be integrally linked to, or situated in, the contexts in which it is to be used. (pp. 674-5)

While teacher education is not the central focus of this study, it became apparent that my findings had important implications for teacher educators. The social and historical context for teachers and teacher candidates becomes evidently critical in their literacy practices. One version of my research proposal began, "Literacy is an

idea." I am revising this assertion, to something like, "Literacy is a social practice, about which teachers have ideas." The teachers have shown me how thinking about something begins in its practice, rooted in experience as they have interpreted it and contextualized in a complex historical consciousness. Gadamer (1999/1960) describes this dynamic:

> If thought is to be conscientious, it must become aware of these anterior influences. A new critical consciousness must now accompany all responsible philosophizing which takes the habits of thought and language built up in the individual in his communication with his environment and places them before the forum of the historical tradition to which we all belong. (p. xxv)

I did not intend to begin this dissertation with my autobiography of literacy. Despite understanding from years of exposure to interpretive research, which asserts the significance of the researcher's own narrative to the development of the inquiry, I did not recognize the extent to which personal childhood experiences were relevant. It was a revelation through the data (that perhaps should not have been a revelation), that people's own stories formed and shaped their understandings of literacy – in many cases, their early experiences, before they even went to school. Gee's (1989) notion of primary and secondary Discourse is helpful here. (He

I have an early memory, of being perhaps three years old, and sitting at the kitchen table while my mother prepared dinner. I had in front of me my very favourite book, *Peter Rabbit*, and I can still picture the garish images on the pages (I didn't have the pastoral Beatrix Potter original): Peter as his bright blue coat with brass buttons tore off on the fence, Peter shivering beneath the green watering can. My mother was too busy to read to me just then, and told me to look at the

denotes his particular use of the term with the capital "D" which I will also use for clarity). Our primary Discourse is that which is formed at home, our first enculturation, the "one we first use to make sense of the world and interact with others" (p. 7). Gee notes, "We acquire this primary Discourse, not by overt instruction, but by being a member of a primary socializing group" (p. 8). The secondary Discourse is the one which we encounter in the broader culture, usually first experienced within the institution of schooling. Gee defines Discourse as an "identity kit" or:

book by myself while I waited for her. I astonished her by "reading" the book through, from cover to cover, from memory – according to her, word for word. This was when I realized that I could tell the story to myself, and I remember the pleasure of this. I was anxious from then on to decipher the print text of books, so that I could read things whenever I wanted to, without having to wait for my busy mother.

> A socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and artifacts, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or "social network". (Cited in Hagood, 2000, p. 313)

For some people, like myself, there was a clean mesh between primary and secondary Discourse. We can encounter many further discourses throughout our lives, and I did not experience a disruption of my primary discourse in regards to literacy until I entered graduate school. For many children, that disruption occurs the first day of kindergarten. To a far greater extent than I had expected, primary Discourses around literacy were crucial to the teachers' conceptualizations.

Outside of the literacy field, other educators notice the importance of socializing experiences to learning. In the field of teacher education, Carter and Doyle (1996) note the recent shift towards an "emphasis on personal narrative and life history in learning to teach" (p. 120), arguing that "antecedent socialization overpowers most of the effects of formal teacher preparation" (p. 122). The data collected in my study calls attention to this phenomenon specifically in relation to literacy practices.

I began this inquiry thinking definitionally about literacy, wondering what it *is*, and this is reflected in my initial interview protocol, found in chapter 3. I agreed with de Castell, Luke, and MacLennan (1986) when they wrote,

> Any attempt to make the world intelligible begins with some form of definition.... Only when habitual forms and unexamined definitions of a problem are made conscious and their inadequacies exposed can appropriate responses to the problem be substituted in a manner that allows positive change to take place. . . . Just what is literacy? What are its functions and aims? It is only when we have the requisite theoretical understandings to respond to these questions that we can. . . determine which methods and programs best facilitate literacy. (p.3)

Through the process of this inquiry, I have revised this notion in favour of understanding literacy as always in the context of "doing something" – a practice which has value laden, historically situated constraints, but not one which exists in the realm of pure theory. There is a subtle, but significant difference between a theoretical understanding and a hermeneutic understanding. Hermeneutics never separates ideas from the world in which they live (Gadamer, 1999/1960). In understanding the

dynamic relationship between what teachers think, what they do, and how they interpret their experiences, hermeneutics has become central to this inquiry. It was the discovery that teachers do not think about literacy separate from their practice, which led me to see hermeneutics as not only a methodology, but a means of understanding what was at work in the literacy practices and understandings described by teachers. A tension became apparent between literacy practices within schools, or "school literacy," and what might be seen as "new literacies," or "multiliteracies" (Willinsky, 1990; Christie & Misson, 1998; Morgan, 1998; Hagood, 2000), terms which try to describe the myriad forms literacy now takes beyond print text – including, but not limited to, digital media. Caputo, in his work *Radical Hermeneutics* (1987) shows a way forward that allows for postmodern rupture within a hermeneutic context, and this proves helpful in negotiating these tensions. Caputo's notions of how to proceed in inquiry are central to this project, which I will explore in more detail in chapter 3. Chapter 2 outlines the four broad perspectives towards literacy that I used initially to frame perspectives on literacy. These broad orientations continued to be helpful throughout the study, but did not emerge as a cohesive underlying structure as I had expected. Chapters 4 – 7 take up the data in different layers, and the final chapter discusses the implications of the study how our notions of literacy must be radicalized for the future.

Chapter Two

HISTORICAL CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF LITERACY

In my preliminary work on this study, I identified four broad orientations to literacy: traditional, subjective-individual, critical, and postmodern. This is both a historical evolution and a philosophical one. This literature review is structured around these four paradigms or orientations towards literacy. Each emphasizes a different element of the text-reader-context relationship: the traditional orientation is a text centred approach; the subjective individual emphasizes the personal experience of the reader; the critical approach recognizes the social context within which the reader encounters the text; while the postmodern focuses on the spaces between these elements, de-emphasizing the importance of all three. Berlin (1997) argues that our pedagogical strategies in relation to literacy and literature are grounded in beliefs about our relation to the world, and suggests that these beliefs are rooted in historical perspectives. They describe a "different world with different rules about what can be known, how it can be known, and how it can be communicated" (p. 234). Thus, the historical and cultural orientations we ascribe to, articulated or not, have a direct impact on pedagogical approaches taken.

The exploration of the literature then, will take a roughly chronological approach in tracing the evolution of thought regarding the meaning of literacy and our relationship to texts. This chronology is far from absolute, however, and as Willinsky (1990) points out, it is not so much a matter of one emphasis completely shifting to another, but rather of new ideas and emphases being added to the fray. He writes, "I do

not see any clear evidence. . . of one model or paradigm of reading eclipsing the other. . . the coexistence of competing paradigms remains the rule in education" (p. 68). Timelines and boundaries between ideas tend to blur. The old ideas carry on alongside the new, in vestigial if not overt form, periodically resurrected by new champions. As we will see in the interviews with the teachers, all of these constructs are still visible today in an uneasy coexistence.

Traditional Textual Emphasis:

In the Beginning Was the Word

There was a time before written text. There was a time when writing was considered "a new technology" with all the fears and warnings that now accompany electronic technologies (Abram, 1996; Stephens, 1998; Westby & Atencio, 2002). Abram (1996) writes eloquently about how the world changed for humanity when we shifted from an oral to a literate culture:

> Today it is virtually impossible for us to look at a printed word *without* seeing, or rather hearing, what "it says." For our senses are now coupled, synaesthetically, to these printed shapes as profoundly as they were once wedded to cedar tree, ravens, and the moon. As the hills and the bending grasses once spoke to our tribal ancestors, so these written letters and words now speak to us. (p. 138)

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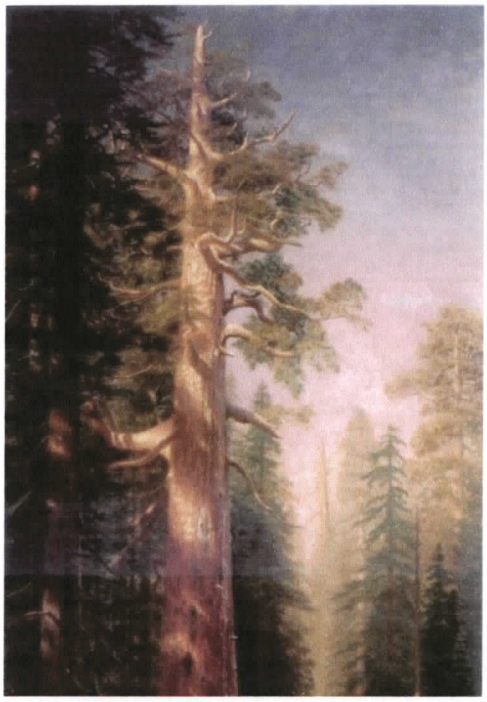
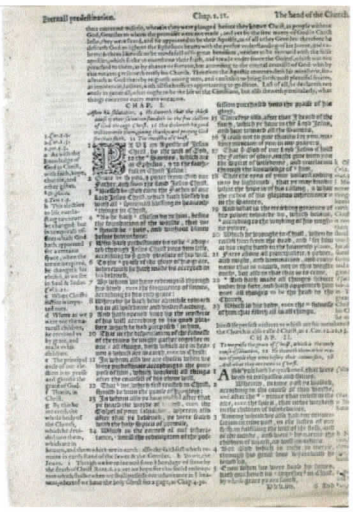
I become movement in
the alders,
something unseen by my
own eyes,
a possibility that did not
exist
moments before.
-Harry Thurston
(in La Rocque, 2003,
p. 120)



Abram explores how written text, once it became phonetic in Western languages rather than pictoral, came to have "a strictly human referent" (p. 138). Once language started being written down, the text, as Rosenblatt (1978) asserts, became important to the extent that it mirrored reality: "the primary concern was the relation between the work and that universe of orderly and permanent forms of which it was to some (debated) degree an imitation or reflection" (p. 2). This is what Berlin (1997) terms "the Aristotelian scheme of things" where "the material world exists independently of the observer" (p. 235).

The authority of the text, however, takes on much larger dimensions when considered in relation to the enormous impact on Western culture of the Bible. The predominance of the text as location of Truth and the emphasis on the text within the triad of reader, text, and context, is easily understandable when the Bible is remembered as holding sway for centuries as the central book published and read. Prior to the Reformation,



∞ Geneva Bible, 1581

Catholic monks hand scripted copies of the Bible; they held the keys both to Salvation and to literacy. The painstaking and exquisite artwork that was done around the borders of the text was illumination, meant to shed light upon the text. During medieval times the relationship to text, meaning Biblical Text, was a mediated experience. Thomas Aquinas, 13th century scholastic theologian, was "fascinated by the conception of the Word, by the

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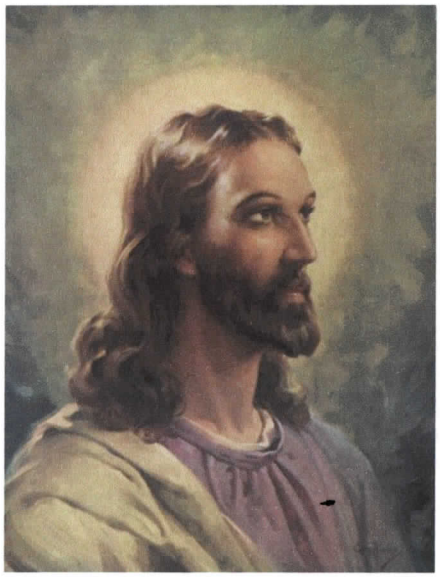
attempt to understand how the knowledge of God enters the human mind" (Colish, 1983, p. 111). The 15th century invention of the printing press facilitated 16th century Reformation, where Martin Luther demanded the printing of the Bible into the vernacular rather than Latin, espousing the individual relationship of the believer with God through the Word. The relationship to the Word became direct and absolutely fundamental to spiritual life. Although Western culture has become largely secularized, we still carry with us vestiges of this direct pathway between reader, text, and God. Whether Church doctrine leaned towards a literal or symbolic interpretation of Biblical text, its role as authority in the life of the reader was pivotal:

> Nothing is more crucial, more basic, or more determinative for the Christian life than the reading of Scripture. Everything else depends upon and follows from it, and if anything has standing in and for the Christian life, it derives from or is analogous to the reading of Scripture. It is the occasion when or the site where the basic, transforming event in a person's life occurs. The church is a company of readers, and preaching "borrows its status of Word of God from Scripture." (Kort, 1996, p. 35)

The idea of the "Word" has tremendous power in Protestant faith, and a closer reading of the New Testament reveals the double meaning: the Word not only refers to the Bible, the revealed Word of God, but also to Jesus Christ himself:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1: 1-5, Revised Standard Version)



In this passage, the Word, meaning Christ, the Saviour of mankind, part of the Holy Trinity, quite literally *is* God (Ong, 1982, p. 179). He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him and with him. It seems of consequence that in this passage the Word, *precedes* the World; indeed the Word created the World. The Word is something we are born into. It is through Christ that the believer is forgiven his or her sins and achieves salvation, and thus through the Word that salvation is achieved (John 3:16). There is an underlying assumption that the reader has been born sinful,

simply by virtue of being human. Thus, any inconsistency in interpretation would naturally be an error in interpretation on the part of the reader; an error in the text was inconceivable since "the Bible, which, back of its human authors, has God as author as no other writing does" (Ong, 1982, p. 179). Notice the reference also to light: the Word is also tied to enlightenment. Little wonder that the written word, the text, was privileged to such an extent in Western culture, and by corollary, in schools. Doll (1993a) asserts that North American schools are strongly Calvinist institutions (p. 282). Calvin led a Reformation in Holland parallel to Luther's German one, with somewhat different doctrinal emphases, but the same conviction in the believer's direct relationship with God through scripture. Kort (1996) illuminates Calvin's orientation to the reading of Biblical text, which clearly has influenced our traditional approach to literature:

> Calvin's theory of reading, then, often directs a person to read with receptivity or passivity. . . A sense of reading as an act of ingestion, of allowing the text to become a part of oneself and of taking the words as nourishment, accounts for the close relation that exists for Calvin between reading Scripture and receiving the Sacrament. (p. 21)

This orientation to text and influence over literacy practices persisted well into the 19th and even 20th centuries, even once schools were developed to train children, not only initiates into the church. Christie and Misson (1998) explain:

> Instruction in one's letters for the greater majority of children in the elementary schools of the nineteenth century was about learning to recognize the alphabet, to be able to read improving works, including religious tracts, and perhaps to write one's name. (p. 2)

Biblical Ways with Texts

It was perhaps studying Shirley Bryce Heath's seminal work, *Ways With Words,* which first sparked my thinking in terms of how cultural relationships with Biblical text impacted relationships with text in general. Her fascinating ethnography traces the experiences of children growing up in two communities in the American Carolinas (Trackton and Roadville). These two communities, although geographically connected, were culturally divergent. The argument of the text is that each community's "ways with words" differed profoundly in terms of how the community both valued and interacted with language, both oral and written. These differences became problematic only once children entered school, because the traditions and

assumptions were most closely aligned with the values surrounding literacy of the townspeople, mismatching those of Roadville, and even more desperately, Trackton. Most fascinating was how each community's "ways with words" could be directly related to how they saw Biblical text. It was almost as though their practices surrounding the Bible could be seen as a metaphor for how they interacted with all other texts. As Heath (1983) recognized, "The church is a key institution helping to provide occasions and rationale for their approaches to being parents and to enabling their young to use language" (p. 147). For the black community of Trackton, their gospel church was a place where oral language and song dominated services. Their perception of Biblical text was enormously flexible and open:

> The Sunday service as a whole is a harmonious blend of uses of highly formal written materials, lists of items and informally written announcements, oral performances which draw from the formulae of either written or oral expressions and expand these. Hymns, prayers, and sermon are intertwined in patterns which defy analytic description by their complication in overlapping and simultaneous pieces. Outsiders, unfamiliar with the routines of the service and the norms of participation by members of the congregation, cannot understand the service in many parts, and often report their feeling that "too much is going on at the same time." A personal testimony provokes a spontaneous response in song, which ends abruptly as a prayer begins; throughout the prayer, as many as three different songs may be hummed or sung; as the prayer ends, the sermon may begin, the preacher speaking slowly and deliberately at first, and only gradually moving into a series of chants, each with its own crescendo, punctuated by spontaneous bursts

> of song, prayers, or verbal expressions of agreement from the congregation. (p. 203)

Heath's evocative description of the experience in the church attended by Trackton residents links closely with her detailed accounts of how this community regarded language and literacy in their everyday lives. Children learned to speak not by the supportive "mother-ease" described by Bruner (2000, p. 27), which he seems to assume as universal, but rather, through repetition by the child over weeks at a time of one particular phrase at a time, and in general a very different pattern of interaction than we consider to be "normal" in white middle class society (Heath, 1983, pp. 73-8). Baby talk and simplified language were not used by adults with children, and in fact, Trackton residents made fun of those who do use them (p. 95). Texts, in the form of letters or catalogues, were brought out onto the porch to be read aloud and interpreted by the community (p. 196). Verbal virtuosity by children was rewarded. Inventive stories regarding events were encouraged. Thus, it can be argued that the community's flexible, communal, and verbal interaction with Biblical text was extended to their entire view of language and literacy. This need not be seen in terms of cause and effect, but rather, an integrated system. Naturally, the ways Trackton children understood language and literacy quickly became problematic in the schools. For example, when children read books to younger siblings in their day-to-day lives, "They almost never read the text as it appears in the book" (p. 103). As a preacher in Heath's analysis asserts, "*The Words must live*" (p. 233). Heath's elucidation of the relationship people have with text within the context of the church is particularly important:

> Almost all parts of the service - hymns, prayers, and sermon - have in their background written sources. There are hymn books, and hymn board at the front of the church gives the hymn numbers, as does the bulletin. Those who are called on by the minister to pray have always been asked to prepare in advance, and most bring a card or small piece of paper with their prayer written out on it. The sermon is based on a Biblical text, and the pastor always writes out portions of the sermons in preparation for Sunday services and revival meetings. Yet in each of these parts of the service, there is a pattern of movement away from the form and formality of the written sources. . . The sermon begins slowly and deliberatively with low pitch, and there is no distinctive recitation pattern for the first few minutes of the sermon. However, soon the preacher introduces a question or a phrase, which is taken up as a chant either by him or members of the congregation, and from that point on, the performance is joint - pastor and congregation. . . Indeed, these unique combinations out of the familiar gathering of the congregation make it possible for each member of the congregation to be at once creator and performer. (p. 205)

Roadville residents, in contrast, viewed the Bible as literal truth, and would be described in the Christian community as fundamentalist. They "hold 'the Word', the Bible, up as 'the absolute.' Religious knowledge in the church and church-related activities is fixed, and the emphasis in all transmission activities is conservational, relying on the finite nature of religious knowledge" (p. 140). This orientation then was evident in all of their approaches to language and literacy. Storytelling was discouraged in children, other than strictly non-fictive stories that "stick to the truth"

(p. 158). They are expected to learn appropriate sayings or proverbs for particular situations (p. 159). Lying is considered a grave sin (p. 160). Thus,

> Before they enter nursery school (usually at age four), Roadville children have had relatively little exposure to extended prose fictive or fanciful stories, either told or read to them. They have also not been allowed to tell stories, either told or read to them. Nursery school teachers do not follow the story-telling norms of the Roadville community. . . .(p. 161) In their play, Roadville children carry their parents' requirements for using language: report exactly how something is said, maintain a single consistent label for items and events, and render stories in absolute chronological order with direct discourse. (p. 165)

These requirement seem directly related to the way this community interacted with Biblical text. The Bible, and our relationship with it, is an enormously powerful text in our Western history. Despite the widespread secularization of society, it is my argument that our historical relationship with Biblical text heavily undergirds our entire relationship with and orientation to language and literacy. However, the relationship found in the broader culture is not the one described in the Trackton churches, these kinds of contexts represent those at the margins, not those of the dominant culture. Rather, it is the traditional form where Biblical text is taken as literal truth. This Calvinist tradition underpins our school "ways with words" even as religious beliefs hold less and less sway. Teaching is historically linked to religion, as in many cultures the priests were also the teachers, frequently being the sole profession with access to text and to literacy. This, incidentally, has in part accounted for the powerful "magic"

and power that continues to be associated with literacy, echoed in some of our language to this day, for example, "spell-ing" (Abram, 1996, p. 133).

Canon

The Biblical underpinnings of literacy and the study of literature, and the Western emphasis on text-as-truth in white, middle class school culture, the emphasis of study was been at least until recent years, certainly prior to 1950 on learning the canon. Still today, the prevalent practice in secondary and undergraduate English programs consists in reading the "classics", determined in a singularly univocal manner. Revivals of this means of understanding the educated individual find their way into current debates, with writers such as Harold Bloom (1994) advocating the reading of "great books" in such texts as *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages.* He writes:

> Unfortunately, nothing will ever be the same because the art and passion of reading well and deeply, which was the foundation of our enterprise, depended upon people who were fanatical readers when they were still small children. Even devoted and solitary readers are now necessarily beleaguered, because they cannot be certain that fresh generations will grow up to prefer Shakespeare and Dante to all other writers. The shadows lengthen in our evening land. (p. 16)

Thus, the Truth of Biblical text is replaced by the Truth as found in specific "great works" of literature. The question is not only, which texts are included in the

canon, but more importantly, who decides, and the canon has been critiqued on these grounds. Rosenblatt (1991) explains:

> Linguistic and textual analysis, the study of Anglo-Saxon, the history of literary periods and movements, the concern for objective scholarship, and the concentration on works deemed good or great characterized the usual English program. . . . The undergraduate program sought to promote knowledge of the canon, viewed largely in terms of great writers and literary periods. . . .Certain assumptions concerning the study of literature can be discerned as having prevailed over the wide educational spectrum until recent decades. . . . the general assumption was that competent readers could interpret the text and agree on the author's intended meaning, on "what the text meant." (p. 57)

The replacement then, of the Bible with authorized "great works" changed little the underlying assumption that the Truth lay in the text, and it only remained for the reader to learn these great works and interpret them according to agreed upon meanings. Even now in my undergraduate classes, to question the practice of teaching Shakespeare as the fundamental curriculum in secondary English classes is met with astonished and puzzled faces. My students are often firmly against the notion that popular culture and media should be part of elementary and particularly secondary education; forgotten is Shakespeare's role as the popular culture of his time. One century's lowbrow entertainment is another century's classic literature. Csikszentmihalyi (1996), in his analysis of creativity, quotes one of his respondents:

> Literary reputations are constantly shifting. . . . nobody's place in the canon is very secure. . . it's constantly changing. . . John Donne's position was in the

> nineteenth century of no consequence at all. The *Oxford Book of English Verse* had only one poem of his. And now, of course, he was resurrected by Herbert Grierson and T.S. Eliot and he's one of the great figures of seventeenth-century poetry. But he wasn't always. (p. 30)

In accounting for this, Csikszentmihalyi counters the prevailing view, that an artist's, writer's, or composer's contemporaries simply did not recognize their creative genius. For example, van Gogh was a painter unappreciated in his lifetime. Of him, Csikszentmihalyi writes, "What we are saying is that we know what great art is so much better than van Gogh's contemporaries did – those bourgeois philistines. What – besides unconscious conceit – warrants this belief?" (p. 31). Rather, Csikszentmihalyi argues that "his creativity came into being when a sufficient number of art experts felt that his paintings had something important to contribute to the domain of art" (p. 31). An artist is recognized when "the community is moved by his work and discovers new possibilities. . . . creativity can be constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed several times over the course of history" (p. 30). The same might be said for great literature. Greatness, then, is in the eye of the beholder, but more than that, is reflective of each community's particular context. Thus, the canon is exposed as reflective of aesthetics and values of the time and culture rather than some objective measure of a work's

worth. In this sense, the "truth" of the text, with its agreed upon meanings, must be questioned.

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"Oh, that," he said. "It's a poem by a fellow I met at court. A customs official, a bureaucrat for the king. His name is Chaucer. Mark it well. You may one day hear it again. He has peculiar notions about language, but he's a fine poet." He retrieved the text from her and returned it to the desk, straightened the stack of papers she had disturbed. "He says *this* is the real language of England."

"This?" She pointed to the manuscript on the desk. "The real language of England?" She was sufficiently outraged at such a notion to forget her embarrassment. "There is no *language* of England. There's Norman French for the lords and Saxon and Old Norse for the common sort. Latin for the clerics. (Vantrease, 2005, p. 72)

An important tangent to the firm emphasis on the "truth" of the text was the tangential interest beginning in the late 18th century in the author, in the wake of Romanticism. Rosenblatt (1978) tells us that, "Both Wordsworth and Coleridge, for example, find the question, What is poetry? practically interchangeable with the question, What is poet? The traditional formulation is that the mimetic view gave way to the view of art as expression" (p. 2). The biography of the author, and the relationship to his or her text, was paramount. The reader's experience was still

relegated to the sidelines, "left to play the role of invisible eavesdropper" (p.2). The writer's work was in the nature of soliloquy (p.2), not conversation. She or he wrote to an empty theatre, or at least a darkened one. Also according to Rosenblatt, the 20th century practicality and impatience with the poet and her or his emotions brought only more "unrelenting invisibility" (p. 3) to the reader. Ong (1977) writes of "the roles imposed on the reader by the written or printed text" (p.54). Fortunately for this long neglected reader, Rosenblatt enters during the 1930s to rectify the situation.

Subjective Individual

Louise Rosenblatt has been an enormously influential player on the field of literary theory. With her first seminal work, *Literature as Exploration,* written in 1938, she refocused our attention on the aesthetic experience of reading. Her work on reader response theory began here. She was part of the Progressive Education movement (Willinsky, 1990, p. 100) and influenced by educators such as John Dewey, in fact, the term "transaction" was borrowed from Dewey (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 268). Forty years later, she was still writing, and in her 1978 work *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: A transactional theory of the literary work* she more fully developed a theory of interaction between reader and text, one that was reciprocal rather than unidirectional: or *transactional*. In the 1990's, she was still actively participating in the dialogue about literary theory, spanning an incredible six decades in what Willinsky (1990) calls a "long and outstanding contribution to an education in literacy" (p. 99), and he terms reader-response theory a "guiding light" (p. 71). She has "been able to establish, through a concentration of critical energy, the importance of the reader's experience of

the poem as an educational ideal" (Willinsky, p. 103). Although she has at times been misinterpreted as focusing wholly on the reader (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 268; 1985, p. 33), in fact she is interested in the dynamic interaction between the poles of reader and text: "This implies a constant series of selections from the multiple possibilities offered by the text and their synthesis into an organized meaning" (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 268). Current textbooks in the area of literacy teaching reflect this view, particularly for young children. One text simplifies it thus:

> A useful metaphor for literary study suggested itself as Steve watched his son playing with two lumps of modeling clay, one yellow and the other red. As the boy worked with the two lumps, a third color emerged - orange. In literature, the same kind of transformation occurs: a new color results from the mixing of red - the book - and yellow - the students' previous experiences. Orange then represents engagement. (Tchudi & Mitchell, 1999, p. 164)

Reader response theory is so named because it recognized that what the reader *brings* to the text is pivotal to what they *take away;* they bring to any reading "a network of past experiences in literature and in life" (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 35). As she writes, "The purpose will be to admit into the limelight the whole scene - author, text, and reader. We shall be especially concerned with the member of the cast who has hitherto been neglected - the reader" (1978, p. 5). Rosenblatt was deeply concerned with the *kind* of experience a reader had with the text, and she grouped these experiences into two categories: efferent and aesthetic. Efferent is the kind of experience one has if what is sought is information, and the reader "will narrow his attention to building up the meanings, the ideas, the directions to be retained; attention

focuses on accumulating what is to be carried away at the end of the reading" (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 269). This reading is focused on what is retained *after* the event. An aesthetic reading, in contrast, is focused on the internal experience of the reader *during* the reading, common to more narrative forms of literature: a poem, a story, a play. During an aesthetic reading Rosenblatt (1985) describes the reader as being focused on --

> *what he is living through during the reading-event.* He is attending *both* to what the verbal signs designate *and* to the qualitative overtones of the ideas, images, situations, and characters that he is evoking under guidance of the text. The literary work of art comes into being through the reader's attention to what the text activates within him. (p. 38)

Rosenblatt very strongly urges the importance of aesthetic experience within any education of literature. I recently experienced these two forms of experience bumping up against one another at an assembly in an elementary school, celebrating the launching of a book created by the kindergarten class. Two speakers, one a doctor, the other the local mayor, both told stories about their own literacy experiences. The doctor spoke of Saturday trips to the library with his father when he was a boy, where he would pore over books about Africa, eventually contributing to his many trips there giving medical aid. The mayor spoke about the only books in his house, a set of encyclopedias, numbers one to twenty, with only number nineteen missing. He spoke of reading every page of these texts (except nineteen), to find out "everything he could". It struck me that each story was about efferent reading, and both speakers encouraged children to "keep reading" so they could "find things out about the world".

Yet, each speaker told a story, and told it well, and we as the audience had an aesthetic experience of their efferent readings: an interesting juxtaposition of Rosenblatt's categories. Although she sees a sharp distinction between these forms of reading, I am not convinced they are so discrete. In the doctor's story I heard both "what he found out" about Africa, but also about how his imagination was engaged about "this strange land so different from his own."

Since Rosenblatt, there has been a sustained interest in the relationship the reader enters into when reading the text. Researchers such as Sumara (1996) have written extensively about the phenomenology of the reading event, and what happens when this event occurs within a public context such as a classroom, and the importance of "dwelling" with texts rather than simply "touring" through them or utilizing them in the service of skills development:

> The decision to commit ourselves to shared readings and responses to a literary fiction requires a particular kind of thinking which develops with dwelling and building. This thinking is never merely a thinking *about* something, but instead is a thinking *through* something. . . . It is an act of building, but not the kind of building that erects monuments of truth. Rather, it is a building that is associated with dwelling – a living location that becomes a meditation. (p. 165)

Rosenblatt's ideas are compatible with those of the philosopher Bakhtin, who had a deep interest in the notion of dialogue. This dialogue he saw not to be binary, but multidirectional, and in operation wherever language exists. He also had great concern for the aesthetic, and he saw language to always be "a potentially aesthetic medium" (Schuster, 1997, p. 458). In terms of reading, he made a lasting contribution to a

theory of the novel, and envisioned a three way relationship between reader, text, and the hero. He saw all of these roles shifting and interconnecting, and each participant taking multiple roles:

> The three elements of the dialogue speak, listen, and influence each other equivalently. . . . Speaker and listener, in the act of engaging with the hero (which is, like them, both a speaker and a listener), become charged by the hero's identity. They change as a result of the association, for they are just as affected by the hero. Like planets in a solar system, each element affects the orbits of the other whirling participants by means of its own gravitational pull. (Schuster, 1997, p. 459).

Under this view, style cannot be separated from content, and "to attend to style in language is, according to Bakhtin, to perceive the interpretive richness of discourse" (Schuster, 1997, p. 461). Bakhtin is concerned with opening up possibilities for the reader, to allow for infinite variations in interpretations, to help the reader see the multivocal complexity of language, for which he frequently used the image of the carnival (Holquist, 1990, p. 89). In a similar vein, Sumara (1996) writes, "It is important, therefore, to understand that what we perceive as literary emerges from a recursive relationship – through the act of reading – among the *real,* the *fictive,* and the *imaginary*" (p. 38). Moreso than Rosenblatt, Bakhtin seemed to have a notion of the importance of the context. Kristeva (1986) writes of Bakhtin:

> What allows a dynamic dimension to structuralism is his conception of the "literary word" as an *intersection of textual surfaces* rather than a *point* (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the

> addressee (or the character) and the contemporary or earlier cultural context. (p. 36)

Here Bakhtin is identified as a structuralist, and although his work built on that of Saussure, he also tried to extend beyond Saussure's rigidity. In many ways his philosophy was what he called a border philosophy, moving "in spaces that are liminal" (in Holquist, 1990, p. 14). Showing this liminality, Holquist (1990) writes of Bahktin's view:

> Existence, like language, is a shared event. It is always a border incident on the gradient both joining and separating the immediate reality of my own living particularity (a uniqueness that presents itself as only for me) with the reality of the system that precedes me in existence (that is always-already-there) and which is intertwined with everyone and everything else. . . in existence that is shared, there can be nothing absolute, including nothing absolutely new. (p. 28-9)

Rosenblatt defines herself as neither structural nor post-structural, complaining that both of these orientations are far too focused on the text to the exclusion of the reader. Although she does make passing reference to social context, it seems only the lightest of nods, interested as she is on the internal aesthetic experience of the reader, seeing "the individual reader's transaction with the text as primary over the local context of classroom or sociocultural contexts beyond the classroom" (Lewis, 2000, p. 257). Rosenblatt writes, "Once the unobstructed impact between reader and text has been made possible, extraordinary opportunities for a real educational process are open to the reader" (1938, in Connell, 2000, p. 30). Rooted in the Progressive Education

movement, in company with Dewey, Rosenblatt is interested in the democratic potential of her theory (Connell, 2000, pp. 33-35), and thus it is a largely individualistic concern. She sees the path of the efferent or the aesthetic reading, for right or wrong, as a *choice* or *stance* on the part of the reader (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 269). Sumara (1996) argues, "Because these engagements are experiences, they become woven into the fabric of the reader's world, and thus we see how the imaginary weaves itself back into the real" (p. 38).

In a fascinating turn, Illich (1993) argues that the very idea of the individual person or *persona* is actually made possible by the existence of text, positing that this notion did not exist prior to the 12th century, when scholastic reading dawns. He writes, "What I want to stress here is a special correspondence between the emergence of selfhood understood as a person and the emergence of "the" text from the page" (p. 25)

Sometimes (or perhaps always) the text makes particular demands of us, sometimes we are positioned in particular ways without or even in spite of our "wanting or doing". As Ong (1977) writes, "Histories of the relationship between literature and culture have something to say about the status and behaviour of readers" (p. 54). It is to the role of context, or the cultures surrounding literacy, that I will now turn.

Literacy as Social Practice

The understanding of literacy as social practice was pioneered by such critical theorists as Paulo Freire, in his work with illiterate adults in Brazil. He worked from an emancipatory perspective, and recognized that reading, indeed the very motivation to

learn to read, had a social dynamic, meaning, and purpose. Freire and Macedo (1987) write,

> Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world. Language and reality are dynamically interconnected. The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context. (p. 29)

Freire took into account the internal experience of the reader, but argues that particularly in terms of marginalized groups, this experience is one of internal as well as external oppression, recognizing that "the interiorization of oppression is profound" (Stuckey, 1991, p. 67). Thus, the focus now shifts heavily to context. Stuckey (1991) writes, "Literacy is a social restriction and an individual accomplishment. . . . Teaching literacy depends on the circumstances rather than on the textbook. Our attention needs to be focused on the conditions in every instance" (p. 64). I have placed this section here rather than after the post-structural, which chronologically is also a candidate, because the recognition of literacy as social practice still depends upon notions of *meaning,* which a post-structural view departs from.

In contrast to reader-response theory, literacy as social practice recognizes that the meaning cannot be located *inside* the reader, that it is dependent upon and answers to the social constructs surrounding her, but also that the text itself positions the reader in a particular way. Christie and Misson (1998) describe this shift in understanding: "Whereas language and literacy had previously been seen as being produced from an essential private self, the very existence of a self outside language and society was now

being questioned" (p. 6). This is consistent with Wittgenstein's notion of *language games*: "the technique is a kind of therapy, the purpose of which is to free ourselves from the philosophical confusions that result from considering language in isolation from its place in the 'stream of life'" (in Monk, 1990, p. 330). In a Wittgensteinian view, there is an understanding that there is no text without context. There are many current theorists who work with the notion of reading as a socio-cultural practice. In a recent text entitled *Literacy as Snake Oil* (2001), edited by Joanne Larson, James Paul Gee writes:

> When we read - child or adult - we always read *something.* This something is always a text of *a certain type* (in a certain genre) and is read (interpreted) *in a certain way.* . . . Social (really, socio-cultural) groups . . . engage in shared practices using texts. These groups and their practices, now and in history, *make* a text function as a certain type (or genre) and demand that it be read in a certain way (and not others). (pp 16-17)

This notion is illustrated exhaustively by Heath (1993), introduced earlier, where she demonstrates clearly how a child's understanding of the ways to interact with text were taught by the community. Heath also showed the disconnect between many of these ways and the ways encountered by the child when he enters school, and the disconnection persists as Stuckey (1991) asserts: "certain ways with language are esteemed according to their usefulness within communities, but that the power of the ways with language is dependent upon the power of the communities" (p. 38). So what happens, then, when the language or the dialect or the topic or even the means by which a story or information is presented is different than what a given reader has

come to expect in his or her community? How does this immediately position that reader as Other, before even beginning to choose an efferent or aesthetic reading? Not only is text mediated by the social context surrounding both the author and the reader, the reader becomes positioned by the text itself in relation to a particular world. As Ong (1982) states so powerfully, "Writing. . . is a particularly pre-emptive and imperialist activity that tends to assimilate other things to itself" (p.12). He argues (1977) that not only must the author fictionalize the audience in order to write, so too must the reader fictionalize him or herself:

> What do we mean by saying the audience is a fiction? Two things at least. First, that the writer must construct in his imagination, clearly or vaguely, an audience cast in some sort of role - entertainment seekers, reflective sharer of experience. . . inhabitants of a lost and remembered world of prepubertal latency (readers of Tolkein's hobbit stories), and so on. Second, we mean that the audience must correspondingly fictionalize itself. A reader has to play the role in which the author has cast him, which seldom coincides with his role in the rest of actual life. (p.61).

Of course, the reader may resist that particular fiction, or may simply find it inaccessible. And the context within which he reads has something to say about *how* something is read, not only the text itself, nor an internal stance. So, when we have difficulty in understanding text other than in, for example, a literal and absolute way, which is still (incredibly) the way textbooks are treated in many schools, it is not difficult to understand why students don't think critically. I think of one of my student teachers I observed recently, who deplored today's children's "lack of imagination"

even as she was handing out the next in a series of interminable worksheets to students seated in rows facing a black board and admonishing them to "work quietly". Giroux (1983) writes, "literacy can be neither neutral nor objective, and that for the most part. . . is inscribed in the ideology and practice of domination" (in Stuckey, 1991, p. 53). As Kesson (1999) explains, "*the way we think* is to a great extent the product of *the way we are educated"* (p. 87). Luke (1991) draws our attention not only to the highly politicized nature of reading and the teaching of it, but to our general oblivion to this fact, as though reading could occur in isolation from other things:

> The teaching of reading is an exemplary area of educational endeavour requiring political critique. By this I refer not its excellence, but to the relative naivete of its practitioners and advocates about its own historical development and presuppositions. . . . For "reading" - whether conceived of as an indicator of moral virtue, distinction and taste, deep linguistic competence, intelligence or psychological skill acquisition - is a social construction: an historic and culture-specific competence which has been regulated institutionally in accordance with particular economic and political interests. (p. 6)

These economic and political interests intersect issues of class, race, and gender. The notion of text as perpetuating unequal hegemonies is central to the recognition of literacy as social practice. Text is never neutral, and has historically privileged, for example, not only a male view of reality, but also helped to buttress patriarchal structures. Feminist readings continue to be crucial for any shift in consciousness. As Kenworthy (1998) points out,

> Dominant Western discourse set up and regulate a system in which men as a category are superior to women as a category. They also set up expectations about appropriate masculine and feminine behaviour. . . . Texts that draw on these discourses, if not read critically, are regarded unproblematic because they are seen to represent reality, rather than to construct a version of reality. (p. 5)

Understanding literacy as a social practice, then, means not only understanding the reading of text to be a social activity, but also one with emancipatory potential, if a *critical literacy* is developed. Lankshear (1987) states that "Literacy has a potential role within attempts by subordinate groups to engage in political action aimed at resisting present inequities of structural power (and their human consequences) and bringing about structural change" (p. 28).

> We are not just private individuals in whose private minds the printed word works powerful deeds. We are, to be sure, natural individuals, but we are social before we are born, and the commerce we do with literacy is always, fundamentally, social. We are arranged by our relations to literacy, to how and why literacy is produced, and to the effects of what literacy is about. (Stuckey, 1991, p. 95)

The Post-Structuralist Turn and the Postmodern: Alternative Texts

In a post-structural approach to literacy, a vastly different orientation to literature becomes visible. As the term implies, this was a reaction to the rigidity of structuralism, and the underlying assumption of *meaning*. In the evolution traced thus far, first the text was emphasized, then the reader, then the context. Now all of these

categories become suspect, and the notion developed that meaning is always *deferred*: the meaning of a text can never be arrived at, once and for all, it is not contained in any one place – in the text, as the traditional orientation would have us believe, in the reader, as the subjective-individual perspective argues, or in the context, as in the socially critical orientation. Meaning is always in motion, a kind of moving target. One of the early, significant theorists to develop these complex ideas was Derrida, and the historical attack of structuralism is often traced to a paper he delivered in 1966, entitled "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (Bush, 2003, p. 1). Derrida complicates and dismantles our understandings of language. He shows us a world where textuality becomes endlessly slippery, unstable, ambiguous, and meaning indeterminate. He exposes a dramatic tension between the limitlessness and finitude of language, and speaks of the difference between the presence of oral language versus the absence of written language.

> However the topic is considered, the *problem of language* has never been simply one problem among others. . . .Yet, by one of its aspects or shadows, it is itself still a sign: this crisis is also a symptom. It indicates, as if in spite of itself, that a historico-metaphysical epoch *must* finally determine as language the totality of its problematic horizon. It must do so not only because all that desire had wished to wrest from the play of language finds itself recaptured within that play but also because, for the same reason, language itself is menaced in its very life, helpless, adrift in the threat of limitlessness, brought back to its own finitude at the very moment when its limits seem to disappear,

> when it ceases to be self-assured, contained, and *guaranteed* by the infinite signified which seemed to exceed it. (Derrida, 1976, p. 6)

A post-structural view has major implications for the analysis and interpretation of literature. Sumara (1996) writes, "For Derrida, the reader does not exist before the work, but is invented by the work through her or his engagement with the work. It is the iterable character, the ability to mark and re-mark that permits this invention" (p. 38). Gone is the authority of the text, the concern with the biography and character of the author, the emotional response of the reader, and the understanding of shared cultural meaning. "It traces the limits of teaching and at the same time it breaches those limits from within" (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 195). Lyotard (1984) shows the point of departure: "The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (p. 37). A post-structural view is also highly compatible with the notion of multi-literacies, since the very idea of "text" is interrogated. In a post-structural perspective, it becomes at least momentarily possible to imagine ourselves as "beyond language" (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 192). Post-structuralism is the literary aspect of a post-modern world, and as new technologies continue to burgeon at astonishing rates, it might be argued that a post-structural perspective is the only possible response. As will amply be demonstrated by the data, while many schools continue to teach students under reader-response or even authoritative text models, the world has raced ahead, and those same students live in a world where the notion of authorship, particularly in electronic environments such as the Internet, has become unrecognizable, where

subjectivities are fragmented, layered, and contested, and where multiple communities and contexts are participated in simultaneously. Griffith (1987) writes:

> A text is not a book; neither is it, in any simple and straightforward sense, a passage in a book either. . . every text is an intertext. . . . With such a complex artefact, varying readings are not only possible, they are positively obligatory. Again, this may sound a little like reader-response theory once more, but the differences are more important than the resemblances. There is no central core of meaning to be discovered. . . There is no interpretive community available to validate wildly deviant readings. . . . there is no stable self to be discovered by interaction with the text, since the self is as multiple and as written-through as the text is. (pp. 43-44)

Thus, while post-structuralist ideas are not new, they seem glaringly conducive to the plethora of new media surrounding us. We are in the midst of a massive cultural shift, and the understanding of literacy as black marks marching on a linear path across a white page seems hopelessly inadequate. Theorists in the field are becoming increasingly interested in media of various types, and are turning to cultural critique as a way of responding. For example, Henry Giroux (2002) is now writing about film; James Paul Gee (2003) is writing about video games. Fascinating texts are emerging that attempt to re-introduce the notion of *image* into learning:

> The scales of meaning and teaching need to be balanced so that word no longer eclipses image. Language is not the sole, perhaps not even the primary, means by which we create meaning of our worlds. Imagery arises within and around us, marking indelibly the linguistic fabric we weave. (Fleckenstein, 2002, p.4)

It is not as though these new media are unequivocally "good" in any sense, any more than they are inherently "bad". However, it would be naïve to imagine that we have control over how these technologies are used or use us. An urgent necessity exists to *respond* or at the very least to *notice* what is happening to us, sometimes in spite of us. As Holquist (1990) writes in a Bakhtinian vein, "The world addresses us and we are alive and human to the degree that we are answerable…We are responsible in the sense that we are *compelled* to respond, we cannot choose but give the world an answer" (p 30). A postmodern view recognizes that we have only very limited agency in the discourses that surround us, and thus a highly tuned awareness is demanded from those who wish to participate.

Uncharted territory

This chapter has attempted to explore the effect that reader, text, and context have had on the understanding of literacy. What becomes clear is that all of these terms have sustained continued flux, never more acutely than today. All of the variations and emphases in regards to how these terms are viewed persist alongside of one another, in a kind of uneasy co-habitation which frequently erupts in argument. Agreeing with Berlin (1997) and Luke (1991), my experience of schools is that teachers of literacy and literature are largely unaware of the rhetorical history and theoretical underpinnings of their orientations and practices. Frequently, these practices contain aspects of all of the orientations presented above, and this can lead to both conceptual and pedagogical confusion. This study seeks to explore teachers' conceptualizations and their practices in relation to these ideas. Hopefully for the teachers involved in this

study it may help to raise deep rooted understandings about literacy into consciousness. As our world becomes profusely postmodern in its complexity, we increasingly live in the spaces between reader, text, and context; meanwhile those points no longer hold fixed axes as they once did. Notions of reader, text, and context, and what it means to be a literate and literary person, continue to oscillate madly. New notions are evolving, as yet perhaps only intuitively grasped. Little is known about how teachers in current classrooms are navigating this highly contested and fluctuating nest of concepts surrounding the printed word and our relationship to text, and it is this question this inquiry seeks to address.

Chapter 3

HERMENEUTICS IN PLAY

"Both the way and the thing."-- *Caputo*

Means of Inquiry

This study seeks to come to a deeper understanding of teachers' conceptualizations surrounding literacy. The question requires me as the researcher to excavate teacher's beliefs about literacy and to interpret those within broad socio-historical contexts of these beliefs and practices. Given these requirements, I locate this research in an interpretive framework, specifically, hermeneutics. However it has also been my aim to keep a sense of play and disruption in this study, and Caputo's radicalization of hermeneutics allows for this play (1987). Thus, in this chapter, I will look broadly at interpretive research, hermeneutics as a means of proceeding (rather than method with strict rules), and then specifically at Caputo's work in radical hermeneutics and what I can glean from his thinking for the purpose of this study. Finally, I will describe the specifics of the inquiry design: the sources of data, the participants, the means of interpretation, and an explanation of the representation. Caputo's (1987) description of the goal of hermeneutic interpretation is what I aim for in this work:

> Interpretation is the working out, the unfolding of a preunderstanding. Hermeneutics is the recovery of a prior understanding for which we have hitherto lacked the words. Hermeneutics uncovers because it recovers, brings us to stand in the place where we already are, a place of mysterious proximity.

> There is no proving and disproving in hermeneutics but only a certain letting-be-seen in which we find (or fail to find) ourselves in the account. (p.81)

Interpretive Frames

Any method of research is tacitly answering questions about reality even before the actual work of the study is undertaken. Understandings of what "truth" is, and the degree of absoluteness possible, are implied by the methodology chosen. The method of data collection and analysis then stem from these basic assumptions. The degree to which these assumptions are made explicit varies greatly. All research methodologies operate under implicit notions about the world and how it is known (e.g., that scientific methods can yield concrete truth through highly controlled experimental conditions). However, interpretive methodologies recognize that these orientations are situated rather than givens, and explore them as a relevant part of the inquiry. For most questions surrounding complex social questions of experience, quantifiable data is not appropriate, because attempts at certainty result in superficial understandings, and necessarily do a disservice to the issues raised. Schwandt (1998) writes,

> Knowledge of educational phenomena cannot be reduced to a scientific model which limits knowledge to the objective verification of regularities and where our situated selves have no bearing on what constitutes knowledge. To understand what it means to educate (and what it means to do educational inquiry) is to participate in the cultivation and acquisition of practical wisdom. Therefore, as a process of this kind, education is interpretation, it involves self-understanding, and its purpose is to make us more human. (p. 411)

Thus, I saw an interpretive frame to be most relevant to this inquiry and this orientation underpinned my research decisions. It is important to make tacit orientations explicit, because they affect my perspectives and ways of understanding, my way of asking questions, seeking out data, and interpreting results. This is not seen as a limitation of the study, because *all* research must begin *somewhere*, in some space of understanding and orientation to the world. Interpretive research recognizes the absurdity of supposedly "objective" inquiry: the researcher is always present, always one of the participants. In interpretive inquiry this presence is named and considered rather than artificially made invisible. This framework is selected partly because of who *I* am, and partly because of what the *question* is. In interpretive research, my own history and mentorship within the field of education is relevant: the theorists I am drawn to, the methodological approaches which resonate for me and which seem to "fit" with my way of understanding the world. I cannot artificially erase my presence. Secondly, the question itself has something to say about how I proceed. Part of this process necessarily becomes being open to transformation as a result of the inquiry; I remain open to the possibility that my understanding of the world may shift. This means of proceeding can be seen as a "method without method" (Caputo, Lecture, April 21, 2006). Jardine (1994) writes,

> The interpretive effort is directed squarely against [a] flattening, overly technical, surface reading of our lives. . . and the lives of our students. . . Interpretive work wishes to evoke and bespeak the figures that haunt us beneath the clean and literal surfaces of technique. It wishes to evoke the places where collective meaning resides – a haunted space where tales arc into tales and

> sense into sense, where the ambiguous passage of message ensues. . . . It is a gap between worlds. (p. 18)

Or, as Mayers (2001) puts it, "Understanding and interpretation come from a tension that lives in between what is familiar to us and what is unfamiliar" (p.6). Interpretation does not take place from outside; one must inhabit the phenomena being studied. Thus, in interpreting teachers' conceptualizations of literacy, I am working through a sense of inhabitation; we *inhabit* literacy, in multiple and shifting ways, in possibilities that are as potentially violent as they are empowering (Stuckey, 1991), in ways that are rooted in cultural histories and lived out towards individual and collective futures. Inhabitation as my methodology, rather than observation, allows for multifaceted, diverse modes of interpretation. We also inhabit interpretive research. Hermeneutic interpretation demands a high level of sensitivity to the phenomena studied, and requires the researcher to consider multiple possibilities in understanding data gathered, always contextualizing these in broader terms. It is a continuous process of play between what is and what might be, recognizing "the centrality of the tradition from whence one speaks, set among and in between the fluid motion of the world" (Mayers, 2001, p. 6). This task is difficult, it is a means or practice of inquiry that is always in the process of becoming, and finds truths while never quite arriving at them. The means of inquiry is philosophical in its process, and the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (in McCleary, 1964) is helpful here:

> How can a philosophy which rejects all claims to an absolute point of view and which insists upon the situational character of all truth still meaningfully seek the truth? According to Merleau-Ponty, it can do so because it knows that the

> center of philosophy is "everywhere and nowhere," in the sense that truth and the whole are in the first philosophy and every subsequent one, but as a task to be accomplished and thus not yet there. (p. xxv)

My question, *how do teachers conceptualize literacy,* is hermeneutic in the sense that the socio-cultural and historical situatedness of language and literacy is considered to be deeply relevant to current individual understandings. Teachers know about language and literacy through multiple histories, enactments, and meaning systems. How they make sense of this was the object of my inquiry. However, in commencing this research I suspected that the meanings of language and literacy would be anything but unified, between participants certainly, but perhaps even within individuals. The possibility exists of multiple and fragmented identities and meanings. Postmodern sensibility allows for more tension and recognizes the potential for fragmentation and confusion of meaning, and while pursuing a hermeneutic process I see a need for postmodern disruption. Even as I inquired into literacy through interviews I recognized the difficulty of language and communication. It allows for the gaps. Ellsworth (1997) writes:

> It is impossible to say everything, once and for all, in language. Any attempt . . . brings me up against the limits of language, up against the impossibility of language coinciding with what it speaks of, up against the gap . . . up against language's inevitable misfire. (p. 44)

Using language as a means to understanding is a hermeneutic project, however, I am caught in my inquiry between language and its limitations. Sometimes what was not said was more important than what was said. Absence can be as important as presence. For this reason, I will first explore what is meant by "hermeneutics," and then look at how a postmodern disruption can be brought into play, recognizing the gaps and misfires.

Their work evoked the whispers and melodies of language we could not hear, it filled us with nostalgia for a world we have never known. (Grumet, 1988, p. 60), on reconceptualist curriculum theorists.

Hermeneutic Interpretation

> Hermeneutics is thus for the hardy. It is a radical thinking which is suspicious of the easy way out. . . Hermeneutics wants to describe the fix we are in, and tries to be hard-hearted and work "from below." It does not try to situate itself above the flux or to seek a way out. (Caputo, 1987, p. 3)

Hermeneutics, on first glance, means "interpretation," and is a tradition with its own long history, developed through a series of philosophers usually marked as beginning with Schleiermacher, Husserl, and developed through the work of Heidegger and Gadamer. Gadamer's interest was incited by the work of Heidegger, and involved a particular "manner of engaging with *texts* and fascination with the binding character of *tradition."* He saw philosophy as a "living, participative activity" (Moran, 2000, p. 248). Hermeneutics can be a slippery and difficult term to define, but Moran (2000) helps us with this description:

> Hermeneutics is the art of interpretation or understanding, and, for Gadamer, always signifies an ongoing, never completable process of understanding, rooted in human finitude and human linguisticality. Gadamer follows Heidegger's *Being and Time* in seeing understanding as *the* central manner of human being-in-the-world. Humans are essentially involved in the historically situated and finite task of understanding the world, a world encountered and inhabited in and through language. . . . Philosophy, then, is a conversation leading towards mutual understanding, a conversation, furthermore, where this very understanding comes as something genuinely *experienced.* (p. 248-9)

Gadamer sees this experience of understanding as a profoundly linguistic event. He is interested in shared understanding as a conversation that comes about "between people and their tradition - the common understandings which emerge in a dialogue and which go beyond the intentions of the speakers" (Moran, 2000, p. 249). Biblical and legal hermeneutics had to do with the interpretation of texts, whether the Bible or the Law, in terms of what they have to say for the particular situation or case in front of us *today* (pp. 272-3). Thus, a dynamic relation is set up between the text and our lives, between the old and the new. Not only does the text have something to say about the decision we make today or the way we read or understand a situation, but this new situation then helps us to recast the past and helps us to see the text anew. This is known as the "hermeneutic circle". Caputo (1987) describes this as a "creative production which pushes ahead, which produces *as* it repeats, which produces *what* it repeats, which makes a life for itself in the midst of the difficulties of the flux" (p.5). Gadamer (1999/1960) explains that this circle is not simply reconstructive of the past,

but consists "in thoughtful mediation with contemporary life" (p. 169). There is a dynamic relationship between past, present, and future – "History is only present to us in light of our futurity" (Gadamer, 1977, p. 9). Caputo (1987) writes that the hermeneutic circle "teaches us to decipher by reading backward. . . according to which all forward movement is likewise a movement in reverse" (p. 165). However, the hermeneutic circle is not a vicious one; it is not simply reproductive, although it does contain a certain violence: "Interpretation must always be a forceful setting free of the matter to be understood which counters [our] tendency to fall and take the easy way out" (p. 63).

Much of this revolves around the notion of *presuppositions.* In quantitative research methodologies, researcher bias is identified only with the purpose of erasing it. A researcher must be neutral and objective. Hermeneutics views the binary of subjective/objective as a false dichotomy. It views truth as neither "out there" in the world or "in here" inside the subjective individual. Rather, it recognizes the negotiated, intersubjective nature of truth, contextualized within historical consciousness and negotiated between us all, past, present, and future. Hermeneutics recognizes the impossibility of erasing our foreknowledge or presuppositions that foreshadow any experience and colour its interpretation. This notion is indebted to Heidegger. Caputo (1987) explains:

> To understand means to project a certain horizontal framework within which being is to be understood. . . . We can learn something new only on the condition that we have already been appropriately oriented to begin with. (p. 61)

Clear seeing is burdened with all the limitations of human consciousness, always situated in spatial perspectives and temporal phases. Furthermore, our work, no matter what its form, is not the seeing itself but a picture of the seeing. (Grumet, 1988, pp. 60-1)

Hermeneutics then asks us to become attuned to our being-in-the-world, first conceptualized in Husserl's phenomenology (Caputo, 1987, p. 36), in a way that recognizes "things just as the things which they are" (p. 57). We make every attempt to restore life to its "original difficulty" (p. 1) and to "let the thing speak for itself" (p. 80). Then, "the matter to be 'decided' is whether the projection 'fits'" (p. 80). However, all of these projections are "revisable" or "provisional" (p. 80); we must decide if the world is disclosed or distorted by the interpretation. Does it resonate, do we say, "*That* is what we are looking for. That puts into words what we have all along understood about ourselves" (p. 81)? It is that which we hope for in a hermeneutic interpretation, but even at its moment of realization, it is once again open for reinterpretation, "no interpretation is safe" (p. 73). Hermeneutic interpretation requires a kind of insight, which allows us to understand our own historicity and experiences in new lights:

> Insight is more than knowledge of this or that situation. It always involves an escape from something that had deceived us and held us captive. Thus insight always involves an element of self-knowledge and constitutes a necessary side

of what we called experience in the proper sense. Insight is something we come to. (Gadamer, 1999/1960, p. 356)

In conducting the practice of hermeneutics as educational inquiry, Smith (1991) elucidates four aspects of what he calls the "hermeneutic imagination" as descriptive characteristics.

- *A deep attentiveness to language itself, to notice how one uses it and how others use it (p. 199).* As in the tradition of Schleiermacher, Husserl, Heidegger, and particularly Gadamer, one must become deeply immersed in language, to become aware of its nuances and undercurrents. Etymology becomes extremely useful, but so does simply becoming attuned to words and words within words. Metaphor, analogy, symbol - all create and evoke a sense of our collective consciousness and even unconsciousness. It is the artistic expressiveness inherent in the writing that often gives interpretive work its distinctive, evocative style.
- *A second requirement for hermeneutical explorations of the human life-world is a deepening of one's sense of the basic interpretability of life itself (p. 199).* Part of this is a belief that one can interpret what is happening, and also that grand narratives can be recognized and interrupted so that fresh interpretations of life as it is "actually lived" can be made, rather than continuing to see the world through the old lenses of, for example, patriarchy or materialism.
- *Hermeneutics is not really concerned with hermeneutics per se: that is, with its character as another self-defining imploding discourse within a universe of other discourses. Far more important is its overall interest which is the*

question of human meaning (p. 200). Hermeneutics asks larger questions and sees each of us in the middle of narrative, storied experiences. Another way to ask the research question might be, "What is the story of language and literacy?" or, "What is the teacher's story of language and literacy?" The hermeneutic imagination requires a deep rendering of significant topics; it is not content to scratch away at the surface.

- *A fourth aspect of hermeneutical inquiry implicit in all of the others suggested so far has to do with its inherent creativity. Hermeneutics is about creating meaning, not simply reporting on it (p. 201).*

Emphasized in all of these descriptions is the deep concern with meaning. This is a relevant means of proceeding then, in this inquiry, because of its interest in teachers' *meanings* of language and literacy. There is also a particular hermeneutic way of moving through inquiry, which requires the attentiveness described earlier - attentiveness to the connection and tensions between past and present, between text and lived experience, between individuals and their historicity. Gadamer's fascination with language as a means of coming to consciousness will also be relevant philosophically to the inquiry, even as I attempt, tremulously, to interrupt this certainty, a grand narrative of its own. I grew up, intellectually speaking, in a hermeneutic environment. My tendencies toward interpretation and finding meaning flow from this rich, generative space. Yet lately I have become suspicious that meaning is not always central, that understanding is not always possible, and even that humanism, of which phenomenology and hermeneutics are unabashed manifestations, is not always desirable. Through my doctoral work I have become uneasy with the comforts of

hermeneutics, even though it seems the most natural way to proceed. So in this inquiry I want to allow space for interrogation of these world views, that hold human experience and meaning so dear.

A Radical Approach

"Not to closure, but to disclosure." - Caputo

In a move that infuses hermeneutics with postmodern flux, Caputo attempts to instill Derridian flux into traditional hermeneutics. Derrida, who questioned the whole notion of meaning and incited the project of deconstruction, was an outspoken critic of hermeneutics. Yet Caputo (1987) believes that Derrida "does not undo Husserl; he unfetters him. He does not undo hermeneutics; he releases its more radical tendencies. Or rather, deconstruction is an 'un-doing,'. . . which does not raze but releases and which is ready for what is difficult, indeed, ready for the worst" (p.5). In my inquiry, I wanted to conflate the unlikely bedfellows of poststructural and hermeneutic interpretations, and was initially concerned that this would be too contradictory, working against myself. In Caputo, I find just this conflation: he writes, "This hermeneutics exposes us to the ruptures and gaps, let us say, the textuality and difference, which inhabits everything we think, and do, and hope for. . . . All of this is, I claim, hermeneutic work. For it describes the fix we are in." (p. 6). I could not ask for a clearer description of the intention of this inquiry in relation to language and literacy: to expose the ruptures and gaps in literacy beliefs and practices, and to begin to recognize and describe the fix we are in. Like Caputo, I hope not to make things easier,

but to allow their original difficulty; I hope rather than to answer my questions, "to keep them open, to let them to waver and tremble" (p.6).

Lyotard (1984) writes that "our working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age" (p.3). According to this argument, postmodernism is not a philosophy or theory that we may choose or choose to ignore, it is the reality of the world we live in; it requires us to respond. Signs of this are easily observable, much more so even than was the case when Lyotard wrote this. Mass media become increasingly pervasive, fragmented, and integrated into everyday life. The world wide web, and its infinite varieties of uses and abuses, the instant messaging, the wikies, the logs and the blogs, the pseudo news replete with popup advertisements, youtube, the role-playing combat games with thousands of participants world wide: this is a postmodern environment. It is fragmented, confusing, with multiple, deferred or seemingly absent meanings. Language is shifting more quickly than we can track. As with the other methodological approaches suggested above, postmodern theory, and its literary sibling, poststructuralism, will have much to say about language and literacy, offering a starkly different interpretation of the reader's relationship to text and the possibilities for shared understanding in conversation.

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Postmodern methodologies are most clearly defined by their refusal to privilege any discourse or narrative. They are also insistent on the deferral of meaning, and the inevitability of gaps between what is intended and what is understood. This kind of perspective was helpful in understanding classroom teachers' conceptualizations, in considering the possibility that there are fragmented, unfinished, incomplete, or conflicting beliefs and practices surrounding language and literacy. Postmodern theory has a way of turning in on itself, allowing its own claims to come under question as well. Ely et al. (1997) quote Atkinson (1992) regarding the "flux of contemporary ideas" leading to:

> A radical questioning of the certainty and authority of the scholarly text; a rejection of the search for 'truth' and reason as absolutes; a denial of the intellectual and moral distance between the academic and his or her human 'subjects'; a suspicion of the 'big' narratives of totalizing theory. (p. 229)

This perspective calls into question humanistic, meaning centered approaches. However, Caputo, in his uneasy intertwining of Husserl and Derrida, recognizes the invisible thread between hermeneutics and the postmodern, writing, "Derrida is the turning point for radical hermeneutics, the point where hermeneutics is pushed to the brink" (1987, p. 5). Caputo preserves the hermeneutic process, but no longer does so in the naïve pursuit of meaning. Radical hermeneutics means a loss of innocence.

> What I have called here radical hermeneutics. . . exposes itself to the twilight world of ambiguous and undecidable figures which populate that shadowy sphere. Its role is not so much to "come to grips" with it – that is the metaphorics of grasping, and we have insisted on its ability to elude our grip –

> as it is to cope with it or, best of all, to stay in play with it. . . . I do not intend to return us to a more traditional hermeneutic, bent on interpretive projection and finding meaning. I have already said that radical hermeneutics arises only at the point of the breakdown and loss of meaning, the withdrawal and dissemination of meaning – in short, the thunderstorm. (Caputo, 1987, p. 271)

Thus, a radical hermeneutic does not seek meaning, it occurs precisely at the point of its loss. In the field of language and literacy, I argue that we are at this point of rupture. This is the moment then, for hermeneutic process to both recover and deconstruct what we believe it to be. This becomes a radical process, "There is no hermeneutic recovery without deconstruction and no deconstruction not aimed at recovery" (Caputo, 1987, p. 65). This deconstruction is aimed at disrupting our self-interpretation as "beings of the present" (p. 64), and the work of recovery happens by "clearing away the superficial and commonplace understanding of things which systematically obscures our view" (p. 63). Remember that this work of recovery is not one of exact reproduction, but a productive, creative act, that does not take the easy way out but places us firmly, decidedly in the fray.

SO LET GO, JUST
GET IN
OH, IT'S SO
AMAZING HERE
IT'S ALRIGHT
'CAUSE THERE'S
BEAUTY IN
THE BREAKDOWN

·· FROU FROU

Narrative Approaches and the (Auto)Biographical Necessity

What became intensively apparent through the research process was the significance of teachers' biographies of literacy in relation to their current practices. There has been a great deal of work done on the relevance of narrative approaches to interpretive inquiry and support for working biographically with teachers. While I did not initially anticipate this direction for my inquiry, focusing more as I was on the historical contexts of literacy, the data lead inexorably in this direction, thus a need exists to delve into some of this literature, to see what has come before. For guidance I look both to the literature on narrative inquiry as well as to the teacher education literature, and find that a tradition is well established in these areas. What was interesting to me was that the data for this study was in a sense a "re-discovery" of something already present within the field. Thus, in this sense, the data did not find something altogether new, but serves as a re-membrance and re-minder of the importance of teachers' autobiographies and the fruitfulness of working narratively with their stories in order to better understand and potentially transform curriculum. Elbaz-Luwisch (2005) suggests, "Narrative research makes it possible to pay attention to the wider concerns that shape the work of teaching, looking at the whole lives of teachers and other educational practitioners, and exploring those lives as embedded in multiple contexts" (p. x). Particularly illuminating is Connelly and Clandinin's (1999) argument that teachers' questions of identity, and their concerns as researchers with teacher knowledge were intertwined. This was lived out in ways I did not predict at the outset in my inquiry, in finding that teachers' construction of themselves as literate

people were inextricable from their conceptualizations of literacy that they worked with in their classrooms.

This way of working is congruent with hermeneutic ways of working, and echoes Caputo's (1987) admonition to work "from below" (p. 3). Goodson (1992) makes the distinction between telling teachers' life stories, and "life history" work, suggesting that life history is situated within its historical context (p. 6). Thus, this is a fundamentally hermeneutic concern. Goodson (1992) argues the importance of this kind of work, writing, "Studying teachers' lives will provide a valuable range of insights into the new moves to restructure and reform schooling" (p. 11). While I was familiar with the notion that teachers "teach who they are," I had always thought of this more in relation to their overall teaching philosophy and approaches in the classroom to their relationships with students and the image of the world that they operate under. What was most significant, for me, in the course of this study was to understand the significance of teachers' autobiographical experiences specifically in terms of curriculum.

Elbaz-Luwisch is one theorist who works in a strongly narrative tradition. She traces the development of this tradition back to Schwab (1978), "who developed an understanding of curriculum as a practical endeavour that called attention to the lived experience of young people and teachers in schools and classrooms" (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2005, p. xii). She calls attention to MacIntyre's (1981/1984) "elucidation of the notion of practice as tied to communities and their traditions, and to the living out of storied lives within those communities" (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2005, p. xii). There are numerous others, including Clandinin and Connelly (1985, 2000), Goodson and Walker (1991),

and Oberg (1990), who work with teachers' lives autobiographically and narratively. Of Connelly and Clandinin, Elbaz-Luwisch (2005) writes that they have "pioneered a conception of narrative inquiry" and that "narrative inquiry as they understand it would bring a language of possibility into being by making educational research a fully relational and educative endeavour" (p. xv).

Eisner (2002) notes the growing understanding of practical knowledge in teaching, and argues that teaching is a kind of "performance: decisions are often made quickly, in flight as it were" (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2005, p. xii). Clandinin (2000) echoes this, drawing on Bateson's notion of improvisation: "Action and perception are creative acts that draw forward experiences from our pasts to let us deal with present situations in improvisatory ways" (p. 30). Elbaz-Luwisch (2005) writes, "One of the reasons teaching is so complex is that it can – and should – be thoughtful, artful, and practical at the same time" (p. xiii).

Also relevant to this inquiry is the question of teacher education: the data lead into questions of how teacher education had impacted the teachers' conceptualizations of literacy. Narrative, biographical, and life history work intersects as a field with that of teacher education, notably in the work of Calderhead, 1996; Carter & Doyle, 1996; Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Lipkin and Brinthaupt (1999), McLean (1999), Munby et al (2001), and others. In these perspectives, the process of becoming a teacher is endlessly complex. Theorists such as Britzman (1991) argue that becoming a teacher must be understood as a social construction as well as an individual experience. McLean (1999) writes,

> Autobiographical work with stories is based in the same set of assumptions as reflective practice – that the teacher needs to know herself well, and that an important component of that self-knowledge will involve investigation of one's personal history. . . . The autobiographical approach seeks understanding of the self (or of multiple selves) by examining one's past; considering the interactions between the person and the context that have helped shape the "complex, multidimensional and dynamic system of representations and meanings" (Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1994, p.47). (McLean, 1999, pp. 79-80)

This last is a critical point which I cannot overemphasize. Narrative inquiry, and autobiographical life story, can easily deteriorate into an overly self-indulgent and subjective exercise. While potentially therapeutic, this is not a useful means for proceeding at least for very long in educational research, whether that be in terms of literacy, teaching and learning, or teacher education. The narrative, biographical endeavour *must* be placed in a dynamic relation to the socio-historical context. Otherwise, it becomes open to criticism of that such as Denzin (1991):

> In making the sacred visible, in a pornography of excess which leaves no secret uncovered, the biographical text, in a single, swift stroke, erases the boundaries between the public and the private while it ceremonializes that which it has just exposed. In so doing it perpetuates the myth that the private life and its inner meanings still exists. . . . In making the personal public the biographer follows a textual politics which valorizes the subjects in question. This heroic gesture diverts attention away from the social structures that have done the oppression.

Goodson (1992) suggests that a reasonable response to this valid concern is to continuously pursue "a wider structural frame of inquiry" (p. 10). In other words, teachers' experiences and stories cannot remain solely with them. The point of telling their stories is to work with them hermeneutically, to create a dynamic tension between each story and its' socio-historical and institutional context. Much of what the teachers expressed was an individualistic, idiosyncratic understanding of teaching. It is my aim in this inquiry to recontextualize those individual experiences within a broader frame.

Proceeding: The Inquiry Design

> We invite endless problems of interpretation not as imposters at the banquet planned for truth but, indeed as the guest of honour. (Grumet, 1988, p. 60)

In this inquiry, depth is sought after rather than breadth. Broad sweeping statements regarding the whole of language and literacy in relation to the whole of the teaching profession are not pursued. Instead, a thorough, careful, attentive reading of a particular cluster of teachers is hoped to yield insight and illumination regarding how language and literacy is lived and understood. The elementary school is the site of investigation primarily because of its strong orientation towards literacy learning, and secondarily, because of my background as an early childhood educator. This provides additional experience and expertise to the study in the area of elementary education in general, and language and literacy learning in particular. In order to provide an in-depth reading of beliefs surrounding literacy within a common cultural framework, the study focused intensively on one local school.

Sources of Data

Context

The staff of a local elementary school indicated an interest in participating in this project, based upon my involvement with them in the past through my language arts student teachers. The school is located in a mid- to upper- socio economic area, near the university. The school has maintained a particular focus on literacy for the past year, a focus that has also been mandated district wide, and the staff has been holding conversations regarding the teaching of literacy and the question of multiliteracies. The principal and the assistant principal were very enthusiastic about my inquiry project, seeing it as an extension of their own work in the area of literacy and a further opportunity for discussion. I had initially planned to observe in the participants' classrooms, but realized that the question of conceptualizations of literacy was one best investigated through the talk of the teachers themselves. How this translates into practice– or not – the extent of alignment between ideas and actions, or my interpretation of that alignment, was beyond the scope of this study. I found the data gathered through the recording of group conversations and individual interviews to already be enormously complex and rich text to work from.

Conversation

Initially, this research began in conversation. My first data collection was at a lunch hour meeting, led by the assistant principal on the topic of literacy. With the guidance of the administration of the school, I then invited the staff to four lunch hour meetings, which I called "Literacy Cafes" and left invitations for in the teachers' mailboxes. This invitation is included in Appendix A. I had thought that organizing the

discussions around broad themes might pique curiosity and provide initial topics. These discussions were not well attended, with only three members of the staff typically involved. The principal offered some union issues around professional development as an explanation, while the assistant principal suggested that time pressures were likely the reason. In my discussions with teachers, it appeared that it was in fact the topics I had generated, which seemed to them to be too broad to be useful in their classroom contexts. Nevertheless, the conversations held by those that participated were fascinating. These conversations were recorded digitally and transcribed for analysis. The conversations were unstructured, with only the topic provided as a starting point for discussion. This was conceived as an opportunity for the teachers to consider, describe, and interrogate their own understandings of literacy. Teachers often mourn the scant time available in busy school life to reflect thoughtfully on practice in conversation with others. This was intended to provide a supportive forum and community in which language and literacy might be explored. Those that participated commented that it was a good opportunity to do this.

Interviews

I determined to ask individual teachers if they would participate in a semi-structured interview, and the majority of teachers were pleased to participate. I interviewed twelve teachers, as well as the school principal, for one interview each ranging from twenty to ninety minutes, with most interviews taking about forty minutes. Several of the teachers were interviewed a second time. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The grades represented ranged from kindergarten to grade five (elementary schools in this school district are K-5), along with the

technology specialist, the French/Dance teacher, and the Reading Recovery teacher. The questions I brought in to the interview are listed below, however I considered these to only be a skeleton, and in most cases I was diverted by the answers given to ask questions unique to each participant. I found that the teachers at this school were most generous and enthusiastic in describing their literacy practices. The questions as initially developed were:

1. How would you define literacy?
2. How would you describe its importance?
3. How would you define the act of reading?
4. Where do you think your ideas about literacy come from?
5. What do you think is the approach to literacy taken by the curriculum?
6. Do you think ideas about literacy have changed over time?
7. Do you think that culture and history affect our understanding of literacy?
8. How do you think the development of technology has affected literacy practices?
9. What do you think is the relationship between the text and the reader?
10. What do you think about the idea of multiliteracies?
11. How do you think your ideas about literacy shape your classroom practice? Can you give me some examples?
12. What is the most important thing you want your students to come away with in relation to literacy?
13. What do you still want to learn about literacy?

14. Do you consider yourself to be a writer?

Once transcribed, the transcripts were given to the teachers with a request for any feedback.

Participants

Following is a list of the participants, their respective roles in the school, and their approximate years of experience in a classroom setting, to help the reader track the interviews. All names used are pseudonyms. The name of the school, Summerside, is also fictionalized. Striking is the experienced nature of this staff, currently typical of this school district.

My purpose in providing this list is organizational. However, in this study, the participants as individuals are not the focus. Instead, I have organized my inquiry in terms of the ideas surrounding literacy in a hermeneutic cycle of uncovering, rather than evaluating or critiquing individual practices or articulations. These teachers were all generous in their participation and patient with my questions; I have no wish to make vulnerable their well-intentioned work every day in their classrooms. Rather, the teachers' articulations are seen as clues pointing to underlying constructions of literacy both within a specific school setting and reflective of social and historical situatedness. Conceptualizations of literacy, rather than the participants themselves, are the topic at hand.

Summerside Elementary School Participants

Primary Group	
Laura	Kindergarten (25+ years)
Anne	Grade one (30+ years)
Mary	Grade one (30+ years)
Vivian	Reading Recovery (varied experience, mainly in learning assistance and RR)
Katie	Grade three substitute teacher (<5years)
Intermediate Group	
Emma	Grade four (7+ years of elementary, 10+ years of special needs, secondary)
Sara	Grade four (20+ years)
Elizabeth	Grade five/Assistant Principal (30+ years)
Darlene	Grade five (15+ years)
Dan	Grade five (15+ years)
Specialist teachers	
Caleigh	Dance and French (<5 years)
Jack	Technology specialist (<5years)
Administration	
Rosemary	Principal (30+ years)

Interpretation of Data

I attempted to read the data hermeneutically for the dynamic relationship between socio-historical narratives and the conceptualizations of language and literacy of the participants. I read the data for the interruptions and gaps between thought and action as they described, conceptualization and practice, experience and intention, allowing all theoretical constructs and narratives to remain in flux, to keep the questions of meaning open and at play. I shared the transcripts of their interviews with the participants, and discussed the data with the participants, and my evolving sense of the inquiry, to allow the teachers to speak back to their data. Ely et al. (1997) suggest that data analysis remain an emergent process, and I tried to stay aware of my "continually evolving theoretical constructs" (p. 4). I did this through a research journal, to track my own thinking as it evolved, and in conversation with the participants. Once transcribed, I read the data closely and attempted to thematize and organize according to ideas. Initially I identified over fifteen different themes (i.e. reading, writing, childhood experiences, classroom practices, Reading Recovery, early literacy, teaching philosophy, professional reading, curriculum, authority, new literacies, etc.). I found these categories helpful to organize the data however I found them to be overly broad topics with superficial similarity rather than hermeneutic resonance. I then revisited the data for interrelationships within what the teachers said rather than superficial similarity. This complex process helped me to begin to see patterns in what the participants and I determined themes organized around ideas rather than simple topic. To help me further, I went back to the initial meeting I observed and transcribed, and viewed this experience as a vantage point from which to view the data as a whole. This

story became chapter 4. In chapter 5, I outline the teachers' conceptualizations of literacy as articulated, and in chapter 6 I argue that these conceptualizations exemplify a complex hermeneutic. In the ruptures and gaps of the interviews what was largely absent in the data was a sense of new or muli-literacies: this absence is taken up in chapter 7. These four chapters comprise the presentation and analysis of the data.

A Word about Representation

Given the methodologies discussed above, a multi-modal, layered approach to writing up this inquiry was pursued. I kept returning to the data recursively, as Caputo (1987) describes, trying to look deeper with each turn (p. 68). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) state that interpretive practices involve "an aesthetics of representation that goes beyond the pragmatic, or the practical" (p. 4). This well describes my intent in finding ways of representing my insights. Critically, this allows the data to remain in flux without receiving treatment that says, for once and for all, where the truth lies. The reader will notice that in many cases I chose to present long quotations from the transcripts. The purpose of this is to avoid taking the participants' words out of context – to attempt to provide a fuller sense of what they were articulating. I noticed throughout the data collection process that the topic seemed of deep interest to the teachers, and they were eager to discuss the rationale and purposes behind their literacy practices. Many of them commented that our conversations caused them to think about literacy in different ways and to make new connections to their past experiences. It is not known, however, if any impact from these conversations ensued; this would be a fruitful area for further investigation and perhaps more longitudinal study.

The reader will also notice some attempts to disrupt the text with images and with "other" texts in the margins. The intent here is to create a sub-text, in places, to disrupt my own voice and provide opportunity for a more active process in the reader. As Caputo remarks, "We do not aim at a conclusion but an opening."

Chapter 4

"TAKE ONE"

> To know the "meaning" of something is to know that in terms of which it is to be projected, the horizon in terms of which it should be cast, the sphere to which it belongs. . . . we are looking for the right horizon. (Caputo, 1987, p. 71)

Day One of Data Collection: The Literacy Meeting

My first day of collecting data coincided with a lunch hour meeting about literacy in the school library. Literacy was an area of focus for the Greater Victoria School District that year, and certain expectations of schools are itemized in the document *Accountability Contract 2005-6,* which is a contract between the District and the Ministry. Literacy leaders have been appointed for each school, and a 0.1 release time provided. They are expected to hold in-service, attend district meetings, and otherwise support staff members in improving literacy practices, although exactly how this is accomplished seems somewhat open to interpretation. Elizabeth, the Assistant Principal at this school, is holding an informal literacy meeting on the day I begin my data collection. She has asked teachers to bring a favourite book for this meeting. About two thirds of the staff are in attendance. The delicacy of these meetings was clear, and Elizabeth expressed some trepidation in being positioned this way with the other staff. These are her opening remarks:

> *Well, I guess every second month we'll have one, and we may have a few more. So I would like it to be as pleasant as we can make it, and I'm not intending to be like, to be teaching. I'm thinking that what we often don't have*

time for is some really quality conversations around literacy, just time to talk about it, and share what we're doing, what we're thinking. (Literacy Meeting, 01-17-06, p. 1)

Elizabeth immediately sets the tone of the meeting as a sharing time rather than as a situation where she is "expert". Something commonly mentioned at the school was the teacher strike that happened early in the year. This was referred to as a time when teachers had the opportunity to have professional conversations ordinarily not afforded by the school day. The need for this kind of discussion was very apparent throughout this study, the chance to have rich conversations. Sara interrupts Elizabeth as she's talking about sharing:

Sara: We did a lot of that when we were on strike, Emma and I,

Elizabeth: Yeah, I know…

Sara: We were sharing books and reading chapters (laughs).

Elizabeth: You know, I think we do a lot of it all the time, actually, I know I'm often talking with Emma, and obviously Darlene, and you know, we do that. But to do it as a whole school would be really wonderful, too. So, I was thinking if we could come together and almost have it like a book club, like a talking time, really informal, not like I'm in charge and I'm going to give everybody tasks to do or anything like that, but that this is a time we sort of set aside. I was actually going to stop and pick up some little treats and things however it was the school based [laughter] team meeting this morning and I was running late and I didn't, but I will do that next time I promise. Just while we're waiting for, there's two things I would like to do today though, and one

is just... I asked people to bring a favourite book, something that was important to you in your personal life or in your professional life, it didn't matter, something that you could talk about. (Literacy Meeting, 01-17-06, p.1)

Notice the mention of snacks for the meeting; there was a sense of community evident whenever members of this staff gathered. Despite some quite glaring philosophical differences amongst the teachers, they are a group that appears determined to be collegial and to interact with one another in a friendly and inclusive manner. This tone, in my view, has been set by the administration in this school. Many of these teachers have also been working with one another for several, and in some cases, many years. The need for supportive, personal relationships seemed to overtake the need for common theoretical understandings surrounding a topic such as literacy. What I noticed continually throughout the process of transcribing both discussions and interviews was how frequently the participants laughed, particularly during group discussions. There is a sense of connection and of shared history. Linked to the sense of community, family was a common topic of conversation. I began to notice that literacy was associated with people's children and grandchildren in an interesting way. Elizabeth begins by pointing out the kinds of connections we would see between the texts and people's lives and families:

Elizabeth: One of things I was thinking about was that we would get to see, you know the sort of variety of texts that people chose to bring and like Katie just said to me, she said. . . say what you said (laughs) -

Katie: I said I forgot my book because I didn't really understand, but I'm currently reading the Week by Week of Pregnancy *and I'm sure you're all*

very interested in hearing what happens in the 22nd week of pregnancy (laughs)!

Emma: Well, I am, because I'm going to be a grandma.

Elizabeth: Oh, so am I. Yeah same here. Everybody's having babies vicariously. . . . But I thought that was a really good example of like, you read what's current in your life, you know that's pretty, pretty key. So that was one thing, I thought we could just share the kinds of texts we have and why, and the other thing I have to look at is about our pro-D day that's coming up. (Literacy Meeting, 01-17-06, pp. 1-2)

Elizabeth here immediately draws my attention to the relationship between literacy and people's lives as personal meaning-making. After the meeting, which I recorded and transcribed, I wrote the following in my research journal:

> In conversation about literacy, underlying assumptions and clues to the role literacy plays in peoples' lives is exposed. Reading seems important in all of these teachers' lives. I wondered if that could also be how they have learned to speak about it. However it seemed genuine. Also, I noticed that if they were not currently reading something they felt they had to explain that (my children keep me so busy, for example). Grandchildren were talked about a lot at this meeting, and I was intrigued by the importance of passing on favourite children's stories to the next generation - passing on of *cultural artifacts (?)* There was a desire to portray professional reading. The shift between personal and professional selves was ongoing throughout. I was struck by their good intentions.

As I transcribed this first meeting, I found much to think and write about. There were some broad observations I felt I could make, and I determined to explore

these further throughout the course of the data collection. In many cases, these observations were confirmed and deepened through the course of the study. I left the first day of data collection very surprised by some things, in particular, the blending of theoretical discourses and the significance of literature as a cultural artifact in people's lives. Following are a series of six broad observations I made and some supporting data from the discussion. In many ways this foreshadows what I was later to find in the process of in-depth interviews.

Initial Observations

Oberservation #1

The teachers talk about literacy as though they mean reading and writing.

This first observation was perhaps not so much of a surprise. In part I wondered if this was structured by Elizabeth when she set the intent of the meeting, by wanting to discuss 1. a favourite book (reading) and 2. the content of the upcoming Professional Day (writing). Regardless, throughout the conversation as it shifted between personal and professional topics it seemed readily apparent that in talking about literacy, the

Word Count for the literacy discussion:

"Literacy"
1

Read, Reading or Reader
96

Write, Writing or Writer
43

teachers were talking about reading books, and they were talking about writing. In fact, the conversation seemed heavily weighted on the reading aspect: reading professional literature, and children reading in the classroom. As we've seen, this is the historical focus on literacy, with the word "literacy" only coming into common

usage in the last half of the 20th century (Christie & Misson, 1998, pp. 1-2). The main exception to this focus on reading was Elizabeth talking about the children's writing in her classroom, and her teaching partner Darlene talking about potentially writing a family history. Following are some typical statements regarding literacy, although the actual term did not really come up after the opening remarks by Elizabeth. After that, the terms "reading" and "writing" were used most heavily. In the following three excerpts, we listen to the teachers talk about "reading about reading":

> *Emma: I'm also part of the District professional book club and we're doing* Strategies that Work, *but I had already got that in the summer, and I'd read it, so it's a review and it's one that I love, and I'd changed my reading program to accommodate these things or to follow the kinds of things in here and. . . . the belief that there are a certain number of strategies that students need to learn to be good readers, and that it doesn't matter what you use as far as the reading material, but there are basic strategies that you work through. And I love this. . . . [My friend] and I were chatting about these things a couple of weeks ago, and she said she has. . . a group of grade three girls, who are very strong readers, that's her particular reading group, and they just come in and they say you know, I've made this connection to this text, and my personal connections, connections to texts, connections to people. They know the language; they've taught the strategies since kindergarten, and they all know the strategies, and she said the conversations that they have in their school around literature are absolutely amazing. (Literacy Meeting, 01-17-06, p. 2)*

This way of talking about teaching reading: the focus on specific "strategies" such as making personal connections was a common theme in the data. The idea that "it doesn't matter what you use as far as the reading material" was also typical. This is where I began to see the second, subjective-individual paradigm at work; these comments would fit nicely in to Rosenblatt's ideas of transaction (1978). There is also transaction evident amongst teachers. Anecdotal stories, or reference to "teacher talk" is common throughout the data, where teachers recount conversations or insights they have received from other teachers. Several of the teachers, including Emma above, and Margaret below, are involved in District Book Clubs aimed at updating literacy practices throughout the district and lead by a District chosen literacy teacher, mentioned in the Accountability Contract. This is a relatively new way for school districts to go about Professional development, but it is optional enrichment for teachers outside of their workday.

> *Margaret: Well, my reading book is at home, because I managed to pick up my knitting (laughs). I've got all these bags. I'm also doing the book club; I did it last year, I really enjoyed it. And this year it's a Debbie Miller book, she's a real risk taker, way more than me! You know, she started off with "the bluebirds" and "the buzzards" or whatever, and she's made this quantum leap to, she starts out the year with a bucket of books in the middle of the table, and the kids start reading them and using them. . . . She runs her class with the kids doing individual books, which is pretty amazing, I think. . . . I'm not ready for that! (p. 3)*

In this we begin to see the broad range of practices in the school, where grade one children utilizing individual books for their reading program is seen as relatively radical by this teacher. A large percentage of the teachers at this school have been teaching for 30+ years. However, there is not necessarily a correlation between years of experience and literacy practices, with one or two of the most traditional teachers (self-identified) being younger than some of the teachers with more alternative approaches.

Another common sentiment is expressed above, where teachers referred to how they would "take or leave" new professional ideas they came across as they felt comfortable with them or as they fit into their already existing practice. Throughout this discussion, I noticed a concerted effort on many of the teachers' part to speak of their professional reading. I was not sure if this was for the benefit of the school principal, or perhaps simply that it seemed most relevant to a school literacy discussion. If the teacher speaking was not currently reading a book, they seemed to feel the need to explain this:

> *Sara: Well, I read a lot, in the summer, but my three children keep me so busy, during the school year, I don't tend to read much at all, in that time. But one book I read, or three books I read, through the summer, and I have pulled back out again because I'm about to switch what I'm doing in reading again, are the Frank Serafini books. Last spring, Margaret, Anne, and Emma and I went to go and see him in Vancouver, and I just found him so inspirational, and re-affirmed so many of the things that I do, but really made me question and think about some of the other thing I do. And as I'm making a shift in*

gears right now with my reading program, I thought, I've got to pull those out and go back and rethink, what I thought was so good, because I haven't read it since the summer. And while we walked the picket line, Emma and I talked about the books she brought, as we were shifting books and reading chapters at night and coming back and saying, what do you think about this, what do you think about that. And so I have implemented some of those things in my class this term too, some of which have worked really well, some I've twigged a little bit to work for me. And now I'm going to try some of the.. it's all very similar, very, very related ideas in terms of strategies for teaching reading, and ways, just different ways to get responses from the kids, that focus on those strategies. And given my choice I'd teach reading five hours a day, 'cause I love it. (p. 6)

I came to recognize this as a very typical way of talking about professional reading and professional development, as an experience of affirmation at times or an experience of hearing new ideas that one could "twig" or "tweak" to fit into one's own practice. Again in this quote is the focus on reading strategies, teachers talking about *how* children read rather than *what* they are learning. In some ways it almost sounded to me like it didn't matter so much what connections they were making, as long as they were making them. Later on, Sara tells us a story about one of the students in her class:

I was marking last night. And one little girl doesn't like the book she's reading, and on every page, she had about ten post-it notes, and she didn't even, usually they have them nicely lined up, and they're in order, she had

them stuck all over the page, and she had, "boring boring boring boring boring" and I wrote back, "great, tell me why, (laughter), you know, I get it, you're not liking this, but tell me a bit more so we can talk about this" (laughs). So, there we go. And in the summer I read all kinds of books, but like I say, my life is too full during the school year, to spend much time reading. (Literacy Meeting, 01-17-06, p.7)

Here it seems that the fact of the child engaging in the response process is more important than the response itself, and there is a danger here of a slide for the child into what Jardine calls "a narcissistic pool of self-satisfied and self-confirming reflection" (2006, p. 3). This is the dark side of the subjective-individual orientation to literacy. Again in Sara's words, we see that not doing much reading outside of school on the part of the teacher is seen as a fact that needs explanation. Writing is not viewed in the same way.

Observation #2

The teachers view literacy as being attached to personal meaning.

This observation was suggested in the section above. It became very clear throughout this meeting, perhaps because of Elizabeth's request for people to bring a favourite book, that literature is closely connected to people's everyday lives, especially in terms of the texts they choose at particular times. Elizabeth comments:

The thing that struck me as we were talking, it was what I was kind of hoping would come out, was, just, you know we're all reading at different times for different reasons and different stages of our life, like I'm really getting back into

what I want this last year of teaching to be like for me, so I'm really thinking, what's most important to me, so I'm going back and revisiting things, that I think, okay I've kind of let that slip a little bit, that's the core of what I want to do. (Literacy Meeting, 01-17-06, pp. 12-13)

This turned out to be a very important statement as I carried on with my data collection, because the idea expressed here, that teachers have core notions of practice to which they want to stay true, was returned to again and again by various teachers. I often got an impression of a kind of recursive process of circling closer and closer inward to a practice that was more and more genuine to an "authentic self", rather than a linear progression of learning or developing new and better practices.

Observation #3

This staff of teachers is a group of passionate readers.

This insight turned out to be a critical finding of this project. In the first few minutes of this meeting, Emma made statements about herself as a reader that were echoed again and again throughout the data:

Well, I read tons, from murder mysteries to (?) until I fall asleep and sometimes it's 'til 1 o-clock in the morning and then I'm just positively grouchy the next day, and I'm also reading a wonderful book called Deafening *for my book club right now, which is my high brow book as*

Frances Itani did not intend to write a war novel. She reveals this over coffee on a wind-whipped April morning in Ottawa. Green-eyed and taut, Itani bristles with the itchy energy of a person recently released from a long hibernation. What might pour from someone else as a confession is relayed by Itani as unadorned fact: She walked into a mess, and, when she noticed what she'd done, simply kept

> *opposed to my murder mysteries, and some nights I can't go there, but it is a wonderful book. (Literacy Meeting, 01-17-06, p. 2).*

walking.

- Lahey, 2003

Of course, it's not the number of books in the home that boosts student performance -- it's what they represent. The researchers say a big home library reflects the parents' dedication to the life of the mind, which probably nurtures scholastic accomplishment in their offspring. They also found that not all books are created equal. "Having Shakespeare or similar highbrow books about bodes well for children's achievement," they wrote. "Having poetry books around is actively harmful by about the same amount," perhaps because it signals a "Bohemian" lifestyle that may encourage kids to become guitar-strumming, poetry-reading dreamers.

-- Morin, 2006, p A02

An interesting concept is illustrated here, where certain texts are considered to have more value than others, in this example, the novel *Deafening* by Frances Itani has more status than the mystery novel, is more "high brow". Traditionally in schools we have followed a tradition of learning the canon, and this sets particular texts and kinds of texts in positions of supremacy over others.

Why is a wartime novel superior to a mystery novel? Are these assumptions connected to the canon and what it represents? So while this teacher talks a great deal about personal meaning, and was quoted earlier saying, *"there are a certain number of strategies that students need to learn to be good readers, and that it doesn't matter what you use as far as the reading material, but there are basic strategies that you work through" (p. 1),* but in the same breath she implicitly places texts in a hierarchy for her own reading. She implies that for learning to read, any text will do, yet by her other comments, clearly some texts have more worth than others. This value is not

judged by the meaning made by the reader, rather, an outside standard. This conflict, between texts having equal value in some contexts but differing values in others, is a point where conflicting cultural beliefs around literacy are in evidence not only between teachers but within the thinking of individual teachers, contradictions which we all experience. Elbaz-Luwisch (2005) notes, "Listening to teachers speak about whatever most concerns them in their work, it is not surprising that we hear a wide range of different voices not only from different teachers but within the speech of any one teacher" (p. x).

Observation #4

A minority of the staff is equally passionate about writing.

This is not to say that the teachers do not think seriously about the importance of writing for their students, but it became clear that they were less passionate about writing in their own lives compared to their love affair with reading. There are a couple of exceptions, Elizabeth being the main one. When it came to her turn during this staff meeting, she spoke about the writing that she was having her class doing, and a book that had inspired her practice in this way:

So, I brought a couple of things, and the one I was going to bring I left at home, it's an old Donald Graves book about teaching writing, and the reason I was going to bring it. . . one of the things I've always felt strongly attached to was the kind of Donald Graves way of looking at writing. And I just went in and it talked about writing workshop and things, and I found it interesting just a little while ago, where I thought I really want to get back and do more of that, giving kids more chances to do their own writing, like you know we're talking about what our reading is, and do, I've done that, but I want to do that more with their writing, like, well what do you want to write? You want to write memoirs, write memoirs, you want to write instruction booklets, write instruction booklets. Like, you go for it. I just said to them one day, it was kind of like, getting back into some more risk taking, and said "okay, we're doing writing workshop, um, what's your project?" (Literacy Meeting, 01-17-06, p. 12)

The tone for writing is set by what the teacher does, not by what the teacher says. In this instance, writing will be treated as a laboratory or studio subject. That is, instead of giving writing to children, you will share it with them. You will write with them. (Graves, 1983, p. 12)

This was my introduction to the large scale writing project Elizabeth spoke of frequently throughout the data collection period. This project was unique, where the topic and the genre and the length and the work groups and the deadline were completely up to the students. Elizabeth spoke frequently about the writing that she was doing with her students, and her excitement about their progress as the year

continued. She spoke very differently about the reading her students did as well, often she seemed to read with them for the purpose of developing their own writing. We spoke about this at greater length during one of her interviews, but I had my first hint at this initial meeting:

> *You know it's funny I just read the first paragraph of this to our class (Haddix,* Among the Hidden*), and just the first paragraph, and said, what do you know from this paragraph already, without anything else. And they said, "He's always been hidden, he's known since he was little, his mother's afraid," and just the information they could glean just from the first paragraph and then they got into writing their own. (p. 11)*

Sometimes in research there is a "difference that makes all the difference". I don't think I would have noticed the absence of talk about writing in this way with the other teachers without its presence in Elizabeth's talk.

Another teacher who referred to writing in the context of this literacy meeting was Darlene, who was thinking about writing a family history. Darlene is Chinese-Canadian, and has a fascinating family story:

> *And I started thinking you know, I should start writing, like we've got a really interesting family history, just from my ancestors coming on tall ships there, and all these things, but I should probably start writing some of these things down for my kids, and you know I could write kids' books, it would be for my kids, but they're family history. . . . It's funny the other thing I brought in a while ago was a picture of my dad when he was a child, and it's, I explain, okay there's my grandfather, beside him is this woman, and then over on the*

side is a younger woman, who is my father's mother, but she's concubine #3, so just things like that, and you look back at wife #1 who was the richest and you look at her feet, and they're all bound, because she was rich, well where's wife #2… she ran away (laughter), she didn't want to be a concubine anymore… (Literacy Meeting, 01-17-06, p. 11)

This amazing photograph was well known by the staff, and referred to by several people in later conversations. This is an example of how literacy, both visual and written, can be used in intensely personal ways to preserve experience and histories, in a way that at one time would have been passed down orally. This observation is connected to the next, in the way I noticed literacy to be connected to notions of memory.

Observation #5

Memory seems to play a significant role when talking about literacy.

One of the things I was immediately struck by during this meeting was the significance of childhood memory to the discussion about literacy. In terms of literature, the emotional attachments people had formed to books they had loved were evident, and in particular, to books from their childhoods. Several of the staff had recently become grandmothers or were expectant grandmothers, so more than once the topic turned to books that were important to pass down to the next generation; these texts seemed to function as a kind of cultural artifact:

Rosemary: Going to the opposite end of that, with new babies, and the world, you know my peer group, I don't have any grandchildren yet, I'm waiting,

> *(group laughter, exclamation, "she just got married in July!") But anyhow, with the new babies, and I'm going back to books again, most beloved books. (Literacy Meeting, 01-17-06, p. 13)*

Another teacher spoke of rediscovering Dr. Seuss and having gotten into the habit of giving *Oh the Places You'll Go* and *You're Only Old Once* as gifts, saying, "These are personal books that have come to have meaning in my life." Rosemary talks about books that were special favourites of her own children:

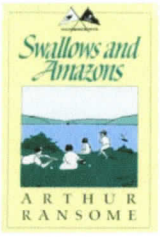
> *And the Mercer Mayer,* A Boy, A Dog, and a Frog *series, the picture books, I just, those were the most favourite, of my, especially my eldest son, and I had to go and special order it to get them, to keep that going with a friend's family. And the* Pat the Bunny *which was [my daughter's] favourite, is very available, so that's a gender bias there. But that's what we do, as my gift, as you have your gift, bringing it from my past and it comes with very pleasant memories.*

This idea, that notions of literacy are built around texts which carry with them strongly evocative and emotional memories, seemed crucial. It was noteworthy that this discussion was filled with reactions and noises and engaged agreement as a social group. These texts were shared by many of the participants, there was a kind of indirect shared history around such texts as *Pat the Bunny*, originally published in 1940.

When this book was mentioned, I immediately flashed back to reading this "touch and feel" book to my own daughter, and her chubby little toddler hand as she felt the pages, with the little patch of synthetic fur for the bunny and the swatch of sandpaper meant to be the daddy's stubbled cheek. If these kinds of sensory memories were so easily evoked in an informal discussion about favourite books, I wondered to

what extent these memories played in to teachers' theoretical constructions of literacy in the classroom. I also wondered if these kinds of pleasant memories surrounding books were something many elementary teachers had in common, if indeed these were the people most likely to become teachers in the first place, and what that might mean for all those students who perhaps had a very different association with texts, or little association.

Emma: Did anybody read Swallows and Amazons*?*
That was my favourite book as a kid.
Elizabeth: Yeah, Arthur Ransome.
Emma: And nobody, the kids nowadays don't read Swallows and Amazons.
Sara.: I haven't heard of him.
Elizabeth: Really? It's kind of that classic,
Emma: I loved Swallows and Amazons.
Rosemary: There's another one, too, a pig one, the pig book I finally met someone who had read them, I forget, there was a whole series,
Sara.: Freddy the Pig*!*



In a later discussion with Elizabeth, we talked about the role that illustration plays in these memories, particularly for the child not yet reading independently, how vivid those illustrations are to the child and how, decades later, we each could remember specific illustrations in perfect detail (Williams, 1998, p. 19).

Observation #6

"New literacies" are not a typical part of daily conversations surrounding literacy.

Again this is more an observation of an absence than a presence. This conversation, broadly intended to be about literacy, was specifically about reading (in the classroom and in teachers' lives) and to some extent, writing in the classroom. There was no mention of media, visual art forms, electronic technology, and so on. The conversation exclusively focused on books and on writing with pencil and paper. When asked later in the interviews, these teachers would acknowledge alternative text forms and a variety of media, as well as raise the question of critical literacy. But when not asked specifically, in the context of this informal meeting, those teachers present demonstrated what I would argue to be a kind of "everyday consciousness" about literacy. In a few cases, the books described by teachers that they were personally reading alluded to what some might consider to be alternate literacy forms, for example, Dan spoke of reading manuals on power tools as he remodeled his house, one teacher mentioned reading a biography of actor Johnny Depp, Katie was reading a book on pregnancy, and several teachers mentioned travel books. Rosemary was preparing for a trip to Scotland, where she was completing an exploration of family roots. This is considered by some theorists to also be a form of literacy, as "family" or "cultural" literacy (Christie & Misson, 1998, p. 3):

> *So right now I'm reading* All Things Scottish *because I'm preparing to go to Scotland -- one of the closing pieces of searching out my roots, which has been going on for a number of years. . . I'm building the feeling of Scotland from reading novels. (Literacy Meeting, 01-17-06, p. 4)*

In a similar vein, we heard Darlene earlier speaking of writing a family history. In a broad definition of literacy, knowledge of these kinds of things: tools, family culture, pregnancy, pop culture, might be considered literacy forms. In this sense teachers were using traditional literacy forms (the book) to explore alternative literacies. It was interesting however that they were not using the Internet, film, or documentaries, or at least they did not mention doing these things in the context of literacy. They may well be "reading" these text forms, but they did not speak of them during this conversation, leading me to wonder if alternative text forms were, for these teachers, what they thought of when they thought of literacy.

These broad observations piqued my curiosity. Through the course of the literacy discussions I conducted at the school, and the individual interviews, I wanted to deepen these ideas and attempted to confirm or rule out what I initially noticed, as well as to broaden the exploration of literacy into other areas as well. I will first explore what teachers told me about their conceptualizations of literacy in chapter 5. In chapter 6, I will delve more deeply into their social experiences of literacy and what I came to see as a kind of hermeneutics of literacy and the notions of experience and practice expressed by the teachers, and chapter 7 takes a look at their views on alternative literacies and texts. Finally, chapter 8 will consider the implications of what I have found through this study, and I will make an argument for where we need to go next as literacy educators and educators of literacy teachers into a radicalized literacy.

Chapter 5

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF LITERACY

> There is no other way to proceed. It is the very nature of the understanding. . . to proceed projectively, to forge ahead and clear the ground within which the entities to be investigated make their appearance. . . not by clearing away all presuppositions but by stating them explicitly and clearly in order to penetrate them all the more fully. Its aim is to insure not that the treatise is free of presuppositions but that its presuppositions are deep enough and ample enough to encompass the matter at hand. (Caputo, 1987, p. 68)

In the individual interviews with teachers, my main purpose was to inquire into their understanding of literacy. This chapter summarizes and attempts to take up what they directly told me about their conceptualizations of literacy. I introduce each teacher who participated in the study, and excerpt relevant sections of their interviews where they speak to my questions surrounding the nature of literacy, what it *is.* To begin with I asked teachers how they defined literacy. This was often initially met with a surprised silence, as teachers tried to put into words a term they worked with contextually everyday. The *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* defines the term very simply as: 1. the ability to read and write. 2. competence in some field of knowledge, technology, etc. This is a functional definition that was present within the teachers' responses, however beneath this was a great complexity, and it is this complexity I will attempt to represent in describing the teachers' responses to this specific question.

I realized over time that the question, "How do you define literacy?" was quite an abstract theoretical question, at times somewhat threatening to the teachers; often they responded as though I must be looking for a specific answer. Other times they responded as though it were a nonsensical question, everybody knows what literacy means! This points to what Caputo (1987) calls "common and everyday conceptions" (p.63), that hermeneutics seeks to resist. He writes, "The work of recovery cannot proceed except by clearing away the superficial and commonplace understanding of things which systematically obscures our view and subverts our understanding" (p. 63). It was the teachers' everyday conception of literacy that I first sought to identify and then to dig beneath. This chapter is an attempt to describe their conceptualizations, with attention to the individual differences as well as common threads.

Importantly, through the interview process, I began to understand that the teachers did not *begin* in their teaching of literacy with an abstract definition. Rather, I began to understand that the teachers could not separate their definition of literacy from their practice. I felt an affinity for Wittgenstein, when he talked about the "queer" way that philosophizing could cause one to view things:

> We have the feeling that the ordinary man, if he talks of 'good', of 'number' etc., does not really understand what he is talking about. I see something queer about perception and he talks about it as if it were not queer at all. Should we say he knows what he is talking about or not? You can say both. Suppose people are playing chess. I see queer problems when I look into the

> rules and scrutinize them. But Smith and Brown play chess with no difficulty. Do they understand the game? Well, they play it. (Monk, 1990, p. 356)

I realized it was important to start to come at literacy from the point of view of the teachers, rather than from my perspective where I was seeing "queer problems". Because of the startled responses I was receiving from many of the teachers, I started to ask later interviewees what their approach was to literacy in the classroom, which in contrast to the more abstract definitional question was met with a torrent of description. Often, their conception of literacy was clearly embedded in how they described their practice. I came to see that the teachers *defined literacy by means of practice*. This was akin to what Lave (1993) describes as "situated practices" that are "part and parcel of the lived social world" (p. 6). The teachers typically gave me numerous examples of practice from their classrooms in response to my conceptual questions about literacy. In the chapter that follows this one, I explore further what the teachers talked about in terms of where their ideas of literacy come from. But first it is worthwhile hearing from the teachers what they said in response to my questions asking them to define literacy or later, describe their approaches. I found their responses as fascinating as they were diverse.

There is one important caveat to keep in mind: I have chosen to take up what it is the teachers *say,* recognizing that what is said is always necessarily incomplete. As Ellsworth (1997) demonstrates, this fact can become a source of richness rather than a limitation. Had I gone into their classrooms, I likely would have seen a complex relationship between what they said and their practice in the classroom. However, this study is not about congruence between conceptualization and practice,

or rather my interpretation of its congruence, but instead it is about the nature of those conceptualizations as expressed by the teacher. Thus, the teachers' comments are not viewed as permanent or fixed, but as living and fluid. There is rich material for consideration within what they have said, keeping firmly in view an understanding that it is impossible to always say exactly what we mean. In fact, it is sometimes in this incompleteness that interpretive moments can crystallize.

Each teacher demonstrated multiple paradigms at work in their thinking. I have divided up the interviews broadly into the Primary group (K-1), Intermediate group (4-5), Specialist teachers (dance and technology), and the school principal. This way the diversity of viewpoints even within one grade group can easily be seen. Elizabeth has multiple roles in the school, of Assistant Principal, grade 5 teacher, and teacher librarian, but I have included her here in her teaching role, since much of our conversation centered on her classroom practice.

Primary Group

I ended up focusing my primary interviews on the kindergarten and grade one teachers. Several of the grades two and three teachers declined to be interviewed, and one teacher interviewed withdrew her data. However, this does allow a close focus on the kindergarten and grade one teachers' notions of literacy: these two years represent arguably the most intensive literacy focus for children as they are being introduced to schooling. Many grade one teachers view their primary role as teaching children to read.

Laura

Laura is a highly experienced kindergarten teacher at the school with very clear ideas regarding literacy. She was very pleased to speak with me and share her approaches.

> *So I guess, literacy is just a person's ability to read and write and understand what they're reading and writing. So, from there, as a teacher of early, you know young children, I think I have a responsibility to teach them the strategies that they need to be able to read, and write. So, I very much teach phonics, I believe in that, I believe in teaching kids about the structure of language, and not just letting it happen developmentally. I think if you don't teach them, then you don't really enrich the opportunities for those kids who perhaps are developmentally ready, and can just reach a little bit beyond their comfort zone, and then those ones who aren't ready, if you didn't teach them who knows how long they would take to learn those skills. So that's where I come from in teaching. (Laura Interview, 02-22-06, p. 1)*

Here Laura begins with what might be viewed as quite a traditional notion of literacy: literacy as, simply, the ability to read and write, with an emphasis on comprehension. She explains that she believes in direct teaching of skills in a structured program. Here there is a body of knowledge to be passed on through explicit teaching methods, specifically phonics. She comments,

> *When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking. I mean when you learn to read, that rule most often holds true. They say that there are all these rules that don't hold true for the English language, but I think when you're learning to read the majority of the time they do work. And you know those are great strategies to help you to decode.(Laura Interview, 04-06-06, p. 6)*

> The rule "when two vowels go walking, the first does the talking" (when two vowels appear side by side, the long sound of the first is heard and the second is silent, as in "bead") worked in only 45% of the cases Clymer examined. (Krashen, 2002, p. 33)

However, also notice the echoes of constructivist theory in Laura's description, where the teacher is there as a guide to provoke learning, when she talks about the children who can "just reach a little bit beyond their comfort zone" which sounds a great deal like Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development," which is an "opportune area for growth, but one in which children are dependent on help from others" (McGee & Richgels, 2000, p. 5). While Laura defines literacy in terms of reading and writing, and acquiring the rules of a stable language system under the traditional view, the meaning based subjective-individual paradigm is also visible in Laura's conceptualization, when she describes how she teaches reading through the children's own writing. In the next passage, a blend of ideas is present: constructivist notions of learning, explicit teaching of skills, learning as repetition of practice, and the importance of self-concept in learning.

> *Well, I use an eclectic approach, obviously, so everything goes hand in hand. And I guess my goal with little kids is to get them really comfortable and*

confident and believing they can do it, because unless they want to risk they're not going to try, I find. So, everything kind of goes in tandem: start to learn some phonics, I'm doing some modeling on the board, they're starting to write in their journals, they're not making connections, there's lots of things that aren't happening at the beginning, you know strings of letters, even some of them all over the page, but by this point in the year you should see what they can write, it's awesome. And how is that accomplished? Only because I've taught them. And I don't teach for mastery, I can't possibly in kindergarten. So it's just, it's introduced, it's practiced, practiced, practiced, practiced, in different kinds of ways all over the place, regularly, and you know, they just, the pennies drop and they put it together and ah, the lights go on and they can do it. It's very cool; I love it. (Laura Interview, 04-06-06, pp. 1-2)

It is striking how theories of literacy learning blend in her description, as she describes both an active and passive process on the part of the children. When she talks about the "pennies drop and they put it together" it sounds very much like constructivist ideas, and yet she also says, "how is that accomplished? Only because I've taught them." Interestingly, this same teacher also talks about teaching children to read through their own writing, which is also a more meaning centred approach, and demonstrates a notion of literacy that views reading, writing, and oral modes as linked:

So, I'm all about too reading through writing. I don't really focus on the reading so much to start with as I do on the writing because I want them to really believe in it all. . . I employ some language strategies like always,

> *KWL's, encoding the schema to start with, and predicting with books, picture books and that sort of thing, even some fiction and non-fiction. Then we'll do reflecting, summarizing, elaborating, evaluating, but that's all done orally in the kindergarten. (Laura Interview, 04-06-06, p. 2)*

Laura demonstrates a blending of the traditional and the subjective-individual paradigms of literacy. There was no evidence in her transcript of a critical or postmodern orientation. I started to notice phrases like "I want them to believe in it all" in Laura's interview and in the interviews of other teachers as well. It struck me that there is a kind of belief element in becoming literate, a kind of "leap of faith", and it made me think of the early ties of literacy to Bible learning. I wrote in my notebook, "Is bringing children to literacy is like bringing children to God?" I started to liken the fervor the teachers had for literacy to a kind of religious zeal, and wondered if the same kind of entrenched belief system exists about literacy within a school as religious doctrine within the church. While becoming literate is no longer about salvation through the Word, it is still salvation through the word. Illich (1993) writes of the last eight hundred years: "Universal bookishness became the core of western secular religion, and schooling its church" (p. 1). He believes this era is ending. Under this view that has been so dominant, there was a strong conviction that literacy is essential for participation in social life, and certainly for participation in schools. This conviction is not unfounded. But I was often struck by the ways in which this seemed a matter of belief and faith, teachers believe that literacy will edify the individual in much the same way as the religious believe that faith will edify. I heard echoes of this throughout the interviews.

Anne

Anne is a teacher with more than 30 years of experience teaching grade one. She tells me, when I ask why she has stayed in grade one throughout her career:

> *It's just wonderful being involved in the reading and writing process. You take children who in September can hardly print a letter, or read a word, most children, and by the end of the year they're fluent readers, generally, they can write little stories, they can do math. It's exciting to see their excitement, so I just really enjoy being involved in that process. (Anne Interview, 02-28-06, p. 1)*

Her excitement echoes that of Laura's. However, her approach is markedly different. Throughout, Anne continually emphasizes a developmental understanding of literacy learning, and one, which was very individual to the child, based on meaning. Again in talking about literacy she is clearly talking about reading and writing, with an emphasis on the reading aspect.

> *I don't think many teachers, who have not had that experience, really understand reading. If you teach intermediate, or you teach high school, you don't see that process. I see from the very beginning, and I see the growth. They say that in the first five years of life, children will learn more than they ever do. Well I think in this first year of school, they learn a significant amount of what will happen in their 12 years of schooling. Because most of them cannot read when they come into grade one. (Anne Interview, 02-28-06, p. 1)*

Anne identifies herself as following a whole language approach, which emphasizes personal meaning making with and around text, in shared experiences, even though she comments that currently whole language is like a "*dirty word*" (p.4). She describes the need for a literacy rich environment, and like Laura, talks about the importance of repetition. However, as we see by the quotation to the right from Laura's interview, her experience with her son influences her perception. The importance of childhood experiences and experiences with one's own children are taken up in chapter 6. Meanwhile, Anne tells me:

My son, was it kindergarten, no it was grade one. When he was in grade one, he had a teacher, who was a total whole language purist. Absolutely. And he has very poor phonetic skills. He's 22. He hates reading, doesn't like to read, can't read that well. And I kind of think that if he had a more structured, formal kind of teaching about language he might have had a better opportunity to be more successful, in English. Like I just don't think that you just expect it's going to happen.(Laura Interview, 02-22-06, p. 6)

> *Basically I believe children have to be exposed, to lots and lots of books, and there are lots and lots of books in this classroom, fiction, non-fiction, and I believe that they need to practice, they have to have lots of, just like riding a bike, you need lots of opportunities to practice and you need to practice books that are right for you. They need to be exposed to good literature; they need to hear it. They need to be involved with shared writing, shared reading, so my program works with themes, because, teaching socials and science in a grade one classroom is difficult, for me, unless I do a themes approach. So right*

now, we finished working on bears for instance, so that meets science objectives, but it also fulfills literacy, because we're practicing with the language. (Anne Interview, 02-28-06, p. 2-3)

Here is a common thread throughout the data, that anytime children are involved with language, regardless of subject matter, they are "doing" literacy. Her comments here are very consistent with a whole language approach, and view literacy learning largely then within the subjective-individual paradigm. She says, "*We need things that are meaningful for the kids. Literacy is meaning. They have to want to relate to it, they have to be able to relate to it*" (p. 7).

Margaret

Margaret also teaches grade one, and works closely with Anne. They identify their approaches as being similar and they do much of their planning together. Margaret also has been teaching grade one for over 30 years. Many of the teachers talked about their approaches in a very personal way, it was usually "my" approach rather than one based upon a particular method or theory, although Anne is an exception above when she links her teaching to the philosophy of whole language. None of the others were inclined to cite any one particular theory or method (other than the Reading Recovery teacher). I think of Savage (2004) when he writes arguing for a "balanced" approach, "While experts argue, teachers teach" (p. 8). Laura told me that her approach is "eclectic" and Margaret uses the same term. It seemed to me that individualizing in this manner made teachers more comfortable both in their own methods and in working with others; they didn't have to tie themselves to one

particular approach, and they could respectfully interact with colleagues without having to come to a common understanding. True to North American culture, diversity of views is tolerated and even encouraged on staff (Rosemary Interview, 03-10-06, p.1). There is a high value placed in our culture on the right of the individual to their opinion. Many of the teachers expressed that what was right for them might not be right for another teacher. There was an emphasis on tolerating a variety of viewpoints on literacy while continuing to be true to one's own methods:

> *So I don't know, sort of eclectic things as I've been to different workshops or different ideas have come along, that work for me, because if it doesn't work for me I'm not doing it. I just keep incorporating it. Now when I went to University the line was, if you believe in it you will teach children to read using that method . . . . We've seen a lot of strange methods come and go. I like mine. I like it because I think it's about children. The children are using their own language, their own thinking all the time. I actually have tried a bit of the basal reader stuff, and the comprehension questions and things like that, just doesn't work for grade ones. (Margaret Interview, 03-29-06, p.7)*

Here Margaret makes mention of something emphasized to me again and again: the teachers talk about "what works" in the classroom, "what works" for children, "what works" for them as teachers. However those practices vary enormously: there is not a common consensus on what it is that works.

> Teachers' practical knowledge. . . relates to practices within and navigation of classroom settings and highlights the complexities of interactive teaching and thinking-in-action. This knowledge is anchored in classroom situations and includes the practical dilemmas teachers encounter in carrying out purposeful action. (Munby et al, 2001, p. 880)

Vivian and Reading Recovery

Vivian is the Reading Recovery teacher for the school. Reading Recovery is a remedial reading program, developed by literacy educator Marie Clay, and delivered usually to the 5 or 6 lowest readers in grade one (that do not have designated special needs). Marie Clay is a well-known presence in the field of literacy, and has been for some thirty odd years. She developed this program to assist struggling readers, with a strong notion of early intervention being key for future success. Her program is widely implemented in Australia and New Zealand. The children are pulled out of the classroom, individually, for half an hour a day for a period of several months. The school board is currently encouraging schools to use funding to provide this for their school, but ultimately it is the principal's decision whether or not to hire a Reading Recovery teacher, or to use their staffing allotment for other staff, either learning assistance more generally or specialist teachers. The principal at this school feels very strongly about having Reading Recovery at the school (Rosemary Interview, 03-10-06).

In interviewing Vivian, I realized that I had to confront some of my own assumptions about Reading Recovery, and what I assumed would be the perspective of that teacher. Vivian was extremely thoughtful in her responses and interesting in the sense that she recognized conflicts within her own thinking. In response to the question "what is literacy", she says:

> *How interesting, given that I am a literacy teacher, what is the definition of literacy. If an individual is literate, I would believe that, well, an individual would be able to demonstrate that they can get meaning from print, in a*

> *meaningful way, for the needs of their life, and that the individual could transmit meaning in writing. So that to me would be literate, being able to, I mean basically read and write . . . . [and] transmitting meaning, through your writing. And literacy has to include, being really comfortable with literacy. The individual needs to know why they're reading or writing and be really comfortable with different genres, and I would say be able to identify what those are. (Vivian Interview, 02-06-06, p. 1)*

So the focus on reading and writing is present, as well as the meaning base. She qualifies with *"for the needs of their life,"* suggesting that these needs might vary. She introduces a metacognitive aspect, *"the individual needs to know why they are reading and writing."* Prior to interviewing Vivian, I thought about Reading Recovery as a kind of blanket remedial solution to a complex problem. I had also wondered about choosing the lowest achieving students in reading across

> Reading is a process by which the child can, on the run, extract a sequence of cues from printed texts and relate these, one to another, so that he understands the precise message of the text. (Clay, 1979, p. 13).

schools, recognizing that the "lowest" students in various socio-economic, rural and urban, English as first or second language would vary enormously. I thought of Reading Recovery as a program that ignored class. Therefore, what I didn't expect was the social justice and ecology focus of this teacher. As happened many times throughout this project I found my literacy assumptions challenged, and uncovered greater complexity than expected. When I asked Vivian why she became a Reading Recovery teacher, she explained, voicing her orientation towards social justice:

> *What led me to this is that I feel I can really make a difference. I think, in a way it's a social justice program. I think for some economic areas, in some areas, there are clumps of kids who come to school disadvantaged, for whatever reason, and Reading Recovery can make a huge difference that way. In terms of the emotional well being of children, I think it makes a huge difference. I have, in my career as a Learning Assistance teacher met many many really bright people who just never got it in reading, and they feel dumb. . . their life is a lot less happy, even as a little kid, than it could be, if they'd had some early intervention. . . . So to me, it's a way to make a visible difference. It's also very gratifying to me, because I can see the difference I've made. . . So I think it's a big payoff for the kids, and it's a big payoff for me too. It's the ideal teaching situation. I can teach exactly what that child needs. I don't have to filter it in terms of trying to hit the top, the bottom, and the middle. It's ideal. (Vivian Interview, 02-06-06, p. 2)*

I was quite surprised to hear her say that it was a social justice project, and this pushed me to reconsider my view of Reading Recovery as an effort of homogenization. Vivian expressed concerns about the school system and the literacy expectations of young children in our culture, but argues that given the current system, Reading Recovery provides essential support:

> *There are lots of contradictions in literacy and in teaching. Some people feel that Reading Recovery is imposing literacy on kids too young. I could probably step over to the other side of the room and have a good argument with myself, and say, yes, it is. But in terms of the reality that kids are placed*

> *in the school system, that their self esteem can suffer greatly if they don't learn to read pretty quickly, then I'm offering a vital service, for survival in this environment. And that's where they are, in this environment. (Vivian Interview, 02-06-06, p. 13)*

Vivian's comment that she *"could step over to the other side of the room and have a good argument with myself"* is striking. Such contradictions in teachers' thinking have been noted by various researchers. Elbaz-Luwisch writes,

> Bloom (1996) uses the term "non-unitary subjectivity" to speak about the fact that teachers themselves are often of two minds about their work, and that on different occasions – or even in a single telling – they may tell conflicting stories or one story that is layered, nonlinear, and which different voices or personas can be heard. (p. 4)

This ability to *see* the contradictions in one's own thinking was expressed only by two of the teachers, Vivian and Elizabeth. Interestingly, these are also the teachers who identify themselves as writers. Is it possible that in writing, in being a "writer", one is confronted with the contradictions and confusions in one's own thinking in a way that is not catalyzed by reading alone? It is, perhaps, more straightforward to respond to the writing of someone else, to agree or disagree, to relate to one's own experience and reflect, or sometimes to just regard it as information or input without any further action or thinking required. But writing requires a kind of commitment to ideas, and through this the writer often has to struggle through conflicted notions in the self. Elbaz-Luwisch (2005) confirms this idea, with the advent of a more postmodern conception of writing:

> Writing is seen as a way of making meaning, the formulation and bringing into being the ideas that were not there before being written, a method of coming to know. . . . [but] it is no longer possible to entertain the pleasant image of the writer carefully observing a neutral slice of experience and then putting it into words. . . . this situation [is] of being in the midst of texts. (p. 83)

It was apparent that running this Reading Recovery at Summerside was a contentious issue. Research presents conflicting findings regarding the benefits of this program, particularly in the long term. This conflict is reflected at the school level, with the grade one teachers not being supportive of the program and having children pulled out. This discussion has been ongoing at the school, and all of the affected teachers were quite open about their position, while making it clear that this was not to be interpreted as a personal issue with the Reading Recovery teacher herself, who is well respected in the school community. Reading Recovery is an excellent example of the kinds of theoretical conflict that can exist between members of a staff and how administrative decision-making can affect individual teachers. In the following table, I have placed the views about Reading Recovery, side by side, of the stake holders in the school: the Reading Recovery teacher, the two grade one teachers whose students are pulled out for the program, and the principal who has brought the program into the school:

Vivian **Reading Recovery**	**Anne** **Grade One**	**Margaret** **Grade One**	**Rosemary** **Principal**
Marie Clay's guide-book sets out the basic methodology of the practice. However the practice is fine tuned for every child. Reading Recovery to me is the ideal literacy experience for children, because the teacher is required to meet the child exactly where the child is, and to stay at the cutting edge of what the child knows. And to me this makes so much difference, I see kids who, I mean I think for some kids, waiting, waiting will work, but why take the chance? As a learning assistance teacher, I meet those kids later, that waited, you know we were waiting, and it never happened, and they're still struggling in grade 4, they're basically kind of doomed, to a life in learning assistance, because they didn't get the early intervention.	*Personally, I have a hard time with the word "Reading Recovery" who are just into grade one. So I'm not the greatest supporter, I'm sending kids, I'm going along with what's happening, but I think it's expensive, and we could do it some different way . . . . Because previously to having Reading Recovery, we had small groups of grade ones, grade one was always a focus, and we had five kids going at the same time, and they just needed that little boost. So do they come back being stronger readers? That hasn't been the case. Personally. But I do have a bias, which is against it, some people think it's just a fabulous program, and its worked wonders, I just haven't seen that. And I'm confident with most children, they will learn to read. We need to give them the time, and you need the resources.*	*It's challenging to try to keep them going with what I'm doing in the classroom as well. . . because that's the big thing, is being left out. . . The other is a bit of a juggle. . . It's being flexible, but you just do it because our main thrust is teaching the children to read, so it may take three or four of us to do it. . . . Most of them I find, I think they would have caught on, I think they're just catching on at a slower rate. But, some of it doesn't transfer very well to the classroom, which is kind of surprising, like it takes a while. Like one student, okay, I know he could use the sounding out strategies, because goodness knows from explicit teaching on my part and I'm sure his mother's, it's just not happening. So, if Vivian can get him to go for it, great. . . . It wasn't my choice to have the program at the school. . . . Just a different approach.*	*I know it's best practice for kids. I know what it does for kids. And I know we need more than that, but I know that's such a window of time to get them on board, you know years and years and years of research. You know. . . I really pay attention to research, not just saying "oh I think it's a good idea". It'll be researched, if I'm really behind it it's because I have a lot of evidence to support it and that does. And I have some resistance in this building. However I know it's right.*

This is a clear example of how perspective varies based upon your vantage point. As Bakhtin shows us, "everything is perceived from a unique position in existence; its corollary is that the meaning of whatever is observed is shaped by the place from which it is perceived" (in Holquist, 1990, p. 21). In the context of this study, I am not concerned with deciding whose perspective is correct: I take all of these perspectives to be, in a sense, true. This is a case of what Bakhtin calls "both/and" (Holquist, 1990). The contrast does illuminate, however, some interesting things about literacy. It shows how contextual competency can be: if we take the position of believing the teachers, it is apparent that improvement within the context of Vivian's tutoring does not necessarily show up in the classroom. As educators have begun to understand more and more about learning, learning in one environment does not necessarily show up in another, the transference does not always occur (McKeough, Lupart & Marini, 1995). These responses also demonstrate the political nature of literacy: teachers are frequently quite protective of the territory of their classroom. A community is created and they find it disruptive when children are pulled out, even when it is for additional support. Finally, I found it interesting how the teachers negotiate a theoretical disagreement within the social context of a staff. All four people above refer to the program in terms of imposition or resistance. But the teachers are careful not to locate this disagreement in the individuals. An ethic of professional respect and a willingness to "agree to disagree" is apparent. This instance demonstrated to me how even within one milieu that quite radically different perspectives on literacy could co-exist.

Consider then, the implications of the above four perspectives on literacy for the children in the school. The children in these classes over their kindergarten year will likely have been exposed to quite different notions of literacy, and this is made additionally complex by the notions of literacy they arrive with from home and the broader culture in which they live. "What counts" as literacy in one classroom might be different from what counts at home or in the classroom the following year. Thus continual adaptation of literacy practices on the part of the child becomes necessary.

The ideas and practices of literacy discussed in this chapter have been focused on the learning to read process. In grades 4 and 5, it is hoped that most children know how to read and write at a functional level. There is a clichéd notion in elementary schools of "learning to read" in primary (K-3) versus "reading to learn" in intermediate (4-5). The next section focuses on this intermediate level, where understandings of literacy have a similar range but some different purposes emerge.

Intermediate Group

Emma

Emma is a grade four teacher who has moved from high school to elementary school relatively recently. In making this transition, she did a lot of thinking about what literacy in the elementary context was all about. She tells me:

> *When I was first starting out, coming in, I was overwhelmed, because I'd come, and it's not that long ago, just seven years ago, and I can remember that panicky feeling of whoa, what do I teach, and how? So I really went to the websites and I looked, and I made sure I marked for the Ministry . . . so I had*

> *a sense of what it was that I should be doing, like what did grade four writing look like, what was reading like. And I used, when you go to the Ministry they have samples, of the writing, and they have lessons, so I kind of looked at that stuff. But I really did feel that I had to educate myself on that, and I had to read lots and figure out what was right. (Emma Interview, 02-03-06, p. 5)*

Thus her struggle to understand how to teach literacy in this context has been much more conscious as she made this transition. Of all the teachers, Emma emphasized turning to professional literature most heavily, to figure out what was *"right"*. She also emphasized critical literacy to a greater degree, and was one of the few teachers that mentioned other modes than reading and writing print text without prompting. This is what she said in response to the question of how she defines literacy:

> *Wow. You read all sorts of fancy definitions of that. What do I think is literacy. I don't know, I guess to be a literate person to me is to be able to read, and to write, and to listen, critically, to material, be it, whatever. So to be literate, you could be literate in a written way, to write clearly, I guess, in lots of different ways, to listen, to news, or listen to people talk, and think and understand language, and respond critically some form or way, to read, any number of things I guess, and to be able to respond critically and think about it. Pretty broad I guess . . . Or, I don't know, to be literate in all different areas. One of the big areas we're looking at now is to be literate in mathematics, is mathematical language and thinking, so I guess it's in all different ways . . . . To be literate to me is not just taking in information in a*

> *literal sense, but to think about it, and to respond in some way, or think about it in a, I guess I don't think of a literate person as somebody who just takes a piece of text or a message or something and just reads it, or hears it, but I think you need to process it in some way and to think about it. To be really, to be quite, to be literate, I think it's one more, one step above that. (Emma Interview, 02-03-06, p.1)*

In her emphasis on reading and writing, but she immediately introduces other text forms such as media and oral speech. She also emphasizes throughout her interview the importance of having a critical relationship with what is being read, a kind of critical engagement and understanding of subtext, in *"seeing what's going on"* and *"not being so manipulated" (p. 4).* How is this accomplished? She says,

> *I have a real strong belief that kids should be reading and reading and reading and responding lots and lots of thinking and reading, so that's my basic premise. And as to how we're doing that, and what, that's where I've been working hard on. (p. 9)*

Emma, like several of the intermediate teachers, has a strong interest in specific reading strategies as a means of working with text. These strategies include: making connections, asking inferential questions, looking at imagery, picking out rich words. She has difficulty in finding enough time for the children's own writing, in comparison to the importance of reading: *"In my class we do lots of reading, and we don't do as much writing as I'd like, we do a fair amount of writing, too (p. 9) . . . . I just need to somehow fit more writing in every day, which is hard to do" (p. 10).*

While there is an acknowledgement of alternative text forms and of critical literacy in Emma's interview, she also emphasizes the importance of personal meaning making in response to text. I asked her what she thought was the relationship between the reader and the text, and she said,

> *So that relationship, I guess, it's a pretty personal one, based on your background knowledge and your understanding of words and your understanding of texts, and interest, because when you're looking at the books some genres don't even appeal to kids, or, you know fiction, non-fiction. So it's pretty individual, seems to be (p. 11) . . .. You can never presuppose what somebody will bring to something, or what they're going to get out of it. (p. 12)*

This echoes Frank Smith when he writes, "Normal reading seems to begin, proceed, and end in meaning, and the source of meaningfulness must be the prior knowledge in the reader's head. Nothing is comprehended if it does not reflect or elaborate on what the reader already knows" (cited in Weaver, 2002, p. 14). Thus, in Emma's interview, I was fascinated to find at least three of the paradigms present. She had a very articulated view of literacy, perhaps through the process of being thrown out of her comfort zone in shifting from secondary to elementary school. Emma's conceptualizations of literacy were not confused, but they were complex, and did not rest within one univocal theoretical home. I began to see that the many cultural forces over time in regards to literacy could all play a role in the conceptualizations of teachers. This was even more the case if the teacher, like

Emma, valued staying current in her field. This means the constant adaptation of literacy ideas and practices to new approaches as they develop.

Sara

Sara has participated in the lunch hour conversations around literacy, and has spoken with other teachers, so she is ready for my question. She begins by acknowledging thinking about literacy as "reading and writing" as her first reflex:

> *Well, my first thought, off the top of my head, would be reading and writing, but then we can be literate in so many things . . . In school, I tend to think of it as mostly reading and writing, until we talk about being, well numeracy also ties in. Being able to attach meaning to what you hear, see, or speak, I think. Communication, I guess it's communication to me, there's got to be two people, either an author and a reader, or a speaker and a listener, there's got to be an audience, and something has to be communicated.*
>
> *Michelle: Communicated, through oral means, or*
>
> *Sara: Or text, or it could be pictures, yeah. There has to be a medium, I guess, and two people, at least two, could be more. (Sara Interview, 02-03-06, p.1)*

Sara focuses her understanding of literacy on communication between two people, regardless of medium, although she says, *"in school, I tend to think of it as mostly reading and writing."* This statement is very telling, because it points to how school literacy is a particular form of literacy that has become entrenched over time. While literacy practices have arguably changed outside of schools, within the walls of the classroom change is very slow. Lankshear and Knobel (1998) argue, "We are at

an important literacy conjuncture. New literacy practices are emerging around new technologies which are making ever deeper incursions into everyday social practices. . . These changes have major implications for literacy learning" (p. 166). However they also argue that school Discourses are disconnected from these practices, that they "don't merely separate learning from participation. . . they actually render the connections entirely mysterious" (p. 163).

In Sara's description, rather than outside societal literacy practices, her personal literacy is reflected in her classroom practices. In her own life, reading is her great love, a "*huge part of my life*," writing is "*a little part of my life*" *(p.5).* In her teaching she says, *"given the choice I'd rather teach reading than writing" (p. 10).* The connection of teachers' conceptualizations of literacy to their personal literacies and histories of literacy will be explored further in the next chapter. It is interesting that this emphasis on the reading element is reflected not only in the interviews of many other teachers, as we have already seen, but also in the history of schools, as opposed to the broader society.

> Time honoured practice, going back some centuries, required that students learned to read first, moving on to learn writing much later on. In practice, in the nineteenth century and even in the early years of [the twentieth] century, many educational programmes for children, particularly at the elementary level, concentrated on the teaching of reading only. (Christie & Misson, 1998, p. 1)

Sara explains that she sees communication as being the heart of literacy, and acknowledges a variety of forms to achieve that. She always sees two people at either

end of any text or text form, but the purposes and aims or positioning of the reader does not come up. Many of the other teachers as well, when pressed, would expand their definitions to include things like visual art or electronic media. However, like a magnet at the center, the talk is always pulled back to the central notion of reading. In Sara's interview, there is a great passion expressed in relation to reading. In the following excerpt, she mentions writing briefly, and oral language as a way of sharing what is being read, but the reading focus of her classroom is evident:

> *I think it's really important that kids read lots, be read to, have the opportunity to write lots, and have examples, and that they get to use their own ideas, and that they can self select books, and sometimes there's something I need everybody to be reading so we can work on something, but most of the time I want them to be reading self-selected things that they're interested in because they want to read it. I like to be able to help them, if they can't find a book, find one at their level that they're interested in. . . . I think kids need to be actively engaged, in whatever they're doing, so I try and provide those opportunities, and have opportunities to share with each other. I'm only here one day a week in the afternoon when they do their silent reading, but I always give them chatterbox time, where they can turn to a neighbour, they don't have to, they don't have to share, but if they want to there's five minutes where they can turn to a neighbour or walk across the room to a friend, and just quickly share something really exciting they read or something like that. (Sara Interview, 02-20-06, pp. 9-10)*

As has become familiar by this point, the personal meaning making in relation to reading fictional texts is paramount, and there are myriad ways in which this is supported in the classroom, involving both oral and written response. These responses tend to be text based. There is a continued emphasis on adapting these practices to meet individual needs, but ultimately in motivating individuals to read and to respond to reading:

> *I keep trying different things, and you try something new and for some kids you can just see the lights are on and this has been a real connection for them and you see others kind of going oh, this is kind of stupid. Okay, so what am I going to do for those guys next, to change it. I often change things as I go, like Emma and I started doing, we gave them the bookmark, I think she talked about it, with all the different things of thinking while you're reading and the post-it notes to put in, and for lots of kids that was really great, but for some of them I'm thinking, I'm not getting enough from you, I don't know, they needed more structure, okay give me five sentences about what you read today so I know you understand. And for them that worked way better. So I don't have to have the same thing from every child. But I have to have them accountable and me know what they were doing each reading time. That's what we use our reading response log for. (Sara Interview, 02-20-06, p. 10)*

Thus, while reading for pleasure is emphasized by Sara and many of the teachers, the school context requires these forms of accountability. In the classroom, we read lots, and we respond to what we are reading. In fact, much of the writing

described by many of the teachers is writing always in response to a previously existing text.

An interesting aspect that comes up in asking about alternative text forms is the notion of specific vocabularies or vernacular language in relation to different disciplines. As I attempted to probe teachers' conceptualizations surrounding literacy, this idea often came up as the way literacy could be extended into other subject areas, more so than seeing literacy as *a way of thinking* or competency within another discipline. In other words, it was a question of how language elements were involved in other disciplines such as mathematics or science, rather than logic or the scientific method being considered its own *kind* of literacy:

> *Anything using language, has usually got a literacy attached to it. I think? (pause) Most of it boils down to reading though. But with specific terms, right? A scientist is going to have to know the terms involved, sort of like math, you need to know what addition is, what the sum is, what the difference is, in science... I can't think of one off the top of my head, but depending on what branch of science, you have to know certain things and be able to communicate those ideas. (Sara Interview, 02-03-06, p. 4)*

So this becomes an interesting kind of paradox in the interviews. When asked about visuality or media teachers would acknowledge this as a form of literacy, and yet over and over again when I was delving into the boundaries of literacy the language base is heard:

Michelle: I think part of what I'm doing here is trying to find the boundaries of literacy. So some people, numeracy, or mathematical literacy, is that a form of literacy?

Sara: Some of it is and some of it isn't. You have to know mathematical terms, and what they mean, which is language based, and fits in with literacy easily. But there's certain principles of math, or operations, that you have to know, if you're reading signs, is this addition, this is equals, we know what to do, so we can attach meaning to it. But is it communicating at that point? Not really. Just doing math questions I don't think of as literacy. But there's a literacy component about knowing those terms and what they mean, and what to do when they're used. But an actual math question, that somebody was just sitting and doing, I don't think there's a lot of communication going on. Other than, no that's not true, they've got to read the signs, and if it's a word problem, well certainly, because that's where lots of kids struggle, if you just gave them the straight math question they could often do it, but throw it in the context of a word problem, where they have to sift through information and see what's important and make decisions about what they have to do or what information they need to use to solve it, that can be very complicated for some kids, because they can't read it and understand it, not that they don't know what they're doing in math. So you're kind of linking two together.

For Sara then, the subjective-individual paradigm is dominant, with many traditional elements evident, in particular a passion expressed for the experience of reading, explored more fully in chapter 6.. In her interview and as I got to know her

during the lunch time literacy discussions, she always spoke of literacy in relation to personal meaning making, rather than in terms of critical engagement or interest in new or postmodern text forms.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth has a complex view of literacy. When I ask her how she defines it, she immediately counters with the notion that she defines it different ways depending upon context, challenging my question and showing me its limitations:

> *I define it different ways at different times. It's like any other word; I use it contextually . . . . If I'm talking about a person being literate, meaning functionally literate, that they can read and fill out forms and find out what's going on around them by looking at newspapers, then. When, we're talking in a school about literacy being the goal, which is, it's the district looking at improving the literacy scores, then I'm looking about it not like that. I'm not thinking of having the kids, that's sort of like a real bottom line definition you know of literacy, but I'm thinking more of it in terms of like a power, like an ability to use language, to participate in the world, and you know negotiate your way and all of those sorts of things. I'm not thinking of like I just want you to be able to decode. It's much bigger than that, and it's got to do with being able to express yourself, and make meaning, and be, not being manipulated by others, of course you always are, but being able to interpret, and you know it's much bigger, than the basic definition of being able to read something and write something and speak something. It's far more idealistic I*

guess. Like I want kids to, with language, start to make that connection with their thinking, I want to help them think, think about… Oh it is a hard question, because it is such a huge term, but I think that's what I bring to it. (Elizabeth Interview #1, 04-06-06, p. 1)

Elizabeth expresses the complexity of literacy. Sometimes functional literacy is at issue. In her response, she talks about meaning, she talks about power, and she talks about the ways in which we talk to ourselves in order to think. This echoes Gadamer, when he says, "Being that can be understood is language" (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 213). Elizabeth seems to be able to view literacy from multiple perspectives simultaneously. She is able to see the contradictions in what she thinks as she is explains it. In the above excerpt, for example, she speaks to the importance of being literate in order to *"not be manipulated by others"* while in the next breath saying *"of course you always are."* This sense of the importance of literacy, despite its impossibility, came through in several of my conversations with her.

Elizabeth talks about the expressive aspect of writing, which for her is more significant than the receptive aspect of reading. She explains that when she thinks of literacy, she does think of language, even while acknowledging other modalities. I ask, "*Do you think about it in relation always to language?"*

Elizabeth: I think I do. I understand there are other things like visual literacy and so on, but I think when I'm talking about literacy I'm talking about language. It's the way I use it. I've heard people, there's media literacy, yeah I guess I include that in there, images.

Michelle: Yes you were talking about not being manipulated by media, right?

Elizabeth: So I do include that. But I'm not, like when people talk about say technology literacy, I think just because I'm not, I don't use it that way. Although I understand that meaning, but it's not what I'm,

Michelle: What you're talking about.

Elizabeth: Not when I'm talking, or thinking of the term. I do find that writing might even be a stronger thing for me, than the reading. Although I obviously recognize that it's about reading. It's about language. It is, for me. (Elizabeth Interview #1, 04-06-06, pp. 1-2)

Elizabeth has completed a Master's degree, and the experience of writing a thesis in that context impacted her work in the classroom, because she began to understand writing in a different way. This notion of writing in order to understand one's own thinking was unique to Elizabeth in this series of interviews. Generally writing was talked about in terms of clarity and competence in the skill of communicating, rather than as a means of understanding or a way to do thinking. Through Elizabeth's experience in her own writing, she came to understand writing in a different way, and thus thought about her classroom practice differently. I wonder if it would be possible for this kind of understanding to evolve without the experience of writing that she describes:

Well, I think when I got most in tune with writing was when I was doing my Masters' degree, which was interesting because I always wrote before then, I always wrote things like poetry, and I would write letters, I wrote a lot, and I've always read a lot. But when I was trying to figure out how I thought, and doing that when you're writing a thesis, or papers, or whatever, and really

> *struggling to find words, that's when I realized it helped me think, that doing that was a way of thinking. Then it became much more powerful for me. When I became conscious of that. And I became conscious of that so late, particularly for an English teacher. And to find that personally so powerful to me in my 40s, it really changed the way I thought, it changed the way I thought about the process of writing, and trying to recognize what I was thinking, by finding the right way of putting it into a sentence, the right words, the right experience to choose to recount, and all of those decisions around that like thinking why did I choose that, like why am I writing about this, what is that. And it gets into something about your memory, and what is all that. . (Elizabeth Interview #1, 04-06-06, p. 2)*

Elizabeth's linking of writing to memory is striking. This was the aspect of this research that I had not anticipated, but it seemed to keep arising in the interviews and conversations I had with teachers. Jardine writes,

> The link, it seems, is, at least in part, memory. But this is not memory understood as simply the compiling of information for later recall. What is at work here is a deeply embodied, fleshy, intimate sense of memory and knowledge and their cultivation. (2006, p. 1)

As Gadamer (1999/1960) says, "Understanding begins when something addresses us" (p. 299). I felt continually addressed by teachers' memories of literacy being intertwined with their practices. I became increasingly curious about this over the course of the study, and will talk about this more in chapter 6. But here Elizabeth illuminates how writing causes us to delve into our memories in a particular way, that

helps us to understand what we think and who we are: "composition is not an act of writing, it is rumination, cogitation, dictation, a listening, a dialogue, a 'gathering' (*collectio*) of voices from their several places in memory" (Carruthers, 2005, p. 297-8, in Jardine, 2006, p. 6).

Darlene

Darlene is one of the teachers that identify herself as a more "traditional" teacher. She is one of a cluster of teachers who have approximately 15 years teaching experience. While it sometimes true that teaching methods can be generational, on this staff it is some of the younger teachers who self identify as having the most traditional methods. Teaching approaches to literacy seem to depend more upon particular kinds of experiences rather than the decade of their teacher training. Darlene begins the interview by explaining that she is not teaching Language Arts this year, she shares a classroom with Elizabeth and is responsible for math and science. But she is still open to talking with me about how she views literacy. She observes a change in culture at Summerside from what she experienced before:

> *I don't know, there's just all these new things, like now there's Guided Reading, now we're all expected to go and do this, okay, now there's Lit Circles, and you know it's not the old fashioned, okay here's the reader, and answer these questions, even in the last few years. I've really noticed a big change, and I don't know if it's because I'm at this school now, and that may have made a difference. I was at another school for 8 years, an inner city school. So we did mostly "okay let's just do this," and we're teaching this,*

really basic things and then since coming here I've noticed a total change in things. Like some of the teachers say, oh I'm doing this, Lit Circles, and Guided Reading, and all these other things, so. I've been here, this is my third year here now. I've noticed that the teachers here are much more current, they're trying all these newer things. (Darlene Interview, 04-06-06, p. 1).

Darlene makes a clear distinction between what she sees as traditional and *"old fashioned"* approaches to literacy and what she sees to be as more current practices of Literature Circles and Guided Reading. However, old or new, the focus in literacy is on reading and writing, and again especially reading. Darlene says:

I guess part of it is I'm not teaching Language Arts this year. That makes a difference.

Michelle: Right. So if you were, do you think you would get into some of those things?

Darlene: I'd probably do a combination, I think I'm still quite traditional, and I would still do a lot of the, you know read this, let's work on these comprehension questions. . . .

Michelle: Okay, so when you say that you're a bit more traditional, what do you mean by that?

Darlene: Um, the old, the anthologies and you know let's read this, answer these few questions, you know I start with that at the beginning of the year, you know rather than the big projects and things like that. We do get into things like that, but I always like to start with the basic. (Darlene Interview, 04-06-06, p. 2)

I was interested to hear about how Darlene's approach meshed with Elizabeth's, since they shared a classroom and really expressed radically different approaches to teaching. She said that they work well together and are both flexible, and that the children adapt (Darlene Interview, 04-06-06, p. 11).

In Darlene's description above, there is a hint towards the notion of literacy as having a foundation of "the basics", which once mastered can be built upon with more complex work. So far, Darlene's conceptualizations of literacy seem to most closely represent the first, traditional, text based orientation. There is also a class element present in her comments, when she suggests that the teaching approaches had to be more structured and traditional in the inner city school, where:

> *I spent more of my energy, well the grade fives, my last year my grade five class, I had kids tested out between grade two and grade twelve in Language Arts. So that's a pretty wide spread there. And quite a few in the resource room, and another few that are on behaviour plans. So it was a different world. We were, I don't know I guess we were surviving, and the nice quiet work, you know, individual seatwork was your survival. It helped you manage more. (Darlene Interview, 04-06-06, p. 1)*

This is a significant point on two levels. First, the differences in educational approaches described by Anyon in her 1981 study, "Social class and school knowledge" seem evident here, where students in a lower socio-economic environment may receive a different education than their counterparts "up the hill", regardless of their being under precisely the same prescribed curriculum. Darlene also makes me wonder if many of the choices teachers make in teaching literacy have to

do with the physical management of a group of students rather than philosophical orientation. This is another version of "what works," and it calls our attention to how the demands of keeping thirty 11-year-olds in some semblance of order may dictate curricular choices more than we are willing to admit. In teacher education we often tell our teacher candidates that if their students are engaged then behaviour problems will be greatly diminished. However, as Darlene suggests, the students must be willing to cooperate to some degree before this engagement can be accomplished. She tells me that her willingness to try some of these more "current" methods has a lot to do with the student group:

> *You know we did have the wide range, but behaviour wise, just the logistics, 33 in a class, grade 2 to grade 12 spread. So it was really hard. So coming here I really noticed a difference. . . .You can manage it more here. Especially this year, I only have 25, so, and two of those are special needs that are not even in that mix, so 23. For the most part I have some really strong students, like behaviour wise, independent students, I guess. That you can say, "Here, here you go, this is what you would do." (Darlene Interview, 04-06-06, p. 2)*

This idea, that children from lower socio-economic classes needing more structured learning is deeply imbedded in our cultural discourses. Often children in schools such as the one Darlene describes, which has a reputation in the local community as a "tough" school, show a much higher level of resistance to schooling practices. This may be, as Heath shows (1983), in part because of a mismatch between their home literacy practices and those of the school. In the classroom, these can clash and the teacher is left to decide how to proceed. Often, as Darlene said,

teachers end up feeling that they are in "survival mode". These are difficult conditions under which to teach. Simply telling teachers in these situations that they should be teaching with more current methods, and that they would have fewer behaviour problems if they did so, seems a naïve response. I remember one day working as a field supervisor making detailed notes to my student teacher about her lesson and how it might be made more constructivist. As I did so, one of the children in the class came over to my chair, barking and panting like a dog. I looked up to catch the amused yet exasperated eye of the student teacher I was "supervising". Suddenly, the notes I wrote seemed to dissolve in the face of the child in front of me, who was not interested in following the rules of schooling, however perfectly designed the lesson plan. This instance is a relatively benign one, but I have other students who come back from practicum telling stories of young children hurling chairs across the room. What seems needed here is a deeper consideration of schooling structures. More on this in chapter 8.

I argue that there is an interesting triad created in our unconscious between illiteracy, low class status, and uncleanliness. Caleigh, the dance teacher, illuminates this link:

> *The people who are really kinesthetic, like mechanics and people who like working with their hands, they end up going into trades, and somehow, is it blue-collar work it's considered? Somehow that's less classy, and we're starting to break free of that and saying, "You know how much plumbers earn?" "But their hands get dirty, they're not well educated," but it's like, no, that's not true, if you didn't need to be educated to be a plumber, we wouldn't*

call plumbers to come and fix the plumbing, you need to know what you're doing, or electricians. (Caleigh Interview #3, 03-29-06, p. 3)

In this seemingly innocuous comment, the "everyday consciousness" which says that education and cleanliness are linked is present: *"but their hands get dirty"*. There is a historic link between class and literacy, in the past it was only the wealthy that had the leisure to pursue book learning. This notion persists, buried, that to be less educated is to be "less" and to work in ways that "get your hands dirty". There is a great shame attached to being illiterate, as Caleigh comments: *"When people don't learn how to read, they cover it up. . . . people who are illiterate, it doesn't mean they're not smart. And some of them are very good at hiding it, because it's so shameful" (Caleigh Interview #3, 03-29-06, p. 3).* While the effects of literacy may be viewed from many perspectives, the results of being illiterate are devastating. Stuckey writes, "What we need to abandon are literacy practices that make unnatural and unfair the lives of human beings. Certainly, literacy signifies profound human communication. Yet literacy itself has nothing to say. What we must develop is an agenda for fair things to say" (p. 95).

Dan

Dan is one of the grade five teachers, and he is the only full time male classroom teacher at the school. Jack is in the school part time as the technology specialist.

Dan emphasized to me the traditional nature of his teaching approaches, and acknowledged that his practice would not be considered "current". He describes his approach to language arts:

> *Well, I break it down into its parts, and I'm very routine based in the classroom, so I have spelling, I sort of separate it into its parts as I say, spelling is one part, writing is another part, reading is another part, and language, the punctuation, anything that comes up in writing, that needs to be examined closely is another part. So there's basically four parts to my reading program. Reading is something that I think is most important, so we do that every day whether that's silent reading or working on comprehension or vocabulary type assignments, writing is also very important, reading and writing are often hard to separate because they're both so closely tied in. Spelling, it is a spelling program, "Spelling and Language Arts" and a number of teachers use it, and it teaches the phonetic spellings of words, it teaches prefixes and suffixes, and the meaning of words. It's a very comprehensive program. (Dan Interview, 04-05-06, p. 2)*

Dan frequently emphasized his approach to teaching as one of compartmentalizing:

> *So I break it down into its parts, and timetable it out, Monday they'll receive their spelling words and their spelling activity sheet, Friday I give them a test on their words, pre-test on Monday, post-test on Friday. We correct their spelling test together, and that's how I handle spelling. I know some teachers don't do spelling anymore, there's no wordlists. But I'm sort of a traditionalist, I think of myself as a traditional teacher, and I still do it, I think*

there's a place for it, for spelling still and learning how to spell words. (Dan Interview, 04-05-06, pp. 2-3)

This is a more extreme example of a traditional view of literacy, a literacy that can be broken down into components of reading, writing, spelling, and grammar. Each of these components has their time slot in the schedule and their routines. What was most interesting was the clarity Dan had about the nature of his teaching, that teaching in a traditional manner was a conscious choice on his part, and not because he didn't see other ways as having merit, but because this is what best "fit". He says, "it works for me as a person". Again there is the sense of a practice reflecting an "authentic" self, rather than being based on this or that educational theory. This agrees with Calderhead's (1996) report that teaching is often seen by both experienced and novice teachers as "largely a matter of personality" (p. 720). In the next excerpt, Dan uses the phrase, "black and white," and this describes his approach well. He tells me, when I ask him what he means when he says that he is a traditionalist,

Well, I break the subjects down into their components, so, a lot of teachers nowadays, they, it's not broken down into it's parts so much, for instance spelling, is not something that's taught, it's taught within the framework of language but it's not a subject unto itself sort of thing. The fact that I still prefer rows, than pods, much like the traditional teachers have, I find that works best for me, and in general the kids, the students find that it works best, or it works well for them, I don't know if it works best for them but it works well for them. I'm not into, you know whole language was an approach that I

was never into, that's not the way I approach it. I do approach it in its more, it's sort of each subject area as opposed as I say to, and the students know each day, they look at their timetable and they say okay, we're going to have spelling today or today's going to be a writing day or today's going to be a, you know we're going to have reading at this time, and so it's very sort of black and white for them. They know what to expect. And they know, they'll have their notebook on their desk before I actually say take out your notebook because it's very routine based in the classroom. So I find that they have a certain comfort with that. They know there's no questions as to when something is due because they look at their timetable and they say okay, we're going to have it on Thursday and I guess it's due on Thursday sort of thing. So I think of myself as fairly traditional, in that manner, much like teachers taught when I was going to school, I think of myself. And for some, that's not what they want their children to be a part of, and for others that's exactly what they want their children to be a part of, sort of that traditional style. (Dan Interview, 04-05-06, p. 6)

So here is a conscious choice to reproduce the practices he remembers from his own schooling. This agrees with Lortie's (1975) observation (cited in Carter & Doyle, 1996) that "prospective teachers undergo, as K-12 students themselves, a protracted apprenticeship of observation. . . this antecedent socialization overpowers most of the effects of formal teacher preparation" (p. 122). The effect of a teacher's childhood experiences will be taken up in depth in the next chapter. Meanwhile, there is a thread introduced here that I found wove its way through many of the interviews,

and that is the role that parental desires and expectations play in schools. Several of the teachers introduced parental expectations for example, in explaining why they still ran a weekly spelling list. Spelling was indeed the most consistent practice across teachers, and while spelling programs varied, only one teacher, Elizabeth, does not work with spelling lists at all. Rosemary drew my attention to the pervasiveness of the spelling test as a practice across North American elementary classrooms (Literacy Café #1, 02-15-06, p. 4). In the meantime, it is worth hearing what Dan has to say about reading and writing. It is clear that in his conceptualization of literacy print text forms dominate, although he does introduce items like sporting magazines into his classrooms. However, the main discussion is about reading, writing, and the mechanics of spelling and grammar. Above, he says, *"reading is something I think is most important" (p. 2)*, so again the reading focus is evident that was found in so many of the teachers' practices. Unlike many of the teachers I spoke to, Dan's students all read the same texts, and like Darlene, Dan is comfortable using a reader as a base text:

> *So reading comes from, in my class we look at novel studies, I do two major novel studies a year, and I also do stories from their basal reader, they have a little reader, a grade five reader, "Impressions", and I take stories from there and I've gone home and on the computer written out some words from the text that are very like challenging and have the students look them up, look the words up and put them in a sentence, and then I ask the students five or six questions based on the story, and I'm looking at their comprehension of that material and I'm teaching them how to put some of the question in the answer.*

> *So, full sentence answers, that's a bit of a skill that needs to be practiced, we practice that so we look at that. And then we just read for enjoyment, we read for fun, and reading is supposed to be fun, I'll often as I said earlier, I'm a big believer in short stories, the stories you can get around in one sitting, and my trick is to ask the students three questions based on the story, just those ones that kind of have a hard time sort of tuning into the story, it gets them sort of focused and it gives them a bit of a challenge at the end, can they identify the three questions. And I ham it up, I'll say, "Oh here's a real hard one coming here, I don't think many of you will get this one," and it sort of makes it more interesting. And I do come up with high interest stories, from, Reader's Digest is a source that I use, but anytime I come across one in my reading I'll cut it out or photocopy it and I'll add it to the collection of stories. (Dan Interview, 04-05-06, p. 3)*

This question of whether the class reads texts together, or read texts of their own choosing individually or in small groups as in Literature Circles, can at first glance be an indicator of literacy beliefs. On the surface it would be easy to view the level of individualization as an indicator, with the most traditional teacher typically reading common texts. However, I would argue that what is important is what is done with the texts post reading. Dan here describes asking the students questions, and by his descriptions the answers to these questions are contained within the story. This does suggest the traditional paradigm, where answers are indeed found within texts themselves. A more subjective-individual conceptualization would have the students making personal connections to the texts such as Sara and Emma describe, or the way

Anne talks about children needing to make meaning of the texts. Again Elizabeth's approach to reading in the classroom stands out as unusual: texts are read together but for the purpose of understanding the craft of the author as she described in chapter 4.

As traditional as Dan's approach is, he was also the only teacher that spoke about the importance of bringing media based texts such as magazines into the classroom:

> *So I like to, it's as I say, it's getting everyone interested in reading. I know at school we emphasize novels, and novels are good to read, but sometimes it means getting a skateboarding magazine to these students, and we have wonderful magazines over there in the library, and reading is reading. It doesn't necessarily matter, in my opinion, what you read. It's the fact that you've found something that you're interested in and you want to learn more. And so, for the boys, it's often skateboarding, or basketball, or Sports Illustrated. (Dan Interview, 04-05-06, p. 10)*

Interestingly, this is one of the first times that gender differences in literacy practices has come up in the interviews. I did not specifically ask questions about gender. Dan draws attention to different reading preferences among boys, possibly based on his own experiences as a student (see chapter 6), and then he also comments on the differences in writing habits as well, which none of the other teachers mentioned. Dan explains how his approach to teaching writing has evolved over the years, and embedded here is a comment about the way the girls write:

> *Writing, very important, obviously, and I, it used to be when I started out I thought the way to go was to get them fired up about an idea and get them*

writing about it, and it would be pages upon pages of ideas but there's no sense, or there's lots of thought but not organized thought. And to edit something like that and to refine it took forever. So I thought, wait a minute, this is not the right approach, I don't think. And I know the teachers teaching kindergarten to grade 4 or whatever, there's a lot of, they stress sentence structure and building sentences and so on, and I know they have an understanding of how to construct a sentence, so what I do is I say okay, we're going to go with paragraphs. Paragraphs are five, six, ten sentences, but you've really now got a smaller piece of writing, and it can be refined and really looked at in detail, and polished much quicker, and there's an end in sight for the students. Rather than thinking this is going to go on forever, they can see the end. And so I'm a big believer in paragraph writing at this age, especially at the beginning of the year, and looking at descriptive paragraphs, how do you write a descriptive paragraph, and we get into persuasive paragraphs. You want to persuade the reader to believe what you believe. So we look at the different types of paragraph styles, and we write a paragraph, on each type of style, and that's what we do to begin with. At this time of the year, we look at other types of writing that are very important, writing a letter. Whether you send it in the post box, send it through the mail, or write it on the computer and email it off, that's another important skill, so we've just completed that activity. Poetry, that's something that we'll be doing next, that's another form of writing. I like pieces of writing where you're writing for a purpose, and there's a definite start and a definite conclusion, and as I say

earlier on in my career I had these, generally girls, who would write these stories that would go on forever and it would just take so long to show them how to polish it up and it just didn't work. Now I'm much more inclined to give tight pieces of writing. So that's how I go about that. You get it done and then you go on to the next one. It's much, it's faster and more in the now sort of thing. So that's how I approach that. And then of course in their writing, that's an opportunity for me to look at what they're doing, and in language when we get a chance to sort of understand how to use, say, to, too, and two, that'll be, I'll see that there's some students that are having trouble with that so that becomes a lesson, or there, their, and they're, or punctuation, or parts of speech. But it gives me an opportunity to see what they can do and where they need to go, and we'll explore those areas during our language component. So that's basically how I come up with my language program, a lot of it has just evolved over the years, and sometimes you'll see an idea from someone else and you'll add that, but a lot of it's just sort of, it's evolved. And as you do something for a longer period of time you get to see what works and what doesn't work. (Dan Interview,

04-05-06, pp. 2-4)

It is worth noting that Dan and Jack are the only male teachers at the school. This tends to be typical in local elementary schools: one or two male teachers, often in the upper grade levels, and often fulfilling the role of administrator, P.E. teacher, or technology expert. In Dan's case, he takes much of the responsibility at the school for extracurricular sports – my interview with him was scheduled around coaching

commitments. If male and female students encounter these types of gender roles played out throughout elementary schooling, we perhaps should be less surprised that school related literacy is seen as something more "for girls." Blair and Sanford (2004) point out through their study their recognition of "distinct characteristics of boys' practices and behaviours with respect to literacy in the classroom, in hallways, and in the playground" (p. 452), and question what this means both for boys and for girls inside and outside of school. Dan commented once to me, "I like to leave the literacy to the ladies," when the question of his participation in my study was first broached. I certainly would not go so far as to suggest that Dan's conceptualizations are typical of male teachers, but it does seem consistent with some of the research showing how boys and girls are socialized to literacy differently, and demonstrating how their uses of literacy also differ (Blair & Sanford, 2004). It becomes apparent how these socializations might easily be perpetuated. It is interesting to consider in this specific context what effect this might have for these students, where team sports and technology might be perceived as something "for boys" and novel reading and story writing as something "for girls". When I asked him in the interview, however, about that comment, Dan explained further.

> *Michelle: I think another day I was here you were making a comment that the Language Arts part of it probably isn't your, I'm not sure exactly what you said but that wasn't your real passion as far as subject area, is that right? Did I have that right?*
>
> *Dan: No, I would say that I, I like teaching it all. I do. I know I wanted to be a P.E. teacher, at one time, and it didn't work out for me. I have a very, I have*

sort of a P.E. background. But I'm very pleased that I am where I am and I can teach, because I enjoy it all. (Dan Interview, 04-05-06, pp. 11)

Specialist Teachers

In the process of the inquiry, I decided to approach all of the staff for interviews, even if they were not directly teaching literacy in their classrooms. One of the specialist teachers, Caleigh, who is only there part time, teaches dance and French. While in the staff room one morning during recess, I by chance had a fascinating conversation regarding the nature of dance as a kind of language. She enthusiastically agreed to participate in the study. Jack, the technology specialist, is at the school two days a week. He also agreed to participate. Both of these interviews were quite fascinating, in the sense that they looked at literacy from an oblique angle.

Caleigh

In speaking with Caleigh about her work with the children at the school, it came up how learning dance can be analogous to learning the vocabulary of a language. I wanted to ask her further about this in the first interview:

Do you think there is a connection between dance and language?

Caleigh: I think there is, on lots of different levels, because of course there's vocabularies specific to dance, which is not exactly what you're addressing but I know that that's one aspect. It certainly uses a different part of the brain than a lot of academic work, because a lot of it is muscle memory, and you've got to remember where your muscles go. How to explain this better, you have

to almost not think about it too much, and let your body, your body has to learn what it's doing, so there is that aspect, and there's certainly very specific learning that goes on. . . . . I compare it a lot of times, like playing a musical instrument, or learning a dance or something like that, I often compare it to language learning. Language learning is way more complex, obviously, but it's cumulative, it builds on itself, because the more you learn certain moves, whether it's hip hop moves or jazz moves or whatever, instead of thinking about each move individually, and having to think about what your feet are doing and then try desperately to think about what your hands or arms are doing at the same time, your body gets used to certain things going together, or used to particular moves, so you tend to remember it in chunks. . . . . But basically, I guess for example when you first start reading you sound out each letter, and kids start to recognize "cat" "sat" and begin to make generalizations. It doesn't mean they recognize all words, but as time goes on we learn sight word vocabulary, and it's a little bit like dance because we tend to remember chunks over time, like you learn a particular move and instead of remembering each move individually, you remember one group of moves and they attach to another group and it starts flowing together a little bit more, if that makes sense. Instead of remembering every little detail, you're remembering much less because your body already has that repertoire, it's a little bit like sight word reading. (Caleigh Interview #1, 03-01-06, pp. 1-2)

This was an interesting comparison. In her experience teaching dance, and learning dance for herself as she says "relatively late in her life," she had many opportunities to make connections across kinds of learning. Caleigh had also spent time teaching and living in China, and in her efforts to learn Mandarin she thought a lot about language, literacy, and how it works:

> *One of the languages I speak is Chinese, and one of the reasons I learned was because I was fascinated by the writing system. The writing system is all sight words, because they're pictographs, and there are sound components to it, but it's basically memorization. What's really interesting for me, just the way I learn, and it seems to relate to dance, is I do the bizarrest thing, when I'm writing in Chinese, because I often have trouble writing the words, I can read them but I can't write them, because I don't always remember the stroke order. Again, it's muscle memory, because if you can't do the first stroke or two strokes, you can't write the word, you can't write half the word, it doesn't make sense, your mind memorizes the whole word, it's the movement of the pen on the paper. It's quite an odd experience. Chinese is not really a language that you sound out, because it's pictographs. But the weirdest thing for me, that I've noticed I do, is if I forget a word, I actually start sounding it out phonetically, because that's how I've been taught coming from a Western language, and for some reason the sound will often trigger, how to start, it's the bizarrest thing that I verbalize, and for some reason it will trigger the writing for me. It's the strangest thing because it's not a phonetic based language, I shouldn't be able to do that. It just was connecting to the dance,*

that I often need to, unless it's really easy I need to verbalize what I'm doing. . . . Mandarin is my preference. It's much more intuitive than English is; it's much less wordy. . . . But Noam Chomsky I think. . . talked about sort of a thing in the brain like birds have to teach them how to sing, there's a language readiness, a language box. . . . I have a friend. . . . essentially, she's done the same thing I did, and came to Chinese in her adult life. . . . but she says that, her theory is that Chinese, Mandarin Chinese and probably all Chinese languages because the grammar is the same, is very close to that little black box language. She says it's really intuitive to speak. I don't have enough language learning experience to say that, but I do, I don't know if it's because it was the native environment I was in, or because it was intuitive, or because it's grammatically simple, but. The tones are difficult, the writing is difficult, but the language itself is much, much easier. (Caleigh Interview #1, 03-01-06, pp. 4-5)

This long excerpt gives a flavour for how different Caleigh's interviews were from those of the teachers I had spoken to thus far. Because of her experiences in living in China and learning a radically different language, her awareness of her own learning processes in relation to language and literacy were heightened. Earlier I had hypothesized that writing pushes someone to become more conscious of their own thought, in the complexities and contradictions in their thinking. Here I also saw what one might intuitively sense, that living and working in a different culture not only has the potential to broaden thought but to make one more intensely aware of one's own culture, and in this case, the cultural nature of literacy. Throughout her interviews,

Caleigh expressed how our practices in relation to literacy were specific to our language. (Caleigh Interview #1, 03-01-06, p. 6)

Jack

Unfortunately, the audio for Jack's fascinating interview was lost. I typed up notes later that evening and sent them to Jack, who read them and wrote back explaining some of his points further. So in reporting on his data, I am paraphrasing, but my interpretation of what he said has been checked.

Jack sees literacy as communication, regardless of medium. He disagreed with using the term technological literacy as a separate term, saying that using electronic media *is* literacy. He pointed out that writing with pencil and paper is also a form of technology, and that computers are a recent form. He suggested that in a real sense, teachers who are not comfortable with using computer technology for communication are in a real sense partially illiterate, and that this is understandably difficult for them to acknowledge. We had an interesting discussion around metaphors, and he was talking about the importance of using traditional literacy metaphors for adults to learn the new medium, such as likening computer files to files in a cabinet, or using terms like "cut and paste". In his message to me, he wrote:

> *Adults require metaphors in order to use technology. It works like scaffolding; in order to acquire a new skill or understand a new concept, a learner needs to build on previous knowledge. Without concrete metaphors or similes to parallel digital concepts, adults are unable to grasp how the computer works. Similar to children acquiring math concepts (ugh.*

> *mathematical literacy) who must progress from concrete to iconic to symbolic stages, adults need to be shown "look, this thing works a lot like a typewriter but with glitches instead of sticky keys". Children however do not seem to require the metaphors. In fact, whenever I use metaphors in teaching technology, it tends to confuse younger students. "Cut & Paste" doesn't conjure up images of scissors and glue for the young, it just means "take this from here and put it there"; there doesn't need to be a parallel to the "real world" because for them, the technology IS the real world. (Jack E-mail Response, 03-02-06, p. 1)*

Like many younger teachers, Jack also has spent time teaching in Asia. Again I was struck by how this seemed to influence his understanding of literacy, perhaps because it causes one to view literacy from underneath, perhaps because it puts the adult back into the space of being a new language learner, a new literacy learner. Jack's perspectives were postmodern and critical in orientation, and he had done a great deal of thinking about media and how it operates in society. Throughout his interview, he referred to thinkers such as Marshall McLuhan and Foucault. He sent me this quote:

> [Literacy] viewed from a Foucaultian perspective, is one among many technologies of the self and is developed through an objectification process that orders bodies in time and space in order to induce conformity among those subjected to various educational mechanisms that produce knowledge of language systems. Those socialized to be literate become literate subjects; literacy standards are determined by the most powerful in the society, who

define knowledge as what has descended from the historically powerful. -- Agnello

This was a unique perspective found in the school, in his willingness to step back from literacy and think about how it can disenfranchise as much as empower. However, Jack is not a classroom teacher, and his strong interest is in new media and technology, thus he is invested in literacy in a different kind of a way. It made me wonder about how difficult it is to think about literacy from "inside" the perspective of the classroom. Only Jack and Elizabeth were willing to delve into the postmodern as a means of understanding literacy.

> THERE IS NO STABLE SELF TO BE DISCOVERED BY INTERACTION WITH THE TEXT, SINCE THE SELF IS AS MULTIPLE AND AS WRITTEN-THROUGH AS THE TEXT IS (GRIFFITH, 1987, P. 44)

Administration

Rosemary

Rosemary, the principal, was an interested and supportive participant in all aspects of the study. She seemed to view my research as an opportunity to open dialogue about literacy amongst the staff, and a chance for professional dialogue. While encouraging a level of diversity in teaching practices, she also felt responsible for creating a certain amount of alignment in practices as well. It was interesting to

watch how she went about this with her staff. I asked her about the diversity of literacy practices from her perspective:

> *So I guess there's two things, one, is the more diversity the better, because then you're going to get more of the real world interfacing with the students, so they need to bring who they are and what they are to the practice because it's all good practice, but different kinds of practice, and that can work more and less for different kinds of students with different kinds of learning styles, so there's all that going on. But also over here, there needs to be some aligning. And so that's why, I'm so delighted for example right now that I have over half my staff attending Guided Reading workshops. The Guided Reading just is the catalyst. It happens to be Guided Reading. . . . We also did the Six Traits of Writing together, the whole staff, and that's wonderful because we started to do the looking at words, in literature, and talking about some applications in our writing that we could be bringing school wide. The school wide write also does that. Thank goodness we are now into, well into that, and all the teachers of each grade meet so there is some alignment happening there. It's growing out of some of these, it's going in different ways. You cannot force alignment. But you can certainly set up structures to encourage it, and I think the school wide write has been the most significant. Because they're talking, and as soon as they talk about their writing well they move into their reading, and it gets the literacy conversation going.*
>
> *(Rosemary Interview #1, 03-10-06, pp. 1-2)*

Rosemary continually emphasized the notion of conversation throughout the interview and the literacy discussions. In my discussion with her, the tensions involved in her role became apparent, in negotiating expectations of the Ministry, the School District, the parents in the community, and the diversity of approaches represented in the staff. I had a sense of Rosemary as maintaining a very delicate balance. The teachers were aware of her views on literacy and certain expectations and decisions that had been taken administratively, such as the School Wide Write (where all the students in the school wrote a story on the same topic) and Reading Recovery. While the teachers' conceptualizations of literacy were not set by the administration, I was curious about Rosemary's views on literacy and how these might set a tone for the staff. She told me:

> *Well, it's composed of so many things, we've been talking about some of them, and it's kind of the umbrella that has a lot of things hanging on it. And so it's some of the things we've talked about, like the Guided Reading, the, any of the reading, the oral reading, the writing activities, the listening to the literature, or the appreciation, the mechanics of it, everything to do with the written word. And the hearing of it, storytelling, the drama, it's all literacy. And it also crosses over into numeracy, because you're reading the problems. So it permeates everything we do. The words are, I guess it starts with the word, for me. . . . It now has gone to visual. . . . But it's the word and the meanings of words. And for me, like I did an English major, that was my area, with linguistics, so I loved the words, and the origins, and the changes over time, and the emotions that, you know words create wars. So it's extremely, it's*

about everything we do each day. For me. I have a very broad view. Then I could talk about exactly what in your reading programs or those kinds of things. If you're talking about literacy, I would say it's big. (Rosemary M. Interview, 03-10-06, pp. 4-5)

Thus, the language focus of literacy is consistent also through the administration of this school. Several of the teachers, and most emphatically Rosemary, talked about "loving words." The linguistics background of Rosemary is a little unusual in teaching, and gives her an understanding of language as being "alive".

Rosemary talked quite a bit about the notion of "best practices" as being important for the alignment of the staff. So this is an interesting tension, between the idea that teachers have a kind of professional autonomy to pursue their own approaches and the idea that certain practices are "best" and that teachers should "align" around these. While decisions such as implementing Reading Recovery require that grade one teachers, for instance, cooperate, it seemed to me in speaking with the teachers that they viewed their literacy practices as highly individual and idiosyncratic. In asking them where their notions of literacy came from, they most commonly spoke of "experience" rather than teacher education, professional development, or administrative philosophy. It is to this question, of where the conceptualizations surrounding literacy are rooted, that I turn to in the next chapter.

Chapter 6

HERMENEUTICS OF LITERACY

> With each new turn, with each new pass over the same terrain, the whole is deepened and radicalized, the hermeneutic sights and foresights are sharpened and refined, and the investigation makes its way further down, further back into the preunderstanding from which it proceeds. With each repetition we penetrate all the more radically the presuppositions from which we set out. It is not a question of escaping these presuppositions but of unfolding and penetrating them, of tapping into their latent wealth. (Caputo, 1987, p. 68)

The next turn of this inquiry, as Caputo above exhorts, attempts to penetrate deeper into the conceptualizations the teachers carry of literacy, to delve into their presuppositions. It was my initial assumption that the suppositions teachers held were historical conceptualizations, played out at the level of the individual. I suspected that they might be largely unaware of these constructions in the historical consciousness, and that discussions surrounding these contexts might be helpful in more consciously constructing their practice. Through the process of the interviews and group discussions, I found this to be only partially the case. Hinted at already in this study, and the topic of this chapter, is the way in which teachers' conceptualizations of literacy were embedded within their personal histories. This was not a matter of "teaching the way they had been taught", another clichéd notion about teaching. It was more a complex hermeneutic of reaching back into their childhood memories and embedded relationships with literacy, and circling this forward into their current practices. In listening to the teachers talk about their histories of literacies, I heard

many echoes of Caputo as he describes the hermeneutic process of repetition, inherited from Kierkegaard:

> Kierkegaardian repetition, like Derrida's, is productive. It does not limp along after, trying to reproduce what is already present, but is productive of what it is repeating. The repeating is the producing – of the self. But not absolutely: One does not create *ex nihilo* but always beginning from a situated standpoint one gradually carves out an identity for oneself. The paradox is resolved, therefore, in a way which anticipates the hermeneutical paradoxes. . . by introducing a kind of existential circle, according to which the self by choosing the self comes to be the being which it all along has been:
>
> > He becomes himself, quite the same self he was before, down to the last significant peculiarity, and yet he becomes another, for the choice permeates everything and transforms it.
>
> He does not create something altogether new, but actualizes what he has been all along. Repetition thus is not an ethical gymnastics which thinks anything possible. It begins with the situatedness in which one finds oneself. (Caputo, 1987, pp. 29-30)

This Kiekegaardian understanding of repetition precisely describes the conceptual process regarding literacy expressed by the teachers. They describe a process of finding practices that bring them closer and closer to an authentic sense of being true to their identities, and I suggest here in this chapter that their identities surrounding literacy are shaped to a surprising degree by their childhood experiences. By this I do not mean how they were taught in school, but rather, the experiences they

had in relation to literacy both before school and surrounding school. Their family experiences, and what literacy came to mean for them as a child echo through their current practice. Many of the teachers were voracious readers as children, although as we will see in the next section, not all of them were, and these exceptions prove as interesting as the rule. Also, we will see that not all of the teachers became dedicated readers through the influence of reading families, although many did. Rosemary, the principal in particular became a reader in spite of the values of her family, as "*a defiance. . . almost a response against" (Rosemary Interview, 03-10-06, p. 12)*. This aspect of the interview data became a critical insight for me as I came to better understand conceptualizations surrounding literacy of the teachers. Also of note is that most of these stories were in relation to reading, rather than writing or other literacy forms, which repeatedly seemed for most of the teachers to be the central tenet of literacy.

Childhood Memories

In Sara's interview, she tells me:

> *I could read before I started kindergarten, and I don't know where that came from. . . I was always read to, I was always surrounded in books, I loved books, my younger sister would say I was a pain to take on holidays because I'd just sit and read all the time. So I guess a lot of it was from being immersed in an environment and loving it, I made connections easily and quickly and it took me to other worlds and I loved it. And I had teachers who always encouraged, and always pointed out different books to me, or if they knew I liked something they'd say "oh have you read this one?" I used to volunteer in the library in elementary school to shelve books and stuff like that. And as a teacher it's my favourite thing to do, I could do literacy all day (laughs). (Sara Interview, 02-03-06, p.4)*

Sara's description above, of her childhood reading, is a passionate endorsement of a particular kind of reading, an immersion in the world of books, of being transported by fiction and "loving it". She can't tell me why she loved reading so much as a child, but just that she was read to and surrounded by books, and was "taken to other worlds". This kind of description was, although not universal, very common amongst this group of teachers. I began to wonder if people who had this kind of experience with books are people more likely to become elementary teachers in the first place. Her experience mirrors my own, and, it became clear, that of many of the teachers. I too was a pain to take on holidays, always worried I would not have enough books to read on the trip; my suitcase usually contained more books than

clothing. I was struck by how what Sara said mirrored Caputo's (1987) description of Kierkegaard's repetition, where people are actively involved in a productive, not merely reproductive, process of being and becoming, beginning in "situatedness in which one finds oneself" and "by choosing the self comes to be the being which it all along has been" (p. 30). She tells me that her goal in teaching for the students is: *"to inspire them to keep reading and writing as much as they can" (Sara Interview, 02-03-06, p. 5).*

The warm memory of Sara's childhood reading goes unquestioned, the essential "goodness" of this is uninterrupted. Schooling is, at root, a middle class endeavor, and the middle class value placed on books and reading is a dominant discourse in schools that is very difficult to disrupt (Stuckey, 1991). Thus, what Sara had in her childhood, *"I was always read to, I was always surrounded in books, I loved books. . ."* is what she wants to do for the students in her class, saying on more than one occasion, "*as a teacher it's my favourite thing to do, I could do literacy all day,"* and during the literacy meeting, *"given my choice I'd teach reading five hours a day, 'cause I love it" (Literacy Meeting, 01-17-06, p. 6).* Sara was one of the teachers for whom reading was a much stronger focus in her classroom, as it is in her life:

> *Michelle: Do you consider yourself a writer in the same way?*
>
> *Sara: No. I can write. I don't do a lot of writing. I do a lot of reading, I don't do a lot of writing. I write grocery lists, I write notes to my children's teachers. I don't have time, anymore. I used to write letters, before I had kids, with friends, and, email I guess, but I don't do a lot of that either, because*

Emma can email me something and three days later I still haven't read it, because I don't have time to look at it all the time. I don't write nearly as much as I read. I could, I'm capable, but it's not a major part of my life. When I was younger, like a teenager, I used to keep diaries and things. But no, reading is a huge part of my life, writing is a little part of my life. When I was going to university, writing was a big part of my life, because that's what I had to do a lot of, lesson plans, papers, and so on. But as an adult, report cards, that's a lot of writing, but I don't spend a lot of time on it.

Michelle: In the same way.

Sara: Nowhere near the same. It's interesting, I never thought about that before. (Sara Interview, 02-03-06, p.5)

It was striking that Sara, along with many of the other teachers, had often not made these specific connections, which, in hindsight, seemed quite obvious. While Sara mentions her university professors, professional reading, and colleagues as all having influence on her literacy practices, arguably the underlying conceptualizations of literacy were rooted much further back in her history. Another example of this rootedness making its way forward into teaching, previously unnoticed by the teacher, is Elizabeth's description of her experience as a child in school with phonics:

Oh yeah, that was very strange, that took me a long time to figure out what they were doing. I went through several years of school thinking, "Oh god I'm so bad at phonics, I'm so terrible at it." And I was, you know, I mean I don't think I was terrible, I think I could probably do it, it was really weird, I just dreaded phonics, I hated it . . . just this bad time of meaningless stuff. I didn't realize they were doing that to teach me how to read.

Michelle: Right. Even though you already knew how to read.

Elizabeth: I knew how to read; I had no problem reading. I think I was a little bluebird instead of a, you know in all those reading group things, but that I just thought it was, like math, it was like a separate subject kind of, there was reading and phonics and they were completely not connected. (Elizabeth Interview #1, 02-22-06, p. 3)

Reading pedagogy, according to the Comprehension Hypothesis, focuses on providing students with interesting, comprehensible texts, and the job of the teacher is to help children read these texts, that is, help make them comprehensible. The direct teaching of "skills" is helpful only when it makes texts more comprehensible. (Krashen, 2002, p. 32)

And Elizabeth makes this significant connection:

> *I was thinking, that probably had a huge impact on me, that remembering about the phonics, because I've never seen that as an appropriate way to teach as a result.* (Literacy Café #1, 02-15-06, p. 19)

In working with student teachers in developing their literacy practices in most teacher education programs, or in working with practicing teachers on developing their literacy practices, there is very little of this kind of hermeneutic thinking back in order to understand forward. In terms of the literacy paradigms identified in chapter 2, there are significant reasons why certain teachers find a conceptual "home" in one paradigm over another. I argue these reasons are rooted in teachers' childhood relationships with literacy to a degree unrecognized in the field. There is a substantial amount of literature showing how family literacy practices support or work against school literacy practices for students (Voss, 1996), but not enough recognition of the significance of the *teacher's* literacy experiences, at least until recently. Carter and Doyle (1996) note:

> An emphasis on personal narrative and life history in learning to teach represents the shift that has taken place since the early 1990s from an assumption that the teacher is simply an instrument in the production of school achievement to a view of the teacher as an intelligent agent in educating children. (p. 120)

Still largely unexplored are the importance of personal narratives and life histories directly in relation to curriculum areas. Importantly, the teachers in this

study are surprisingly unaware of the directness of these connections. One of the most poignant stories from childhood came from Elizabeth:

> *When I was a child I was reading a lot. Like I was one of the kids that my mother was saying I couldn't read any more, "No more reading for you, you have to go outside." Because I was really quite content. I remember going to the library when I was about 10 and just bursting into tears because I thought I had read it all. And my mother then taking me, I must have been younger than that, and saying no there's this whole other section here, you've finished with this children's section and now you move over here, and just thinking, "Oh boy! Wow!". . . . One of the presents I got, I remember this, it was like the best present in the world, and I'm still amazed that they knew to do this, because they also thought that it wasn't that healthy for me, to be spending as much time as I did reading, and they're actually much more of an active, let's go skiing, we'll go to the beach, that's my family. But, I remember one Christmas, they gave me this big box of books, it was, I just remember just opening this up, I think I must have been about 11, and it seemed like in my memory this huge, like half my size, so it probably wasn't that big, but it was a big box, and I had no idea what it was, and I opened up this box, and it was just completely full of books, like, more than I could read in a week. Oh it was so exciting. That was the best present I think I ever got in my life, you know it was just so, pulling out the titles and looking at them. It was wonderful. (Elizabeth Interview, 02-22-06, pp. 2-3)*

This story, of unpacking the box full of books, became a metaphor for how I imagined the teacher's literacy practice: they were always unpacking the memories from the literacy boxes of their childhood, yet surprisingly unaware that this was so intertwined with their decisions surrounding practice.

Emma embodies another example of family practices surrounding literacy having clear implications for the teacher's classroom. She tells me:

> *I come from a family of readers. And so, that was something that was always valued in our home, is to read, and talk. So that's something always, in my life, I've just read tons, so for me, just on a personal level, to read in that form, and to talk about ideas is really important. I can remember when my kids were really little, and being home, and starting a book club, that was a long time ago because my daughter is twenty-three now but, I just couldn't bear to not talk about something or think about something. I came from a family of everybody reads. There's books everywhere, all over the house, and books from murder mysteries, to non-fiction, my dad has a huge collection of non-fiction. It's just, everybody reads. My sisters, and I, we all read. (Emma Interview, 02-03-06, p.2)*

Listening to the teachers' voice should teach us that the autobiographical, 'the life', is of substantial concern when teachers talk of their work. And at a commonsensical level I find this essentially unsurprising. What I do find surprising, if not frankly unconscionable, is that for so long researchers have ruled this part of the teachers' account out as irrelevant data. (Goodson & Walker, 1991, p. 144)

Emma's description of her childhood is echoed precisely in her priorities for her classroom, which we heard in chapter 5, "*I have a real strong belief that kids should be reading and reading and reading and responding lots and lots of thinking and reading, so that's my basic premise" (p. 9).* This underlines once again Caputo's description of Kiekegaardian repetition, "the self by choosing the self comes to be the being which it all along has been. . . [she] does not create something altogether new, but actualizes what [she] has been all along" (Caputo, 1987, p.30). Emma's situatedness began in a home filled with books, books *"everywhere, all over the house,"* and in her family there was a common practice of reading, thinking, and talking about what you read. The value of this practice then permeates her classroom, forming a central pillar of her day-to-day practice. Vivian tells a similar story, and echoes Sara's description of reading as an escape:

> *Michelle: What about your own, like your personal literacy, your family experience of literacy, do you consider yourself, are you a reader, are you a writer yourself, and does that impact what you do?*
>
> *Vivian: Yes, I'm a reader, I read very early as a child, and just lost myself in reading, it was a great way to cope with life. It was sort like a legal drug I guess (laughs), get into great myths or whatever, and leave the rest of it behind. So I read a lot as a child. I mean it was a great escape, and very enjoyable. As I got older, it was just really neat to contact other minds.*

Here is a fourth teacher making reference to the magical experience offered by reading, and the value it had in "coping with life". Sara was "transported," Emma used it as a springboard to "think and to talk," as a new mother starting a book club in

order to cope with isolation, Elizabeth would rather read than play outside. Vivian's description of reading as a "legal drug" was fascinating, given how we often celebrate signs of "addiction" to reading in school children, while being appalled if they show similar addictions to television or video games. The consistency amongst the teachers this way was striking. On the positive end, it makes sense that adults with a passion for literature might become those that teach elementary school. Do we have as many teachers for young children equally passionate about mathematics or science or other disciplines? Does reading fiction passionately as an escape become a feminized activity, since most elementary school teachers are women?

In contrast to many of the other teachers, Vivian also immediately following upon her love of reading, explains how this grew into an interest in writing as well:

> *Going along with it, as an adult, I've become more interested in how it's actually put together, how did the person get there, how did various writers that I admire actually structure this story, and not only stories but factual writing. I try to write occasionally for the newspaper and they're always telling me to hack it down to about half. So I really enjoy the challenges of becoming a better writer myself, and I've taken lots of editing, substantive and copy editing courses and writing courses. I just do it for pleasure, but it's fun. Sometimes I do it professionally, I've written some things for school here and for the district and for the newspaper; it's fun. (Vivian Interview, 02-06-06, pp. 6-7)*

Vivian and Elizabeth were the only teachers, as we have noted before, who considered themselves writers as well as readers. But these experiences carried

forward into their practice. Elizabeth, for example, used text in her classroom in a very different way than the other teachers:

> *I'm thinking about a lot of the ways that I use reading, is about writing. Like you know I'll read something, and then I'll talk about, like I'll read it to them, like literature, I'll read to them and we'll talk about it. I'm kind of doing it for some other, I'm not teaching them reading so much. When I was teaching poetry, I think my main reason for teaching poetry was, you know I love it, it's my favourite, it's so they'll write poetry. And like with those, you know those, "Rose how did you get so red?" and those books by Kenneth Cook, do you know those ones? Oh I love them. I think they're really good. You know where he takes a metaphysical poem, and teaches it to the kids, "Oh you see what he's doing here, he's taking something mechanical and doing a metaphor about, so here if you were going to compare yourself to something, what would you do, would you be an eggbeater?" And then they write these things about, "I am an eggbeater because." You know, that kind of stuff. I like doing that.*
>
> *Michelle: And I think that for a lot of people it seems like the emphasis is on responding to reading. To be thinking, thinking about what you're reading and responding to it, but the emphasis is not on their writing. So I would say that's different.*
>
> *Elizabeth: Yeah I just realized that as I was talking to you that most of, when you brought that up, I was just thinking that is what I do. I say, "Well, oh you*

see how he does that? You could do that there!" How to get your own experience and thinking.(Elizabeth Interview #2, 03-30-06, p. 17)

It was clear in getting to know Elizabeth's practice, and she was the teacher most interested in participating in this study and having long conversations about the nature of literacy and her teaching practice, that her focus in the classroom especially in relation to text was unique amongst the staff. This approach, where reading in large part was in the service of writing, and writing in the service of thinking, really contrasted to the reading response approach described by most of the others. None of the other teachers talked about reading texts with students in order to understand the craft of the author, yet this was a central aspect of Elizabeth's work. Thus, becoming a writer in her own life transformed her literacy practices in a very real way.

Several of the teachers made reference to having been able to read before ever going to school. This might be an interesting survey, I wonder how many teachers could report an experience similar to Margaret's:

I think actually I could read before going to school, which sounds pretty weird now, but my mother didn't have a clue I could read, and I can remember going to school with the Dick and Jane books, and the person gave me this little book, and we were supposed to have read to page 10. I'd read the whole thing a few minutes later, and I noticed she had a couple of other coloured books on the shelf, and I put up my hand, and said, "Could I please have the yellow or blue one now." And she said, oh that book is supposed to last a month or something, and I was like, "this little thing?" I don't think so. But my mom said she didn't have a clue I could read. And she'd been reading to me the whole time. But she said I never ever indicated that I could read.

Michelle: And you just, from being read to.

Margaret: From being read to. . . I know I spent most of grade one sitting there. And I actually did grade one and grade two in grade one, and then I went on to grade three the next year. . . That was in the days when they believed in acceleration.

Michelle: And you read a lot, growing up?

Margaret: Oh, tons of books, yes. (Margaret Interview, 03-29-06, pp. 10-11)

> The traditional perspective included at least four assumptions about children learning literacy: (1) reading and writing were difficult to learn; (2) children were considered knowledgeable about literacy only when their reading and writing approximated adults' reading and writing; (3) reading required readiness; and (4) writing was learned after reading. (McGee & Richgels, 1990, p. 6)

Her description of learning to read by being read to at home, and then her boredom with the basal readers and accompanying worksheets is reflected in her own practices, "*I like to use real literature in my teaching, and so, I have some old basal readers in my classroom, I don't use them, they're just there if any kid wants to read them, great. But it's not part of my program. So basically I teach thematically, so*

almost everything I introduce by some book of some sort" (Margaret Interview, 03-29-06, p.1).

Most of the teachers on staff have children of their own, and whether they were still young or grown up they usually made reference to their children's literacy practices as well in the context of their own childhood experiences. This in a sense exemplifies the hermeneutic circle, and the recasting of the past in the context of the present. We interpret our experiences in the context of what we have known, giving rise to new questions and allowing us to understand the past differently. Moran (2000) explains Heidegger's hermeneutical circle thus:

> We therefore disclose the answer in the light of what we already know. This might appear to be circular – how can we learn anything new if we can only grasp it in terms of what we already know? . . . Heidegger's way out of this is to claim that the circle is not closed or 'vicious' as in cases of circular reasoning, but rather it involves a certain "relatedness backward or forward" because our questioning really is a kind of light which casts a certain pattern on the phenomenon, while also filling in our expectation in a way that allows us to formulate further questions, and thus to advance our understanding. (p. 237)

Katie, a young teacher who was covering a sick leave at the school at the time of her interview, remembers:

> *I remember my mom reading a lot to me, at home, like continuously at night kind of thing. I don't really remember learning how to read, maybe that's the whole thing about learning to read I don't specifically remember learning to*

read it's just a whole bunch of experiences finally put together when the light bulb goes off, I don't know. I don't remember, that specific grade or age that I that actually learned to read. . . . I remember my mom, reading reading reading, reading novels at night, some kind of program, which I don't know if we probably specifically had, but,

Michelle: She read to you?

Katie: Yes, an avid reader, so I always saw that.

Michelle: Okay, yes. So do you read yourself now, do you read for pleasure?

Katie: I try to.. (Katie Interview, 02-25-06, p. 3)

For Katie, the time constraints placed on her as a teacher and mother to a toddler hinders her ability to read for pleasure, even though she also mentions how she *"used to go on holidays and take stacks of books."* But she describes reading with her daughter every night, as her mother read to her:

I read a lot of little baby books. . . she'll pick up 15-20 books a night and sit there and want to read them, and I start to see that now that I have some education in beginning emergent reading, not that she's about to read, but she wants to repeat the same books, and then she knows certain little things, we'll get to that one page and she'll belt out that word that's not necessarily a word in the book but just about that page, just something we talked about or whatever. . . And to see that interest in books already at two, it's like, it's to the point that we're all in bed and my husband is sneaking books off and hiding them because we're going to be up forever if we read all these books. You know she could read them over and over again. So it will be interesting to

> *see and I think back to all the books I loved as a kid, and think about reading them to her in the years to come. (Katie Interview, 02-25-06, pp. 4-5)*

A hermeneutic circle: Katie looks forward to reading back the books she loved as a child to her own child, bringing new light to those texts and keeping things going in the present, the present generation. This value of reading then, passed down from parent to child, is a value we often take for granted as teachers with the children who come into our classrooms. If children don't come from homes with this inherent value placed on the lap reading described by Katie, it is easy for teachers to see those children as deficient and those homes as doing less than their share to help educate their child. This is, in a sense, true: as Gee shows us, children who experience middle class values in their primary Discourse in relation to literacy are likely to find the transition to the secondary Discourse of school literacy much smoother. Primary Discourses in Gee's formulation are the "Discourses of family life that shape our values, experiences, and beliefs and initially influence the ways we think, act, and behave" (in Hagood, 2000, p. 314). School literacies constitute a secondary Discourse, which involve "socialization of people into more public and social institutions" (p. 314):

> Discursive practices produced within Discourses form the systematic acceptance of ideas, opinions, behaviour or ways of thinking in the Discourse. . . . Discursive rules create order and structure the workings within Discourse so as to herd people into or exclude people from entering it. What is considered natural, normal, and acceptable in Discourse results from constructed inclusions and exclusions, which may be consciously or tacitly

understood. The normalizing effect of discursive practices within a Discourse is to make it virtually impossible to think outside it. (Hagood, 2000, p. 314)

Thus, within the normalizing practices of literacy Discourses in the context of schooling, it is very difficult for teachers to think outside of what seems self-evidently true, for example, that children should be surrounded by books, that literacy is a form of empowerment (but never disempowering), that children should be read to every night by their parents, and so on. It is very difficult to disrupt or question these assumptions, that seem "natural and normal" from within the context of the school. What of the teachers who did not have the smooth experience described above, of having their primary Discourse surrounding literacy flow smoothly into the secondary Discourse of school literacies?

> Six of us are sitting in front of the big storybook called *More Fun with Dick and Jane*. . . .
> Mrs. Swenson is saying, "And in this picture, who is coming in the door?"
> "Father!" we all chime.
> "And who is he saying hello to?"
> "Mother!" we exclaim.
> "And what do you think is happening?". . . . Silence. . . ."Yes, Cara?"
> "Well, he's coming to see if he can come back home. She had maybe put him out for drinking and now he's gotten sober and dressed up nice. . . He has his dirty clothes in his suitcase." I point to what the illustrator meant as a briefcase, an item no first grader from the poor part of a rural Michigan town would ever have seen. (Garcia, 1998, p. 606)

Exceptions to the Rule

The principal, Rosemary, paints a picture of a different kind of childhood, in a working class family where literacy was not valued. She came to a passion of reading, but in a kind of oppositional path to her family:

> *Because of the context of my childhood, and every childhood brings what it brings, so I'll give you a story about what I did with reading one night. I had a lamp on my bed, that was a plastic one, it was one that hung over my headboard, and it was plastic and in order to read, I guess I did like to read because I had the covers over it so my parents couldn't see the light under the door, and I fell asleep and it's lucky we didn't have a fire. Because it just kind of melted, and so that's what I was doing with reading. My father came through the depression, and he had to leave school in the 30s. He left school when he was in grade six. And he was very, if he'd had training he would have been an engineer, because he was always making things up, but he learned how to read blueprints and things and became a carpenter, because he self-taught. . . . So education had no place. His mother, and I always found this amazing, ended school in grade three, because again she came from Europe, and it was very hard and they farmed and that was the background in the prairies, and then moved west. So there was no place for education, it was all about work, and I was the eldest, and had younger to help. So to sit and read would be perceived as not working, so I was never allowed to do that, or I was sneaking doing it sometimes. I was permitted to do homework but again they thought I was doing too much of that. So I had quite an academic bent. I was*

the first ever to graduate from a university in the family. That's the one side of the family. So it was a foreign thing and not valued. . . . So school for me was, I just absolutely loved school. Loved it. Because it was where I could do these things that I loved. . . . So it was partly defiance, for the reading, because I was told I couldn't, and so I did, so there was a bit of that.

Michelle: Because it was sort of the forbidden thing.

Rosemary: It was, yes, you were supposed to be working. Like what do you mean sitting there reading, you're doing nothing. That's what I'd be told, nothing productive. But I did get permission, I finally figured it out when I got old enough, if I called it homework, I'd sit and look like, it had to be in that way. But now I love reading. There's not a day that I, sometimes it's that much, and like one page, but I've always got a variety of books, I've got non-fiction, I've got fiction. . . I've always got an array of books on the go. Because now I'm able to do it. So that's interesting. (Rosemary Interview, 03-10-06, pp. 12-14)

So this was one kind of exception, essentially a class difference, where the family Rosemary came from valued a certain kind of work in the family, a certain kind of labour. Reading was seen as "not doing anything," and for Rosemary she came to her passion of reading in spite of this. Throughout her interview and the literacy conversations that she attended faithfully, Rosemary expressed a great drive to bring children into the fold of literacy, and when I heard this story I could understand where that passion came from. For her, literacy was an escape, not simply in the sense of fantasy but a literal escape from her working class background. She

not only graduated from high school, but attained a university degree and a Master's degree and had become an elementary school principal. In referring to a project where reluctant students became excited about a writing project, she exclaimed, "this is POWER" *(Literacy Café #3, 03-01-06, p. 3)*

Another kind of exception to the commonalities identified in the previous section is that of language. Darlene spoke Chinese as her first language, so this has impacted her experience with school literacy:

> *Well, I was ESL, I was born in Victoria, but went into kindergarten not speaking a word of English, back before they had ESL programs, and I don't remember grade one and learning how to read, at all,*
>
> *Michelle: Do you remember learning how to speak English, at school?*
>
> *Darlene: No, no, I don't. I ran into my kindergarten teacher a while back and she said I used to just yatter away at her, probably in Chinese, just yatter yatter yatter, but I don't remember. I don't remember, this is before they had ESL classes, it was total immersion, you just went in and you learned. I guess probably around grade four or grade five I started reading a lot. At least a book a week sort of thing.* Little House on the Prairie*, those were the first real chapter books I remember because I had to get through the whole series. I remember reading those. I was a pretty avid reader. Not a fast reader, but every night.*
>
> *Michelle: And now you are?*
>
> *Darlene: Yes, I read – I'm not into, here again there are lots of other people saying, "oh yes I'm doing this in this book club and we're talking about this*

and that." That's not for me. I just read for enjoyment, and I don't really care to analyze or discuss it. (Darlene Interview, 04-06-06, p. 3)

So then, this orientation to literature, where Darlene enjoys it but is not inclined to discuss or get into depth with her own reading, shows up in her literacy practices thus:

I think I'm still quite traditional, and I would still do a lot of the, you know read this, let's work on these comprehension questions.

Michelle: Okay, so when you say that you're a bit more traditional, what would you mean by that?

Darlene: Um, the old, the anthologies and you know let's read this, answer these few questions, you know I start with that at the beginning of the year, you know rather than the big projects and things like that. We do get into things like that, but I always like to start with the basic.

Michelle: So how would you, again knowing you're not doing it this year, but something like spelling how would you approach that?

Darlene: I do the old spelling lists, program. (Darlene Interview, 04-06-06, p. 1)

Dan, one of only two male teachers at the school, (the other is the part-time technology specialist Jack), portrays an entirely different experience of childhood literacy. While he has come to appreciate literature later in life, and considers it of paramount importance in the classroom, there is an entirely different quality to the description of his teaching:

Michelle: Did you read a lot, as a child?

> *Dan: No I didn't. I was a non-reader. It wasn't until my parents got me a Sports Illustrated magazine that I just thought that was, I was so into sports, like a lot of the boys are, and I would read that cover to cover. It would come to my mailbox, my mom would say, "it's here." I would just read that thing. And for some boys, that works. That's what it takes. Others, they're readers long before they've ever met me, and it doesn't take much to get them in a book. I find it doesn't necessarily matter what it is, as long as they're interested in it. . . . . So I like to, it's as I say, it's getting everyone interested in reading. I know at school we emphasize novels, and novels are good to read, but sometimes it means getting a skateboarding magazine to these students, and we have wonderful magazines over there in the library, and reading is reading. It doesn't necessarily matter, in my opinion, what you read. It's the fact that you've found something that you're interested in and you want to learn more. And so, for the boys, it's often skateboarding, or basketball, or Sports Illustrated. (Dan Interview, 04-05-06, pp. 10-11)*

The difference then, that class, ethnicity, and gender can make to literacy experiences are exemplified in the above descriptions. While I certainly don't want to generalize based upon these three interviews, even in terms of these teachers' particular practices, it is striking that these important elements have made a difference in their childhood experiences and show up in their conceptualizations of literacy. Rosemary is very passionate about reading as a kind of gateway to personal power. Darlene has found the pleasure of reading, and in fact speaks of attempting to write a family history as a way to preserve her unique family background, but does not carry

an intrinsic drive to interpret and discuss at length texts that are read. The fundamentals of spelling and grammar are significant for her, and she extends this into her practice. Dan's story is almost stereotypical of young boys, gravitating towards sporting magazines but avoiding long novels. This cannot be seen as a universal experience for boys, but it is a common story. Dan then keeps this in mind within his own classroom, preferring short, dynamic pieces of prose and having the students focus on writing persuasive paragraphs rather than long stories (Dan Interview, 04-05-06, pp. 3-4).

It is tempting, as is always the danger in interpretive inquiry, to make too much of the stories told. Once I began to see the teacher's childhood stories in this light, as having direct parallels in the classroom and firmly rooting their conceptualizations of literacy, it was difficult to see them another way. There is risk here, and the personal is always mediated by the social and historical. However, the power of the childhood stories cannot be ignored. While conceptualizations of literacy are clearly complex, I continue to be struck by the influence of childhood relationships to literacy to current thinking. Indeed, other studies have been conducted supporting this notion. Noteworthy is Nias's (1989) study of 99 British teachers, reviewed by Carter and Doyle (1996):

> One of the central arguments Nias made was that "the self is a crucial element in the way teachers themselves construe the nature of their job" (p. 13). She attributed this "personal" view to the intellectual traditions of primary education and teacher preparation for primary teaching (traditions grounded in Rousseau, Foebel, and Pestalozzi). She further argued that this personal view

> is also emphasized in the solitary and isolated nature of much primary teaching and the relative autonomy teachers at this level possess to pursue individual ideology. (p. 130).

This very much supports the data gathered for the present study. As an additional explanation, I would offer that a Western orientation towards individualism and freedom of expression may also contribute to the idea of teaching practices as idiosyncratic and personal. Lortie (1975) theorizes an apprenticeship period for teachers while they are students in school. Schempp et al. (1999) suggest, "the belief that teachers' work is individualistic rather than collective and professional can be directly traced to this period of socialization" (p. 145). They write that the influence is often "subtle," but remains "powerful" and "pervasive" (Schempp et al, 1999, p. 145).

Imagine a first year teacher walking through the door on the first day of school. It would be easy to imagine their teacher education as being the most recent, rational, and likely influence over what they will do in their classroom. As time goes by, professional reading and collegial interaction in theory will play a role (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2005, p. xi). I will turn now to these elements to see what the teachers said about these factors.

Teacher Education

The influence of teacher education on conceptualizations of literacy, and practice in general, in this study, was overall negligible. Only one teacher, Laura, cited university professors as having a direct and lingering impact on her literacy

teaching. Many of the teachers said something similar to Emma when I asked about the impact of her teacher education: *"No, that didn't have much at all. . . there was nothing, nothing back then. I can't remember a thing" (Emma Interview, 02-03-06, p. 2).* Anne talked about the influence her Early Childhood Education background had, in terms of its developmental focus:

> *I have an early childhood background, and I have a really good sense of child development, in fact when I did my practicum it was in early childhood development. I never was in a classroom teaching. I set up a nursery school, ran the nursery school with colleagues, but we had really good focus on child development. So I firmly believe that children need to play. And that we, I would say that we expect an awful lot of six year olds, too much in fact. In many classes there would be limited play time, and if you ask any six year old why they come to school, they come to school for centres and recess, and time to be with their friends, not because they come to learn to read. So I think we've sort of lost that, many educators have lost that. (Anne Interview, 02-28-06, p. 1)*

In her case, then, her teacher education had an influence in terms of her overall teaching philosophy, and this also came up with Elizabeth, who had attended Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, and this program had a strong philosophical rather than methodological focus. So these programs orienting the student teacher seemed to have an impact in terms of the way these teachers understood their role in the classroom. However, only one teacher out of the thirteen

involved in the study referred to any literacy methods learned at university. Laura, in her interview, tells me:

> *I use Language Patterns Program, which I learned from Norma Mickelson, and Jean Day, and Kay Christie and all those gals long long ago. So that is a program that uses a blending method too I suppose, because they learn, do you know the program?*
>
> *Michelle: No, no I don't know that one.*
>
> *Laura: So they learn first of all, a says "a", then they learn "t", and they can make "at", so it's a little bit of blending, of cvc words [consonant-vowel-consonant], and I use that in conjunction with journal writing, the old language experience charts, and then we just totally pick it apart. You should come in and watch me teach one day, you might find it interesting. (Laura Interview, 02-22-06, p. 1)*

I found it interesting that this teacher had emphatically identified herself as a phonics teacher, and opposed to whole language approaches, and yet referred to Norma Mickelson as one of her influences – this professor was one of the early proponents of whole language at the University of Victoria. This is not to "catch" this teacher "out", but rather to shine the light on one of the numerous contradictions inherent in any one teacher's description of their literacy approaches and conceptualizations: teaching

practices and ideas surrounding literacy are often deeply contradictory. Teachers' practices are often a blending of theoretical paradigms, with little awareness of the history of their views or where they fit into the larger context. Most teacher education programs focus on current methodologies, and student teachers immediately recognize the contradictions between what they are told in university methods classes and what they see in their practicum classrooms. This puts them in a difficult and contradictory situation, and they perhaps then are most likely to reach back into their own experiences and create practice from within their own identities, in the absence of a consensus on "method". Dan explains,

> Teaching and learning have multiple and conflicting meanings that shift within our lived lives, with the theories produced and encountered, with the deep convictions and desires brought to and created in education, with the practices we negotiate, and with the identities we construct. (Britzman, 1991, p. 10)

> *I don't teach the way my professors would have me teach, or would, no. I'm a little different than that, I would say (laughs). I would say when I think back to, and I won't mention any names, but their approach was far different than mine. And, you have to really too, think about the nature of your students, you know some of these, again I like to have a quieter class. My classrooms are relatively quiet, and I find that we do our best work when the conditions are quiet. That's not to say we can't break into groups now and then, and we do that too, but if you're going to do some real serious work, it's better in my opinion to have kind of a quieter tone to the class. And I know that some of the professors at UVic liked lots of little groups and discussions and for me, jeez,*

there's just too much going on. It just didn't work for me. For others it did, for me it didn't. (Dan Interview, 04-05-06, p. 8)

These kinds of statements from teachers were not uncommon, in the sense that their teacher education only had an impact if it connected in some way with what they already felt comfortable. In Dan's case, his approach to teaching is firmly rooted in his identity and perspective on the world, and this was in direct conflict to the approaches advocated by his professors. It was not as though he did not understand the approaches being taught, he simply disagreed with them, in terms of his own practice although he emphasized that those same approaches might not work for others.

Elizabeth was certainly the exception in this regard, and her description of her teacher training, and then the influence of her own graduate work and its influence, continues to build a picture of her unique understanding of teaching amongst the staff:

Well it is a funny thing, because when I started teaching, and it was different from when I did my teacher training, at Simon Fraser, we didn't do this. It was more of like, you did your philosophy, and you know all of that. And then I hit school, and my first year teaching, there was a Superintendent in the District. . . . he would come around and inspect you. And this guy, you had to write, what he looked for was, like your day book had to have an objective at the top of the page, underlined in red pen, if it wasn't you were in trouble. So that is sort of like articulating something and then deriving a plan from it, which is I guess the way most people got taught to teach. . . But you don't go

> *into the other stuff, really, because it's sort of superficial I think, it might be more like, to teach diversity of Canadian culture, but then the method of doing that is that part that you're getting at, like how you might approach something, and what's that congruity, or incongruity. Like that's the part, I mean why I enjoyed that work that I did when I was doing my thesis so much, was like looking at that part of it, because it's deeper. . .Where you're looking at your own self, and thinking, why am I doing it? And am I doing it the way I want to do it, or is this in contradiction to what I think I'm doing, all those sorts of things. (Elizabeth Interview #2, 03-30-06, p. 4)*

As hypothesized before, I wondered if Elizabeth's capacity to see the contradictions in her own thinking, and to ask the deeper questions regarding the congruity or incongruity of her practices, come about because of her experience as a writer. I wonder now, do we do children a disservice in schools if the emphasis of their literacy work is on reading and reading response. Is writing, in the manner that Elizabeth conceptualizes, as a form of thinking, and way to work out ideas, important as a way of working with students? If I am correct, and teachers draw much of their perspectives on literacy from their life experiences with literacy, is it important that teachers become writers? Is this critical to infuse into teacher education programs, thoughtful and reflective writing rather than dozens and dozens of lesson plans?

Professional Reading

Out of all of the teachers, Emma made the most significant reference to professional reading as a source of influence over conceptualizations of literacy. She tells me,

> *I went to lots of workshops, and read, and then once I started teaching in elementary, I just, I read tons. I guess the ways, I go to workshops, and I read books. So you know, I'll read... Lucy Calkins, Regie Routman's books. . .I don't know, there's just so many different people, Fay Brownlee's stuff, Susan Close, Richard Allington, so I read all their books and look at ideas from that. There's just so many. We started Lit Circles. . . and I started looking. I've got this book, the one that we're doing for the District book thing, which I'd ordered last summer, and that's the strategies book . . . then I had Regie Routman's book* Conversations, *and I had Fay Browlee's book out, and I had, there's just so much out there, to look at. I don't know what influences, there's just so much, but it's interesting to see how they all converge, the research does. And I will read research documents, reading journals, and things like that. (Emma Interview, 02-03-06, p. 2)*

In the early 1980s, when I was experiencing success using literature and meaning-based strategies to teach reading and writing. . . I thought other teachers could benefit from my story. . . Somehow, I had the notion that perhaps I could write a book for teachers. At the time, the idea seemed outrageous. I had never even had an article published. I did not consider myself a writer. – Regie Routman (1991, p. 1)

This was unique amongst the teachers, to have reference to multiple specific theorists in literacy practice. Based on this, Emma felt very strongly about certain aspects of her practice, and unlike most of the teachers, did not feel like it was simply a matter of individual, idiosyncratic practice. Later, she comments,

> *I really did feel that I had to educate myself on that, and I had to read lots and figure out what was right. So, the open endedness is good, but it's also so open ended that there's not much consistency and when I look around sometimes I can be quite judgmental. . . So I think it's so open ended that unless you have some sound practices, and I guess it sounds pretty judgmental but that there could be some classrooms that there's not that much going on, very sound, I would think. (Emma Interview, 02-03-06, p. 5)*

In many cases, the teachers' confidence in their teaching approaches seemed to come from their sense of experience, and a sense of personal choice. Margaret commented that, *"Now when I went to University the line was, if you believe in it you will teach children to read using that method. . . .We've seen a lot of strange methods come and go. I like mine. I like it because I think it's about children" (Margaret Interview, 03-29-06, p. 7).* Many other teachers echoed this sentiment, "if you believe in it, it will work". These kinds of statements at times gave me an impression of a kind of magic, or perhaps it was faith, that was needed in order to teach children to read (again, where we always seemed to end up when I asked about literacy.) In fact, Rosemary said in her interview, *"We know that if you read every day that it's like magic, it's magic. Reading every day is magic. Just that in itself" (Rosemary Interview, 03-10-06, p. 11).* It was interesting to hear Margaret call the method

"hers," having personal ownership over it rather than seeing it as fitting into a historical context or being based upon the work of specific theorists, even as I could tease apart her approaches and find their roots in the field. Sara echoes this notion of "belief" and individual idiosyncratic approach to the curriculum:

> *The curriculum is curriculum, it's not the means to the ends, sort of what we're trying to get across to kids. How you do that, that's where professional autonomy comes in. We're all very different, particularly on this staff at the intermediate level. Lots of us have similar basic ideas, but how we go about getting there can often be different. But it's fascinating to sit and talk, and different people have different ideas about how they want to do something and what they're comfortable with. What I find fascinating is it really doesn't matter what you do, if you believe what you're doing is good, kids will lap it up; but you try and teach in a way that you're uncomfortable, it's hard for you and it's hard for them to learn from. So, I don't think it matters unless someone is doing something that's really awful, I can't think what that would be, but yeah, when you believe in something, you do it really well. (Sara Interview, 02-20-06, p. 7)*

Some teachers made vague, passing references to professional reading, but this didn't seem to go much beyond a surface nod, with the exception of Emma as noted above. Elizabeth also marked turning points with particular theorists, and frequently mentioned ideas encountered in her Masters' work as influential. However, most of the teachers referred to experience as their teacher in this respect, and to some extent, their colleagues. Teachers, especially those with many years of experience,

looked to an internal processing of what was right in their teaching, rather than to external sources of teacher education or professional literature, or as Sarah says above, "*that's where professional autonomy comes in.*" This again points to that spiraling towards a teaching practice authentic to the self rather than a linear progressive model.

The teachers were intrigued when through the process of the conversations some of the roots of their conceptualizations surrounding literacy were uncovered, as I have shown, rooted much more dramatically in their childhood experiences than through their teacher education or professional reading. However, overwhelmingly, when asked what has influenced their beliefs what the teachers consistently said was *experience.* How they understand experience is another critical element of this study.

Notions of Experience

Education has always had a complex relationship with the notion of experience. Where learning occurs in relation to an experience, whether learning can happen abstractly separate from experience, whether experience must be mediated by language – all of these questions swirl around the very endeavor of education. Throughout the interviews, the teachers called upon "experience" as the main location of their conceptualizations and practices surrounding literacy. As one teacher stated, in response to my question about where her ideas came from: "Thirty years experience." There was a kind of language built surrounding the idea of learning, through experience, "what works." This agrees with the findings of Clandinin and Connelly (1986) that the day-to-day experience of public school teaching leads

teachers to form professional practices that are practically oriented rather than intellectual (Giroux, 1988, in Schempp et al, 1999, p. 145). From most of the teachers with two to three decades of teaching, the exception again being Elizabeth, their experience seemed to give them a kind of certainty surrounding the lessons that experience had given them. Following are a number of comments in response to my question about where the teachers thought their ideas come from:

Anne	*I just have seen it work, and I feel good about what happens in my classroom.*
Darlene	*I guess what's worked for me in the past. Past experience, mostly. Probably my comfort zone, you know what that particular class can handle.*
Dan	*Most of it's evolved through experience.*
Margaret	*I don't know I just sort of evolved to it. I find it hard to even say.*
Rosemary	*I would say, my understandings and my practices have improved as I learned more.*
Katie	*A lot of it I've really learned on the job, from subbing experiences, seeing what different teachers do in their programs, and picking up on certain things that I really think are effective.*
Laura	*It would have to come from my teacher training, and my experiences, as a teacher.*
Sara	*I think my ideas about literacy are always evolving, like they're very different right now than they were 10 years ago, not hugely different, they're all sort of on the same bent, but I change my practices, and it depends on the kids you get, too, what you do with them.*

It can be seen then that a kind of everyday consciousness regarding the nature of experience in teaching manifests when we begin to talk about how certain practices

develop. There is a notion that by practicing one develops a clearer understanding of how to proceed. However, what the teachers express is not necessarily complex in their view, it is simply a matter through trial and error of discovering "what works." This is not seen in absolute terms, but in terms relative to that situation – that individual teacher, that group of students. In its strong form, this would be the development of practical wisdom, or in Gadamer's reading of Artistotle, phronesis:

> The old Aristotelian distinction between practical and theoretical knowledge is operative here – a distinction which cannot be reduced to that between the true and the probable. Practical knowledge, phronesis, is another kind of knowledge. Primarily, this means that it is directed towards the concrete situation. Thus it must grasp the "circumstances" in their infinite variety. (Gadamer, 1999/1960, p. 21)

While I see phronesis in the teacher's words, my sense is that their understanding of experience is perhaps less nuanced. They are referring to a kind of knowledge that is built, and accumulated through the concrete particulars of everyday life. What the teachers express seems to me to be akin to Kant's notion of experience, that knowledge comes through experience: "There can be no doubt that all our cognition begins with experience. For what else might rouse our cognitive power to its operation if objects stirring our sense did not do so?" (1929, p. 6, in Jay, 2005, p. 70). Experience, in this sense, is something "one has rather than something one merely undergoes" (Jay, 2005, p. 79). While in the field of education we often rely upon Dewey when considering how learning comes about based upon concrete

experiences, however, much of the complexity found in his notions of experience are often lost. Dewey exhorts:

> The distinctive characteristic of practical activity, one which is so inherent that it cannot be eliminated, is the uncertainty that attends it. Of it we are compelled to say: Act, but act at your peril. Judgment and belief regarding actions to be performed can never attain more than a precarious probability. (in Jay, 2005, p. 292)

As I came to understand the teachers' processes and conceptualizations more fully, I think it was this awareness of complexity in the nature of experience which I found absent. Experience seemed to make the teachers more certain, with the notable exception of Elizabeth. There also seems to be a tendency to see experience as personal, rather than as a shared event or a social construction. Yet, as Jay (2005) reminds us, experience is found at the intersection of public and private, "between expressible commonalities and the ineffability of the individual interior. . . However much we may construe experience as a personal possession. . . it is inevitably acquired through an encounter with otherness" (pp. 5-6).

Katie, a new teacher who subbed and took over short term leaves, expressed trepidation in being interviewed, feeling that her "lack of experience" would mean that she had "less knowledge" and in fact raised a fear that she might give me the "wrong" answers. To Katie, I would like to speak Gadamer's (2001) words:

> Being experienced does not mean that one now knows something once and for all and becomes rigid in this knowledge; rather, one becomes more open to new experiences. A person who is experienced is undogmatic. Experience has

> the effect of freeing one to be open to new experience. . . . In our experience bring nothing to a close; we are constantly learning new things from our experience. . . this I call the interminability of all experience. (in Jay, 2005, p. 402)

My hope in unpacking the teachers' conceptualizations of literacy in this study would be to arrive at a less stable notion of literacy, which I will explore further in the final chapter. But to this point, we have seen how the teachers' conceptualizations of literacy reach backward hermeneutically into their past, with or without their awareness, and how these past experiences reach forward into the present and the future to inform what it is teachers attend to as important in their classrooms. This is not a passive, but an active process of recreating what they have been, always anew. This is why I have come to see this as a deeply hermeneutic process. It is easy to see, then, why the advent of "New Literacies" (Hagood, 2000; Lankshear & Knobel, 1998; Willinsky, 1990) do not easily make their way into these teachers practice, as it is generally not part of their experience (with notable exceptions, of course). In this time of radically shifting literacy practices, questions surrounding the place of these literacies in schools and the responsibilities of the teachers are at the fore. It is to this aspect of the study I now turn.

Chapter 7

QUICK BROWN FOX

> Digital media technologies and their so-called killer apps, and the popular adoptions and acceptance of these computer applications, are revolutionizing our sensory perceptions and cognitive experiences of *being in the world.* In the process, new visual, aural, linguistic, and literary codes and signifiers are emerging that require new hermeneutic responses on our part simply to keep pace. (Everett & Caldwell, 2003, p. xi)

New Literacies, Alternative Texts

The world is changing. Arguably, a massive cultural shift in terms of how we read and communicate is occurring (Everett & Caldwell, 2003) and this will have and indeed already has had enormous impact on the fabric of our everyday lives. Everett and Caldwell, above, argue that this is actually transforming our sensory experiences of the world. Illich (1993) writes of the book as a metaphor for the age from which we are just now emerging, "The book has now ceased to be the root-metaphor of the age; the screen has taken its place. The alphabetic text has become but one of many modes of encoding something, now called 'the message'" (p. 3). I was interested in finding out to what extent these "new literacies" would emerge in the teachers' interviews, and this chapter explores this facet of the study. Do they consider various forms of digital media as part of their literacy teaching? Do they consider other means of "reading" – for example, reading images, (or "visual" literacy) to be part of the term? Do they consider other text forms, such as the screen, to be text? Does the term

"multiliteracy" have meaning for them (Hagood, 2000)? For most of the teachers involved in the study, this was not the case. Vivian in her interview argues,

> *To me, literacy, like literature, it's quite different from, it's like multiple intelligences, being able to read and write, maybe I'm just old school, and not with the program here, but literacy to me encompasses those kinds of skills, reading, writing, things to do with, (pause)... visual... well darn it, here I am now, well media literacy, I can get into that, because there's a certain amount of reading going on in there, but it's like are we going to call an appreciation of art, I mean if you say visual literacy, it's like it's too big, that could be print, it could be pictures, it could be television, to me it's too big of a category to really be meaningful. . . . So I don't know, I'm kind of digging in my heels to try to curb the all purpose use of literacy to mean understanding of anything. It gets to be meaningless after a while. (Vivian Interview, 02-06-06, p. 10)*

The structures of schools were built around traditional text forms: individual desks, paper (or, at one time, slates), writing implements – ink, pencil, and pen, the chalk board at the front of the room. Beyond word processing, this structure does not adapt itself easily to alternative text forms or electronic media. These media demonstrate different *"affordances,"* a term used by Kress (2003) to argue that "whether I want to or not I have to use the possibilities given to me by a mode of representation to make my meaning. . . 'The world narrated' is different to 'the world depicted or displayed'" (p. 2). This notion is critical to understand the cusp of history that we know stand on the edge of. Ellsworth (2005) writes of "media as facilitators

and regulators of flows but with their own distinctive modes and potentials for setting learning selves in motion" (p. 125). These affordances affect not only possibilities for expression, but also the possibilities and imperatives that exist for schooling. These forms are endlessly complex and provide opportunities for non-linear experiences and expression, yet typically adults tend to think of them in relation to print metaphors, as Jack pointed out (see page 154). Children have a *fundamentally different* relationship with digital media (Fischer, 2006; Hagood, 2000; Kress, 2003). Fischer (2006) observes:

> We have all noticed that our children are getting along in the cyberworld much better than we are. We navigate its surface, but our children frolic in it like dolphins. They were born into it and have no first-hand memory of the old world that came before. They will inherit this new world, and they will not contest that inheritance. (p. 253)

Teachers and schools face enormous challenges in introducing computers, for example, in a meaningful way into the students' daily work, simply on a practical level, as Laura describes in her interview:

> *You know I used to be at [another school]. Awesome, awesome lab. Incredible. Go in there and there was a working machine for everybody, all the programs were networked, so each computer had the same program. This one here? A disaster. An absolute walking nightmare. Now they're getting new machines and things will be networked just as we speak, but for the last two and a half years, uh-uh. Maybe half of the computers would have the same program on it, so the other half of the children are using cd's. Well I*

> *can't run around and have like 12 kids figure out their cd, and run a program with 10 other kids on something that's networked. (02-22-06, pp. 9-10)*

These practical frustrations, in working with out-dated computer labs, limited software, limited support, limited resources, and often a lack of personal skill plague efforts at integrating computer technology at the classroom level, despite mandation in the curriculum. More importantly, however, is the paradigm shift in moving from print to digital texts. Usually it looks more like Morgan (1998) describes of a class of students preparing to publish on the web:

> Because the teachers and students have limited access to networked computers, the old literacy technologies (chalk, pencils) here persist as the means of instruction in the new. That is, the students are still 'doing it by the book' – writing instructions on paper for writing instructions for the computer. They are thus doubly dependent on the authority of the teacher's written word. (p. 140).

Thus, in using computer technology in the school, children undergo a process which differs enormously from the experiences they have at home, where blogging, instant messaging, iTunes, email, and youtube all blend in a postmodern swirl, largely, if not entirely, uncontrolled by adults, and never planned out on paper first. They use computer technology for their own purposes, to their own ends, with results we cannot control, even if we understand. While we may all be experiencing a shift in consciousness resulting from the introduction of digital media, this difference is qualitatively transforming children's experiences at a much more fundamental level. Davis et al (2000) write:

> The word technology emerges from the ancient Greek *techne*, the original meaning of which was more toward "bringing forth" than "manufacturing." Various signifying systems and objects can be considered technologies of the self. Over centuries, humans have elaborated their linguistic technologies with the invention of written symbols, alphabets, printing presses, silent reading, mass communication, electronic information devices, and so on. For the most part, in fact, technology has been understood as these sorts of tools and machines, as opposed to the manner in which these artifacts and processes have been incorporated into human existence – that is, how they have literally become part of human bodies and culture and how, in the process, they have been used to help bring forth human identities. (p. 170)

This point is a significant one, in recognizing a more expansive definition for technology than simply as a "tool", and acknowledging its impact on human identities. It is my argument here that the affordances brought about by digital media, in comparison with the printing press, is bringing forth *different human identities* and that the young, who have been "born" into this world, experience this in different ways that those of us who have a more liminal experience.

Using educational programs to teach literacy skills specific to traditional books forms of literacy is a foreign endeavour, and no wonder students find this largely meaningless and frustrating. When I asked the primary teachers about technology and literacy, they usually assumed I meant using packaged educational programs to teach children how to read, for which they saw some, albeit limited, benefit. Most of the teachers do not use this kind of digital media meaningfully in

their own lives, and the potential benefit they saw seemed to be in correlation with what they lived. In Emma's view:

> *Well, I would think teachers, in general, would value book and writing literacy much more than computer literacy, because a lot of teachers aren't computer literate, they're Neanderthals. They really are, they can't even do their marks on the computer, or report cards, like they just don't have any computer skills, so it's not something they value or, at all. Would be a pretty big judgment statement, but it is. I mean my husband teaches computer science at a high school (laughs), and even at the high school level he's seen it. Teachers just aren't comfortable with it. Now, as we, as the generation switches, and you get younger people in, it might change. But certainly the teachers value, and I would think most people when they look at literacy would just think of writing and reading. (Emma Interview, 02-03-06, p. 8)*

In Emma's case, she had a certain appreciation for alternative text forms, partially because of the experience she had with learning disabled children:

> *But a lot of the learning disabled kids had such a hard time, reading and understanding text, so there was a big push to look for strategies or ways to help them look at things. And then I also began to realize moreso that they can respond and become literate in a way, and not even read the text, if the text is provided for them orally somehow, so they could still be quite literate, but it was just a matter of finding ways to help them with that. That was always the real challenge in working with teachers, because they had a belief that if they couldn't read the text by themselves, they wouldn't be literate. But, they*

> *couldn't. But they could still understand the big ideas, and sometimes make responses that were much more highly developed than some of the kids who could read it. So it kind of stretches your, at least for me, stretched that idea of what it is to become literate. (Emma Interview, 02-03-06, p. 3).*

Through her experiences teaching children who struggled with literacy, she realized that literacy can take different forms or be expressed in alternative ways. Of her son she comments, "*He's literate in the sense of our culture and the ideas and things that go on. He doesn't read them, but he knows. . . he can watch TV and respond critically to commercials or propaganda, he can see what's going on; he's not so manipulated" (Emma Interview, 02-03-06, p. 4).* However, what she described to me in terms of her own practice was a classroom strongly focused on text based reading. It seemed that the teachers recognized the value of alternative text forms to greater or lesser extents, but confirming what I found in previous chapters, it seemed to only impact their classroom practice if it was something they had a relationship with in their own lives – appreciation does not necessarily lead to altered practice. Some teachers saw little relevance to the children they teach for new literacies and alternative texts in their classrooms; Anne tells me:

> *It's a tool. It's a tool, and, you know I'm going to talk about six-year-olds. I have a computer in the room; they play games on it, and they enjoy it. They're working, it's centre time and we go to the computer lab and they use a program, it's a drawing program and they use other programs but it's a tool. By the time they are in the workplace, that technology is going to be totally different. So, is it really important? No. For young children. When they get*

> *into grade five, grade six, it might be more important, but it's the least important for young children, especially in this environment. Everyone has a computer at home, that is much bigger and faster than what we have. You take children who are in [low socio-economic areas], they don't have that exposure, so the school is really important for them to get that comfort level of working with the tool. (Anne Interview, 02-28-06, pp. 9-10)*

Anne's view, then, that grade one was about learning to read, and that computer literacy was *"least important"* for young children, informs her priorities in practice. She sees book literacy as having primary meaning for young children. She sees the computer as a tool for traditional literacy, rather than as transformative to it, arguing, "*Is it going to help them be more literate, at this stage? No. Picking up a book and listening to a good story, or listening to a tape, that's going to be much more beneficial for that six-year-old's life" (p. 10).* She also shows the kinds of perceptions of class Anyon spoke of (1981). Margaret, who Anne identifies as having a similar philosophy, on this matter seems to view computer literacy as being more integral to children's lives. In her account, she seems to blur distinctions between book literacy, environmental print, and computer literacy:

> *Using the computer, the T.V., reading the, kids get a lot of real life, I don't know if you want to call it literature or literacy, but you know they can read the McDonald's things, they know it says Wendy's, all kinds of, they can read cereal boxes, they recognize so many things, there's so much out there. You know it all adds up to a literate person. So, leave no stone unturned. Try everything. I mean really. Actually I know this person who's got this whole*

thing about bringing in cereal boxes for kids to read and things like that. . . . And I like to use, on the computer the kids have to think, they can write, there's just a lot of stuff out there. (Margaret Interview, 03-29-06, p. 10)

Margaret's recognition of the importance of environmental print for young children (e.g. McDonald's, Wendy's, the text on a cereal box) might be considered an example of an alternative text form. The awareness of its importance is part of a whole language approach to literacy: "Many children have more experience with environmental print items – toy packages, street signs, and food labels – than they have with books" (McGee & Richgels, 1990, p. 141). Margaret identifies with the whole language orientation to literacy learning, however an awareness of the importance of environmental print doesn't necessarily recognize the fundamental shift in daily practices that children experience in relation to the computer and other digital media. Rather, this view simply sees text on a computer as another form of environmental print, which does not go far enough to recognize its crucial postmodern distinctions from environmental print text primarily used for brand recognition and advertising: it doesn't realize the fundamental mutability and virtual limitlessness of digital text. Darlene marks some of the cultural changes she sees in terms of computer technology:

My kids have, my own children are six and almost eight. They've never really written a letter, they've written one or two letters to Santa, and that's about it. I don't know. I think it has changed, I think kids, if you ask these kids if they've emailed people, they'll say yes. But I don't know how many of them have written letters. And I'm not sure, you know the emails, my emails tend to

be really short and casual, really short because I know it's just as easy for me to sit down tomorrow and write another email. And just pop, next week if I have something to say it's not nice long lengthy letters, short little notes. That might be a change, I don't know.

Michelle: Do you think, do they play video games?

Darlene: Oh yeah. I think a lot, well, a lot of the boys do, I don't know about the girls, they might, but they don't talk about it, if they do.

Michelle: Do the boys talk amongst themselves?

Darlene: There's certain games, yeah. They try to suck me into their conversations about this and it's all cool and this and that. . .

Michelle: Do you know which games they play?

Darlene: No, no. I tune it out (laughs). Because a lot of them, I think some of them, oh yeah, I got this many points, and I got to this level, and I killed this person, and I don't know. I don't know what ones they're playing. It's not something that interests me or that I know anything about. So I just tune them out.

(Darlene Interview, 04-06-06, pp. 12-13)

Remember that Darlene was one of the teachers who identified herself as being more "traditional" in her approaches. While she recognizes a fundamental shift in literacy practices, it doesn't impact the way she approaches it in her classroom, thus, a disconnect can clearly be seen between how the world is and how the teachers teach, even within their own awareness. Is this disconnect something we have simply come to expect from schools? As far as video games go, Darlene admits, "*It's not*

something that interests me or that I know anything about." Video games did not come up frequently in the interview, but when they did, it was rarely in a positive light. Meanwhile, theorists such as James Gee (2003) argue:

> Video games are particularly good places where people can learn to situate meanings through embodied experiences in a complex semiotic domain and meditate on the process. Our bad theories about general meanings; about reading but not reading something; and about general learning untied to specific semiotic domains just don't make sense when you play video games. The games exemplify, in a particularly clear way, better and more specific and embodied theories of meaning, reading, and learning. (p. 26)

Seeing video games as something relevant to the literacy process is not a view shared by teachers that I interviewed. There is also a gender element here: boys are seen by the teachers as those playing video games, while the girls are often seen as enjoying their work related to school literacy (Dan Interview, 04-05-06; Darlene Interview 04-06-06; Sara Interview, 02-20-06). These perceptions, as Sanford (2005) suggests, are "hegemonic constructions" and ones that need to be "analyzed and children helped to question how they shape, and are shaped by these discourses." She argues that while girls may conform to school based literacy practices that this does not necessarily translate into automatic success later in life, particularly as the disconnect grows greater between societal and school literacy practices (pp. 313-314).

Teachers do see changes in terms of how children today go about traditional processes of research and writing in using the tool of the computer. Dan marks changes in the way that children go through writing and editing processes from when

he was a student and in how they seek out information, with a brief reference to a concern over time spent on video games:

> *Well, I went from everything that was written, or any assignment that was completed, in say writing, was written, to now two-thirds are done on the computer. So that's been a real evolution.*
>
> *Michelle: Do they do that at home, or here in the lab?*
>
> *Dan: The rough copies are all written in the classroom; the completed version is done at home. So that's where I've seen it the most. The students that have some sort of a deficit in terms of their fine motor skills, the use of alpha smart, it's a little computer much like the one you're using right now, where they can actually take notes, keyboard the notes, in class, as opposed to actually, that's been a big help for those students. I've got one in the class right now using that. So I've seen technology, yes there are a lot of students using it for video games and that is an issue, but I don't quite know how to tackle that one. But as far as researching information, as I say we're doing a social studies report . . . I bet you most of my students will be downloading information through the Internet, and now that's a thing of the past almost, is you can teach them how to provide a bibliography using the internet, but as far as a book or an encyclopedia, they're not being used anymore. So it is changing, and trying to keep up with it sometimes is a challenge. (Dan Interview, 04-05-06, p. 11)*

Here, in Dan's description, an approach shared by many adults to new media can be seen: using the computer to access information like "an encyclopedia." In this way, one can clearly see what Jack spoke about when he said that adults who grew up

with print literacy need to use familiar metaphors in order to understand computers: "*Without concrete metaphors or similes to parallel digital concepts, adults are unable to grasp how the computer works. . . . Adults need to be shown, "Look, this thing works a lot like a typewriter but with glitches instead of sticky keys" (Jack E-mail Response, 03-02-06, p. 1).* Like most of the other teachers, Sara acknowledges the cultural shifts that have taken place, but like Darlene, doesn't see this as having a big impact in terms of her classroom, at least, as she says, "not yet":

> *Michelle: What about technology? How do you think, or do you think that technology is altering literacy practices or changing kids' literacy?*
>
> *Sara: Well it certainly changes kids, so it's got to affect them in different places. Lots of times when there has been a movie about a book I want to read, I think "oh darn some of them have seen it." But the book is always different from the movie too, so we talk about that, and it's nice to compare and contrast, sometimes. I think technology has changed our whole world, so it has to have changed us.*
>
> *Michelle: Yes, and the way we, in terms of communication.*
>
> *Sara: I'm running this independent reading program right now, one of the choices the kids have is after they've read a book, they sign up for two projects, and one of the projects can be that you write an interview about your character, and you interview your character, it can be another student or a parent or whatever, and you can videotape it. Well, twenty years ago when I started that wouldn't have been an option. We could have tape recorded it, but you couldn't have done the whole thing. The fact that we can show movies,*

of the books that we read, or talk about them, we can do virtual field trips, now, in social studies and things like that, where I've taken my class down to the museum and we sat in this room and we've been connected with kids in Fort Langley and somewhere else and we all look at the Fort Langley site and see all the things and go through the workshop but we're sitting in the museum! So there are so many opportunities to do them, I don't do them frequently, though, infrequently.

Michelle: You made a comment about email, that it's not something you use to a great degree,

Sara: Not to a huge extent.

Michelle: Do you think the kids are using it, or msn?

Sara: Oh the kids, would be certainly. My kids are, so I'm sure they are.

Michelle: Do you see that kind of impacting your classroom?

Sara: Not in the classroom. Not at this point. I often have my class be penpals with a friend who teaches in Prince George, and we penpal our classes. One of the things we've talked about is being email penpals as well, but our lab has never been set up to do that, so we've never done it. As we get our new computers, that may be an option. And that would be interesting.

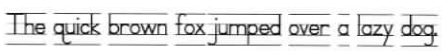
Michelle: So the kids here don't spend a lot of time keyboarding necessarily, do you think penmanship is still as much of an emphasis as it once was, that kind of thing?

Sara: I think so. Yeah. Kids who are really struggling with occupational therapy issues, sometimes it's easier for them to do it on the computer, and

that's fine. My class has 18 minutes of computer a week. We're not doing a lot on computer. (Sara Interview, 02-20-06, pp. 7-8)

So what is fascinating here is the recognition that technology *"has changed our whole world, so it has to have changed us,"* and yet the relatively minor impact on her classroom. Her emphasis, as we saw in previous chapters, is emphatically on reading print text. Even the introduction of film in the classroom is seen as a foil for novels, rather than a text form in its own right. She also does still feel that penmanship is just as important as it once was, although like several of the teachers she is willing to recognize that some students with fine motor issues might find writing easier by computer. This element of penmanship for me was an important little side road for this inquiry, because in some ways it exemplifies McLuhan's notion of schools as "rearview" (McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995, p. 249).

Handwriting and Spelling



Many of us remember writing out this sentence again and again in our scribblers, because it contains every letter in the alphabet. In my work as a field advisor for practicum students, and in watching my own children as they navigate through the school system, I have always been fascinated by the time spent in the middle years of elementary school on cursive handwriting. In looking at the world adults live in today, most people at least in western society have a greater need in their daily lives for functional typing skills than they do for cursive handwriting. Most people I know when they write with a pen do not write with traditional cursive

handwriting: they either print or use some kind of writing/printing hybrid, unique to themselves. My grandparents still script beautifully and uniformly. So I have been intensely curious about this: since it cannot be argued that children will need cursive handwriting in the world that is likely to exist when they are adults, what possibly could be the reason for the time that continues to be devoted to this skill? It is, indeed, a difficult skill to learn, and requires much drill and practice to obtain. Time spent learning keyboarding skills is relatively brief. One argument is that children still need to know how to read cursive handwriting, but as I have seen frequently in my own household, knowing how to write it does not mean they can read it: they often ask me to translate cursive script, because they do not get enough experience with cursive script to cope with variations in style. The vast majority of text they encounter is typewritten, whether in print or on screen. The "quick brown fox" of the computer has leapt and bounded over the "lazy dog" of print text, whether we are talking about handwriting, snail mail, or research done by encyclopedia. There is a sense of nostalgia, particularly for older generations, for letters sent and received. Illich (1993) views this literally as an era that is coming to an end, and links the era of print text to religious history, as I've argued:

> Universal bookishness became the core of western secular religion, and schooling its church. Western social reality has now put aside faith in bookishness as it has put aside Christianity. Since the book has ceased to be the ultimate reason for their existence, educational institutions have proliferated. The screen, the medium, and "communication" have surreptitiously replaced the page, letters, and reading. (p. 1)

When an institution begins to disappear from a culture, the nostalgia built up around its rituals reaches new heights. For example, the institution of marriage: as its structural relevance to western society as an economic unit has decreased, the ritual of the wedding has become more and more elaborate and exorbitant. I have often thought of this in relation to several films valorizing the disappearing ritual of the spelling bee, most recently, *Akeelah and the Bee*, sentimentalizing this institution as it disappears. This film valorizes not only the American dream (poor black girl makes good) but also the disappearing spelling bee, an exercise in memorization and rote learning, now becoming obsolete through the use of the word processor and its spell check. A kind of nostalgia is created in the collective unconscious for how schools "used to be".

In relation to penmanship, when I asked the teachers of this study about its importance, they quickly admitting the importance of keyboarding to students both in the present and the future (despite, as Sara told me, the fact that her grade fives spend 18 minutes of class time a *week* on the computer). However, they also felt that the continued practice of teaching cursive handwriting in schools was justified. Interestingly, they often explained this by using hidden curriculum arguments, as they could agree that the students were likely to have little use for the skill directly:

> *Laura: So maybe by insisting that kids do things properly, and over and over and over for rows and rows it's likely instilling a type of work ethic, who knows? Because I think that's important too. (Laura Interview, 02-22-06, p. 13)*

> *Rosemary: The occupational therapists would tell you there's some good stuff going on there, and there probably is. And that's why, I think it is the hand-eye and all that sort of thing, the fine motor. I think there's a lot of validity for*

> *it that way, but probably not for the way we're doing it. . (Rosemary Interview, 03-10-06, p. 7)*

These two arguments, the promotion of work ethic and the development of fine motor skills, are interesting arguments in themselves. The development of what is at root a *Protestant* work ethic betrays always again the religious roots of literacy practices, where "receiving" the word, through receptive reading and the practice of copying text was a way to train the soul in religious teachings (Kort, 1996, p 35). These practices, as we can see, persist, although we have lost the awareness of their original purpose. Rosemary raises the development of fine motor skills as a rationale, but then later comments, *"You're quite right, with the handwriting. I think handwriting and spelling. They're two institutions that, I don't know, I think they'll continue for a while, for the wrong reasons, probably" (Rosemary Interview, 03-10-06, p. 7).*

With the exception of Elizabeth, all of the teachers I spoke to used some kind of formal spelling program. According to Rosemary, the Friday spelling test is the most ubiquitous practice found common to language arts teachers. Simon Winchester, in his biography of Dr. W.C. Minor, *The Professor and the Madman* (2005), traces the early development of the Webster Dictionary. It was startling to be reminded that the idea of a standard spelling for the English language is only a few hundred years old – that there are standard rules we all must follow in spelling and grammar is something we take utterly for granted. Yet, there was a time when the language written down was much more flexible. Winchester writes:

> The English language was spoken and written – but at the time of Shakespeare it was not defined, not *fixed*. It was like the air – it was taken for granted, the medium that enveloped and defined all Britons. But as to exactly what it was, what its components were – who knew? (p. 83)

It was well over a hundred years, in the 18th and 19th centuries before large dictionaries began to be conceived and assembled. This was partially in response to great writers of the time and their demands that something needed to be done, among them, the likes of Alexander Pope, Daniel Defoe, and Jonathan Swift:

> The leading lights of English literature, had each spoken out, calling for the need to fix the language. By that . . . they meant establishing the limits of the language, creating an inventory of its word stock, forging its cosmology, deciding exactly what the language was. Their considered view of the nature of English was splendidly autocratic. . . . Swift was the fiercest advocate of all. He once wrote to the earl of Oxford to express his outrage that words like *bamboozle*, *uppish*, and – of all things – *couldn't* were appearing in print. He wanted the establishment of strict rules banning such words as offensive to good sense. In future he wanted all spellings fixed – a firm orthography, the correctness of writing. (Winchester, 2005, p. 91)

In the context of schooling, it is a startling thought to remember that the written language of English was not always fixed, that spellings were in Shakespeare's time fluid. The dictionary was, in a sense, an invention. Kress (2003) argues that spelling "is, among other things, one means of exerting and exercising 'authority', and a means for trying to bring about conformity and stability" (p. 26).

We had a fascinating conversation about this during one of the lunch hour Literacy Café's:

Michelle: I read, last summer, that book about the Webster, the makings of the dictionary,

Elizabeth: Yeah I read that one too.

Michelle: Portrait of a Madman. And I found that so fascinating, that the dictionary is such a recent thing, and that they didn't have conventional spelling. Like they had letters from Jonathan Swift, saying, "I think it this is a really good idea. We should all spell words the same way." Prior to that they spelled words however they wanted.

Elizabeth: It's fascinating isn't it. Like it's the same thing as with standardized time. It didn't need to be that way. I guess it's kind of Foucault-ish, you know like that when you start seeing something appear, all of a sudden what's that saying about everything else, like why the need for standardized spelling?

Michelle: I wonder if it slowed down the, that's what I've been wondering, if the language is changing so quickly, with technology, like with msn, and so, will we look back on this three hundred years as being a time when the language got really frozen, because of written text, because of the standardizing, if it slowed it down? Like it's evolving so quickly now again,

Rosemary: You can't stop it. . . Just think of the whole convention of the Friday spelling test, which has so many questions. . . .What is the point? Well, we want to have uniformity. Why? So, and now looking at the big picture, like

you say before, Jonathan Swift, okay, he didn't have it. And now all this time that's being spent on that, and for what. . . . It is an inordinate amount of time for what it is. You know the literature shows that the convention is the most prevailing is the spelling test.

Elizabeth: And you look at what else the spelling test teaches though, it doesn't just teach spelling, which it doesn't teach, so what does it teach, like. . . how to go through a bunch of meaningless stuff. (Literacy Café #1, 02-15-06, pp 4-6)

In this discussion with the principal of the school and the assistant principal who does not run a formal spelling program, is a discussion of the spelling list as a technology of control in the classroom. However, this was not a discussion that occurred or perhaps could occur with any of the other teachers, who ran a spelling program to "cover" that aspect of writing. Like the handwriting, it is interesting when a practice persists despite the teacher knowing at some level that the students either won't really need it or that it doesn't really work. Darlene tells me:

I felt that it was something that I needed to do. Because at this age a lot of the kids have forgotten the spelling patterns, you learn them when they're in early primary. . . and then you forget them. . . .It's a good

As the roman alphabet spread through oral Europe, the Old English word "spell," which had meant simply to recite a story or tale, took on the new double meaning: on the one hand, it now meant to arrange, in the proper order, the written letters that constitute the name of a thing or a person; on the other, it signified a magic formula or charm. Yet these two meanings were not nearly as distinct as they have come to seem to us today. For to assemble the letters that make up the name of a thing, in the correct order, was

> *reminder. But they also made a lot of spelling mistakes in their journal writing so, I don't know. At least I could say, "Well I've taught them that" (laughs). (Darlene Interview, 04-06-06, pp. 2-3)*

In order to understand this phenomenon, it helps perhaps in the case of spelling to remember Abram (1996), as he points out that in spelling is a form of "magic". The children, in learning those spelling patterns, are learning to cast a kind of spell (p. 133).

> *precisely to effect a magic, to establish a new kind of influence over that entity, to summon it forth! To spell, to correctly arrange the letters to form a name or a phrase, seemed thus at the same time to cast a spell, to exert a new and lasting power over the things spelled. (Abram, 1996, p. 133)*

As an alternative to a formal rule based approach (with hundreds of confusing exceptions), Elizabeth describes how she approaches spelling, and how that worked for one boy who had always struggled with spelling:

> *I had a boy, who was a particularly poor speller, and his reaction to the no spelling test was he started spelling okay. . . . I remember the first time we were talking about, I do things on words, and we were looking at evolution of the meaning of words, and how, we were doing Anglo Saxon words, and why that comes about that you spell things with a "k" in front of them, and he's like right there, he's totally interested. I was saying like, you know it isn't like there's a lot of rules, there's a lot of stories, about words, but there's not, spelling rules don't work, but spelling stories do. And he's like (bangs table) YES!*

Viewing spelling from this perspective, as a topic with a history is far different than teaching it as a set of rules and regulations. In the on-line world, written language is once again on the move. The unregulated hypertextual space of the Internet allows children and youth non-censored, uncontrolled means of using language, and it is shifting at an astonishing pace. In instant messaging, conventions are altered, refashioned in the interest of speed, for example, the rampant use of acronyms, omission of punctuation, and the exclusive use of the lower case. These conventions are now starting to make their way into more formal spaces of Email and even handwritten texts. Is it possible that after three hundred years of a relatively "fixed" written language – although obviously even this was impossible to control tightly – we are now entering another era where the language is fluid, cut loose?

Exceptions to the Rule

Elizabeth and Jack were strong exceptions to the general resistance to the notion of "new literacies" or "alternative texts". In congruence with what I have already found in this study, this is because they both have an authentic relationship with alternative text in their lives: Elizabeth is a practicing artist, who both works with alternative text forms in her own work and brings them into the school in various classroom and school wide projects. Jack, as the technology specialist, was hired specifically for his interest and expertise in this area, in contrast to the usual model where a teacher is given a small amount of release time to run the lab. Jack's perspectives on literacy, as we saw in chapter 5, contrasted drastically with those of the other teachers. His view is that technology is a part of literacy in the same sense

that the pencil is a part of literacy; he reminded me that the pencil is also a technology. We also had a discussion surrounding literacy as a technology of control. He sent me a fascinating interview with Sugata Mitra who placed a computer connected to the Internet on the street in India (see Appendix A for the full interview):

> We tried this "hole in the wall" concept, where we put a high-powered Pentium computer with a fast Internet connection into a wall and let [slum] children have access to it with no explanation whatsoever. To be very brief on what happened, the results have been uniform every time we've done this experiment. You get base level computer literacy almost instantly. By computer literacy, I mean what we adults define as computer literacy: The ability to use the mouse, to point, to drag, to drop, to copy, and to browse the Internet.
>
> The children create their own metaphors to do this. To give you an idea of what I mean, a journalist came up to one of these kids and asked him, "How do you know so much about computers?" The answer seemed very strange to her because the kid said, "What's a computer?" The terminology is not as important as the metaphor. If they've got the idea of how a mouse works and that the Internet is [like a wall they can paint on], who cares if they know that a computer is called a computer and a mouse is called a mouse? In most of our classes here at NIIT, we spend time teaching people the terminology and such. That seems irrelevant to me with these children. (Sikshana.org)

In looking at how digital media is changing literacy, ultimately traditional notions of "what is learning?", "what are schools?" and "who is the teacher?" are raised. Mitra introduces a concept of what he calls "minimally invasive education" and Jack brought this up in his interview as something he found fascinating. This inevitably raises questions surrounding the future of schools as we have known them, which were developed around traditional text forms. Ultimately, alternative texts and new literacies will transform school structures.

Elizabeth was very interested in the notion of alternative text forms. The year before I conducted this study, she had an exhibit brought in from the gallery she is associated with. This exhibit was of a project where an artist put out a call for contributions and put together an exhibit of pieces sent in from all over the world, including altered books and cds, and artists cards which are mini pieces of art created on 3x5 cards. One of these in particular struck me: a science lab text book which had been altered into a Book of Spells, creating a viewpoint where science can be seen as a kind of magic. All of the students in the school then created their own 3x5 artist cards and these were displayed throughout the school. Thus, it can easily be seen how a teacher's own relationship to alternative texts forms become part of what is taught. However, this kind of teaching would be difficult for a teacher who did not have this hermeneutic relationship but rather was viewing it from the outside. With Elizabeth's leadership, this became possible.

Due to its intrinsic variety and heterogeneity, it is impossible to definitively define exactly what mail art is; however, the term mail art generally describes a variety of artwork forms that are sent or exchanged through postal or other delivery services. The act of mailing the artwork is often part of the creation process. Many mail artists address social and political themes, including examinations and critiques of the fine art world. Some mail art forms include postcards created by or modified by artists, decorated envelopes, and artist's books or other objects. Common characteristics include the design and use of rubber stamps and stickers, handmade paper, photocopying, collage, the design and use of non-official postage stamps, humor, and the incorporation of text into the artwork. (Spurgin, 2001, ¶ 1)

This exhibit, Jack's example of the computer on the street in India, and the use by children and youth of on-line environments for their own purposes became for me examples of what I began to conceive of as a radical literacy. The teachers in this study, who generously gave of their time and shared with me their conceptualizations

of literacy, brought me to a deeper understanding of where we are in the field and where, potentially, we might go. In the final chapter, I will explore the implications of what I learned, and make an argument for the radicalization of literacy practices, which I have come to understand must start from a deeper root than the practices themselves.

Chapter 8

RADICALIZING LITERACY

> Institutions are the way things get done, *and* they are prone to violence. They are inextricably, undecidably, pharmacologically both things at once. Nothing is innocent. And so it is a question of vigilance about that and, hence, of exercising a certain double agency, a critique exercised from within, of assuming the role of a treacherous and wily Hermes who subverts, who does an 'inside job' on the institution. (Caputo, 1987, p. 235)

In Caputo's infusion of Derrida into hermeneutics, there is a loss of innocence. In disrupting the hermeneutic circle (without destroying it), we return to the place we already are with new eyes, seeing all of the flaws and weaknesses in the presuppositions that brought us here in the first place, without abandoning ourselves completely. It is a further loss in the sense of knowing, wisely, that we cannot escape, that metaphysics cannot save us, and that we must look forward to always living inside the fray. This is both loss and release. In this chapter, I hope not to conclude, as Caputo says, but to aim for an opening. There are a number of insights (rather than conclusions) that have emerged as a result of this study. These insights have been seeded throughout the data analysis. I will now attempt to draw what I see to be the most significant threads together, and to discuss their implications. These are: (1) Reading as the magnet at the centre of literacy; (2) The particularity of school literacy; (3) The significance of teachers' literacy histories; and (4) The presence of absence in teachers' conceptualizations of literacy. After these specific threads are explored, I will look at the broader implications of this study for teacher education and for teachers' and their professional development. Finally, I will argue that similar to Caputo's radicalization of hermeneutics, the same deconstructive process might be taken to literacy, and will try to suggest what this might look like. However, this cannot be an individual endeavour, this is a place for a community of imagination to

begin the reconceptualizing process of how the learning of literacies might be transformed.

> If it works, hermeneutic inquiry necessarily transforms the researcher. I will also explore the ways in which this inquiry has transformed me, in terms of my thinking about literacy and teaching, my practice as a teacher educator, and my own sense of identity within the field.

Above, Caputo writes about what must be done from within an institution, of critique mounted from within. In mounting a critique of literacy and its conceptualizations in schools, I feel not a little treacherous. However, Caputo argues that it is just this kind of treachery that is necessary for the survival of the whole; only by disrupting and fragmenting the grand narrative of literacy can we recover what is of value and open up fissures, creating space for new conceptualizations and possibilities for action. Caputo (1987) describes how disruption can create possibility rather than paralysis:

> The thought of the flux does not leave action behind, does not let us enter a new world, make a leap into a different sphere where there is no longer any need to act. The thought of the flux remains always and already in the same sphere, faced with the demand to act but now with a transformed relationship to action. We act not with the security of metaphysical foundations but with a raised awareness of the insecurity to which we are exposed. We act not on the basis of unshakable grounds but in order to do what we can, taking what action as seems wise, and not without misgivings (Kierkegaard called it "fear and trembling"). (p. 239)

> What does it mean, then, in my work with students to be willing to live in the flux? To invite them to live in the flux as well? How do I do this without abandoning them to the wolves, as Caputo says? Even more pressing here, how do I conclude this study, when the experience has left me with far more questions than answers, when it has made me less, rather than more, certain?

Insights

(1) Reading is the Magnet at the Centre of Literacy.

This insight, that seemed central throughout the study, was surprising to me. I had anticipated that traditional text bound forms of literacy might be central to teachers' conceptualizations. What I did not anticipate was that *reading* would be so central. In almost every case, with Elizabeth as the clear exception, the focus of talk around literacy was not only on text based forms of literacy but on the *reading* and *interpretation* of those texts. Children in elementary schools are being taught to *decode* print text, and in most cases it is assumed that they need to bring *personal meaning* to those texts in order to be able to interpret them. Emphasis is on making *connections*. Fascinating is that while teachers speak of their views as being individual and idiosyncratic, this emphasis on reading is clearly historical. Christie and Misson (1995) note the emphasis in the 18th, 19th, and early part of the 20th century on reading, noting, "There was a sense in which, in much educational practice, reading was often seen as the more significant skill" (p. 1). McGee and Richgels (1990) trace traditional literacy assumptions:

> During the 1920s and 1930s educators became alarmed by the number of children failing the first grade. Many failed because they did not learn to read. . . . Educators began to consider how to get children ready to read. . . .Readiness programs were used in kindergarten and first grade classrooms. . . . No formal programs of readiness for writing were developed because most educators assumed that children could not write until they had begun reading. . . As a result, many teachers spent considerable more time on reading instruction than on writing instruction. (p. 7)

While we no longer believe that children must learn to read before writing, clearly in this study the overwhelming focus of what teachers considered as literacy was on *reading.* Laura talked about reading through writing, but her firm emphasis was on decoding of print text (see pp. 105-108). Anne and Margaret talked about children making meaning through learning to understand text, within a developmental framework (see pp. 109-112). Sara and Emma both comment that they spend much more time on reading than on writing (as they do in their lives), and that they would like to make more space for writing in their classrooms (see pp. 120-130). Vivian, as the Reading Recovery teacher, focuses mainly on teaching strategies for decoding (see pp. 113-116). Darlene emphasized reading comprehension in her classroom (pp. 134-139), and Dan refers to reading as *"something I think is most important" (Dan Interview, 04-05-06, p. 2)* (see pp. 139-149). Thus, the historical emphasis of reading, like a magnet at the centre of literacy, drawing all other elements back to itself, lives on. What is of concern here is that ultimately, children are taught to focus on becoming consumers, rather than producers, of text. What is "given", in print, in

"black and white," the canon, is authorized over children's own voices. As Stuckey shows (1991), texts are never neutral, and literacy practices can serve to disempower. She writes, "Far from engineering freedom, our current approaches to literacy corroborate other social practices that prevent freedom and limit opportunity" (p. vii). The importance of approaching texts critically is present in Emma's interview (see p. 122) and Elizabeth's (see p. 130). Rosemary considers the importance of literacy as power (see p. 180). However, over the staff as a whole, the overwhelming understanding of reading is through comprehension and personal meaning, firmly located in the traditional and subjective-individual orientations.

Elizabeth, Jack, and Caleigh do provide some alternatives. Elizabeth's focus in the classroom is on writing (see pp. 171-2). Jack seems to view both reading and creating print and digital texts in tandem; he spoke simultaneously about children using and creating websites, for example (Jack Interview, 02-27-06). Caleigh's work with the students views dance as a kind of language which the children produce rather than merely decode (see pp. 149-50). Here, then, are the exceptions to the rule, and the openings through which we can imagine other possibilities, other frames for literacy.

> This realization has prompted me to begin emphasizing production rather than consumption of literacy to my student teachers and in my work with other educators. There is a space in which it becomes imperative that we become writers as well as readers. The young are already deeply involved with fundamentally altered notions of authorship and communication on-line. Text is no longer the privilege

> of authorized voices. Anyone can instantly and globally alter electronic text, and this is in stark contrast to the traditional read-and-interpret activities of most classrooms. It is not only the multiplicity of texts that has exploded, but more significantly, their mutability. I emphasized to my students the absolutely crucial role they must be comfortable taking, as producers of alternative texts. This is the only way this will make its way into the public school classroom. However, children are already producers of such texts in their own lives. How can we possibly maintain the relevance of schools?

(2) The Particularity of School Literacy

In presenting the data, I have tried to show how teachers' conceptualizations of literacy are in themselves a hermeneutic process, casting backwards into their experiences and circling forward into their practices. These conceptualizations have little to do with what they have been formally taught in teacher education programs, and in most cases little to do with current curricula, theories, or projections about the kind of world students will be living in when they grow up. They even have little to do with the kinds of literacy that function in the world today, here and now. What they do reflect, however, is an induction into *school* literacy, which is very specific in its form and content. From this viewpoint, and in the context of the historical narrative of literacy, the spelling test, the handwriting practice, the desks and the chalkboards still make some kind of sense. This is what school is, and what it requires, however, what must be recognized now is the growing disconnect between

schools and the world. I think of Vivian, when she told me what she felt she was doing in providing Reading Recovery, "*I'm offering a vital service, for survival in this environment. And that's where they are, in this environment" (Vivian Interview, 02-06-06, p. 13).* There is something tragic about this, that we create a system that causes children to suffer in the event they do not grasp something as difficult as learning to read on schedule, by age six or seven, and then have to provide redemptive services in order to rescue them from the very system we created. Are these children like the ones Williams (1998) describes in his study?

> They were bright, excited children, but very frustrated by school literacy demands and generally unsuccessful in meeting their schools' expectations. It soon became clear, through looking systematically at the language of the texts which these 'low achievers' were reading, that the texts themselves were impeding children's learning and in fact creating many of the difficulties we observed. (p. 24)

Thus, the phenomenon of children with reading difficulties in so many cases is a direct result of the conditions we subject them to. School has colonized learning, and its missionaries teach literacy with a religious zeal. But the forms of literacy taught are a specific, school shaped doctrine, which has increasingly less relationship with the literacies students experience in the world. Macklin (1976) writes:

> Impoverished subject matter, blocked access to information, denial of individual rights, the replacement of self-responsibility with obedience to authority, and the drive to maximize the "amount" of knowledge, means that the operation of the schools becomes a cruel game with people's lives.

> Schooling needs to be seen as a game and not as the way things must be. Games can be dispensed with and the rules can be changed. (p. 42)

These are radical thoughts. What I have hoped to do through this study is to lay bare the "game" of literacy, to show it as a series of ideas based upon individual experiences that are contextualized within specific historical consciousnesses. There are so many school based literacy practices which we take to be natural and correct, but this is often because we are held captive and conditioned by our own language (Gadamer, 1999, p. xxv), unable to get outside of the picture that captivates us (Wittgenstein, in Monk, 1990, p. 365) of what school literacy is and is supposed to be, as this is "repeated to us inexorably" (p. 365). As Williams (1998) comments, "Media reports, and the political policies in which they frequently result, often suggest that useful directions for literacy education policy are to be found in imaginary visions of learning and teaching which are located in the halcyon days of nobody's youth" (p. 18). It is time to break free of the constraining nostalgia that whispers in our ears, unquestioned, about how literacy should be. We listen because we are afraid, because we believe the myth conveyed that students will not be prepared for life without our adherence to practices developed as technologies of control rather than as opportunities for real learning.

> What if schools as we know them cease to exist, as the forms of literacy that catalyzed their original existence undergo radical change? How can we begin to reconceptualize education for a world we do not yet know? I think of the film *Children of Men*, in which schools became quite literally, irrelevant. Who then, do teachers become in such a

> world? Are we really capable of letting go of our authority? Are we able to recognize the robust new knowledge of the young? Are we able to recognize both the danger and potential of massive cultural shift while it occurs?

(3) Significance of Teachers' Literacy Histories

In chapter 6, I explored the connections between teachers' own experiences and histories of literacy and their current conceptualizations of literacy. These stories had great power. In many instances, the teachers were not aware the extent to which their own experiences had shaped their practice, and saw it more a matter of idiosyncratic personality. In each case, I could hear echoes of the childhood experiences they described in their current descriptions of how they understood literacy, and in many cases, their experiences with their own children (see Sara, pp. 162-164; Elizabeth pp. 165-167; Emma, pp. 168-169; Margaret, pp. 173-174; Katie pp. 174-176, Rosemary pp. 178-180, Darlene, pp. 180-181, and Dan, pp. 181-182). We saw how this process of looking back to think forward was a hermeneutic one, still always contextualized within a socio-historical consciousness. These findings agree with much of the current literature in teacher education, which has begun to recognize the significance of teachers' biographies in their being-and-becoming a teacher (Calderhead, 1996; Carter & Doyle, 1996; Clandinin, 2000; Lipkin and Brinthaupt (1999); McLean (1999); Munby et al., 2001). There are important implications, then, for teacher education. The data clearly shows that teachers view their teacher education, in general, as having little impact upon their practices (see pp.

184-189). For those of us involved in teacher education, this should be data that causes us to sit up and take notice. If teachers' practices in surrounding literacy are based on conceptualizations built through childhood experiences, then these experiences must become a central text for the education of teachers, to give them the opportunity to make conscious these experiences and to critically interpret their meaning. I will explore this further below in the section on "Implications for Teacher Education."

> This insight is the one that can most directly impact my day-to-day work with student teachers, as I seriously undertake the writing and exploration of their literacy histories and other histories as a means of exploring the teachers they will become. This must be both a conscious and communal act.

(4) Presence of Absences

There were a number of significant absences in what the teachers described to me about their conceptualizations of literacy, a presence of absence in the conversations. Sometimes it was only when one teacher spoke of something, for example, Elizabeth's description of how she uses texts in her classroom to inquire into the craft of writing, or Jack's comment that writing is a technology, that I would notice its absence amongst the other interviews. The following are significant absences that I noted:

a) **An absence of talk surrounding the significance of race, class, and gender to the task of becoming literate.** In other words, while I could

interpret the effect that ethnicity (see Darlene, pp. 180-181), class (see Rosemary, pp. 178-180), and gender (see Dan, pp. 181-183) had had in these teachers' own lives in relation to literacy, talk of the importance of race, class, and gender to the literacy practices in their classrooms and to the students' lives was markedly absent. I argue that as public school teachers, there is a mythology surrounding the equalizing effects of education, and in particular, the acquirement of literacy:

> We live the mythology of a classless society. We believe our society provides equal opportunities for all and promises success to those who work hard to achieve it. We believe the key to achievement is education, and we believe the heart of education is literacy. (Stuckey, 1991, p. vii)

In contradiction to this mythology are numerous studies demonstrating, in fact, the opposite: that students who vary in ethnicity, class, and gender receive *different* educations. (For ethnicity see Heath, 1983; for class see Anyon, 1981; for gender see Sanford, 2006; for all see Stuckey, 1991, p. 105). So while for at least several of the teachers, these elements directly impacted their own experiences of literacy, they seem hesitant to consider their implication for their own teaching, other than an idealism that they can simply counter these social forces with literacy learning. Rosemary's statement is echoed in many of the other interviews in different ways: *"Reading every day is magic. Just that in itself" (Rosemary Interview, 03-10-06, p.18)*. It is high time we started asking

what the children are reading, to what ends and purposes, and *how* those texts position them in all of their gendered, classed, and ethnic experiences of the world. These questions are being asked in the theoretical literature around literacy, but not enough in the classroom. Perhaps this makes teaching so complex that it becomes, as Ellsworth (1997) asserts it is, impossible.

b) **An absence of the notion of "new literacies" or "multi-literacies" other than in a superficial way.** In chapter 7, I explore this absence, showing how despite the shift in the broader society that Illich (1993) notes, whereby the "book has now ceased to be the root-metaphor of the age," I argue that it is still very much the root metaphor of the school. Schools are designed with printed text in mind. As shown in chapter 7, this absence is becoming more and more glaring, the gap between school literacy practices and societal literacy practices ever widening.

c) **A general absence of viewing literacy as a complex phenomenon, beyond, basically, reading and writing.** In many cases there was talk of complexity, but in their interviews I heard generally a sense of the straightforward nature of literacy. As Vivian put it, *"If an individual is literate. . . they would be able to demonstrate that they can get meaning from print. . . for the needs of their life, and that the individual could transmit meaning in writing" (Vivian Interview, 02-06-06, p. 1)*. Laura was taken aback when I asked her where her ideas about literacy came from, *"Oh my goodness (pause). Maybe I'm off the mark in what I think*

literacy is all about. . . . I guess I just make an assumption that as a teacher it's our responsibility to teach kids how to read and write with comprehension, and to sort of elaborate and expand" (Laura Interview, 02-22-06, p. 5). Now, clearly, the teachers view their work with children as complex, and the learning of literacy by children to be a complex task. However, what I am hoping to accomplish here is to disrupt and confound the common, everyday understanding of literacy. After my interviews with the teachers, several of them approached me to say that our discussion had made them rethink the nature of literacy. This demonstrates the importance of these kinds of conversations in schools.

> These absences must become present in teacher education and in schools, in our theoretical work and in our work with teachers.

These represent what I saw to be the more significant threads of my findings, although each one simply opened up new complexities and opportunities for further questioning. While my question focused on teachers' conceptualizations of literacy, what the data demonstrated has important implications for teacher education, professional development of teachers, and the future of schooling. The following sections explore these implications.

Implications for Teacher Education

If anything has clearly come out of this study, it is that teachers do not consider their teacher education to be a significant factor in their literacy practices. As could easily be seen in the data, there was a much closer connection in teachers'

conceptualizations of literacy to their childhood and family experiences of literacy than there was to their teacher education. For those of us involved in teacher education, and specifically in educating student teachers for the literacy classroom, these results beg some jarring questions about the value of what we do.

It is more than a little disquieting and disheartening to imagine that our work with students makes little difference to their practice, if they are simply "jumping through the hoops" necessary to the completion of their degree so they can get out into the classroom and teach according to personal, idiosyncratic ideas. On the other hand, if my students do not take up my philosophical orientation to literacy and literacy learning, as Dan did not of his professors, and I am bothered by this, does this betray simply another layer of impositional teaching, where I expect my student teachers to assimilate appropriately? Looking at it this way, education becomes a duel of personalities. Teachers in this study saw their own practices as idiosyncratic, and in visiting dozens and dozens of classrooms over the years, I have observed that the teacher, as the possessor of power in a classroom, has the opportunity to create a cult of personality, which students resist or subvert to greater or lesser degrees. Those successful in school have become adept at either not resisting or else, more likely, appearing not to resist for the purpose of getting a good mark and passing the grade, or, for younger children, in return for the approval of the teacher.

If, as a teacher educator, I were to abandon the goal of getting my student teachers to think like me in regards to literacy, and if I were to recognize the teaching of "methods" to be futile based upon the evidence that teachers simply disregard the bulk of this information, what is left? What if we were to discard the notion of teacher

training for one of an authentic education, which means not a technical apprenticeship into the "correct" means of teaching literacy? This would, inevitably, expose myself and my students to the flux; I would cease to be able to imagine that I control what they learn and how they will one day teach. However, this sense of control is only an illusion in the first place (Ellsworth, 1997).

I would like to argue instead for the recognition of the importance of the student teachers' personal histories in relation to literacy (and, by extension, all curriculum areas) and to begin to work seriously with these as a text. What I have found in this study is that the most influential force on a teacher's practice is their personal experiences with literacy. It makes most sense, then, to begin here, remembering and reclaiming these experiences and making more conscious their meaning, raising meta-awareness of their literacy histories. I find that this idea is far from new; Connelly and Clandinin, (1985), Darling-Hammond (2006), Goodson and Walker (1991), Munby et al. (2001), and others advocate this way of working. Connelly and Clandinin (1985) write:

> Educators need to focus on experience, in particular, teacher and student narrative unities. In drawing up, developing, remaking and introducing narratives, the richness of past experience may be brought forward and credited as teachers' and students' personal knowledge of their teaching and learning situations. Teaching and learning situations need continually to "give back" a learner's narrative experience so that it may be reflected upon, valued, and enriched. We want knowing to come alive in classrooms as the multi-faceted, embodied, biographical, and historical experience that it is. (p. 197)

However, what now needs taking up in the field is these narratives specifically in relation to curriculum and subject areas. Many of the connections made in the interviews between the teachers' childhood experiences in literacy and their teaching practices were ones they had not previously noticed; this is not an awareness they come to, necessarily, without prompting. In working with student teachers, we should start here, in excavating these experiences, writing about them, sharing them, and inquiring into their relationship to the students' beliefs, to each other as a community of educators, and to the historical consciousness to which we belong. Ellsworth (1997), in her reimagining of educative spaces, suggests:

> Picture a student-teacher seminar. The focus is not on, What is this author saying in this required reading, what does she mean? The focus is on, What happens to my own processes of thinking, my own symbolic constellation when I read this author's words? Where, as I read this author, do I get stuck, do I forget, do I resist? Where, when I listen to a classmates's response to this reading, does my own project of 'becoming a teacher' get shifted, troubled, unsettled – why there? Why now? (p. 73)

This process could be undertaken with shared readings, or, in reading stories of each other's literacy experiences, such that the experience is not confined to the individual but becomes communal. Perhaps then, more potential directions for action might be opened up in the fissures of these experiences, and as a community we might imagine other possibilities. Take for example the spelling program: rather than beginning by naming and describing various approaches to spelling, and arguing in favour for one approach or another, we might begin in the students' own

remembrances and experience of spelling. These could then be contextualized in the history of spelling, and the practice of spelling might be seen within a broader context rather than a discrete skill to be learned. What if students began by remembering what the spelling test was like, whether it had a relationship to writing, whether they learn to spell words phonetically or visually, whether the word processor has changed their approach to spelling, whether they consider themselves good or poor spellers and where this label came from and what it did to them… all of these are directly relevant to how they will teach in the schools. What if students then learned about where the whole notion of spelling came from, inquired into its history, and how we got from there to here. Does the convention of the spelling test persists because we have not, from inside the institution, been able to creatively imagine how it might be otherwise? Or is it because we do not trust the alternatives? Are we still inside traditional Discourses of literacy, whereby it is difficult to act outside of it? Teachers, despite having read the research that spelling tests do not transfer to good spelling in students' writing, persist with it because as Darlene explained, "*At least I could say, 'Well I've taught them that'" (Darlene Interview, 04-06-06, p. 3)*, despite having observed that they still "*made a lot of spelling mistakes in their journal writing"(p. 3)*. In other words, what is taught is sometimes more to do with a sense of accountability, (to whom? parents? administrators? students?) than to what teachers actually think is effective teaching and learning. It is also very difficult for teachers to imagine doing something else – they may recognize the ineffectiveness of the spelling test, other options seem too risky. As Macklin (1976) argues in his exploration of Illich's thought:

> Illich's point concerning imagination is that institutions have so bound people's thinking that they are unable to imagine a better way of organizing society than the one that presently exists. . . . Thus a man who sees the present situation as being the working out of all possibilities will not be able to imagine anything else to put in its place. (p. 6)

This is as true of the institution of schooling as it is of the institution of the spelling test. Meanwhile, student teachers need to treat their own histories of literacy as relevant text to their inquiry into what it means to be a teacher of literacy. They need the opportunity to inquire into the nature of literacy itself, and to consider how literacy practices are changing in the world and in their lives. These activities of inquiry, if they are able to take seriously the notion that what they have experienced as literacy will have a critical impact on the practices they carry out, have the potential if not to transform literacy practices in schools to at least make the students aware of these practices as *choices* rather than as *givens.* Schemmp et al (1999) consider:

> One possibility for initiating change would be to change teacher induction. Encouraging, or even allowing beginning teachers to express themselves more freely without fear of condemnation, reprisals, or job loss is one such change. . . new teachers must be encouraged to develop an identity that does not simply "fit in," but rather is based upon experimentation and characterized by pedagogical practices and responsive perspectives that place student learning and welfare at the forefront of concerns. They also must be encouraged to reflect critically on what it means to teach in public schools, to interrogate,

challenge, and change the structures of schooling that constrain the essential missions of schools (p. 158).

> We recognize the importance of field experiences for student teachers, and it is these experiences they consistently find most valuable. Does this not simply perpetuate the status quo? Is it possible to work against the socializing effects of a dozen years or more of public education prior to entering teacher education programs?

Implications for Teachers and Professional Development

Implications for teachers in the field, then, and for their continued professional development follow from this. What stands for professional development in most cases is workshops where presenters talk to (or at) teachers about the latest in programs or methods. During the data gathering period of this study, the staff of this school had professional development on "Six Traits Writing", which I observed, and the teachers were involved with district professional development on Guided Reading. The workshop on Six Traits was illustrative of how incorporation of new practices into teaching works: teachers are presented with "practical" ideas that they can, piecemeal, choose to work into their existing practice. Here is an excerpt from the introductory comments made by the presenter:

> *The workshop that I'm going to work with you on is called "Six Traits Writing" . . . and this is the book that I've based today's workshop out of, this is the primary book called* Seeing with New Eyes, *and . . . they put out an*

> *intermediate assessment tool, and writing program called* Creating Writers. *So today's program is a balance of these two books put together with all the ideas pulled out for you because you don't have time to wade through and figure out what's relevant and what's not relevant. And of course this is coming from my end which is what I think is useful and practical, and you might look at the books and pull out totally different things because we all tend to work with different schema. (Six Traits Writing Workshop, 01-30-06, p. 1)*

What is interesting here is the use of the language and the claims made. It was called a workshop, when it was really a stand-and-deliver presentation, the audience was largely passive with a few individual tasks thrown in. There is also the presenter's direct comment that teachers "do not have time" to "figure out what's relevant and what's not". Therefore the presenter has taken on the role of doing that work for the teachers and digesting the information for them. This not only is somewhat patronizing of the teachers, it also speaks to a system that has created jobs for teachers that are so frenetic that they literally *do not have time* to pause and think about what approaches they are taking in their classrooms, and perhaps more significantly the underpinnings and implications of those approaches. Finally, a disclaimer is made that what we find to be significant is individual and idiosyncratic, rather than a shared understanding (Schempp et al, 1999, p. 145). Frequently throughout this study, teachers would comment to me a few days after I had interviewed them that our discussion had stimulated them to think about literacy in a new way. It was, simply, taking the time to have a conversation about some of the

bigger questions of literacy, which judging by the minimal participation in the weekly discussion group is not time that most teachers feel they can afford. School structures are long overdue for reimagining, as I will take up later in the chapter.

As many of the teachers expressed to me, by and large professional development workshops have only minimal impact upon their teaching, which is sensible. A teacher can hardly be expected to completely change their classroom program with each new program that comes along, programs that are all too often old ideas in new clothing. They do, as professionals, consider what already "fits" with their existing program. Margaret told me she incorporates *"eclectic things as I've been to different workshops or different ideas have come along, that work for me, because if it doesn't work for me I'm not doing it" (Mary Interview, 03-29-06, p. 29),* and Sara said something very similar: *"Workshops and interactions with staff members change things, and things I read and learn. It's a constant evaluation of okay, this sort of fits in with what I do but I don't want to do that" (Sara Interview, 02-20-06, p. 4).* Thus, teaching is about style, and new ideas are evaluated for compatibility with what already exists. Teachers often see new ideas as simply recycled old ones, many commented, "the pendulum swings back and forth." In the context of the data, the reason for this swing becomes clear – teachers are drawing upon their own experiences contextualized within the historical consciousness, and when none of this is unearthed, changes are more likely to be cyclical than progressive.

If workshops demonstrating the new and latest fad in literacy education are ineffective, what alternative is there? Based upon the findings of this study, it seems

likely that professional development aimed at teachers' *own* literacy practices would likely have more of an impact at the level of the classroom. This would require two things: first, awareness on the part of teachers and administrators of the impact that personal literacy practices have on the classroom, and second, trust in the teachers as professionals that they would be able to connect the dots afterwards and be able to transfer their own learning into meaningful classroom practices. This is actually quite a large shift, because it begins to bump up against what we believe learning to be, for professional adults as well as children. We live in a constant state of contradiction and even hypocrisy in education, we "lecture" our students, student-teachers, and teachers about the importance of active, meaningful learning. It is my argument that a workshop (rather than a lecture) on writing their own poetry would have potentially more impact for teachers than a workshop on how to teach poetry in a classroom. This, as I say, would require a certain amount of faith in the teachers' abilities to transfer their learning into their own classroom context.

However, the results of this study show that it is the teachers like Elizabeth, who write in their own lives who seem to have a more robust understanding of how to teach writing to children, and indeed, are more likely to do so, where many of the other teachers spend much more time on reading. While it is not clear if this would be universally found across schools, in this specific school context the teachers are much more dedicated readers than writers, therefore, what would make sense for this staff would be personal work in the area of writing. I think of Sara, whose writing activities as described are currently comprised of grocery lists, notes to her children's teachers, and writing report cards. What might potentially come out of an opportunity

for her to write a short story, a poem, an article, or an essay? Might not a first hand, current experience of the difficulties of writing be of benefit when creating writing opportunities for her classroom? The difference in perspective created by this kind of activity is found in the teachers' descriptions of their practice, where Sara has her students read almost exclusively for understanding and the creation of personal meaning, whereas Elizabeth has her students read for the sake of learning about the craft of writing.

This example of writing is only one example. The same might certainly be true of new aspects of the curriculum such as technology integration. It is little wonder that the envisioned curriculum is not implemented, by and large, because of the teachers' lack relationship to computer technology in their own lives. This would take more than a one day workshop on how to use a word processor or download from the Internet. This might take discussion groups online amongst staff for various professional purposes, introduction of "play" such as video games, or groups that might explore interests such as photography or music through available technology. It is not enough to tell teachers what is possible, mandate it in the curriculum and then throw information at them quickly at a one day workshop. What needs to be understood is the relationship between teaching, curriculum, and life, and this makes higher demands on schools and school districts to support teachers in exploring the curriculum they expect them to teach. What is needed is a sustained orientation to inquiry in teacher's lives, begun in teacher education and continued throughout a teaching career.

A Radical Literacy

These suggestions above, for altered approaches to teacher education and professional development, do not get at the deeper question of our conceptualizations surrounding literacy. What I have tried to explore throughout this study is how teachers actually conceptualize literacy and how those conceptualizations are socially and historically situated. What I learned was how directly those conceptualizations were personally located within the teachers' experience. These experiences, while being rich sources for classroom practice, are also limited by the historical consciousness to which they belong. There may be no escaping this entirely, but an awareness of this movement between past, present and future is necessary if we are to open new possibilities for literacy, rather than clinging on to those that have served us in the past, repeating them to ourselves inexorably as necessarily "true". As we look forward in the field of literacy education, at this time of deep change, I would like to argue for a radicalized literacy, using Caputo's (1987) radicalization of hermeneutics as a guide. As previously explored, he attempts to free hermeneutics by exposing it to deconstructive flux.

> If there is no master name, if there are too many truths, what has become of science and ethics, thought and action, theory and practice (provided we can make such distinctions)? If the flux is all, and linguistic, historical structures are nothing more than writings in the sand which we manage to inscribe in between tides, what then? What can we know? What ought we to do? What can we hope for? Who are we, we who cannot say "we," we who are divided from ourselves, our (non) selves?

This move is both redemptive and emancipatory:

> Radical hermeneutics cultivates an acute sense of the contingency of all social, historical, linguistic structures, an appreciation of their constituted character, their character as effects. And so the question which presses in upon us now is whether in such a conception we are thrown to the wolves. . . I want to argue. . . that, although there no way to get rid of the wolves (exposure to such perils is part of the human condition), there is no reason we need be consumed by them. We are trying to restore the difficulty in life, not to make it impossible. . . . Reason is not undone by the foundering of metaphysics but liberated, emancipated from metaphysical prejudices which tended to make of it something less than it is. (p. 209)

In understanding literacy within the sweep of history, its first invention and how that altered our understanding of oral language and memory, in its relationship to Biblical reading and salvation, its shift into personal meaning, and then its extension into a social world (Christie & Mission, 1998, p. 6), we can contextualize our own moment of history where literacy practices are shifting on a large scale. We are now moving beyond a time when literacy seemed to be settled, restoring the difficulty of literacy as its shapes and forms shift. Christie and Misson (1998) assert,

> Not since the advent of the printing press in the fifteenth century has there been anything with equal potential to revolutionise literacy as the advent of digital technology in all its different manifestations. . . . literacy itself will inevitably change, indeed is already changing, has already changed" (p. 13).

This is even more true now, at the time of this writing, than it was in 1998. It is not only literacy that is changing, but the whole world, at a faster and faster rate. Literacy has been cut loose from its moorings, but this fact is not recognized, largely, in schools. Among the teachers interviewed for this study, Jack sees this in his context, Elizabeth also, but the majority of teachers continue to operate under other orientations, as shown. The task for educators is to cease imagining that we are in possession of the knowledge children of today will need for tomorrow. We must become more more brave in wading into the flux, becoming more comfortable, as Caputo (1987) says, "with a raised awareness of the insecurity to which we are exposed" (p. 239). Critical here, I argue, is not a rushing forward into the future, imagining a linear trajectory. Fischer (2006) argues that we must now "develop a critical philosophy of the digital" in relation to "dominant ideologies," a "philosophy that will allow us to rethink the foundations" (pp. 13-4). This is the gift that Caputo gives us, showing how to deconstruct and destabilize without abandonment. The past is neither annihilated nor venerated as a foundation. Rather it is reread, wisely and with eyes open, for the purpose of living now, in the noise and clash of the fray:

> What breaks down in the breakthrough is the spell of conceptuality, the illusion that we have somehow or another managed to close our conceptual fists around the nerve of things, that we have grasped the world round about, circumscribed and encompassed it. . . . This is not to say, of course, that we no longer have to do with conceptual thinking. . . I would say, rather, it inhabits the margins and fringes and interstices of everydayness and keeps turning up on us disturbingly, unexpectedly, only to vanish again. (1987, p. 270)

This kind of thinking is counter to practice in schools, where the institution demands a high level of organization and clarity of purpose. While I have one example from my study of a teacher opening up a writing experience for students in this way, where Elizabeth asks her students, "What's your project?" – this certainly is not business as usual in schools. Indeed the very structure of schooling, let alone its history as modeled on industrial machine, works against an authentic engagement with the flux. Schools are designed for a stable world. This leads to my final argument, going out on a limb perhaps, which relates to the very structure of schooling as an institution.

> Am I brave enough to simply say, "What's your project?"
> Am I able to release traditional text forms in my own work, and work alternatively? What about how I am constrained in the written text forms of academia, without which I fear I will not be taken seriously?

Looking to the Future of Schools (or, Deschooling Literacy)

The structure of schools as we know them today was made possible by the fact of literacy as we have known it, and were built around the possibilities it afforded. It follows that as literacy is irreversibly transformed, so too with time will schools transform, albeit kicking and screaming all the way, with a real possibility that the institution may disintegrate all together. In living with unstable literacy practices in the world, many of which are carried out electronically, the rote learning of letters is more than obsolete. The determined continuation of such practices is explained by Macklin (1976) when he writes, "The school is essentially a

conservative instrument" (p. 38). I recently watched a student teacher struggle to make his way through a lesson amidst a pilot project where all his grade six students had been given their own laptops. By the end of the lesson, he was throwing up his hands in frustration. The structure of a classroom, with more than thirty adolescents on their own laptops, seated in desks facing a chalkboard, was simply not conducive to a lesson, traditionally conceived. There was little the student teacher could do to compete for the attention of the students, yet there was no question that they were learning. What they were learning, however, was all too obviously no longer under his control. According to Ellsworth (1997), however, that control was always an illusion, "A teacher can open a book and begin to read aloud from it to students, but she can never know or control the sense that students will make of it" (1997, p. 67).

As I look around the coffee shop in which I work, I see many people involved in a variety of literacy activities, broadly conceived. The girls in the corner curl up with papers and books spread everywhere; one studies while the other talks on her cell phone. Beside me a couple converse while papers litter the table, at the same time as the laptop on the table hums with the young man's instant messaging conversation which he has open next to the term paper he is writing while his girlfriend flips through her text book and text messages on her cell phone with the other hand. Several men laugh, while one of them describes the content of a humorous email he had received, "typing" on the table as he did so. A study group debates biological processes at the large table in the corner, while the man next to them reads the paper and works on the crossword. Meanwhile, friends meet and converse with lattes in hand. All of these represent multiple literacy processes, for purposes determined by

the individuals who use them. These open, loose communities might represent the education of the future, rather than the tightly controlled community of the classroom, where all legitimate activity is determined by the teacher. This situation is partially an assumption that students will not be interested in learning if they are not compelled, through a complex system of reward and punishment, to do so. This is related to the assumption that without grades as a motivator, students would cease to work. This assumption is as faulty as the first, as I have seen first hand in working in a teacher education program which provides narrative assessment instead of marks. The deep flaws in our systems of grading students have been recognized, over and over again:

> Once the final school grade has been assigned, it is taken up by universities, governments, industry, and the society in general. How does the validity of such a grade stretch to all of these agencies' requirements? In the final analysis, the school's grade is sought not because of the information that it can give but because it has become an unexamined fetish. . . the school selection may be based on a child's adaptability, honesty, interest, willingness to perform set tasks, application to school work or simply a pleasing personality. . . . The final selection expresses nothing pertinent to anyone interested in it but it is about to constitute the basis of a self-fulfilling prophecy. (Macklin, 1976, p. 40)

Despite of years of work in the field of assessment showing the damage done by grading and its counter productiveness in the endeavour of teaching and learning, we seem powerless except in small pockets to stop the practice. This speaks to hidden purposes of schooling, as sorting mechanisms and technologies of control, as playing

"a fundamental role in the continuing operation of the economic system by perpetuating the notion that knowledge is a commodity and that schools are the factories which produce such a commodity" (Macklin, 1976, p. 34). The school ensures its own survival by controlling the credentials with which society's members may obtain employment and professional status. The idea that schools, as institutions, are on the decline, that they very well may not exist a few decades from now, again is not exactly new. There has been much work done calling for a reconceptualization of schooling. Connelly and Clandinin (1999) write of the "parade" of education as it moves through time:

> It is not as if the profession of education has not witnessed changes as far reaching and dramatic as those we now observe: It just seems that way because of the time span. . . But. . . schools. . . that were in many respects more integrally related to community life, more central to its social fabric than are most modern-day schools, disappeared entirely from the landscape. The disappearance of schools as we know them in 1996, though troubling for most to anticipate, may well be part of the passing parade. If so, what will take their place? (p. 132)

There are those that will argue that what we are experiencing in the world in terms of new forms of literacy, particularly digital media, is in fact one of the largest shifts we have undergone as a species, on par with or even more drastic than the invention of literacy in the first place (Fischer, 2006). What is abundantly clear from the data collected in this study is that those changes have not made it into the classroom in any authentic way, or into the conceptualizations of most of the

teachers. It is, unfortunately, business as usual to a surprising degree within classrooms. Reading was the strongest component in the interviews, for example, rooted in the schooling practices of a century ago. What about the predilection for those who love reading to not only be the most successful at "school literacy" but also to become the most likely teachers in the first place. By and large, those involved in the transformation of literacy in society are not those involved in the education of the young. This basic irony has grave implications for schooling and its role as a conservative instrument, the mechanism of this becomes clearly apparent. Those most successful at school literacy are the ones who then take over its perpetuation. Those successful at it are heavily invested in maintaining traditional notions of literacy and text forms, without which the purpose of schooling becomes heavily suspect, and traditional literacy becomes transparent as a technology of control (Stuckey, 1991).

It is not that nothing has changed at all at school in the last hundred years, but relative to the societal shifts we have undergone, particularly in relation to the literacies of today's youth, the change in schools has been at a snail's pace, and often focused in the wrong direction, whether it be "back to basics" movements or limited notions of "technological literacy." Yet the forms of school spaces remain intact, serving social rather than educative functions. Reimagining educational spaces, more fluid and flexible, not contained by boundaries of space and time as we have known them, is difficult to do. What if schools no longer existed as buildings for children to attend, week in and week out, for a period of 12 to 14 years? This kind of reconceptualization requires a kind of playfulness with the idea of education:

> The difficulty, however, is that the world places little confidence in the play of things and a great deal of reliance on constraints, authority, and institutional structures, and that is why we are overrun with creeds and criteria, rules of life and rules of method. The fact is that the advocates of free play meet resistance at every step. . . . I want to argue . . . for a notion. . . which begins by acknowledging the uncircumventable futility involved in trying to nail things down. (Caputo, 1987, p. 211)

Macklin (1976) argues for the separation of the notion of education and schooling, which over the centuries we have come to regard as synonymous. In becoming playful in our imagining of education, as Caputo suggests, in disrupting the "constraints, authority, and institutional structures," the necessity of having formal buildings called "schools" begins to waver as a given. In recent years, alternative schools, charter schools, and home schooling have begun to proliferate. These are, I believe, early pains in what will eventually be a dismantling of the formal institution which we know as "school". The question becomes whether this will happen despite our wanting and doing, or if we will become active agents in its reform. I call here for work in the present from the community of educators in reimagining literacy, reimagining school spaces so that alternatives can be considered now. Insisting on continued "rearview" approaches to education does not serve us, and ignoring the fissures in the institutional structure created by massive changes in society will not prevent the crumbling.

Caputo (1987) says, "We have argued that thinking and acting. . . are to be understood in terms of the agility of one who knows how to cope with shifting and

elusive circumstances. . . to stay in play with the play" (p. 293). We must become co-constructors of the future that is being thrust upon us, rather than nostalgic conservers of a past that has already disappeared. This is a moment of opportunity, where, if we are to embrace the flux of change, and recognize the momentous shifts in literacies even as we appreciate its history and tradition, that we might find ways to act, with fear and trembling, yes, but with purpose.

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Appendix A

You Are Cordially Invited To

"Literacy Café"

If you don't yet know me, I am Michelle Yeo, doctoral student in Language and Literacy at the University of Victoria. I am currently collecting data for my dissertation project, which is on teachers' conceptions of literacy. I have started approaching some of you for interviews. I am also holding an informal (completely optional!) discussion group every Wednesday for the next four weeks and want to invite any interested staff to attend. The general topics are listed below, and you are welcome to attend all or any of them - you don't need to commit to the series! I will bring treats! Hope to see you there!! Any questions? myeo@uvic.ca (382-4665)

What: Literacy discussion group

Where: Library

When: Wednesdays at lunch, Feb 15 - March 8

Tentative Topics:

Wed. Feb 15 - Multiliteracies
Wed. Feb 22 - Literacy and Technology
Wed. March 1 - Literacy and Power
Wed. March 8 - Literacy and Culture

Appendix B

http://www.sikshana.org/children_case5.html

Retrieved March 2, 2006.

Case Study 5: A Lesson in Computer Literacy from India's Poorest Kids

Sugata Mitra has a PhD in physics and heads research efforts at New Delhi's NIIT, a fast-growing software and education company with sales of more than $200 million and a market cap over $2 billion. But Mitra's passion is computer-based education, specifically for India's poor. He believes that children, even terribly poor kids with little education, can quickly teach themselves the rudiments of computer literacy. The key, he contends, is for teachers and other adults to give them free rein, so their natural curiosity takes over and they teach themselves. He calls the concept "minimally invasive education."

To test his ideas, Mitra 13 months ago launched something he calls "the hole in the wall experiment." He took a PC connected to a high-speed data connection and imbedded it in a concrete wall next to NIIT's headquarters in the south end of New Delhi. The wall separates the company's grounds from a garbage-strewn empty lot used by the poor as a public bathroom. Mitra simply left the computer on, connected to the Internet, and allowed any passerby to play with it. He monitored activity on the PC using a remote computer and a video camera mounted in a nearby tree.

What he discovered was that the most avid users of the machine were ghetto kids aged 6 to 12, most of whom have only the most rudimentary education and little knowledge of English. Yet within days, the kids had taught themselves to draw on the computer and to browse the Net. Some of the other things they learned, Mitra says, astonished him.

The physicist has since installed a computer in a rural neighborhood with similar results. He's convinced that 500 million children could achieve basic computer literacy over the next five years, if the Indian government put 100,000 Net-connected PCs in schools and trained teachers in some basic "noninvasive" teaching techniques for guiding children in using them. Total investment required, he figures: Around $2 billion.

On Feb. 25, BW Online Contributing Editor Thane Peterson sat down with Mitra, a stocky 48-year-old with a mustache and a mop of graying black hair, in his tiny, triangular office at NIIT's R&D center on the campus of the Indian Institute of Technology in the south part of New Delhi. Here are edited excerpts of their conversation.

Q. What gave you the idea of giving slum kids access to the Internet?

A. It was a social observation rather than a scientific one. Any parent who had given his child a computer would invariably remark to me about it. I could hardly ever find an exception. Within a very short period of time, the parent would be claiming that the child was a genius with a computer. When I poked a little further, I invariably found that the child was doing things with the computer that the parent didn't understand. I asked myself whether the child was really doing something exceptional or if what we were seeing was adult incomprehension. If the adult was simply underestimating the child's ability to cope with a computer, then that should happen with any child. And I asked myself, "Why then would we want to use the same teaching methods for children as we use for teaching adults?" At first, I tested my ideas with children who were easily available -- children at the company here, whose parents are in our executive group.... Then we tried this "hole in the wall" concept, where we put a high-powered Pentium computer with a fast Internet connection into a wall and let [slum] children have access to it with no explanation whatsoever. To be very brief on what happened, the results have been uniform every time we've done this experiment. You get base level computer literacy almost instantly. By computer literacy, I mean what we adults define as computer literacy: The ability to use the mouse, to point, to drag, to drop, to copy, and to browse the Internet. The children create their own metaphors to do this. To give you an idea of what I mean, a journalist came up to one of these kids and asked him, "How do you know so much about computers?" The answer seemed very strange to her because the kid said, "What's a computer?" The terminology is not as important as the metaphor. If they've got the idea of how a mouse works and that the Internet is [like a wall they can paint on], who cares if they know that a computer is called a computer and a mouse is called a mouse? In most of our classes here at NIIT, we spend time teaching people the terminology and such. That seems irrelevant to me with these children. But we also found that they would tend to plateau out. They would surf the Web -- Disney.com is very popular with them because they like games. And they would use [Microsoft] Paint. It's very, very popular with all of them. Because these are deprived children who do not have easy access to paper and paint. Every child likes to paint, so they would do it with that program. However, that's all they could do. So I intervened, and I played an MP3 [digital-music file] for them. They were astonished to hear music come out of the computer for the first time. They said, "Oh, does it work like a TV or radio?" I said, in keeping with my approach, "Well, I know how to get there but I don't know how it works." Then I [left]. As I would have expected, seven days later they

could have taught me a few things about MP3. They had discovered what MP3 was, downloaded free players, and were playing their favorite songs. As usual, they didn't know what any of it was called. But they would say, "if you take this little box, and you drag this file into this box, it plays music." They had found out where all the Hindi music was on the Web and had pulled it out.

Q. What does it mean? What does it say for the potential of these slum kids? After all, being able to download music isn't enough to get them a job.

A. I don't wish to claim that this shows anything more or less than what it has shown, which is that curious kids in groups can train themselves to operate a computer at a basic level. In doing so, they also can get a generally good idea about the nature of browsing and the nature of the Internet.... And, therefore, if they view these things as worth learning, no formal infrastructure is needed [to teach them]. Now, that's a big deal, because everyone agrees that today's children must be computer-literate. If computer literacy is defined as turning a computer on and off and doing the basic functions, then this method allows that kind of computer literacy to be achieved with no formal instruction. Therefore, any formal instruction for that kind of education is a waste of time and money. You can use that time and money to have a teacher teach something else that children cannot learn on their own.

Q. What else have you learned?

A. Well, I tried another experiment. I went to a middle-class school and chose some ninth graders, two girls and two boys. I called their physics teacher in and asked him, "What are you going to teach these children next year at this time?" He mentioned viscosity. I asked him to write down five possible exam questions on the subject. I then took the four children and said, "Look here guys. I have a little problem for you." They read the questions and said they didn't understand them, it was Greek to them. So I said, "Here's a terminal. I'll give you two hours to find the answers." Then I did my usual thing: I closed the door and went off somewhere else. They answered all five questions in two hours. The physics teacher checked the answers, and they were correct. That, of itself, doesn't mean much. But I said to him, "Talk to the children and find out if they really learned something about this subject." So he spent half an hour talking to them. He came out and said, "They don't know everything about this subject or everything I would teach them. But they do know one hell of a lot about it. And they know a couple of things about it I didn't know." That's not a wow for the children, it's a wow for the Internet. It shows you what it's capable of. The slum children don't have physics teachers. But if I could make them curious enough, then all the content they need is out there. The greatest expert on earth on viscosity

probably has his papers up there on the Web somewhere. Creating content is not what's important. What is important is infrastructure and access.... The teacher's job is very simple. It's to help the children ask the right questions.

Q. Are you saying that if we put computers in all the slums, slum kids could become literate on their own?

A. I'm saying that, in situations where we cannot intervene very frequently, you can multiply the effectiveness of 10 teachers by 100- or 1,000-fold if you give children access to the Internet.

Q. This is your concept of minimally invasive education?

A. Yes. It started out as a joke but I've kept using the term.... This is a system of education where you assume that children know how to put two and two together on their own. So you stand aside and intervene only if you see them going in a direction that might lead into a blind alley. That's just so that you don't waste time.... That would create teachers who are experts at composing questions.

Q. What are the business applications of all this?

A. I get asked this question all the time. It's kind of ironic that a company that makes [a big chunk of its sales from running computer-training institutes] should invent a method where no teacher is required. The answer is that just because a method is economically viable, doesn't mean you shouldn't look for alternatives. A good business is one which provides more and more for less and less. The cost of your goods and services should spiral downwards. The second point is that we are going to have an e-commerce boom. But what happens when an Indian businessman puts his shop up on the Web? Where's he going to get customers from? If someone lets me do this experiment for five years, with 100,000 kiosks, I reckon that I could get 500 million children computer-literate. It would cost $2 billion. But if you had to pay to educate the same children using traditional methods, it would cost twice as much.

Q. If this were to become a business, would it require government funding?

A. Advertisers like Coca-Cola might be interested. But it would absolutely have to have government funding. I can't think of a company that would put $2 billion into this. The governments will have to realize that the problem of the haves and have-nots is about to [become] the problem of the knows and knows-not. Do we want to create another great big divide where the problem of illiteracy will come back in another context? In a very short period of time, adults who do not know how to deal with a [computer] mouse will have a very difficult time dealing with almost everything in life.

Q. But most of the information on the Internet is in English and the people you're talking about don't speak English.

A. We had some very surprising results there. We all have great misconceptions about what these children know and don't know. At first, I made a Hindi interface for the kids, which gave them links for hooking up with Web sites in their own language. I thought it would be a great hit. Guess what they did with it? They shut it down and went back to Internet Explorer. I realized that they may not understand the dictionary meaning of [English] words, but they have an operational understanding. They know what that word does. They don't know how to pronounce F-I-L-E, but they know that within it are options of saving and opening up files....

The fact that the Internet is in English will not stop them from accessing it. They invent their own terminology for what's going on. For example, they call the pointer of the mouse sui, which is Hindi for needle. More interesting is the hourglass that appears when something is happening. Most Indians have never heard of an hourglass. I asked them, "What does that mean?" They said, "It's a damru," which is Hindi for Shiva's drum. [The God] Shiva holds an hourglass-shaped drum in his hand that you can shake from side to side. So they said the sui became a damru when the "thing" [the computer] was doing something.

Q. Of all the things the children did and learned, what did you find the most surprising?

A. One day there was a document file on the desktop of the computer. It was called "untitled.doc" and it said in big colorful letters, "I Love India." I couldn't believe it for the simple reason that there was no keyboard on the computer [only a touch screen]. I asked my main assistant -- a young boy, eight years old, the son of a local betel-nut seller -- and I asked him, "How on earth did you do this?" He showed me the character map inside [Microsoft] Word. So he had gotten into the character map inside Word, and dragged and dropped the letters onto the screen, then increased the point size and painted the letters. I was stunned because I didn't know that the character map existed -- and I have a PhD.

Q. So what you're talking about is a different sort of literacy, a

sort of functional literacy....

A. Yes, it's functional literacy. There are two examples I'd like to give you from the recent past. It's already happened in cable TV in India. There are 50 or 60 million cable-TV connections in India at this point in time. The guys who set up the meters, splice the coaxial cables, make the connection to the house, etc., are very similar to these kids. They don't know what they're doing. They only know that if you do these things, you'll get the cable channel. And they've managed to [install] 60 million cable connections so far. Example No. 2 is the bicycle. I think we have the biggest bicycle-manufacturing industry in the world. The bicycle is ubiquitous here, and it's much the same in Malaysia, China, Africa. But you don't ask how the population became bicycle-literate. They just use it. So what I'd like to see is an India in which a large part [of the population] treats the computer that way. The other thing is [how the Internet will change when most Indians gain access to it]. We have the analogy of cable TV in India. Originally, it was all in English. It took exactly four years for all the programming to become Hindi. Star TV is now almost all in Hindi. If you go to Bangkok, they hate it.

Q. You're saying that a lot of Hindi content will appear as more Indians surf the Net?

A. Exactly. Let me go on record as saying it's not a question of what the Internet will do to India. It's a question of what India will do to the Internet.... If rural India goes onto the Internet, there will be an absolute flood of Indian-language content from people trying to sell to them.

Q. Has the Indian or any other government expressed interest in funding such a project? A. Several government agencies, several state governments, and several world agencies have expressed an interest. Unfortunately, I don't want to name them because I need to get the funds first.

Q. You say that only the children used the computer, not adults. What does this mean for adult education?

A. I'm not even going to suggest that we use this [technique] for adults. The only reaction we got from adults was, "What on earth is this for? Why is there no one here to teach us something? How are we ever going to use this?" I contend that by the time we are 16, we are taught to want teachers, taught that we cannot learn anything without teachers. There are two points I'd like to make about the adults. One is that the adults asked the children to do things for them. For example, to read their horoscopes on the Hindi news sites. The second thing is the reaction of the women. I would ask them why they didn't use [the computer], and they would say, "I don't have enough brains to understand all this." I

would say, "What about your daughters?" And the answer was, "They have lots of brains." So I said, "Do you think I should just remove this thing?" The answer was always, "No, no, no." I asked why not. And they said, "Because it's very good for the children." Now, if the mothers have realized that, I'm happy. I don't care if they don't come [to use the computer]. Because all we have to do is wait one generation. Not even that. In five years, a 13-year-old is going to be 18 and be an adult.

Q. Where do you go from here?

A. There is one experiment that scares me. These children don't know what e-mail is. If I gave them e-mail, I don't know what would happen. I'll probably try it anyway. But remember the stories one used to hear about people finding lost tribes and introducing them to Coca-Cola? I'm really seriously scared about what would happen if suddenly the whole wide world had access to these kids. I don't know who would talk to them for what purpose.