

- FOCUSING ON THE LEARNER'S STORY -

Four Adolescents' experiences with  
institutionalized reading

"We're not being treated fairly as human beings should."

by

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### ABSTRACT

This is a phenomenological investigation of adolescents' attitudes and feelings toward reading experienced in school and personally selected literature. It involved six group meetings with the four students, three grade 7's and one grade 6. With the researcher acting as leader/facilitator the open, peer based talk surrounding the meetings centered on affective issues about school and reading. Also, during the six week research period, classroom observations were conducted, teacher interviews took place, and a parent questionnaire (subjects' parents) administered.

The study sought a greater understanding of the experience of institutionalized learning than provided by previous research into reading development and the acquisition of literacy skills. A text was created from the conversations which was subsequently transcribed and interpreted. The narrative style of this thesis was selected so as to afford a personal description of the learner's experience with schooled literacy.

One purpose of the study was to compare the students' experiences with reading in an institutionalized context with their preferred world of reading. It was hypothesized that learners participating in a more personalized, realistic setting, than provided by the school, would become more involved in the reading process. During some of this study's group meetings, an experiential approach to reading was implemented in order to focus on the uniqueness of the learner and to deemphasize the institutionalized nature of literacy development (ie. externally generated reading assignments).

The experiences of the four adolescents in this study may help to illustrate the complexities of institutionalized learning. The research points to a need for educators to reexamine the environment they create for learners. The peer talk generated in this study offers some direction in that regard as it formed the basis of much of the meaningful, relevant activities surrounding the meetings.

This research contends that a more humanistic, student-centered form of education is needed if today's educators hope to liberate some of the present instructional practices. That there is a need for change is captured by the comment of one adolescent in this study: "We're not being treated fairly as human beings should."


Each learner is unique, bringing to the learning situation a myriad of experiences and beliefs. Accepting and nurturing that uniqueness is the role of every educator.

The stories presented here may cause some reflective thinking and help restore the relevancy and personal nature of reading development.

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\* (ALL NAMES USED IN THIS STUDY ARE FICTITIOUS TO PROTECT THE  
PRIVACY OF THE INDIVIDUALS)

**DEDICATION**

I wish to dedicate this study to my wife, Frankie. Not only has she offered her support throughout the long hours of research, she also demonstrates the true nature of teaching. As a person and as a teacher she projects love, compassion and concern for each and every person she touches. If all educators were as gifted as Frankie, studies of this kind would be unnecessary.

## CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

### GROWTH OF THE QUESTION

The growth of my research question had its foundations in my experiences with teaching reading to maturing adolescents. The instructional techniques I used in my decade of teaching experienced varying degrees of success and failure. My own love of literature caused me to constantly search for the instructional key that would unlock the door on meaningful literacy development. The answer to this dilemma continued to remain a mystery through spells of periodic fulfilment and frequent frustration.

As I became involved in researching literacy development, it appeared evident that educational studies had revealed much about the learning process a child goes through and the activities teachers engage in. It seemed that for all the time and energy being expended on reading research, the researchers could only agree that children improved their reading when there was something they wanted to read and an adult who was willing to guide them.

A survey of the research on literacy acquisition and the learning process revealed the central role that language played in education. Researchers in this field (Barnes, 1969, 1976; Tough, 1977; Hurt et al., 1978; Meek, 1983; Jones, 1988) described the pivotal part talk plays in the process of learning. In learning to talk the child performs by being placed in contexts to which the natural response is language (Jones, 1988). The learner acquires language by using his talking talents to make sense of the world around him by "talking to learn" (Jones, 1988). This "talking to learn" theme became a motivating force for the study of what I was coming to refer to as institutionalized learning.

In researching the present day situation in most modern classrooms, it became obvious that the vehicle of talk was largely being controlled and directed by the classroom teacher

(Barnes, 1976; Goodlad, 1984). The voices of research glorified the value of talk in schools while providing overpowering evidence that control of language seldom rested in the hands of those who most needed it - the learners. The solution to some of the unsuccessful instructional practices seems to lie in a more cooperative learning environment.

Studies into cooperative learning (Barnes & Todd, 1977; Watts, 1980; Johnson et al., 1984) point to the fact that learners need avenues of open discussion with their peers in a student controlled environment to progress intellectually and emotionally. Obviously, if the goal is expanding self awareness, then the child needs to become an active participant in the learning process. Cooperative learning, when carried out in an appropriate framework, provides the peer talk and learner interaction needed in the pursuit of new knowledge.

In forming my preliminary question, I drew heavily from the research quoted here. I became satisfied with the premise that "talking to learn" was of primary importance in our pursuit of any type of learning. Therefore, my developing study became based on the query: "What is the value of peer based discussion in reading instruction?" Inside this broad orientation I sought to better understand the experience of reading and find some enlightenment on the subject of reader motivation. In other words, I wished to find out what made readers read and which situations were most conducive to that activity.

In setting up the study I chose four adolescents from a multi-grade public school situation and prepared a six meeting program focusing on talking about reading and the sharing of personally chosen literature. As leader/facilitator my intention was to facilitate talk, not to control it. The students would be given the opportunity to respond freely to the literature discussions from their own point of view. It was my contention that this open peer based discourse would

further illustrate the value and need for learners to talk about reading from their own experiences and to listen to others sharing their experiences. I felt that the sequestered environment in which the meetings would take place would provide a rich, unencumbered dialogue not always possible in a structured classroom situation.

During our first two meetings together, I asked the students for their feelings and perceptions of school and reading (both schooled and personal). Here I was attempting to lay the groundwork for further literature talk and establish a feeling of trust and collegiality. In a sense, the focus of the study changed following these initial encounters.

I found myself overwhelmed by the depth of response and vibrant emotion flowing out of their views on the institution of schooling and the teaching of reading. Their voices spoke of things more immediate than the discovery of "appropriate techniques" for educational instruction. The students' voices spoke of feelings of helplessness, irrelevance, oppression and inequality. My preliminary question concerning the value of peer based talk in reading instruction thus evolved into the central query of this thesis: "What is the experience of institutionalized reading for the maturing adolescent?".

At this point, the research evolved from a case study, accompanied by the subsequent qualitative analysis of conversational excerpts, to a more phenomenological approach to the developing data. As Wagner (1983) suggests, phenomenology is a way of viewing ourselves, others and all else we come in contact with. It can be a way of viewing reality and orienting ourselves to the human experience. Wagner also feels that one only really comes to understand phenomenology by doing it. By being part of the research I was sharing in the experience being created by the adolescents' dialogue.

The six meetings together, coupled with classroom visits and parent/teacher interviews, provided the text of The Learner's Story. In deciding on the most illustrative method of re-telling the experience of institutionalized reading I looked at the value of the narrative for capturing its true essence. The many interesting and complex stories being offered by the subjects demanded a mode of analysis which would facilitate recapturing the meaning embodied within the dialogue.

By conceiving of the talk as a living conversation, I attempted to avoid the pitfall of turning the oral discourse into merely written discourse de-emphasizing the real life context it evolved within. In a sense, a transcription is frozen in time and abstracted from the actual interaction (Kvale, 1988). By using a more personal and narrative style, I hoped to capture an expression of how the adolescents experienced their world of reading and to formulate a structure for that experience.

Analysis of conversation necessarily means separating something into parts. To accomplish this, without losing sight of the lived experience of the learner, I extracted common themes from the students' conversations. As van Manen (1984b) says: "Phenomenological themes are the structures of experience" (p.59). In formulating these "structures" I tried to remember that these emerging themes were merely my attempt to describe the experience of institutionalized reading, not capture it as some abstract concept. By using the themes like lived connections of the whole I hoped to present a narrative which would best re-live my time with the students and make the reader an integral part of our journey together.

In writing this thesis I have been involved in two distinct processes. Over the six week research period I lived with the students through their stories about school, reading and preferred literature. Their peer based talk provided the text of this story. Their conversation is one part of this

study, my subsequent analysis of it is another.

By re-entering the dialogue of the students I experienced the other dimension of the research. Here it was necessary for me to "make sense" of their conversations by describing their experiences through my eyes. By gathering together commonalities of response I attempted to lift appropriate themes for describing the phenomenon under study. Through each re-reading of the transcripts I relived the experience we had shared and reformulated my sense of the experience.

In writing about the adolescents' experiences I have, in the process, written about myself. Throughout our time together, both as a group, and later on reflectively, I have attempted to come to a better understanding of my own experiences with teaching reading. I have tried to understand what it means to be a reader and those situations or circumstances which best stimulate literacy growth.

The story told here is a descriptive account of four adolescents' conversations concerning school and reading. The difficulty with attempting to present their talk in written form is that this narrative may reflect the experience but it is not the experience itself. In telling a story about a social interaction some of the essence of that encounter is necessarily lost. The interpretation of this experience, as in the analysis of any written text, is, therefore, in the hands of the reader.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The greatest significance of this study is in the personal growth it has afforded the researcher. As I sought to understand the experience of schooled reading, I came to reflect and re-evaluate my own perceptions of educational instruction.

One of the prime purposes of this study was to come to a deeper understanding of the needs of a reader/learner. In formulating a story about four "typical" adolescent readers it was my hope that their words would bring a deeper understanding to the experience of reading. As Holdaway (1979) states:

Learning to read and to write ought to be one of the most joyful and successful of human undertakings. Notoriously, it is not so. By contrast, most developmental tasks such as learning to walk or to talk are learned almost universally with deep personal satisfaction. What explanation can we give for the continuing difficulties experienced by so many children in learning the tasks of literacy?" (p.11).

I, too, sought a greater understanding of Holdaway's question.

If the personal experience of these four unique individuals is portrayed authentically then the reflective text offered here has served its purpose. As was evidenced in this study, learning occurs when a person chooses to pose questions and gain an understanding that will empower him/her to fully experience the moment. If more questions arise out of the reading of this work then a final purpose will have been served. True learning involves the exploration of one thing shedding light on another. We can look at what we now have and move beyond to what could or should be.

## CHAPTER 11

# LITERATURE REVIEW

### FRAMING THE QUESTION

In the development of this thesis I have pursued a question: What is the experience of institutionalized reading for the adolescent? In a sense, the following review traces the evolutionary path of my thinking in an effort to better understand the foundations of my query. As Gadamer (1975) suggests: "In order to be able to ask, one must want to know, which involves knowing that one does not know" (p.326).

I had three questions which served to create a growing awareness of my original question. These queries sprung from a desire to better understand what was needed in school to provide a productive, meaningful environment for the development of literacy for adolescents.

First of all, why do we teach the way we teach? An historical review of literacy development showed that classrooms are small sociocultural systems. Education is not only interested with the transmission of content but also with the conditioning of young minds. Research in this area pointed out that education is concerned with teaching children how to learn not necessarily with what is to be learned (Feinberg & Soltis, 1985; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Graff, 1987). The revealing insights I encountered here provided me with a growing understanding of the dilemma teachers and students face each day in the institution of school.

Secondly, what are the situations or conditions under which learning best occurs? In researching this question, I found work directed toward a common theme. A strong contingent of educational theorists felt the basis of all educational processes was communication. In order to learn the language, one must use language. In borrowing Jones' (1988) phrase "talking to learn", I attempted to understand

the philosophies of thinkers such as Freire (1970): "Without communication there can be no true education" (p.81). I borrowed this theme in formulating my research schedule in an effort to involve my subjects in a different mode of literacy acquisition. Here I hoped to compare their school experience with a more open, peer based talk environment.

It also became apparent that in order to communicate genuinely, a learner must be allowed to experience the object at hand. Experiential learning seemed to provide a vital component in literacy acquisition. My question, concerning the experience of schooled reading for the learner, was becoming clearer.

Finally, I sought to understand the inner motivation surrounding learning and more precisely, the act of reading. What makes a reader want to read? If every pedagogic situation was unique then what were the ideal conditions in which the essence of learning could be nurtured. Here, I looked at the affective domain of the learner in an attempt to observe the importance of attitudes, beliefs and values.

Most of us have spent a great deal of our lives in school classrooms. We carry with us memories of many things, some pleasant, some distasteful. Regardless of our experience we have all been strongly affected by what transpired during the time spent in school. Educational innovators are seeking formulas and methods to help alleviate some of the oppressing boredom and purposelessness of much present day practice. In seeking improvement we must not lose sight of the sociocultural underpinnings upon which our system is based. We must not lose sight of what all education should be striving toward - the creation of thinking individuals. As Johnson (1985) said: "The meaning of education is not in information exchange, or sociocultural conditioning but in understanding, through experience, something of life itself" (p.262).

The Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, encouraged individuals to combine the learned understanding of their world with a strong personal vision (Wing, 1986). By seeking a better grasp of the questions outlined here, I attempted to direct my growing vision onto the developing study.

## **THE POLITICS OF LITERACY - THE CREATION OF LITERATE INDIVIDUALS**

### Where Are We Now? The Questions That Need To Be Asked.

"American schools are in trouble" (Goodlad, 1984, p.1). The first line from Goodlad's monumental study seems to lay bare the current perceptions of our school system. While much criticism is levelled at the school experience, education continues to play an increasingly important role in the cognitive development of the maturing child. The ongoing dilemma facing today's educators is how best to facilitate the intellectual growth of their students and prepare them for whatever lies ahead.

Reading is the most heavily researched part of the school curriculum, and yet, it still remains one of the biggest mysteries. The research has resulted in a wide variety of instructional techniques and materials. How do children learn to read? What relationship to reading does writing play? How does reading effect the values and attitudes of the developing child? What is the experience of reading? Central to the issues confronted in today's education are what makes a person literate and how did we arrive at our current definition of literacy?

The nature and values of each culture has had a marked effect on each society's biases for cultivating and educating its young. As Jean Anyon (1988) asserts, the school system, as we know it, has become an institution of legitimization where the ideologies of the culture are perpetrated and preserved to serve the perceived "good". In historical terms, how has this process of controlled cognitive development

affected the make-up of today's educational paradigm?

The technical world in which we presently live is exposed in the ends-means, empirical-analytical model of our school programs. Werner's (1978) evaluative analogy to a McDonald's hamburger stand is all too revealing. As one looks at his list of key words it is possible to get a sense of today's evaluation dilemma: "Control, certainty, efficiency, precision, cost-effectiveness, predictability, standardization and speed" (Werner, 1978, p.7). How has the pursuit of universal literacy led to such a confining, oppressive view of intellectual progress? "We can talk about culture in two ways: as a lived process,...or a commodity" (Apple, 1988, p.223). In his essay Michael Apple discusses the culture and commerce of the textbook industry. As Apple suggests, the printing of books has had a strong effect on the social structures of literacy. He discusses the school's role as cultural transmitter and attempts to better understand whose knowledge is being taught and produced in our schools. Behind the book, being held by a small child in reading class, stands a plethora of bureaucratic and organizational systems. The same set of words Werner used to describe present day evaluation techniques may also bear some relevance to the school textbook. How does the textbook dilemma effect the instruction of reading and our production of literate citizens?

The scope of literacy is an extremely broad one. In the context of this chapter, or one ten times its length, it would be impossible to discuss all the problems inherent in our current view of education. Steps are being taken today in classrooms the world over to attempt to break the bonds of "schooled literacy". The future of our educational system rests on our understanding of the politics of literacy which can help us broach some of the problems and shed some light onto the problems of reading acquisition.

### A Brief Historical Overview

Our definition of literacy has changed considerably over the past 300 years. Until recently, reading and writing skills were the exclusive possession of a small elite usually housed in religious, secular environments (Cook-Gumperz, 1986). As increased urbanization created a growing dependency on written records (eg. taxation, commerce, law) our definition of a literate individual altered and grew.

For pre-industrial England the only measure of a literate individual was the ability to sign one's name (Schofield, 1981). With the advent of documents and forms this was seen as an important skill. Schofield goes on to say that in the late 18th and 19th centuries a decision was made to invest in the acquisition of literacy skills. An increasing need was perceived (by the ruling class) for members of society to acquire the skills of both reading and writing. These literacy skills were deemed desirable for three reasons: "because it was essential for participation in the life of a particular social group, because it was essential for acquiring skills, or new skills, relevant to a particular occupation, or because it would lead to upward social and economic mobility" (p.212). So, to participate in one's world it became necessary to seek literacy in the social context of established schooling practice. The term literacy and schooling began to overlap.

In 18th and 19th century Europe a shift from an agriculturally based economy to an industrialized one caused the locale of literacy to gradually change from a home based view to a formal school based definition. In the 19th century, social demand for formal instruction began to be heard. For most people of the time, literacy had not been the inevitable outcome of schooling nor was non-literacy a natural consequence of the absence of schooling. Under the advance of an industrialized society literacy soon became a response to an economic necessity or an opportunity for social mobility. Literacy, now referred to as schooling, became a consumption

good, something that could be visibly taught and evaluated. As Cressy (1983) pointed out: "If this is true and if literacy can be regarded as a consumer good, then the historical study of literacy must be a study of the interrelationship of reading and writing with culture; it must be essentially a study in cultural ecology" (p.45).

Schooling, therefore, became a means for the ruling establishment to use control and influence over the masses. The school became an arena for religious doctrine, for the present-day work ethic, for the legitimization of class structures and for the ever-deepening stratification of society. As Cook-Gumperz (1986) asserted, the main goal of mass schooling became the selective transmission of knowledge which sought to control literacy, not to cultivate it. The society needed to re-educate the people and socially train once ruralized workers into now industrialized ones. As school became synonymous with literacy, institutions began to exert increased control over literacy development. We have progressed from a pluralistic idea about literacy, which involves the acquisition of different literacy skills for personally relevant purposes (such as signing one's name or reading pertinent documents), to our modern concept of a single, standardized schooled literacy (Cook-Gumperz, 1986). From a personal necessity to become literate, a shift is evident toward society's determination of what was needed for the masses to be literate.

As the quest for social stability became increasingly important, schooling was seen as the most useful transmission tool. Graff (1987) claims that mass education was seen as the only sensible, safe method for dispensing morality and literacy, two concepts which gradually intertwined to form one. Education was viewed as able to produce the discipline and social legitimation the industrial society needed to create the values and habits required by the new social order. The result was the distribution of print and materials that were carefully structured for the purpose of "schooled

literacy" and its socially approved uses.

Reading and writing were seldom seen as ends in themselves. In a majority of cases undirected literacy was viewed as both dangerous and subversive (Freire, 1970). The increasing control exerted by the hegemonic social structure directed literacy into a mode of standardized methods, materials and moral content. To have a literate population without social constraints was perceived by the ruling class as a threat to the very fabric of society. Therefore, the teaching of reading and writing became a complex array of political pressures coupled with an increasingly bewildering collocation of instructional techniques.

In this study the students would often express concern over the lack of relevance in school. To them there was a perceived school reality which was constantly in opposition to their own lived reality. This contradiction created a sense of confusion and frustration for the students.

#### Evaluation: The Heartbeat of Schooled Literacy

Maxine Greene (1975) comments on the Western tendency of depersonalizing literary works and viewing them as objects and artifacts. She feels that through our educational history we have tended to see literature as stagnant and unidimensional.

In many Language Arts lessons, such as the ones observed in this study, externally created questions and activities assume a set of predetermined conclusions. Numerous textbook queries and many teacher directed activities seek to focus the learner's attention on specific content or ideas.

In the case of reading instruction there is a sense of a single "correct" interpretation of an author's work which is to be passed on to future generations as factual knowledge. Does this perception of literature affect the way we evaluate our reading programs? Exaggerated a little it might sound

something like this:

"Okay, kids," began the teacher, "here is the reading for today. I have some hidden conclusions I'd like you to come to. Those that "guess" them correctly will pass, those that don't will fail. Alright, have fun reading!"

Even the ones lucky enough to "pass" will "fail" to enjoy the reading and lose the experience of a true reader-author dialogue. We come back to the growing problem-solving, easy-fix-it mentality of our culture. Why should a reading passage have but one interpretation? Hermeneutically speaking, it is most unlikely that it will. As Greene (1975) goes on to say:

The reader who encounters the work must create it in terms of his consciousness. In order to penetrate it, to experience it existentially and empathetically, he must try to place himself within the interior space. (p.304)

How have we arrived at our present depersonalized view of reading and literacy? As literacy transformed from a moral virtue into a cognitive skill, schooling provided the vehicle for delivering to society an educated workforce. Through evaluation the community could select appropriate individuals by referring to their ability levels and thus schools, in effect, became institutions committed to testing, selecting and distributing knowledge (Cook-Gumperz, 1986). The natural consequence of an increased emphasis on testing was an individualized, competitive instructional paradigm.

In a society where the definition of a literate individual is changing so rapidly there is a perceived need for re-evaluating how and why children learn how to read. We seek methods and forms. We desire accountability, a way of assessing progress. What past educational evaluative techniques have accomplished is to turn reading and literacy into a technical skill to be acquired solely through society's institutions and current doctrines. How then can the

historical perspective of evaluation be important to the present view of reading acquisition?

First of all, it can be surmised that the present day make up of schooling instruction is firmly based in the political turmoil that has preceded it. In some ways the priorities of evaluative techniques have been responses to the current political and economic climate of the society which demanded a certain amount of control over the literacy skills being taught in their schools. As exemplified in World War I, ability testing received a major impetus as a result of military recruitment. The psychometric test model that grew out of these early experiences with tests was "based on the assumption that if skills were precisely defined they could be satisfactorily measured" (Cook-Gumperz, 1986, p.37).

In Goodlad's (1984) extensive study of American schools, he found the dominant emphasis in the Language Arts curriculum to be the teaching of basic language skills and the mastering of mechanics. He saw no progression in the level of activities but simply an increased amount of the same type of low order skills such as capitalization, punctuation, paragraphs, etc. Goodlad confirmed the heavy use of commercially prepared materials with accompanying evaluative worksheets. Thanks in part to the over emphasis on program evaluation, Goodlad's impression of most Language Arts classrooms was one of substantial repetition and overpowering boredom.

As can be seen, the role of evaluation in schooling has served to almost totally divorce the pursuit of literacy from anything personal in the lives of society's citizens. Reading instruction has been relegated to a cookbook approach to learning where students are seen as empty bowls just waiting for the right ingredients.

The students in this study talked openly about reading assignments and grading practices. They referred to reading

questions as useless and boring. They failed to see any connection between the assignments and their enjoyment of the novel being studied.

The evaluative question has produced another problem of equal importance - the role of the textbook in our schools. What effect do textbooks have on "schooled literacy"?

### The Textbook Dilemma

In brief, it can be surmised that just as learners can be controlled, selected, evaluated and produced so can the materials that are needed to serve that end. As Apple (1988) stated: "What do the social and economic relations within the publishing industry have to do with schools, with the politics of knowledge distribution in education?" (p.225). What Apple wants educators

to realize is that curriculum is not defined, in most schools, by program outlines or suggested topics, but by the standardized text for the grade level. Goodlad (1984) wrote that the majority of classroom instruction found in American schools was centred around commercially produced program materials.

For reading instruction, this translates to the fact that the materials available for study or even general access will be those deemed by the publishers as being worthy (economically) of publishing in the first place. Keeping in mind that the majority of large name publishers have grown out of the ranks of salesmen and businessmen, one wonders as to the value of some of the materials available to educators.

Between the politics of evaluation and the economic realities of the textbook industry, the search for meaningful reading instruction seems almost guarded by an impenetrable wall. We are a product of our history and an integral part of our technical society. What implications for reading do the historical perspectives of literacy hold for present day

education? What strategies are now being instituted to help break the social stranglehold presently in existence in most North American classrooms? The next section will outline some fields of research in this area.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF TALK IN SCHOOL**

### Breaking the Bonds That Hold Us

The concept of the "hidden curriculum" exhibits how schooling serves to socialize learners into the current ethics and standards of today's industrialized society. As Feinberg and Soltis (1985) suggest, the system which advances the principle of freedom for all is in essence the foundation on which social stratification is built. Literacy today needs to have a significance beyond that of simply being able to function in society or an ever diminishing workplace. There needs to be some awareness of the personal value of reading and writing that transcends a functional literacy view.

A new direction in learning is being pointed to by scholars such as Feinberg and Soltis (1985). They see the traditional functionalist's view of education along with the Marxist view (schooling as a major instrument for maintaining control by one group over another) being supplanted by a more student-centred, interpretivist's perception. "For the interpretivist the object of study is to find out just what is going on in a specific social situation and to discover the meaning that it has for those who participate in it" (Feinberg and Soltis, p.89). The implication for reading is for a greater awareness of the reader as a dynamic learner, not as a conditioned, controlled entity. Learning is random, experiential and subject to highs and lows.

As Austrom (1988) points out in a recent paper, the new challenge for teachers is to allow students to explore their surroundings so as to better equip them to cope with modern society's rapid changes. Austrom feels that learners must go beyond mere functional literacy to explore the meaning and

order of all things which have moral and ethical validity to their realities of life. Austrom's words suggest an educational system that stresses both critical thinking skills and experiential learning:

Do we participate in a conscious or subconscious process of cultural transmission which aims at producing a particular type of citizen? If so, we may be violating our students' personal need for freedom of thought and we may be propagating a pattern of enculturation which is no longer functional in our changing world. (p.18)

"Schooled literacy" has been caught within an instrumentalist understanding of the world which now is beginning to be questioned. A critical turn to a fresh understanding of literacy and the act of teaching is leading toward a more personal sense of reading and writing. We are witnessing a change in direction.

#### Talking to Learn: A Communication Based Approach

"There can be no curriculum change without teacher change." (Stenhouse, cited in Jones, 1988, p.129).

To attempt to describe all current work being done in schools aimed at trying to break the political stranglehold on learning would be onerous to say the least. It is becoming increasingly obvious that educators are seeing the need for both the development of personal values and opportunities for individual expression among learners in our school systems. History has created an educational framework of legitimation, competitiveness, outmoded evaluation models and repetition which has resulted in boredom, frustration and a growing population of alliterates as well as illiterates. What is being done to alter this system and change the definition of literacy to a more personally relevant one?

The basis of all educational processes is communication.

Teaching and communication are inseparable. Tough (1976) points out that language is only one mode of communication but reminds us that too often we misinterpret a child's non-verbal communication and think we are communicating, when in fact we're not. It is an accepted fact that schools are places where people talk to one another but the question is, "Who is doing the talking?". If it is the teacher who is doing most of the talking and interpreting then the one who is required to learn is being deprived of the one tool he needs the most - language.

Without language we would find it difficult to share and express ideas and thoughts which are critical ingredients in learning development. Vygotsky (1962) described the need of the child to use words in order to make connections between his lived world and his development of new concepts. He viewed the child's ability to control his own thinking as a key step toward self-awareness and cognitive growth. It can be said that if the child possesses the need to learn then he also possesses the need to talk and communicate.

To facilitate such learning philosophies the educator needs to draw on the classroom resource most often overlooked - the student. Beyond this, educators need to understand how children develop communicative competence and need to see the classroom as a place where effective communication can be learned and developed. To enable these skills to develop children must be able to talk not only with the teacher but, just as importantly, with one another (Tough, 1976). To see classroom communication as strictly a one-way transmission of teacher-giving-knowledge is to minimize the important role of the student's own knowledge and lived experience.

Barnes (1976) views the act of teaching as falling between a transmission view and an interpretation one. A classroom that utilizes the transmission model sees the purpose of learning as primarily one of acquisition and recording of teacher fed information. This means-ends

paradigm of instruction, heavily entrenched in such archaic views of education as the Tyler Rationale (1949), is entirely based on teacher expectations and criteria. Communication is therefore relegated to a "teacher talk student listen" format and again ignores the true sense of learning. "The transmission teacher sees it as his task to transmit knowledge and to test whether the pupils have received it" (Barnes, 1976, p.142).

An interpretation teacher, on the other hand, would see the purpose of teaching as providing meaningful situations to help with the student's own personal development. Students would be encouraged to play an active part in development of knowledge and through language explore the world around them:

This will open to them a collaborative approach in which the exploratory functions of speech and writing predominate. This will encourage pupils to relate new knowledge to their existing purposes and interests. (Barnes, 1976, p.147)

It has been proposed here that some reassessment of the role of communication in our schools is necessary. The suggestion that an over-emphasis on teacher talk will only impede the learner's growth has also been forwarded. The overall purpose of the next section will be to arrive at some understanding of the value of group talk or peer learning situations by reviewing some recent studies on the subject. The conclusions of this section will focus on Watts' (1980) comments concerning an open school system:

Learning need in no way be at anyone else's expense. Indeed, a valuable aspect of learning is learning to help others. The fast readers may help the slow readers instead of making them feel inferior. In solving problems in class, just as we often do out of school, the best strategy is usually devised by a group. There is obviously need for study and learning in isolation as well, but

the teacher in an open school will devise situations that best be resolved by students in collaboration with each other. (p.76)

### **COLLABORATION AND PEER LEARNING**

Group learning is a beneficial mode of instruction when carried out in an appropriate framework. Once a relevant task has been set out for or by the learners, it then becomes their job to work constructively, using their language and their experiences to formulate a plan for accomplishing it.

Communication through language is a critical component for cognitive development in the classroom. If a child is to attain his educational objectives he must first explore, ponder and openly discuss tentative conclusions or ideas. The concept of effective speakers was studied by Wilkinson and Calculator (1982) in an attempt to understand student's use of language in gathering information within a peer group activity. The dynamics of group interaction were analyzed along with the observed growth and maturity of group members' questioning techniques.

The study illustrated the value of effective requests and observed the strategies children use in peer groups to obtain a clear response to their questioning. Basically, the learner was seen to go through stages of initial ineffectiveness, followed by a continuing persistence which later became the key ingredient for effective communication. The research points to the need of the learner to be actively involved in the learning process and thus better able to gather information from the world around him. Without this emphasis on "talking to learn" the student would remain stagnant in his intellectual growth continuing to simply parrot back teacher fed information. As the researchers stated:

We see this work as a contribution to our understanding of the social and language skills that are necessary, even central,

to the interactional process of teaching and learning. (Wilkinson & Calculator, 1982, p.99)

Educators tend to focus the majority of their attention on the written word. Because talk surrounds us and is part of our everyday life we tend to take it for granted. As Einstein so aptly said: "What does a fish know about the water in which he swims all his life?" (cited in MacDonald, 1988a, p.102). If conversation with our peers plays such a consuming role in our own lives then we need to make it a vital, essential part of the classroom environment.

Watson and Young (1986) saw teaching as:

Essentially a process of transactional interaction during which, mainly through exploratory talk and writing, students clarify their ideas and forge links between new knowledge and their previous understanding. (p.126)

Their study of teachers' questioning revealed an all too typical situation where lengthy teacher statements sought to elicit single word responses from the students. Rarely did teacher talk invite the child to elaborate on answers or explore other interpretations. Watson and Young recorded the teacher's need to re-tell or interpret student responses to fit into their own perception of the topic. They used Barnes' (1976) labels of Transmission Teacher vs. Interpretation Teacher and studied the overall effectiveness of transactional discourse as a way of encouraging and extending new ideas and concepts. Watson and Young (1986) understood the need for a much wider recognition of the premise that students need opportunities to learn in small groups. They found that the responses gathered during group situations, as opposed to teacher directed ones, exhibited a greater degree of interest among the students and made for a more insightful questioning process.

Dyson (1987) found that "given tasks worth talking about

and the right to talk, children's interactions can contribute substantially to intellectual development in general and literacy growth in particular" (pp.396-397). When given carefully structured cooperative work the children Dyson studied assumed conversational roles which were not available to them with "teacher talk". She proposed that such group interaction allowed the learner to show his own view of the world and to bring to bear personal experiences. Dyson saw the teacher's role as one of making "the children accountable for their work and helping to instill pride in themselves as artists and as authors" (p.416). Dyson concluded that peer interaction was more spontaneous and intellectually stimulating than interaction between teacher and child.

A great deal of research has established the value of peer interaction and collaborative learning (Barnes & Todd, 1977; Dickinson, 1986; Johnson et al., 1984; Webb, 1982). Other research, however, has exhibited the negative aspects of group work as evidenced by Robert Hull (1985) in his book, The Language Gap: How Classroom Dialogue Fails. The critical component in all the studies is the teacher. The success or failure of peer learning can be directly related to the ability of the classroom teacher to create and monitor successful communicative situations.

The talk surrounding my meetings with the students underlined the importance of open communication in learning. As the meetings progressed and the group became accustomed to this "new" form of learning, their comments became increasingly insightful and purposeful. This risk-filled environment proved considerably easier for me to handle than it would have been for a classroom teacher with larger numbers of students. However, it did point toward some of the more meaningful methods of teaching available to the educator.

#### A Coming Together of Teacher and Learner

In the present context of schooling the most influential,

dominant figure seems to be the teacher and his/her ability (or lack of) to "create" learned individuals. Current research points toward a releasing of control and a moving away from social legitimation into a more open, student-centred approach to literacy development. As Rogers (1983) stated: "Teaching, in my estimation, is a vastly over-rated function" (p.119). Rogers sees a need for administrators and educators to shun their images as subject expert and imparter of knowledge and to adopt a view of learning expert and educational guide. In helping the students learn how to learn educators would be responsible for facilitating knowledge, focusing on process rather than upon fixed information.

One fact that is basic about teaching is that it is a chaotic activity. There is a multitude of events and stimuli to which teachers must attend, not just individually, but simultaneously. The aims and ideologies for the tasks to be covered are often in conflict with the realities of a classroom life. A teacher is faced with time constraints, curricular demands, administrative pressures and the all important instructional goal. As Jones (1988) so aptly states: "Most classrooms are not ideal breeding grounds for pupil talk" (p.70).

The crucial factor in class discussion pertains to the fact that "talk is a very up-front, public activity" (Jones, 1988, p.80). Open communication reveals immediate feedback on the value of the lesson and the depth of understanding. While risk taking can be seen as the basis for learning, it also generates a threat to the control a teacher brings to the situation. Quiet, isolated activities such as reading or writing often mask a great many learning problems or allow the teacher to handle them in an orderly manner. Problems in class discussions or behaviour lapses in small group work can serve to remind the teacher of his inability to cope or direct.

Developing productive communication in a classroom

situation is difficult yet far from impossible. Kerry (1981) studied the common situation where a group is gathered around a table with a specific purpose of talking about a prearranged topic. He saw that such a group usually possessed a leader or chairman whose job it was to direct the discussion. The underlying message throughout Kerry's research pointed to the need of the classroom teacher to instruct and develop good group practices among the students. He saw the teacher's role as one of "quiet control" coupled with non-biased instruction and an understanding of the value of classroom discussion, particularly within the peer groupings. Kerry argues that: "The basic teaching strategy should be one of discussion rather than instruction" (p.66).

Edwards and Mercer (1987) discuss the implicit and explicit functions of educational discourse. They see the conflict created in classroom talk as being the dichotomy between the student's understanding of the learning process and the teacher's perception that learning is based on individual, not group abilities. Edwards and Mercer feel that if one of the purposes of student discussion is to aid their understanding about topics then "for this to occur at all, a child and a teacher must mutually establish a universe of discourse" (p.49). To put it simply, the teacher and student must come together in a world of mutual understanding. To facilitate this the teacher needs to be aware of something of the personal make-up of each child. The educator should spend time discussing experiences, mutual goals, concerns and perceptions of life with the children in an effort to reach a common ground of understanding. Only then can meaningful discourse transpire in the unnatural setting of the classroom.

In Tizard and Hughes' (1984) study of four year old girls at home and at school it was obvious that the home provided a very valuable learning environment for the child. Tizard and Hughes found that conversation between child and parent or child and sibling was an essential variable for intellectual growth. The more natural, intimate environment of the home

afforded more opportunity for the child to share and discuss matters of concern.

The part of Tizard and Hughes' study which has revealing implications to the act of teaching centres around the extensive base of common experiences the family possesses. In adopting the classroom strategy of "talking to learn" teachers are immediately faced with a puzzling dilemma. How are they to know when an activity is becoming too "open", therefore losing its value, and how can they evaluate when a given activity is too "closed" or too heavily teacher influenced? The success or failure of pupil talk will largely depend on the teacher's ability to properly analyze these questions. Tizard and Hughes offer a suggestion to educators. Get to know your students as well as possible. Discuss with them what is important in their lives and share your own experiences so that class can form its own base of common understandings. Tizard and Hughes suggest that these strategies may involve going beyond the school walls and sharing educational experiences as a group. These "shared experiences" will enable the educator to create a common background for future learning situations and help provide the teacher with the necessary insight required to conduct valuable, peer learning situations within the confines of the classroom.

If teachers knew more about the interests and skills that children display at home, they might be better able to see where the school could complement the strengths of the home. (Tizard & Hughes, 1984, p.257)

The recognition of student-as-a-learning-partner provides a myriad of valuable educational situations. Group situations can generate purposeful, supportive inquiry and thinking that is not overly controlled by external forces. The blending of past experiences and the formulation of "open-ended" problems establishes a non-competitive, non-evaluative (technically speaking) framework which may serve to re-introduce interest

and risk taking in learning. Students operating at a high level of thought and feeling, exploring and analyzing new ideas and concepts avoid tedious, controlled, time consuming "busy work".

#### **EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING - FOSTERING REALITY IN LEARNING**

Talking to learn and sharing a common ground of understanding will be brought together, in this study, around the theme of learning from one's own experiences. Our ability to learn from our experiences is important in every facet of our daily lives. Through them we re-evaluate, develop new perceptions and expand our horizons.

In an experiential learning situation the learners are directly involved in the process. The learners bring their own thoughts and attitudes to bear on externally given information. Just as with peer talk, open class dialogue, and a sharing of one's experiences, an experiential approach focuses on the person. The distancing between the learner and the knowledge, as discussed by Barnes (1976), Jones (1988) and Tizard and Hughes (1984) is lessened by an emphasis on a personal assimilation of knowledge.

According to Cell (1984) experiential learning strengthens both freedom and creativity. He adds:

To be a person is to have the power to make a difference, a difference that we find significant, in each of our life situations. (p.5)

By placing the learning focus on the person rather than on the subject matter the educator is better able to provide a personalized, realistic learning situation.

The main significance of experiential learning is not simply its use of experience as a method for learning but that it alters the focus of education from teaching to learning (Weil & McGill, 1989). Experiential learning theory does not

involve simply another learning technique but seeks to put cognitive development into a new arena of language. As Weil and McGill (1989) point out, student pedagogy cannot revolve only around student experience. The teaching role needs to shift toward a facilitator model where personal experiences are used to connect the learner's world of reality with that of the content at hand. Content and process must be seen to be of equal importance.

Our aim is to enable students to interrogate the world of appearance, and to expose the underlying relationships of inequality as part of the struggles for social change... The Tutor must play an active role in constructing and presenting well-integrated and coherent frameworks within which to locate and understand individual as well as group experience. (Weil & McGill, 1989, p.75)

As Weil and McGill go on to say, in this learning process "there is no pressure for the students to bare their souls, yet they are able to examine the personal within the social and political and vice versa" (p.76). Through a sharing of common experiences, often conducted in peer talk format, students come to realize others' views of certain topics and can then relate them to their own perceptions.

Our knowledge of the world is constantly being added to and tested by our continuing experiences. As we move through our daily life we view our world and respond to it via a preconceived set of assumptions. For the learners certain actions make sense and fit into their way of knowing. Yet often in life the learner is confronted by unforeseen happenings and bewildering responses. As Kolb (1984) says: "It is in this interplay between expectation and experience that learning occurs." (p.28). For the learner to focus only on certainty and acquired knowledge is to remain stagnant in thought and limited in cognitive growth. Of course, by the same token, if the learner is being constantly bombarded by new experiences he will be left in a state of confusion and

inactivity. A blend of self-confidence and scepticism is needed to ensure a natural, safe progression of cognitive development. As Kolb goes on to say, if all learning is simply a process of relearning then it is important for educators to design a learning situation which does not treat the student as a blank piece of paper waiting to be filled in. The integration of old beliefs with new ideas can serve to create highly substantial parts of a learner's view of the world. Information feeding courses will not often connect with the internal world of the learner and therefore will be easily lost or forgotten.

Freire (1970) speaks of learning in the context of problem solving. In his revealing work on the dehumanization of education Freire criticizes common "transmit-receive" learning as oppressive and removed from the real purpose of knowledge, that is, the liberation of thought. Freire feels that problem solving education offers learners a way to reflect (critically) on the way they live in the world. Therefore, both teacher and student reflect both on themselves and the subject being discussed in a process of authentic thought and action. Freire describes the action part of learning as a type of movement - a move from the known into the soon to be known:

The point of departure of the movement lies in men themselves. But since men do not exist apart from the world, apart from reality, the movement must begin with the men-world relationship. Accordingly, the point of departure must always be with men in the "here and now", which constitutes the situation within which they are submerged, from which they emerge, in which they intervene. Only by starting from this situation - which determines their perception of it - can they begin to move. To do this authentically they must perceive their state not as fated and unalterable, but merely as limiting - and therefore challenging. (pp.72-73)

In my time with the students I came to realize that curriculum in school is relevant to the child when it deals with his real concerns, combining personal feelings with thinking and acting. In this type of setting the school experience then becomes a natural part of the child's life. By making learning relevant and experientially based it serves to humanize the curriculum. Real world experiences can combine with affective experiences, therefore, to form a kind of flowing together of both feeling and thinking elements of learning.

## **THE AFFECTIVE ISSUES SURROUNDING THE TEACHING OF READING**

### The Importance of the Learner's Attitude

Perhaps the greatest oversight in establishing a meaningful learning environment for students is when educators fail to consider the affective domain of the learner. A teacher's gauge of the success of a learning situation is often predicated on the student's performance on tests or other assigned work. The fact that the student responds correctly to the assigned material does not necessarily indicate a successful lesson nor that the learner has indeed learned. When the student is able to generalize behaviours and experiences to situations outside the institution of school, only then can it be said that he has acquired knowledge. Therefore, both the cognitive and affective domain of the student are of equal importance to his overall growth.

Educators who want their students to be able to generalize school learned behaviours to outside situations must form connections between what is taught in class and the student's attitudes and beliefs beyond school. At times, all teachers have been frustrated in their attempts to teach children to read. Providing the motivation needed can also prove to be an imposing obstacle. As Quandt said in the foreword to Alexander and Filler's (1976) book: "Attitudes toward reading seem to influence how much and how well children read" (p.V). As was suggested in this study's

analysis of four adolescent readers, children who are encouraged to develop an interest in reading will be more likely to read than those who are not.

Studies on the connection between attitudes in reading and achievement (Gurney, 1966; Askov & Fischbach, 1973; Ransburg, 1973; Meek et al., 1983; Fry, 1985; Atwell, 1987) have pointed out that the learner's perception of himself as a reader has a strongly determining effect on his success or failure in that activity. Attitudes brought into reading class will also effect the level of comprehension of material covered. Attitudes developed in school will also determine the recreational reading habits of the student which forms an integral part of his growth as a reader (Alexander and Filler, 1976).

Another factor, as pointed out by Hurt et al. (1978), involves the student's success in a particular content area. For example, interest in reading or having a positive attitude toward the activity will depend to a large degree on the learner's previous success in that subject. As Hurt et al. state:

...a student will acquire an attitude toward a content area very soon after his or her initial exposure to the content area. Whether or not this attitude will be positive or negative will depend, in part, on whether the student's initial experience initiates feelings which are pleasant. (p.30)

Often a learner's potential and his present level of achievement do not coincide to form a productive match. The hidden factor in these cases may be contained in the students' attitudes toward the subject and the value they place on the material covered.

In a recent study by Atwell (1987) the attitudes of young adolescents (Junior High) toward reading and writing were seen to be a determining factor in their overall success in those

areas. Atwell describes her experiences of grappling with the demands of teaching Language Arts to maturing young people. Her early failures, coupled with a growing awareness of what a literate individual embodies, led Atwell to develop an experientially based, student centred literature program. Initial negative attitudes toward reading, in particular, illustrated to her the importance of motivation and enthusiasm for the learner.

In her growth as a teacher Atwell discovered the need of students to be seen as individuals, as people with a myriad of interests and as learners who want to learn. In helping her students come to grips with adult reality she felt they needed: "More independent activity, more say in what happens in the classroom, and more responsibility for their own learning" (p.26).

In Goodlad's (1984) study he discovered, by surveying junior high school students, that almost two-thirds of them appreciated school mostly for the social amenities offered there. The occasion to meet with friends, take part in sports activities and school clubs was deemed of greater importance (by the student) than academic pursuits. To a large degree these adolescents did not look at school as a place to "get smart" but more as a way to work out their social needs and to place themselves in the scheme of things.

In attempting to connect reading to student's feelings and experiences, Atwell (1987) created a learning environment conducive to positive feelings about the activity. By using response journals, providing lengthy quiet reading time, and allowing the students to choose novels that were important to them, she took steps toward independent learning and a creation of a more personalized sense of literacy. Here, learners were allowed to create their own framework of development and to discover what it was like to be a reader. By avoiding formulaic activities surrounding formulaic fiction the reader was allowed to "believe in, trust, and feel close

to a central character" (p.175).

In Meek et al.'s (1983) study of adolescent readers, an attempt was made to observe what actually went on in reading lessons. The narratives collected from the work of six teachers were used in formulating answers to such questions as : "How should reading be taught?" and "How can a slow reader be helped to reach the current standard of literacy competence?"

Like Atwell, Meek et al. (1983) found that successes in developing reader ability and interest grew from a closer attention to what readers could do not what they were unable to do. Meek and her colleagues felt that much of reading research was dominated by the investigations of pupil failures.

Meek and her co-researchers found that peer discussion and open-ended questioning helped stimulate reader interest and promote literacy growth. They confirmed that personal ownership of a book increased reader involvement which resulted in a greater understanding of the material covered. In teaching reading the teachers in the study discovered that to be successful they needed to seek a personally relevant definition of literacy for both themselves and their students:

Like our pupils we had to rid ourselves of all that was not helpful, and to find reasons for doing what we instinctively had known at the start, that literacy is reading and writing. Indeed, the books we all like best are the ones we wish we had written. (p.219)

As was evidenced in my own study, Meek et al. found that students perceived schooled reading as an entirely separate activity from their own preferred literature selections: "Reading, for our pupils, was solely a school task, done there, for the teacher's reasons. They were to do what they were told in order to learn" (p.223).

In attempting to better understand some of their original questions, Meek et al. found certain key factors facilitated literacy growth. First of all, they felt it was necessary to promote reader interest by making reading relevant and purposeful. Secondly, they found readers learned best when they composed their own text (similar to Atwell's methods of connecting personal reading interests with creative writing as well as journal responses). They claimed that by making the reader an author and the author a reader much of the mystique and fear of reading was avoided and the ability to create meaning nurtured.

In much the same vein, Macrorie (1984) compiled the narrative accounts of twenty teachers whose students, in his words, did "good works". Macrorie approached educators who were "not teachers in the usual sense...but enablers who help others do good works and extend their already considerable powers"(p.xi). The purpose of Macrorie's study was not to examine how "good works" were produced but to observe the ways of teachers and students. As in the study presented here, Macrorie wanted a window onto the real life experiences of both teacher and student.

Although Macrorie's study was not specifically concerned with literacy development, the experiences of its twenty successful teachers lent credence to the studies of Atwell and others. His group of "enablers" emphasized experiential learning, peer interaction, pupil involvement, relevant activities, and collaboration between learner and teacher. The teachers in his study cared about each individual as a learner and as a person and encouraged their students to work at high levels of excellence.

In his summary Macrorie spoke of the common experiences most learners have with conventional schooling. His comments reflected the same feelings of oppression and frustration experienced by the adolescents in this study. As Macrorie

says:

Most of us have only the least notion of what a ridiculous institution school is. It has always been a part of our landscape, like rocks and trees. Because we live in school a good number of years of our lives, we don't see it any more than we see the air we breathe. We give our obeisance to school, although as kids it bored and irritated us. And rendered us powerless. (p.233)

The student's attitude toward school and learning, which is dependent largely on the teacher, seems to play a vital role in determining the success or failure of his/her cognitive development. Personalized accounts of schooling practice, exemplified in the studies of Atwell (1987), Meek et al. (1983) and Macrorie (1984) help to create a movement away from the often oppressive confinement of subject instruction experienced by many past learners.

There are no strategies, approaches or plans that work in all situations. Reading attitudes tend to be highly specific to each student in each situation. What is important is for educators to realize the significance of the affective issues surrounding the teaching of reading. Affording the learner creative avenues of expression may be all that is needed in formulating favourable attitudes. As was observed in this study, negative attitudes often develop when students are required to read teacher selected materials, to complete externally imposed assignments, and to work on items unrelated to their own view of reality. The job of the educator may be to implement ideas which humanize the reading activity and to recognize the student's need to be able to personalize each learning situation.

#### SUMMARY

In pursuing my original questions I have come to a personal

awareness of some of the complexities of institutionalized learning.

In the past we have viewed reading and learning as a process of storing bits of fed information and regurgitating them within a framework of "right answers only". This means-ends paradigm has served to create a teacher-as-technician view of education placing the emphasis for communication on the classroom instructor. Teachers were seen as subject experts and were expected to maintain "control" over their students and to administer socially approved curricular content in an organized fashion.

In coming to an understanding of why we teach the way we teach a look at the historical underpinnings of our current educational model offered some reasons for the propagation of seemingly inappropriate classroom practices. By comparing traditional methods of learning with more innovative approaches such as peer interaction, experiential learning, and an emphasis on affective issues, it became evident that schooling was beginning to move away from an oppressive, abstracted model to a more humanistic, liberated approach. For me, the increasing emphasis on the learner added greater relevance to my central query: "What is the experience of institutionalized reading for the maturing adolescent?" As many of the innovative researchers in this review had done, I sought the "truth" from those most closely involved with the process of schooled learning - the students.

In concluding this chapter I turn to a recent study on critical pedagogy done by McLaren (1989). A particular phrase from his work seemed to echo my own concerns for the current make-up of our schools: "We desperately need a new vision of what education should mean" (p.21). McLaren recognizes that any study of the classroom situation cannot be removed from the concepts of power and political history that have created it. He feels it is from the recognition of this relationship that meaningful, more relevant forms of schooling will grow.

McLaren states: "Knowledge acquired in classrooms should help students participate in vital issues that affect their experience on a daily level rather than simply enshrine the values of business pragmatism" (p.183). The feelings of oppression, helplessness and lack of personal involvement expressed by the students in this study seemed to echo the same sentiment.

There are many educational issues that need to be raised. In approaching my question I have looked back on the historical context of schooling and some of the research being done to create a new definition of learning. I have focused on the students and their story both in school and beyond. Their story is not intended to be just "about" their experience but will hopefully provide an increased understanding of institutionalized schooling and schooled reading. In focusing my own eye on the developing study I again turned to McLaren (1989) for clarification. The following quote from his work reflected a similar direction to the one I sought here:

The pedagogy that I propose takes the problems and needs of the students themselves as its starting point. On the one hand, a pedagogy based on student experience encourages us to analyze the dominant forms of knowledge that shape student experiences; on the other hand, it attempts to provide students with the means to examine their own particular experiences and subordinate knowledge forms. We must help students analyze their own experiences so as to illuminate the processes by which those experiences were produced, legitimated, or disconfirmed. (p.226)

Often in education there is a defensiveness behind the practice of allowing students to tell their own stories. Here, their stories are presented as a way of better understanding what a learner wants and needs in order to learn in a meaningful and constructive manner.

## CHAPTER 111

## DESIGN OF THE STUDY

## OVERVIEW

This study sought to investigate the attitudes and feelings of four adolescents toward reading as they experienced it in school. It also examined their response to a more experiential, shared literature format for novel study. By using open peer based talk it was hoped that the affective issues, so often overlooked in childhood education, would be exposed and brought to light. While I served as discussion leader, my role was more one of a facilitator of talk. As our time together increased it was observed that the amount of leader intervention decreased.

The study also involved classroom observations, teacher interviews, parent questionnaire and participation by myself in a school field trip.

In this chapter I discuss the design of the study as well as its possible strengths and limitations.

## PURPOSE

The following questions guided this study:

1. What is the experience of school for the maturing adolescent?
2. What is the experience of reading in school for the students and how does it differ from their recreational reading?
3. Does an experientially based shared literature format produce a different kind of reader response? If so, what is the nature of that response?
4. How do students perceive their teacher and how does the teacher perceive the students?
5. What are parents' perceptions of school and of their child-as-student?

While these questions provided an orientation for the study they by no means encompassed the entire spectrum of

research information. In using an interpretive, narrative approach it was important that I be attuned and sensitive to a wide range of responses, activities and emotions being generated. My refusal to exist under the illusion that these questions can ever be definitely answered enabled me to record the experience of the exploration into these questions. By stressing process over product I hoped to better understand the true meaning of the experience.

### **SUBJECTS AND SETTING**

The four students in the study were members of a 16 pupil, multi-graded intermediate classroom in an elementary-junior high school in the Gulf Islands, British Columbia. The research subjects consisted of all three Grade 7's in the class plus one female Grade 6 student. The school itself housed kindergarten to Grade 9, with the majority of the Grade 8/9 students coming from neighbouring islands. The island community is made up of a large retired population equalled in number by working class residents.

The subjects were selected for two reasons. As the study sought to elicit adolescent viewpoints, the already homogeneous Grade 7 grouping seemed ideal. The fourth student was added because of her maturity and the fact she would provide an even gender split of two boys and two girls. Secondly, I had been closely involved with three of the four students throughout the preceding summer (one being the Grade 6 girl) as director of the local Neighbourhood House. It was felt that my added closeness to these students would help to facilitate a more open, trusting environment for discussion.

### **PROCEDURES**

#### Preliminary Agenda

Before the study could be implemented in the school district it was necessary to undertake several preparatory steps. Permission to commence the study was sought first of

all from the students themselves and then from the teacher, the parents, the school principal and finally the Superintendent of Schools. At each stage along the way positive feedback was experienced and a feeling of cooperation and expectation preceded my first meeting with the students.

In consultation with the teacher, a weekly meeting time was scheduled for the study and a tentative plan worked out for my participation in classroom activities and upcoming field trips. The students seemed eager to get started and two weeks after the preliminary steps had been instituted the study commenced.

#### Schedule of Meetings

Due to the peer based discussion format of the study it was decided that a time frame of 60 to 90 minutes was needed to produce an optimum response from the subjects. The meetings were scheduled once a week for a 6 week period. They took place in the afternoon following a 15 minute in-class silent reading period.

Meetings 1, 3 and 4 took place in a small room adjacent to the school library while Meetings 2 and 5 were conducted in the dining room of my home. Meeting 6 was the only time the subjects were studied on an individual basis as this was a time for me to have them reflect privately on the process they had been involved in.

The meetings themselves were conducted in a relaxed manner and each session commenced with open discussion on any topics or thoughts the students had at that time. As discussion leader, I tried to direct the conversation without controlling it. The students went off on many tangents in our time together and were given the opportunity to do so.

All meetings together were taped and on two occasions two parallel tapings were used to handle pair talk. After each meeting came to a close I would write down my own thoughts and

reflections on what had transpired. This became a valuable source of information in subsequent writing.

The general focus of each meeting is described briefly here:

- |           |   |
|-----------|---|
| Meeting 1 | Perceptions and attitudes towards school and learning.  |
| Meeting 2 | Perceptions and attitudes toward reading in school and recreational reading.  |
| Meeting 3 | Open discussion about favourite literature. Pair talk about what makes a book interesting.  |
| Meeting 4 | A progression of talk from favourite literature into talk of memorable characters from stories read. Theme: Relating to fictional characters on a personal level. Likes/dislikes. Pair talk about what makes a character memorable. |
| Meeting 5 | A personal sharing of favourite literature. Each student brought in a book to share with other members of the group. Each took turns talking about his/her book and reflecting on its merits.                                       |
| Meeting 6 | Private interviews. Here I sought to elicit individual responses concerning some of the topics we had covered. Each interview was framed around the following questions:  |
1. How do you feel you're treated in school?
  2. What would you change about school and what would you leave the same?
  3. Tell me about your reading class. What do you think about while working?
  4. Tell me what you see as the main differences between your own reading and reading in school.
  5. Tell me about our meetings together. What was the experience like for you?
  6. Tell me what you thought about me visiting your home. Would you like your teacher to do the same?

In attempting to come to a better understanding of the school experience for these students, I felt it was necessary to deinstitutionalize some of our meetings together. To better examine the affective issues surrounding the study an

absence of the influences of school seemed important. The two meetings held at my house and the final meeting, conducted aboard a B. C. ferry, provided a much richer, voluminous source of data. Peer talk not only increased in these situations but also seemed to reach a deeper emotional level. Specific reference to this phenomenon will be discussed later in the study.

### Classroom Observations and Field Trips

Over the course of the study I observed/participated in the subjects' classroom on four separate occasions and joined one school field trip. To fully appreciate the subjects' talk I felt it necessary to become aware of their school situation. One classroom observation involved listening to a group discussion on a current novel under study and two consisted of general learning activities such as math, writing and drama (pre-Christmas concert practice). One period was spent assisting the classroom teacher in a P.E. class where the students were divided into two groups to practise volleyball skills. All four observations took place inside the school building.

The field trip was an all day affair consisting of two ferry rides, a visit to a local salmon spawning area, lunch at McDonald's and swimming at a community centre. The activities took place in Victoria and involved a good deal of bus and ferry travel. The subjects' teacher and myself were responsible for taking care of the 16 intermediate students.

During and following each classroom observation and field trip I wrote a reflective record of what had transpired during our time together. No tape recorders were used on these occasions, which may have limited my accuracy on some of the dialogue used.

### Home Visits

To gain a full understanding of the research subjects, I

conducted home visits with each of them. These visits took place at various times during the six week research period. On each occasion I met the student after school and together we travelled to his/her home. The average length of each visit was approximately 45 minutes and on every visit the parent was in attendance.

The purpose of the visits was threefold. First of all, I was attempting to further establish a bond of trust and caring between myself and the subject. It was hoped that this would increase the likelihood of a deeper sharing of thoughts and perceptions during our weekly meetings. Secondly, I wanted to get a sense of both the private and public person. To be able to clearly observe each student's input into the research I felt it necessary to understand the whole person. Finally, as a teacher myself, I was interested in the benefits of home visits in regard to a better understanding of individual needs in the classroom. During the visits I was careful to note interests of each student such as books collected, posters, hobbies displayed, pets, music, etc. The findings from these visits proved to be extremely enlightening and will be discussed at length in Chapter IV.

#### Parent and Teacher Questionnaire/Interviews

Contact with the teacher was ongoing throughout the study. On only one occasion were my discussions with the teacher taped. My other reflections in this area consist of personal observations and paraphrased quotes.

After each contact with the teacher I would write down those parts of our discussion that I could remember. On going back over those meetings I feel a fairly comprehensive picture of the teacher was formulated. The limitation here is that it was observed through the conditioned eye of another.

Following the final meeting with the students, I conducted a 30 minute, taped interview with their teacher.

The discussion was framed around the following questions:

1. Imagine you are talking to a teacher who, for some reason, is replacing you starting tomorrow morning. Could you tell him about each one of the subjects in the study?
2. What do you see your role to be as a classroom teacher? Tell me about your strengths and weaknesses.
3. Where do you feel education should be heading?

Much discussion ensued during the interview, not all of which related back to the questions given here. This was seen by me to be a beneficial and revealing aspect of the overall study.

The parents of the students involved in the study were provided with a brief questionnaire at the beginning of the research. Subsequent face to face or telephone conversations were conducted to help facilitate understanding of the basic premise involved. Response length ranged from one or two handwritten pages to an eleven page typewritten comprehensive reflection. The latter will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter IV along with the other responses. The questionnaire was as follows:

1. How would you describe your child to me if I were seeking a greater understanding of him/her as an individual?
2. Tell me something about what you remember of your own educational experiences.
3. In an educational context, what do you want for your child and what is important for his/her future?

No time pressures were involved with the completion of the questionnaire. Two of the questionnaires were returned within a week, the final one was delivered eight weeks after being received.

## METHODS OF ANALYSIS

Prior to conducting the study, much thought was given to the manner in which the data gathered would be analyzed. To best examine the discourse generated from the meeting it was evident that a qualitative approach would most suit the need to observe the student's interpretations and perceptions. In qualitative data collection the researcher takes note of many aspects of the phenomena and is able to deal with the unexpected outcomes and "hard-to-get-at" observations (Guba & Lincoln, 1983).

Before the commencement of the meetings I had decided to analyze the subjects' dialogue in an attempt to support recent research promoting the need for peer based talk in the classroom. Many researchers (Barnes, 1976; Tough, 1976; Wilkinson & Calculator, 1982; Dyson, 1987; Jones, 1988) have proposed that it is necessary for the learner to openly discuss and communicate in order to best assimilate new knowledge.

As the meetings with the students progressed it became evident that the wealth of information and unforeseen data being generated could well be overlooked by only analyzing the mechanics of dialogue and levels of interaction.

For the purpose of this research the subjects were removed from their classroom situation and put in an artificial environment created by me, the researcher. Although I served as discussion leader, I had to realize that my role was not simply one of observer. In fact, I had, as Freire (1970) discussed, entered into a dialogical relationship, a conversation with them and a text, of sorts, had been created.

Phenomenologists, such as van Manen (1984b) and Wagner (1983) suggest research can look at the phenomena of an object; the systematic interpretation of human experience; a

way of viewing ourselves. To come to an understanding of what the reading experience was like for the subjects I needed to get involved with the phenomena in question.

By the time the meetings were completed I decided an interpretive approach toward the collected data was necessary. The form of this interpretation would be of a narrative style. The dialogue text would form our story together. As van Manen (1984b) wrote: "Anecdotal narrative as story form is an effective way of dealing with certain kinds of knowledge" (p.51). This method of analysis is gaining acceptance as a rigorous investigative method of research (van Manen, 1973; Paley, 1981; Heath, 1983; Peterat, 1983; Atwell, 1987).

To benefit from the rich data being produced I attempted to orient myself to the subjective meaning of personal experience for those involved in the study (ie. the students, parents, teacher and myself). By using a narrative style I was able to reflect on the phenomena in question, create themes for my analysis, interpret the essence of the experience and, hopefully, understand those matters that were brought to light (de Konig, 1982).

#### **STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The meetings took place over a 6 week period and involved over 10 hours of tape recorded dialogue. For every one hour of dialogue, upwards of 8 hours was spent on transcription and analysis. As I fully transcribed all conversations the process was definitely time consuming and often tedious. The transcriptions proved invaluable, however, as it enabled common themes to emerge for further reflection.

The tape recordings enabled me to pick out subtleties of talk not initially evident. It also provided an opportunity to return to certain sections that required added clarification. The combination of taped dialogue along with my written reflections helped to form a more complete picture

of the phenomena in question.

Non-taped encounters (ie. teacher talks, subjects at home, etc.) required keener listening skills and may have resulted in missed or inaccurate information. While the data collected at these times (in the form of field notes) may have lacked the preciseness of taped meetings, it did provide a different dimension to the study. Here, I was required to reflect back on the interaction and attempt to report on what had transpired. Unlike the concrete diary provided by taped dialogue these encounters caused me to remember the experience in its whole state. Body gestures and overall atmosphere of the interaction took on a stronger meaning.

In addition to the time spent on the meetings, the study was comprised of home visits, meetings with parents, classroom observations, a class field trip and a final day outing to the university. Actual contact time with the students totalled about 50 hours, which averaged out to 8 hours per week. During this 6 week period the degree of involvement, from a personal perspective, was deemed to be high and of an intense nature.

Due to the artificiality of the research situation and interpretive nature of the study, encounters with the subjects were often times trying. Not wanting to emulate the role of a "heavy-handed" teacher, I sometimes found myself nervously observing childish arguments or supposedly off task behaviour. While my role as leader/observer was often frustrating, it proved to be beneficial. In retrospect, I can say that if an attempt to "discipline" or manage the subjects had been made it would have been to the detriment of the study.

When producing studies such as these, one realizes that a major drawback involves its replicability. This study involved one researcher, four young adolescents and other minor players. To duplicate this inquiry accurately would be impossible. The voices being listened to here make up a

minute proportion of the whole. The direction of the researcher is his own as is that of the subjects. However, while they may be only a few, they provide insight into the true nature of our educational practices. As van Manen (1984b) says:

... one gains real life experiences about children, not by observing them from a distance by way of test instruments, or through a one-way mirror, but by living with them, striving for the kind of contact and dialogue that helps us to understand what a certain experience is like for children.

## CHAPTER IV

## THE LEARNER'S STORY

## AN OPENING - EMERGING THEMES

In developing The Learner's Story I had to remind myself that this was not a search for a final definition and that what was offered here was only a glimpse of all that had transpired. By selecting from the data contained in the group's dialogue I would be in a sense telling my own version of the story. All research, analysis, reflection or observation is necessarily done from an egocentric perspective (Greene, 1987). With this awareness in mind I have attempted to organize the research information.

Analysis of the data, in the sense of reading and re-reading transcripts, resulted in the emergence of certain themes. The themes, as outlined in this section, do not provide inflexible, clearly defined categories in which to contain data. To be thought of in this manner would rob the study of the real nature of its lived experience. As van Manen (1984b) says: "... when we analyze a phenomenon, we are trying to determine what the themes are, the experiential structures that make up that experience" (p.59). So the themes will provide a direction or a focus for the writing but must not be perceived as a conceptual condensation.

The conversational extracts which form the analytical foundation come from the mouths of individuals. However, the emerging themes are based on a commonality of responses from the group as a whole. The "categories" included here were created from a "single voice"; a voice that was modulated in four different ways but was heard as being essentially one. While certain individuals possessed an articulation or verbosity beyond that of their peers, the talk emerged as a group. The thematic aspects of the group's talk provided the story with its essence and the frame on which to build

reflection.

In seeking enlightenment of the question, "What is the experience of institutionalized reading for the maturing adolescent?", focus for the meetings centered around three issues. In the beginning, the students were given an opportunity to talk about school. From this discussion three major themes emerged. First of all they expressed their frustration with the externally controlled dictates of the curriculum. Feelings of helplessness, imprisonment and oppression were openly shared and reflected upon.

Secondly, and stemming from earlier concerns, the students talked about experiencing a disassociation between their own reality and that of the school. Here they discussed being a non-participant in classroom affairs and being unaware as to the purpose of institutional requirements. A final common experience discussed under school attitudes concerned the social aspects of learning and feelings of frustration regarding the paucity of sanctioned opportunities to socialize in school. As mentioned by Goodlad (1984) in A Place Called School, students find these social issues of utmost importance in their school experience. The study group's feelings of inequality and isolation in the class possibly reflect this same attitude.

From school attitudes talk moved toward the students' feelings about reading, both institutionalized and recreational (the term personal reading will also be used in the analysis to signify individual reading activities). Some of the same experiences with school were expressed when discussing the teaching of reading. One of the two themes emerging here was framed around the subjects' differentiation between schooled reading (being dictated by the teacher) and personal reading (being controlled by the individual). Again, feelings of an unconnectedness and lack of personal reality surrounded talk of schooled reading while recreational reading was seen by the group as an entirely separate activity. This

theme of a perceived school reality being separate from their personal reality pervaded many of their comments.

While discussing reading in school, much talk focused on the assignments or evaluative criteria for the activity. During this time, experiences of distrust and lack of purpose framed the responses. The group found it difficult to understand why they were doing much of what was required of them.

The remaining meetings were arranged around a shared literature format. How would the students respond to this hint of freedom? Here, the students were free to choose their own literature and conduct conversations from their viewpoint, their experiences. The idea for this, while not at all revolutionary, was clearly portrayed in Atwell's (1987) study of young adolescents:

When they can choose, junior high students will read for all the reasons literate people everywhere engage as readers: to live other lives and learn about their own, to see how other writers have written and to acquire other writer's knowledge, to escape, think, travel, ponder, laugh, cry. (p.43)

It sounded marvelous, so we began our experiment.

The themes here fell into four loose groupings. An analysis of their ongoing talk with one another, both in pairs and as a group, illustrated the dynamics of peer based interaction. Looking in at the value of this talk provided a foundation on which to build other perceptions.

Other themes to follow were the experience of connecting as a group, the lived realities of personal literature and the recognition of self-as-reader. Again, a cautionary note to the reader that these "categories" do not represent defined borders but simply paths on the way to understanding the overall experiences embodied in this story. Hopefully, the

overview provided here will help facilitate the listening required for The Learner's Story.

The themes put forth here will be framed around opening and closing descriptions of the students, the teacher and their classroom. Initially, a clinical, anthropological description will introduce the narrative to provide a visual picture of the learners and their environment. In closing out this chapter a more critical reflective inspection of the same will be presented.

## **THE CLASSROOM, THE TEACHER, THE STUDENTS**

### The Classroom

The subjects' classroom is spacious, well lit, with large windows and numerous skylights and it exhibits a plentitude of board and wall space. The room is warm, has desks for each student and also a larger desk for the teacher. There seems to be plenty of shelf and storage space with a partitioned cloakroom to the rear of the class. There are two round work tables against the cloakroom partition and the room's main door provides immediate access to the school office and washrooms. The room's back door is close to the library and gymnasium/change room area.

The student's desks are in four rows and the small class number (16) provides each student with ample space. The grades (4-7) are divided loosely by rows so the Grade 4's are on one side of the room and the Grade 7's on the other. Rows and desks appear to be neat and orderly. The teacher's desk is located at the front of the room facing the students.

Some of the walls exhibit student work. One section is decorated with an art assignment on self portraits and another shows small coloured maps of Canada. There is also one teacher created display on airplanes with commercially produced pictures and descriptions of older models.

The two large blackboards (one at the front, one at the back) seem to be in constant use. The front blackboard includes daily homework and daily instructional offerings. The blackboard to the rear usually contains questions or exercises of an on-going nature, such as novel questions.

The overall appearance of the classroom would suggest an normal intermediate learning situation.

### The Teacher

Allan is a knowledgeable, well-rounded, friendly individual. His interests cover such diverse areas as sailing and karate and he enjoys being with people as well as working independently building his island home. As a major player in this research he kindly welcomed me into his classroom and willingly accepted the time frame involved in the study.

Allan's training had been as a counsellor and special education teacher at the junior/senior level. He had attempted to secure a job in that area but settled for the intermediate posting he now held. Allan is soft-spoken and his experience with psychology is apparent in the way he communicates with children. His overall demeanour is one of calmness and restraint. He appears to be very patient with the children and discusses problems with them without overreacting.

Allan's curriculum and accompanying timetable is organized and sticks closely to Ministry guidelines. Subject areas are taught in blocks with each grade working independently of the other. Each subject is introduced in a thorough manner by Allan with particular emphasis being given to management reminders (eg. staying seated while doing an assignment and working quietly).

Allan considered himself to be an experienced, aware teacher whose job it was to create an orderly, learning environment for his students. Also, in referring to the often

laid back island attitude prevalent in his area, Allan felt a large part of this role as a teacher involved: "converting them (the students) from a group of negative, lacking-in-motivation kids, to those that are a bit more stimulating...and also to raise the expectations of the students." While he expressed concern over his ability to accomplish this feat, Allan did feel he had made some valuable inroads into this problem.

In general, Allan projected the image of a capable, concerned teacher who took his job seriously yet kept things in perspective. He prided himself on being able to separate his school life from his home life which he felt greatly benefited his effectiveness as an educator.

### The Students

Bobbi:

Bobbi is a tall, slim, sensitive 13 1/2 year old girl with a shy smile. She lives on a hobby farm with her mother, father, little brother, her horse, two sheep and several house pets. Bobbi's father is an entertainer and is often away from home and her mother works locally part-time. Bobbi loves her animals and her family.

In school, Bobbi is one of only two girls in Grade 7. She is friendly with all the girls in the class and often socializes with them after school. During school Bobbi was seen to be quiet and often sullen but she seemed to listen well and work well independently.

Bobbi's academic strength is reading which is illustrated by her literature rich home environment. Allan agreed that Bobbi's success in reading stemmed from a good foundation in the home. In other subject areas, Bobbi was assessed as an average to below average achiever. Math is a particularly weak area for Bobbi and her lack of success in that subject

has created an accompanying negative attitude toward it.

During class discussions Bobbi participates little, entertaining herself mostly with desk top staring and fidgeting. Her written work appears messy and disorganized although some of her assignments show a concern for quality. In P.E. Bobbi demonstrated a quiet, shy nature, not wanting to get involved in competitive game situations or introductory warm ups.

Overall, Bobbi appears to be shy, defensive, compliant, awkward and somewhat confused. Her private nature makes her seem nervous and uneasy in structured learning activities. In Allan's words Bobbi shows all the signs of being a "frustrated learner".

Clint:

Clint is an energetic and active 13 year old. His enthusiasm for living often overflows resulting in misbehaviour in the classroom. Clint lives with his father and stepmother and is a very social, gregarious human being. He likes to be with his friends, talks incessantly and makes "humorous" comments at inappropriate times. Clint is seen by his classmates, and himself, as the class clown and rarely seems to miss an opportunity to perform.

In class Clint finds it difficult to keep on task and his note books are extremely messy and lack any coherent progression. Clint finds himself isolated, at times, from his peers which is the teacher's attempt to focus him on the work at hand. Academically Clint is described (by the teacher) as working below his potential. For Clint, it is apparent that the social aspect of schooling takes high priority over that of the academic side. Artistically Clint possesses a great deal of natural talent as evidenced by some class assignments and a myriad of exercise book doodles. As Allan pointed out: "...he's a very talented, artistically (sic), boy but he's lacking in self esteem and in confidence."

For Clint, school offers an ideal situation for his strong social desires. There he can run, shout, laugh, talk, roughhouse -all those things that provide him with the necessary stimulation. Academic pursuits appear incidental for Clint and his natural abilities allow him to "click in" enough to get by.

Mandy:

Mandy is a quiet, contented 12 1/2 year old. She lives with her mother and loves horses. Mandy spends alot of her free time riding her horse, grooming it and keeping it well fed. While she has a few close friends, Mandy seems to enjoy her own company the most. Although Mandy is not a talkative person her impish grin and intent eyes show that she is a good listener.

In school, Mandy often socializes with Bobbi as they both share a common love of horses. Mandy does not seem to get upset easily but rather allows things to happen without a lot of conflict or interference on her part. Mandy is well liked as she treats everyone equally.

Academically, Mandy is a slow, methodical worker. She is described (by the teacher) as an average to below average achiever only working slightly below her potential. Her seatwork lacks organization and is extremely messy. Mandy often reverts to printing her assignments, making them almost illegible.

I often saw Mandy daydreaming during class and when called to task would quietly get on with her work. She seemed to be comfortable with who she was and what she was presently doing.

Rusty:

Rusty is an articulate, knowledgeable 13 year old. He lives with his father and older sister in a rented home on the water. Rusty's father is an art professor and Rusty

demonstrates considerable artistic talents of his own. At home Rusty is a voracious reader absorbing everything from modern pulp to classical literature. While growing up has been difficult at times, he seems to possess a positive attitude toward life and laughs readily.

Rusty finds most of what he is asked to do easy and straightforward. Academically, he falls into the above average category although he is perceived as working below his potential. Artistically, Rusty is a gifted individual and he enjoys art immensely. Rusty's literacy skills are good and, as Allan stated: "Rusty reads quite a bit and consequently his writing is better (than most) and he can express himself well."

Rusty's strong mindedness and quick humour often get him into trouble in the classroom. Some of his behaviour was described by Allan as "smart allecky" and "cheeky". Like Clint, Rusty initiated social interaction at supposedly inappropriate times (such as when the teacher was talking) and was called to task repeatedly.

Overall, Rusty is a bright, enjoyable person to be with. He is popular with the other students and he has considerable talents in several areas. He seems to be an eager learner and keenly interested in everything around him.

## **ATTITUDES TOWARD SCHOOL**

### Experiencing Feelings of Helplessness and Oppression

...It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom; without this it goes to wrack and ruin without fail. (Albert Einstein, cited in Rogers, 1969, p.iv)

The following conversational excerpts took place on the afternoon of Hallowe'en and began with a statement from me: "Tell me about school". This first formal meeting together started off well despite the fact it was costume day and one of the subjects (Mandy) was absent.

At times the students expressed feelings of helplessness coupled with a sense of inequality:

- Rusty -            Sometimes we can't get up to help each other. I feel like we're being strictly forbidden, like a jail.
- Bobbi -            Yeah, you're right.
- Rusty -            We're not being treated fairly as human beings should.
- Researcher -      Would I be under the same rules if I came to your class?
- Rusty -            No, because you're a guest, right?
- Bobbi -            And also you're grown up.

The students seemed to perceive a different set of standards for young people and adults. This sense of being treated unfairly pervaded many of their responses:

- Rusty -            We should work more by respect instead of going by rules.
- Clint -            Yeah, let us work in a fun way instead of all these structures.

To Clint and Rusty the school operated according to an apparently arbitrary set of rules and regulations which they found difficult to connect to their own lives. The external control, guiding their time in school, was something to be resented as it held no meaning for them.

Two weeks prior to this opening meeting I had met with Allan to discuss the research. We sat together at the back of the room while the class worked on a colouring assignment in Art. The students sat together in loosely formed groups while working at the mechanical colouring activity. Allan became uncomfortable with the low hum of conversation developing and frequently interrupted our talk to call students to task:

- Allan - Not so loud, Clint.  
 - Talk quietly, please.  
 - Are you working?  
 - Keep your pencils moving. Don't stop. Just keep them moving.

From a personal perspective the students did not appear particularly noisy or slow in their work and considering the mundaneness of the task seemed quite accepting and obedient.

I began to get a sense of the dilemma both teacher and learner were experiencing. The oppressed feelings being expressed by the students were the complementary side of the teacher's need for control and structure. Somewhere in the middle existed freedom of expression for both.

#### Experiencing Being a Non-Participant

It would seem wise for any teacher to try to draw out from students those problems or issues that are real for them and also relevant to the course at hand. (Rogers, 1983, p.148)

At the start of Meeting 1 the following conversation took place:

- Researcher - What do you have just before we meet? (time is 1:20)  
 Bobbi - Writing or something.  
 Clint - We usually have to read...(mumbles something)  
 Rusty - We have to do some writing and then we do silent reading. Is that right? (looks to the others)  
 Clint - Yeah, silent reading.  
 Researcher - You say you have to do some writing. What does that entail?  
 Clint - We have to.  
 Rusty - He makes us.  
 Clint - He makes us write a story.  
 Bobbi - And if we don't we get in trouble.

A few other things were said clarifying what was required of them then the dialogue continued:

- Researcher - Sometimes you don't have ideas in your head?

- Bobbi - He makes us write: "I don't know what to write". (said sarcastically)
- Rusty - You know what we should do (looking at the others). We should ask him to read our stories out (no response).
- Researcher - So explain to me what happens between 1:00 and 1:30 everyday.
- Bobbi - It's different everyday.
- Clint - (smiling) I never pay attention.

This opening conversation initiated talk concerning the students' feelings of being non-participants in the learning process. Their expressions of feeling oppressed and helpless paralleled their sense of disassociation with the process they were involved in. The work they had been required to do just prior to our meeting was seen by them to be of a mandatory, automatic nature. Nothing of themselves was present in that work and their recollection of the activity was disjointed and hazy. The purpose and relevance Rogers (1983) spoke of seemed to be lacking at this particular level in their literacy development.

At another point in Meeting 1, I asked them to tell me how they felt about working in groups:

- Rusty - Well, I like sitting, well, not in rows, but I like sitting by myself.
- Clint - Yeah, I know, but I like to have a choice.
- Rusty - Yeah, I know what you mean but if I had the choice I'd probably sit by myself.
- Bobbi - I like groups, they're fun.

I then asked the students if they had considered asking their teacher if they could do some work in groups. A general consensus was formed that basically it would be "a waste of time". While later conversations with Allan would show he felt students should be free to express their concerns to him it appeared as though he had not effectively transmitted this to the class. In the eyes of these adolescents it was clearly "them-and-us".

The conversation continued:

- Researcher - What does the teacher expect from you?  
 Rusty - Expecting us to work.  
 Bobbi - Yeah!  
 Rusty - He makes you work.  
 Bobbi - I don't like how he's so calm. He never gets mad.  
 Clint - Sometimes I'll get in trouble for something and he'll never ask me if I did it. Like if I do one thing I have to stay after school and if somebody else does one thing they don't have to stay after school.  
 Researcher - So you think sometimes the punishment administered in school is unfair.  
 Clint - Yeah...(mumbles something)  
 Rusty - Yeah and some of the rules...

From this conversation the group got into relating specific examples of confusing, unfair treatment. Here the students had expressed their puzzlement of how and why certain things were done in school. The "them-and-us" reaction to learning had grown up out of their lack of involvement in the process itself. Work appeared, was done and more work was forthcoming. Bobbi's response concerning the irritating "calmness" of her teacher pointed toward another dimension of this situation. Earlier Bobbi had said: "I don't think he likes me. He never listens to me." Her comments reminded me of the title of Maxine Greene's (1973) book - Teacher as Stranger: "The teacher is frequently addressed as if he had no life of his own, no body, and no inwardness" (Greene, 1973, p. 269). Bobbi's role as a non-participant made her teacher a stranger to her; it made her create her own idea of who he was and what he represented.

The external demands being made on them as learners seemed to be a sensitive issue. Before passing through this theme I must include a conversation that transpired during Meeting 3. The group wanted to tell me about a field trip they had taken earlier in the week. Their class had visited a television station and the provincial museum. They, again, expressed displeasure at being left on the "outside" of

things:

- Rusty - Like, CHAN-TV, I didn't like that part 'cause we were forced to stand there and listen to this guy talk.
- Clint - I didn't like the museum either, though, 'cause we couldn't look around. We had to go to this course.
- Mandy - Yeah, we had to go to this boring course.

Here, I asked for further clarification on what they meant by "course":

- Bobbi - All she (museum person) wanted us to learn about was trees.
- Mandy - Yeah, trees.
- Bobbi - We see trees every day, probably more than her.
- Mandy - She wanted us to look at what she was looking at.
- Clint - And I looked over at something else and I got in trouble.
- Bobbi - And now we can't go the museum on this field trip (referring to upcoming trip) because he (teacher) says the boys were goofing off, which they weren't.

The group's frustration with the situation was clearly evident at this point. "Them" demanded their undivided attention while "us" wanted to explore and discover. The lack of connection between the two caused "misbehaviour". As educators we are quick to lay blame and hesitant to accept it.

As Rusty so aptly said: "They make you do something without asking you for your opinion." His use of the more generalized term "they" caused me to reflect painfully on my own teaching experiences. Their feeling of isolation now became mine as well.

### Social Needs for Learning

In discussing school life, people who have already attended school talk mostly of either their schoolmates or classmates. (Asiedu-Akrofi, 1981, p.67)

A comment that came up frequently when describing the positive aspects of school was voiced initially by Clint: "It's (school) good 'cause you can see your friends." A

considerable proportion of the memories of their school experiences the group shared centered on friends and past social situations such as playground games, camp-outs and field trips.

In one sense the students looked at socializing and learning as separate entities. While they understood that working together was much more stimulating they didn't necessarily perceive it as a constructive learning situation:

- Clint - I like groups better 'cause you can be with your friends.  
 Bobbi - When you're in groups you can choose who you want to work with.  
 Rusty - When you work! (smiling)

The social aspect of a group situation was not necessarily correlated to a feeling of cooperative learning.

An obvious lack of experience with talk and cooperative activities was demonstrated during the opening discussion surrounding Meeting 3. Rusty, who was accustomed to getting-down-to-work, was uneasy about the underlying purpose of the study being conducted. Rusty seemed somewhat restless and finally said:

- Rusty - Every time we come here we talk about reading and teachers and stuff, aren't we supposed to be doing some kind of work?  
 Mandy - I like that!  
 Clint - His project's on how we feel and stuff.  
 Rusty - I find it sort of boring just to talk.  
 Bobbi - Ha Ha! No way!  
 Mandy - It's fun.  
 Researcher - Why?  
 Bobbi - Because there's no work and we talk about things we don't like.  
 Mandy - And you don't have to write it down on paper.  
 Bobbi - Yeah, it's not like school.  
 Clint - 'Cause you can't write your feelings down on paper.

Many other feelings were expressed here about school and learning but Rusty's confusion over the project's purpose

revealed an interesting contradiction for him. Interestingly, Rusty appeared to enjoy the sessions immensely. His keen, talkative nature indicated a real love of peer communication and discussion of things he enjoyed, such as reading. Somewhere in his schooling Rusty has learned that being with friends and enjoying oneself automatically indicated a non-learning situation. Possibly Rusty's concern with doing well in school made him feel that if we, as a group, were supposed to be accomplishing something then we'd better stop chatting and start "working".

A final observation taken from the students' comments about socializing concerns what I have termed "transition time". The students often referred to a "settling in" time both at the start of the day and between subject areas. Again, I sensed a frustration, on their part, concerning their lack of voice and continuing feelings of helplessness:

- Researcher - Describe a classroom that you would enjoy being in.  
 Rusty - Just to be able to, like, go in and go to a table with your other friends.  
 Bobbi - And goof around for a few minutes.  
 Rusty - Just be able to talk and have fun instead of having to go and sit and get to work right away.

They felt they needed time to adjust from their home environment to the school environment. They wanted time in which to switch thought processes from one mode to another. Their comments brought scenes of past staff rooms to light particularly the ten minute span before that first morning bell - coffee cups being filled, news being shared, laughter between friends. I suppose we could view this as teacher "transition time". Do we grant such times to the students?

During their discussions about reading class, this need for transition time was again expressed:

- Bobbi - We only get a two minute break. (between subjects)  
 Mandy - You have two minutes to talk with you friends.  
 Bobbi - But like two minutes, it's not very long.

Time is perhaps the most important commodity in school. Wasted minutes are time that can never be retrieved. How important is social time? How much time is "wasted" in group or cooperative learning situations? The importance of socializing to these students seemed obvious but the role it played in their classroom life was often confusing. On the one hand they felt an innate need to be with one another while on the other they were being reminded (by the teacher) that social talk was time "wasting" and not cognitively constructive. Bobbi and Clint related a particular class situation that could have turned into a collaborative learning situation:

- Clint - Today I was talking to Bobbi and then she needed help so I was helping her out because he (the teacher) was busy with somebody else. He comes out and starts razzing on me and balling me out and stuff like that.
- Researcher - Could I ask what you two were working on.
- Clint - It was about Math.
- Bobbi - I don't like Math.
- Clint - Neither do I but I'm okay at it.

Clint's social talk with Bobbi had progressed into a peer learning situation. As social talk and discussion were discouraged in the classroom an occasion for potentially worthwhile learning was possibly lost.

## **ATTITUDES TOWARD READING**

### The Experience of Institutionalized Reading vs. Personal Reading

...reading generates its most significant meanings when the reader engages in a process of discovery, weaving and circling among the complex of behaviours that characterizes genuine participation in written language. (Atwell, 1987, p.155)

Many things have been written on what makes a child read

and what readers need to be successful. In my time with the group I came to understand how different their personal world of reading was from what they experienced in school. Meaning, purpose, interest and reality were all areas of concern for the students. To begin this section I'd like to simply provide examples of some of the comments they made. I feel their own voice speaks the loudest:

Researcher - Tell me about reading.  
 Bobbi - It's fun.  
 Rusty - I enjoy it.  
 Bobbi - I don't like it when people force me to read.  
 Rusty - Um, um.  
 Clint - Well, at school I don't really feel like reading 'cause, like, right after lunch (silent reading time) you're still hyper.  
 Bobbi - But it's okay.  
 Clint - It's supposed to relax you but you can't get relaxed to me.  
 Mandy - 'Cause you're still excited. (from lunch)  
 Rusty - If you get into the book, it's sort of...  
 Clint - But that's the trouble, with getting into the book.  
 Rusty - Yeah, and if you don't get into it you just sit there.

and

Researcher - Tell me how reading is taught to you in school.  
 Bobbi - They (teachers) make you read something.  
 Clint - They don't ask you what you want to read.  
 Mandy - Last year she (the teacher) would ask you what you wanted to read...  
 Clint - Last year we could sit around a table for silent reading and be comfortable.  
 Bobbi - Yeah, like, you could lay on the floor or sit under a table.  
 Clint - This year we have to sit in rows and face forward.

and

Mandy - I don't see why we have to read a novel study book 'cause we read our own novels. When a person's bored with the book they're not exactly going to read any of it.

and

- Researcher - How would you want Reading to be taught then?  
 Rusty - To be given the choice...  
 Clint - To be given the choice of what book you want  
 and have, like, fun assignments but also  
 they'd be worthwhile.  
 Mandy - Like models (building) and stuff like that.  
 Rusty - Something that's challenging but also fun.  
 Bobbi - You don't want something too easy because you,  
 like, get bored of that.

and

- Researcher - How do you feel about being given a book to  
 read by someone?  
 Clint - I don't like it.  
 Mandy - You feel like not reading it.  
 Rusty - Yeah, you sit there and go from one page to  
 another.  
 Clint - You just find the pictures and look at the  
 pictures.  
 Bobbi - It's boring.  
 Rusty - Yeah, it's boring.  
 Clint - You don't want to do it.  
 Bobbi - Like, in this book, The Gammage Cup, (current  
 class novel) it doesn't make sense. In the  
 beginning they're people but they're green and  
 their names are Muggles.  
 Rusty - It doesn't make sense.  
 Clint - I didn't really like the book.

Despite the negative critique of schooled reading an underlying message pervaded the student's talk - they liked to read. In the context of institutionalized reading, however, the lack of personal choice apparently eliminated most of their avenues for enjoyment. The fact that they were required to read a novel perceived by them as both trivial and divorced from their own personal reality, served to make the activity meaningless. I sensed from the tone of their talk that some of the discontentment with the novel was also the group's reaction to externally imposed assignments.

Clint's memories of his previous teacher brought to light just what constituted enjoyable reading for himself and the others. Their comments centered around the freedom of choice,

not only of which type of book to read, but also where to read. When not given a choice in these matters their reaction was one of frustration and defiance ("You sit there and go from one page to another"). How does this compare with their own world of reading?

- Researcher - Tell me about your world of reading.  
 Clint - I like comics.  
 Rusty - My dad always says he wants me to read to him but whenever he says that I just get mad at him and then I hate reading...but then I'll sneak away and then I'll just sit down and read and I usually enjoy myself.  
 Mandy - It's funner when you can just go off and silent read and if you have to read out to someone you get all embarrassed.  
 Bobbi - I like to read by myself...with my own books.  
 Researcher - How do you choose your own book?  
 Mandy - I read the back (of the book) and then if it sounds good I'll read the first chapter and if I like it I keep reading.  
 Rusty - I go to the middle and if it sounds exciting then I'll read the book.  
 Researcher - What if it isn't exciting?  
 Mandy - Stop reading.

and

- Researcher - Tell me the type of books that you are attracted to.  
 Clint - Stuff that's really happened and has a bit of adventure to it.  
 Rusty - You mean Choose Your Own Adventure or something?  
 Clint - No, I don't mean those.  
 Mandy - I like adventure books and sometimes I read, like, scary books.  
 Rusty - I just like to read. I don't really care what it is I just like to read a book.  
 Bobbi - I like scary books and things that seem real.

It was apparent that the group members were feeding off one another's answers (using "scary" and "adventure", for instance). The effect peer talk has on literature selection will be discussed further on in this chapter but it can be noted that the students had some specific thoughts on what type of books appealed to them. Like all learners, these

students are unique individuals with personal likes and dislikes. For them to be given a book to read or to be asked to read out loud to other people, did not correlate with their preferred world of reading.

The final question I asked them in Meeting 2 seemed to simplify the dilemma of schooled reading:

- Researcher - If you could change one thing when it came to the novels you read what would it be?  
 Mandy - Novels that you like.  
 Clint - Choose ones you like.  
 Bobbi - The ones that you like, I think.  
 Researcher - So you would like a choice in what you read?  
 Rusty - I don't really care what novels I read. I just like most books...it'd be neat, though, to have our choice of what to do for it.

What could be more straightforward? Extending on the theme of being disassociated from the system and feeling like a non-participant the students were voicing their concerns over the apparently meaningless dictates of the curriculum. "Give me a choice - listen to my voice" would be a refrain I would hear over and over again in our time together. While my studious friend Rusty seemed willing to read just about anything, he too desired more purposeful avenues of expression. For Rusty, school was somewhat easier to handle academically than it was for the others. His self-developed literacy talents allowed him to read the assigned class novel in one evening. Unfortunately, Rusty was required to spend the next six weeks "studying" the novel with his classmates. What did he do for those six weeks? Other than some free reading Rusty's time was spent answering questions - questions that, one could conclude, he had already answered for himself after his initial reading. Rusty confessed to me later that in all he had probably read the novel three times in attempting to answer teacher directed questions.

We educators say we are so pressed by time to cover everything that needs to be covered. What are we asking our students to cover? Are what they are spending their time on

legitimate activities in their development of literacy skills?  
Let them tell us.

Talking About Reading Assignments -  
Distrust and Lack of Purpose

Freire (1970) speaks of the "banking concept" of education where learning is seen as a depositing of knowledge from the teacher's hands to that of the students. "It (banking concept) attempts to control thinking and action, leads men to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power" (p.64).

During our time together the students referred often to control. Their feelings of being manipulated, programmed and selected underlay most of their negative comments about school.

Most of the reflections related here grew out of a comment by Mandy: "Most of the stuff I'm interested in isn't in the novels he gives us." From Mandy's comment the conversation swung over to the assignments that were part of their Reading class. Typically, the students expressed disdain for some of the work they were required to do. Some interesting insights into the world of "control" were also provided:

- Researcher - What type of things in reading are you asked to do?  
 Clint - We have novels.  
 Bobbi - We have novel studies. He writes some questions and it's sort of boring.  
 Mandy - And you have to have it done by a certain day and we don't even talk about them (the questions).  
 Clint - Last year we were given fun stuff to answer like building models and things.  
 Researcher - What isn't fun stuff in reading?  
 Clint - The questions that you have to do. The Grade 4's only have, like, 4 questions and we usually have 7 or 8.  
 Mandy - Yeah, once they (Grade 4's) got, like, 3 questions and we had seven.  
 Researcher - Do you see the purpose of questions?

Clint - No.  
 Mandy - No.  
 Rusty - We've read the book, why do we have to find the page number and say exactly what he (the character) says? If we've read the book why should we have to go back and read it over again just to find some answers?  
 Bobbi - 'Cause he doesn't trust us.

Bobbi's closing comment seemed to focus the concerns of the students onto the pivotal question being asked - Why do we have to do questions? Are reading questions being assigned to help further the learner's understanding of the text or are they an avenue of control? While who, what, and where questions may gradually be disappearing from many school classrooms, the purpose of many assignments may still contain the same veiled attempts at assessment. To these students the work being asked of them did little to increase the enjoyment or understanding of the novel. They were attuned enough to the system that they realized this was the teacher's way of "checking up". In an ironic way the students could see the need for such a strategy with a novel that was to them dreary and boring. To them, the teacher had to provide some "motivation" to get them to complete such an assignment.

In the final part of Meeting 3 the group again referred to the fruitlessness of their reading work:

Researcher - What do you like about reading?  
 Rusty - I like reading.  
 Mandy - Yeah, but some of the books are stupid.  
 Clint - He (the teacher) didn't even ask us if we wanted to read the book.  
 Bobbi - Yeah, and sometimes you can't get into these books.  
 Clint - I can't get into this book (class novel).  
 Mandy - It's boring.  
 Bobbi - It has to have a good beginning.  
 Researcher - A good beginning.  
 Mandy - Like, we have to read two chapters at a time...So if you wanted to read the whole book then you'd have to read the whole book over again (to answer the questions).  
 Rusty - Yeah, that's what he (the teacher) said -"Read

the book and then read it again". So we can answer the questions.

Mandy - And then we read it again and again...

Clint - I don't do that. I read the two chapters where the questions are given...so everything's fresh in my mind.

Clint had figured out the most expedient manner in which to get the assignments done - don't enjoy, just produce! Their lack of choice coupled with the external control exerted on them resulted in an unpleasant experience for them all. This type of activity bore no resemblance to the way they read when on their own.

Having to read a book at a predetermined pace, focusing on externally selected relevancy, eliminated any possibility for interest or literacy development.

What the students were asking for was a choice in selection and a common foundation of trust between learner and teacher. They wanted to read; they wanted to learn, but they also wanted to be recognized as unique individuals.

A final condemnation of education followed the preceding excerpt and provided an appropriate epilogue to the student's feeling on school and reading:

Mandy - Well, when you're not in school aren't you supposed to use things you've learned?

Researcher - I agree.

Mandy - And then you don't use them.

Rusty - You never use social studies. As if you're going to walk down the street and some guy's going to say - "What did Ben Franklin do?" (Bobbi laughs loudly).

And if we ever think that adolescents are not articulate individuals I include here Clint's final comment of Meeting 3: "Another thing about school is it isn't as good as having real life experiences because you learn more from real life experiences." In that one sentence Clint had encapsulated decades of progressive educational thought and philosophy.

Can it truly be that simple?

#### **SHARED LITERATURE REFLECTIONS - THE SHARING OF PERSONAL LITERATURE THROUGH PEER BASED TALK**

Allowing readers to choose virtually ensures that everyone will "get into" books...In short, there is no one book everyone has to have read. (Atwell, 1987, p.162)

Meetings 3, 4 and 5 allowed me to listen to the students' needs as readers. As we progressed deeper into our discussions of their personally selected literature I came to understand each person as a unique individual. Their specific interest in books mirrored their interests in the world in general. By allowing the students to direct the conversation from their own "vantage point" I became involved in a vibrant and absorbing interplay of shared ideas and perceptions.

To preface the affective issues arising from these meetings I have included an analytical breakdown of their actual conversations. By doing this I hope to add credence to the myriad of research concerning the importance of "talking to learn" (Jones, 1988). The peer based talk associated with this study proved to be the main contributing factor to the insights the students provided. By sharing and listening to one another, thoughts were forwarded, internalized, reflected on and personalized in a manner not common in a send-receive learning environment.

#### Analysis of Talk

In Meeting 3 the students broke into pairs to talk to each other about favourite literature. The following transcription between Mandy and Bobbi revolved around discussing The Black Stallion series of books. Both girls shared a common love of horses and Walter Farley novels (author of the series). While evidence of the following "mechanics" of peer based talk was in use throughout all our meetings together, the conversation given here managed to

encompass the main components involved. Researchers, such as Barnes (1969, 1976) and Garvey (1984) have analyzed children's talk in an effort to understand its complexities and meaning. In the context of this work I will simply attempt to point out a few methods learners use, during talk, to elicit and form meaning.

In Bobbi's and Mandy's conversation the following strategies were seen to stimulate the process of "talking to learn":

1. A sharing of common knowledge.
2. A rephrasing or adding on from the other's previous statement.
3. The use of conversational prompters in order for the talk to continue.
4. A sharing of personal experiences.

In order to refer back to the conversational pieces later I have numbered each response as it happened. The two girls talked privately in a closed room in the library:

1. Bobbi - How come you like this book? (Black Stallion)
2. Mandy - It's exciting.
3. Bobbi - Why is it exciting? I don't like it. It's dumb.
4. Mandy - I like races.
5. Bobbi - You do? I love this one. (holds up another in the same series) He's going to a race and the plane crashes.
6. Mandy - The plane crashes?
7. Bobbi - Yeah, the plane crashes and (pauses)
8. Mandy - Yeah?
9. Bobbi - Well, I read it a long time ago so I can't really remember. Oh yeah, he bangs his head and what's that disease where you forget stuff?

(At this point the two girls came and asked me for the answer to their question)

10. Mandy - Amnesia! I saw a TV show like that once.
11. Bobbi - So anyway, he finds the Black (horse) but he doesn't know he's found him.
12. Mandy - Um um.

Bobbi then proceeded to relate the plot of the novel, laughing occasionally.

13. Mandy - I'll read that book now that I'm finished my other one.
14. Bobbi - You should.
15. Mandy - I was going to read the Son of the Black Stallion.
16. Bobbi - Do you have it? I'll lend you Man O'War for that one.
17. Mandy - Yeah, but parts of it are so boring. You know, like somebody gets on a train and then he's on the train for awhile.
18. Bobbi - Yeah, I hate books like that. I've had books like that before. I can't remember what this one's like (picking up another Black Stallion book).
19. Mandy - Don't you remember, he meets Satin (horse).
20. Bobbi - Oh yeah, I like this one! I forgot. Who wins?
21. Mandy - The Black wins.
22. Bobbi - Oh, so Black wins.

For several minutes Mandy and Bobbi chatted busily about two other Walter Farley books before finishing up their talk with the following dialogue:

23. Bobbi - What other kinds of books do you like?
24. Mandy - I like ones that you can get into. I hate Gammage Cup (class novel).
25. Bobbi - Yeah, I know, Gammage Cup is SUCH fun!
26. Mandy - Lots of fun (smiles). I like books that are interesting, like you kind of know some things about them so you know what they're talking about in the book.
27. Bobbi - You mean that you know stuff about?
28. Mandy - Yeah, and you know what they're talking about.
29. Bobbi - Yeah, right.
30. Mandy - If you picked up a Black Stallion book and you didn't know anything about horses and they started talking about poles or something (referring to pole position in a horse race).
31. Bobbi - Yeah, uh,uh. Or else handicap races.
32. Mandy - Yeah! And if they don't know what that is, they think, wow, the horse is crippled (both girls laugh at the joke).

The girls' conversation, while only lasting for 15 minutes, provided a meaningful interaction for them both. By

analyzing some of the girls' responses to one another it is evident how the two developed and managed the interaction and why it progressed as it did.

The common knowledge base the girls shared was a key factor in the success of the conversation. At the start of the talk, in excerpts 2, 3, 4 they openly discuss the merits of a book both of them have read. As Tizard and Hughes (1984) had asserted, this common understanding between individuals is of the utmost importance in a learning situation. Further on in the conversation Bobbi and Mandy agree on what makes some books boring (excerpts 17,18) and continue on to remind each other of the plot of a particular book (excerpts 18, 19, 20). This safe personal environment of understanding creates a more natural form of interaction which relates to the reality of their lived situation.

In the final portion of their talk (excerpts 30, 31, 32) the pair discuss the advantages of knowing something about things in novels prior to reading. Here, the girls agree that without their own base of understanding some of the terms or events in a book could be confusing (eg. handicap race being confused with crippled horses).

The strategy of rephrasing or building onto one another's comments seems to provide a necessary springboard into further talk. In the interplay of excerpt 5 and 6 (Bobbi-"You do? I love this one. He's going to a race and the plane crashes"; Mandy-"The plane crashes?") Mandy repeats Bobbi's phrase "the plane crashes" in an attempt to stimulate further clarification. Bobbi does the same thing for Mandy in excerpt 21 and 22 (Mandy-"The Black wins"; Bobbi-"Oh, so Black wins"). Also in excerpt 26 and 27 Bobbi rephrases a statement made by Mandy changing "some things" to "stuff".

The use of conversational prompters somewhat parallels the rephrasing strategy in that it provides the necessary motivator for further talk. This prompting technique is in

evidence throughout the conversation. One example demonstrated in excerpt 2 and 3 (Mandy- "It's exciting."; Bobbi-"Why is it exciting? I don't like it. It's dumb.") shows Bobbi asking a question of Mandy in an attempt to elicit further clarification. In excerpt 7 and 8 [Bobbi-"Yeah, the plane crashes and " (pauses); Mandy-"Yeah?"] a simple "Yeah?" demonstrates Mandy's need for added information and a demand for Bobbi to continue her sentence. The girls use this same brief response technique in excerpt 12 (Mandy-"Um,um") and excerpt 29 (Bobbi-"Yeah, right.")

The sharing of personal experiences amongst the group was continually evident in all the conversations we conducted. Any opportunity to relate on a personal level was taken advantage of and proved to be the richest parts of our time together. In the paired conversation between the two girls, examples of the same strategy were clearly evident. In excerpt 10 ("Amnesia! I saw a TV show like that one.") Mandy relates the disease amnesia to a show she had seen on television. In excerpts 17 and 18 Bobbi tells how she has read "books like that before" in an effort to agree with Mandy's previous statement. The girls also come to a consensus concerning their experiences with a class novel (excerpts 24 and 25).

The conversational "techniques" demonstrated by the pair in this situation were common in all dialogue surrounding the research. Rusty and Clint exhibited similar strategies in their pair talk although, on this particular occasion, the length and richness of their interaction was not comparable to that of the girls. A piece of their pair talk, transcribed here, shows many of the methods described earlier. The boys share a common knowledge of books (ie. Lord of the Rings), ask each other talk promoting questions ("The Hobbit?"), and use other techniques which help to keep their conversation alive:

Clint - Ever read Lord of the Rings?  
 Rusty - Oh yeah, that was a good book.  
 Clint - I like books that are sort of mystical.

- Rusty - Have you read (pause), what do you call it now, it's about a colony in the forest. It turns out the trees are alive and stuff.
- Clint - The Hobbit?
- Rusty - No, not The Hobbit. It's something like that.
- Clint - I hate ones that are really corny like Alice in Wonderland.
- Rusty - Or like Black Rock Cave. Those are so corny.
- Clint - Black Rock Cave was stupid!
- Rusty - I read North of Danger and that's like, an okay book.
- Clint - I like Stephen King books.

This was one of only two occasions in the study when the students talked together in pairs. On both occasions (the other in Meeting 4) the conversation was seen by me as more intense, yet playful in nature. The safe peer environment, along with an added opportunity to talk (two instead of four), forced the participants to listen more intently and respond more frequently. The actual time of involvement during the pair talk was greatly increased and little opportunity was afforded the students for daydreaming or withdrawing temporarily from the process.

According to researchers (Jones, 1988; Elbaz, 1983; Dickson, 1981) learning takes place when a child is "doing" and well organized peer learning situations can help maximize efficient learning time by placing students in an active, continuous process. The pair talk demonstrated interaction that was not only efficient but enjoyable, instructional and worthwhile for both participants.

The shared literature meetings attempted to observe the "other side" of the learning situation. With some of the control of choice and direction now in the hands of the learners the talk took a different turn. As will be illustrated in the following sections, conversations surrounding personally experienced literature demonstrated a dynamic awareness on the part of the students not evident in previous meetings. Progressing from talk motivated by the negative perceptions of learning, the dialogue became an open,

positive sharing of literature likes and personal reflections.

The experiential learning that transpired during these meetings stimulated interest and redefined each student's definition of self-as-reader. This growing awareness of self-as-reader will be described in detail later on in this chapter. As Cell (1984) says: "Personal knowledge of another is based on our knowledge of ourselves" (p.118). In this situation the personal knowledge referred to the characters in our books as well as the growing awareness of each other.

#### Experiencing a Connection

In preparation for Meeting 4 I asked the group to bring in favourite books or ideas for talk concerning a favourite character. By this point in the study, and following the "success" of the pair talk in the previous meeting, a feeling of security and camaraderie was beginning to form. The talk appeared smoother and more relaxed and previously quieter members (Mandy, for instance) began to contribute equally. This sense of group connection culminated in a spirited 90 minute conversation in Meeting 5.

Prior to Meeting 4 I had the opportunity to observe Allan's class practise their Christmas play. Afterwards, the five of us gathered in our meeting area where the following conversation began our session:

Researcher - You guys are working on a Christmas play.  
 Rusty - I like it.  
 Clint - It sucks!  
 Bobbi - Last year we started in October.  
 Clint - Yeah, and we had a really good Christmas play.  
 Mandy - This one's only 3 pages.  
 Bobbi - We're starting now...it's half way through November now.  
 Mandy - And it's only 3 pages.  
 Researcher - So you feel it's a bit late to start a Christmas play.  
 Mandy - It's only 3 pages.  
 Clint - That's like 10 minutes and it's a really boring play.  
 Rusty - Yeah, I guess it is a little short.

The tone of this interplay held more significance than its overall content. The group was developing a certain closeness and each response came quickly without a lot of forethought as to possible reactions. Mandy, who often sat quietly for several minutes at a time, was, with her simple comment, asserting herself as a vocal member of the group. She no longer seemed intimidated by the seeming eloquence of her peers but persisted in her observation ("It's only 3 pages.") until Clint finally acknowledged her statement by extending on her point (ie. "That's like 10 minutes..."). Rusty followed suit and at the same time added his agreement to the others' concerns.

During our sharing of literature it was common for individuals to become "lost" in conversation and carry on discussing a specific topic for long periods of time (anywhere from 2 to 10 minutes). Because their talk concerned something of which they had prior knowledge of it seemed easier for them to respond and share with one another.

On one occasion Clint and Rusty became so absorbed in their dialogue that they completely forgot about the rest of us. The talk was very lively and intense as they collaboratively pieced together a common piece of literature:

- Researcher - Tell me about a character that you liked or hated in a story.
- Clint - I liked the Headless Horseman. I felt sorry for him because he was headless.
- Researcher - Tell me about the story.
- Clint - I can't really remember, but...
- Rusty - I know! It's about this guy and he liked this girl and this other dude did too, so they started fighting over her. And then he told his story about the Headless Horseman and the guy got really freaked out!
- Clint - And he had to ride through Sleepy Hollow and that's where the headless Horseman was.
- Rusty - Yeah, and, uh, something supposedly happened...
- Clint - Well, he died. He just disappeared and all he found was his hat and a dead pumpkin.
- Rusty - Yeah, remember the next day, didn't they have

a picture of the horseman at the table?  
 Clint - No. People said that he might have gone over  
 to another valley.  
 Rusty - Oh yeah, I remember!  
 Clint - That was a cool story. I can still see that  
 guy on his horse.

Together the boys recreated a story they had read in the  
 past. For Clint it proved to be a valuable experience as he  
 didn't read much and during previous discussions about  
 personal literature never got really involved. Later Clint  
 told me that he hadn't actually read the story but had  
 listened to a teacher read it to them one Hallowe'en. He said  
 he really liked scary stories and thought he might try and  
 read the story for himself.

The connection between Rusty and Clint had caused Clint  
 to view reading in a different way. To be able to share  
 literature with someone was a new and interesting experience  
 for Clint. He was beginning to see and hear what other's  
 experiences were with reading. By his own confession Clint  
 was not an avid reader ("I watch T.V. most of the time at  
 home. We've got a satellite dish so there's lots to watch.")  
 Early on in Meeting 3 I felt Clint often responded in a manner  
 that would "include" him in the group discussion:

Researcher - Have you ever felt "lost" in a book?  
 Rusty - Sure.  
 Bobbi - Yeah, I guess.  
 Clint - Yeah, like you just don't know what's going  
 on. That happens to me all the time.

When I found out later from Clint that The Gammage Cup was the  
 first book he had read since last Spring I sensed his need to  
 belong and fit in. As the meetings progressed Clint's  
 artificial interest in books seemed to develop into a more  
 real one. As a result of shared literature talk, Clint  
 attempted to read books, one presented by Rusty and another  
 from myself. While he completed neither novel his added  
 interest stemmed from his desire to experience what others had  
 experienced.

At other times in their conversations about literature the group would connect on an affective level. On these occasions, they would share their common experiences about what it was like to be a reader:

- Researcher - Do you ever feel a part of a book?  
 Clint - You sometimes wish you could get into the book, like, inside the book.  
 Rusty - Yeah, I feel that way sometimes. Like you want to be a part of it or like you are a part of it. That's when I like a book.  
 Bobbi - And at the end you want to know what happened (the characters). You know, sometimes the end...  
 Clint - You mean cliff hangers?  
 Bobbi - Yeah, they sort of leave you hanging. I hate that!  
 Researcher - Yeah, I know what you mean.

Another dimension of the shared literature sessions was the group's growing tolerance of each other's uniqueness. As interests and favourite books were shared a feeling of common purpose also pervaded the responses. They seemed to understand that while individuals possess different likes and dislikes when it came to literature selection, they all wanted the freedom of choice and their own unique avenue of expression.

Earlier in Meeting 3, Clint had joked about how "sissy" books like The Black Stallion were, adding that he couldn't understand how anyone could get so wrapped up in "dumb horse stories". In the following conversation (which is a continuation from the last transcription recorded here) Mandy and Bobbi respond to my comment.

Clint listens quietly while they speak and then adds a positive comment to complete the interaction:

- Researcher - Cliff hanger endings must happen in your books (Black Stallion), Mandy.  
 Mandy - They do.  
 Bobbi - Yeah, they sort of just drop and then you have to buy the next book.  
 Mandy - Well, there's different stallions in some of

the books.

Bobbi - There's Man O'War.

Researcher - Do you like him as much?

Mandy - Well, I haven't really read him a lot but he's supposed to be exactly like the Black (Stallion).

Bobbi - Yeah, like he's red and he's wild but the Black is much more strong.

Mandy - Yeah, like he's supposed to be the same strength and stuff.

Bobbi - He's similar.

Clint - Well, one thing I liked about the movies of the Black Stallion is the good photography of the horse running along the beach.

The agreeable manner in which this final comment was presented exhibited none of the earlier sarcasm concerning the girls' love of horse literature. Also, in the above exchange, the two girls shared information with one another in a very non-threatening way. As Clint and Rusty had done earlier, they were simply sharing knowledge of a common area of understanding. Out of the connection with one another came an understanding; out of the understanding came a recognition of self.

### Connecting Personal Literature with Lived Realities

The experiences the students began to share created an atmosphere of intimacy, warmth and stimulating conversation. As the inter-connectedness of the group increased, the vehicle of shared literature took on added importance for them. In being able to share past read stories and books, each individual started to create an image of himself-as-reader.

Paulo Freire (1970) once said:

...acquiring literacy does not involve memorizing sentences, word, or syllables - lifeless objects disconnected to an existential universe - but rather is an

act of creation and recreation, a self transformation producing a state of intervention in one's context. (p.48)

"Our ability to learn from our experience is important in every part of our lives." (Cell, 1984, p.3). The transcriptions included here will help illustrate Cell's statement on experiential learning. As the group formed lines of connection with each other and with their own selves, the control of learning shifted from an externally imposed force to a more personally driven one. As the conversations surrounding these final few meetings suggest, the empowerment of the learner produces a more meaningful, relevant learning situation (Rogers, 1983).

In Meetings 3 and 4, talk surrounding favourite characters and books produced a number of interesting observations. As alluded to earlier, the talk created during this time took on a more productive, positive feeling. In Meeting 3, for example, negative references were sometimes made to the way reading was taught in school, interspersed amongst the talk concerning shared literature. This is illustrated in Mandy and Bobbi's pair talk when they referred back to the class novel, The Gammage Cup, and is also evident in the boy's pair talk:

- Clint - I like stories about weird occurrences. Like, you ever watched Unsolved Mysteries?
- Rusty - Yeah!
- Clint - I like stuff like that.
- Rusty - I like those kind of shows 'cause they're interesting.
- Clint - (after a short pause) I hate this book we're reading now because it doesn't have any action in it.
- Rusty - Yeah, I just feel that other books are better.

After these comments the boys carried on with their talk about favourite literature.

As we progressed through the next meeting, talk of this

type (ie. negative references to school) decreased markedly as the students got more and more involved in relating past literature experiences. The negative comments were replaced by a growing awareness and interest in the books being shared.

On several occasions during our shared literature talk, students expressed an interest in a book another student or myself was discussing. Early on in Meeting 3 I shared a part of the novel Lord of the Flies with the group. After reading a small section from the beginning, Rusty asked if he could borrow the book as he had always wanted to read it. The next time we met he informed me he had read the book and thoroughly enjoyed it. Despite the brief time we spent together this happened on several occasions. The non-threatening, non-evaluative structure of our meetings seemed to provide a natural foundation for sharing.

In our last formal meeting together (Meeting 5) Clint also expressed an interest in a book I had brought to share:

Clint - The Outsiders, that's a cool book! Is this your book? Can I borrow it?  
 Researcher - Actually, it's out of your library. You can have it if you want.  
 Clint - Thanks!

This particular conversation got others of the group interested as well which may or may not have resulted from Clint's initial enthusiasm:

Rusty - That's a cool book. I've read a bit of it. I'm going to get that one.  
 Mandy - That's the book I should've brought. It's supposed to be cool.

The effect of peer approval on reading choices may provide another dimension on the value of shared literature. The consensus that this was a "cool" book seemed to make Clint all the more determined to read it. He quickly reminded me at this point that he had requested the book first. I assured him that he could have it at the close of the meeting.

In preparation for this final meeting as a group, I had asked the students to bring in one favourite book to talk about. As we sat around the table much passing and sharing of books preceded our talk. The ninety minute conversation that evolved from this meeting was the lengthiest one we had. Halfway through the talk I asked the students if they wanted to go overtime and they all heartily agreed. In subsequent transcriptions of the meeting I found my own talk to be very minimal and non-directive. The times I did respond seemed to be on more of a peer level than that of a discussion leader. The dynamics of the talk appeared to take on a life of their own and, in my opinion, was both rich and rewarding in nature.

After I had finished talking about my book, The Outsiders, it was Clint's turn to share. He had brought in a novel he had read last year called Space Station, Seventh Grade. As Clint was describing the novel and its characters he continually made reference to Chapter 2 which, he explained, was a slightly "naughty part" by saying it concerned a scene in the Grade 7 boys change room where the main character was nervous about showering naked with his fellow classmates. This elicited nervous giggles from Mandy and Bobbi and a group demand that Clint read out the scene in question. Clint did so amongst much laughter and embarrassed smiles. The interest level at this point was high and after the reading was finished the book was eagerly passed around the table to a chorus of: "I'll have to get that one!" The book touched upon some realities of growing up and obvious connections were being made by all group members. As Meek (1983) said in her study of literacy: "Reading lessons were not 'special' to our pupils because they were about reading, but because they crystallized their hopes and fears, their anxiety and doubt about themselves" (p.223).

The following transcriptions came about from Rusty's sharing time. After Clint had finished, Rusty began to talk about his book, True Ghost Stories. What transpired from this point on was forty minutes of intense, in-depth discussion of

personal experiences with the "unexplained". Rusty began slowly, almost hesitantly, perhaps feeling a book of short stories, on a possibly fictitious topic, was not appropriate for sharing. After a few minutes Rusty stopped and I took the opportunity to ask the group whether or not they believed in ghosts:

- Mandy - Sometimes it's just your imagination.  
 Bobbi - I don't believe in ghosts...I'm more afraid of people, like murderers and stuff.  
 Clint - Yeah, I know what you mean.  
 Bobbi - Just awhile ago me and Mandy and Chrissy watched Hallowe'en.  
 Mandy - Oh yeah, that was freaky!  
 Bobbi - Yeah and we were all alone in the house and we got so freaked out!

At this point in the meeting the talk became spirited. The students all had something to share, initially with a movie they had all seen, and then with personal situations they had experienced.

- Bobbi - Yeah, so the guy in the show (Hallowe'en) all through October he killed people and I thought, you know...  
 Researcher - It's your turn next!  
 Bobbi - Yeah!  
 Mandy - Oh, Hallowe'en, yeah, I think he killed 16 or 17 people, then...  
 Bobbi - Like, I always hate it when people (murderers) just walk, they don't run.  
 Mandy - I know! (she shivers a bit)  
 Clint - And he's always there.  
 Bobbi - Yeah!  
 Clint - He's just psyching you out!  
 Mandy - And he's always there, like he walks, right.  
 Bobbi - And his mask.  
 Clint - It's just a white mask.  
 Mandy - Chrissy says you can see his eyes.  
 Rusty - You can see his eyes.  
 Clint - Well, sort of.  
 Bobbi - Well, they couldn't be black.  
 Rusty - You see the outlines.  
 Clint - Yeah.  
 Mandy - You can see the outlines but I'd think they'd colour them all black so that you can't see.  
 Bobbi - But it was gross at the beginning when this

guy's head (was cut off) and all the blood.  
Yuk!

Clint - Yeah, I cut my finger in gym and Becky goes:  
"Eeeuww!"

Bobbi - I can't stand blood.

Clint - (looking at me) She would have fainted,  
remember this summer when I flipped my bike?  
She would have fainted!

Researcher - True.

The group had shared their reactions to the movie Hallowe'en and had become absorbed in the re-telling of it. They had also related parts of the movie to things that had happened to them. Bobbi admitted she hated the sight of blood which caused Clint to remember an experience at school. Clint and I then shared some common understanding in reference to a bike accident he had experienced on a biking tour I had organized the previous summer. The constant references to lived realities seemed to stimulate the talk to greater heights.

The talk continued with Clint and Rusty describing a scary night walk they had gone on. Their story initiated the following exchange:

Mandy - I hate that feeling when you're walking down a street and you get the feeling that somebody's following you.

Rusty - Yeah, I know. (Here Bobbi does an exaggerated shiver and moans quietly)

Clint - And then you start to run and get more freaked out.

Researcher - Then when you look back you think you see a shadow.

Bobbi - Because your eyes are moving.

Mandy - Yeah, but if I don't look back I imagine there's something behind me.

Clint - I like walking with somebody else 'cause then I'm not freaked out.

Mandy - Yeah, I know.

Rusty - Yeah, but me and Clint were still freaked out. (Referring back to their scary night walk)

Rusty went on to provide further details of the walk with Clint relating parts of Rusty's story to a movie he had seen

involving a similar situation.

As Rusty finished his story he asked Mandy about something she had told him had happened to her:

- Rusty - Weren't you guys (Mandy and Bobbi) in a barn or something?  
 Mandy - No, we were up in a loft, you know, Crissy's loft above the stairs?  
 Rusty - Of, yeah!  
 Mandy - And we'd think somebody'd be under the stairs ready to grab you or something.  
 Clint - I hate going down stairs!  
 Rusty - I hate going down stairs!

The group continued to become "lost" in their talk telling each other about their own fears and funny ways of dealing with them:

- Bobbi - Whenever I'm scared I feel like lying down.  
 Mandy - I lock myself in a corner.  
 Bobbi - Like, I don't feel like waking up. Like, I feel like going to sleep so I can't see anything that will happen.  
 Researcher - The hiding-under-the-covers-trick!  
 Clint - Yeah, I always do that 'cause you don't know if he's going to come and get you and if you have a chance to get away.  
 Mandy - Yeah, I hate that when you think you hear someone come into your room at night and the door is closed and then it opens.  
 Rusty - Yeah, I hate that.

At this point both Rusty and I related scary occasions we had experienced while alone at home. The others listened intently and forwarded several clarifying questions in an effort to fully appreciate the situation.

The talk growing out of Rusty's book choice took up over half of our meeting time and ended with me asking the group about their interest in these types of books:

- Researcher - How many would be interested in reading ghost story type books?  
 Rusty - I would.  
 Mandy - Yeah!

Clint - Me too.  
Bobbi - I like ghost stories.  
Rusty - Oh, I can't sit here in bare shorts.  
(referring to the goose bumps caused by some  
of the experiences shared)

Bobbi borrowed the book from Rusty that day and took it home to read. The following week she mentioned to me she had read several stories from it and found it very entertaining. Bobbi added that she wanted to buy a "scary type book" the next time she was in town.

The few excerpts included here from the group's lengthy discussion on ghosts is not intended to be a prescription for meaningful reading instruction. The situation in which the talk was generated was one not necessarily conducive to the classroom environment. We were but a small group of friends getting together to discuss some common interests. What the talk does point toward is the value of bringing together the personal realities of the reader. The feelings of irrelevance and powerlessness expressed earlier by the students seemed to disappear in an excited exchange of personal recollections of their own experiences of literature.

In a sense, the great waste in school comes from the child's inability to be able to use the experiences he gets outside of school in any sort of meaningful, creative way (Dewey, 1963). Here the students were able to freely relate experiences to one another in a socially charged atmosphere. The subsequent borrowing and sharing of literature amongst the group may also provide some answers to the age old teacher question: How do I get this kid to read? As exemplified in a reluctant reader such as Clint, peer talk about common literature and experiences can be a highly motivating force in directing and stimulating a reader's interest.

In closing this section on personal realities I find it necessary to reflect again on the power of choice. The apparent success of this meeting resulted, in part, from the freedom afforded the students. They were free to bring in

whatever book they chose. During their talk time they were free to digress or expand on any portions of the conversation they deemed necessary. From this freedom sprang an hour and a half of relaxed fun, worthwhile sharing and effective group discussion strategies. As Rogers (1983) says: "Significant learning combines the logical and the intuitive, the intellect and the feelings, the concept and the experience, the idea and the meaning" (p.20). In talking about their scary experiences the students brought their whole selves to bear and revealed a uniqueness uncharacteristic of the generalizations of the classroom.

#### Recognition of Self-as-Reader

As Rusty so aptly said: "There's some books I really like and others are just okay". Rusty had a sense of what it was to be a reader and an overall impression of what he liked to read. As is common with all active readers he was developing a growing awareness of himself-as-reader.

Some of the advantages of allowing a reader to choose his/her own direction in reading is it provides him/her the space in which to develop interests and be attuned to shifting tastes. In these critical moments of experimentation, of thoughtfulness, of engaging with living text, readers come to hear their own voice (Polakow, 1986). By dialoguing with the text readers are, in effect, creating their own personal views of the world around him. In this dialogue there is a need to explore and grow. A classroom of prescribed novels and imposed literature can serve to undermine and confuse this growing process.

The lack of personal involvement in school with their own literacy development, offered some interesting insights into the group's experience with reading. Rusty's interests in books were eclectic to say the least:

Rusty - I enjoy all types of reading. I just like to read. I don't care what they're about. I

just like to read.

and

Rusty - These are my Dad's books from when he was a kid. They're all about King Arthur and knights and stuff. They're really neat.

and

Rusty - Yeah, I really enjoyed the book (The Lord of the Flies). It's like you said, desert island stories are neat.

and

Researcher - How many of you liked The Gammage Cup?  
 Clint - Not me.  
 Rusty - I enjoyed it. Some parts were boring but I enjoyed it okay.

While his interest in literature was varied it also appeared to be random and aimless. During our time together Rusty often discussed books he liked and ones he hadn't enjoyed:

Clint - Ever read Lord of the Rings?  
 Rusty - Oh yeah, that was a good book.  
 Clint - I like ones that are sort of mystical.

and

Rusty - (Books) like Black Rock Cave, those are so corny.  
 Clint - Black Rock Cave was stupid.  
 Rusty - I read North of Danger and that's like an okay book.  
 Clint - I like Stephen King books.

In these earlier exchanges with Clint, both boys used each other's responses to build their own definition of a good book. Rusty's comment on North of Danger being "an okay book" shows him judging the merits of one book over another [eg. "I really enjoyed the book (The Lord of the Flies)"]. As he continued to verbalize his personal tastes and interests I saw Rusty better appreciating what it meant to be a reader:

Rusty - When I'm reading I always imagine myself as the guy

(in the story)...and it's just me doing what that guy does. I can see it perfectly.

Bobbi - You mean you're killing someone or something?

Rusty - I don't know. I just have that (ability). I'm lucky I guess 'cause when I read I can hear and see what's happening. It makes me that person and I'm the one walking around or shipwrecked (referring to novel Lord of the Flies). It's like I can sense everything perfectly.

As was evidenced from Rusty's talk during the study and my visit to his home (discussed in an upcoming section) Rusty did "care what they're about" when selecting a novel. Without knowledgeable direction (from the teacher) and avenues of literature sharing, Rusty simply read. Some of the talk that transpired from our meetings caused him to reflect more on what he read.

Another interesting observation concerning the reader's recognition of his own voice came about toward the close of Meeting 5. After Rusty and Clint has finished sharing their books with the group Mandy and Bobbi began to talk about the Black Stallion series again. As evidenced from the pair talk in Meeting 3 the girls shared a common love of horses and horse stories. During my home visit to Bobbi's I had noticed two other novel series displayed on bookshelves in her room, The Babysitting Club and Sweet Valley High. As the following conversation unravelled I reflected on this fact. Mandy began by explaining a Black Stallion book she had brought to the meeting:

Mandy - Casey has been winning some races and then I forget the other horse. What's the other horse's name? (looking at Bobbi)

Bobbi - I don't know.

Mandy - Anyway, there's a colt younger than the Black and Casey (that) has been beating other horses (in races). Oh, it's Eclipse (the name of the horse).

Researcher - What attracts you to these books?

Mandy - I know something about the books so it just saves time. You know what they're talking about. So it's more interesting.

- Researcher - Bobbi?  
 Bobbi - I don't like them very much anymore. There's something about them.  
 Researcher - So are you growing out of these books?  
 Bobbi - Yeah, I guess so. They're sort of, like, all the same and the topic doesn't really excite me anymore.  
 Researcher - How about you, Mandy?  
 Mandy - I still like 'em. They get boring after awhile, like, if you read a certain book they get boring. Some of them I like.  
 Bobbi - There's more to life than just horses.

A few minutes later, after Mandy had finished talking about her book, I asked Bobbi the following question:

- Researcher - Do you see yourself going anywhere from here now that you're not reading these books (Black Stallion)?  
 Bobbi - I don't know.  
 Mandy - You read Babysitting Club books.  
 Bobbi - No, I don't like those anymore either.  
 Rusty - What about Sweet Valley High?  
 Bobbi - (smiles) Yeah, I like those ones!

In her final comment ("Yeah, I like those ones!") Bobbi shyly admitted that her taste in literature had swung over from horse stories to "boy" stories. Her conversation with the group seemed to crystallize her new found interest in adolescent literature. She had redefined her interests as a reader and had come to realize that it was natural to grow out of one type of book into another. Bobbi was over a year older than Mandy and more physically and emotionally mature. Mandy, while admitting that even she found Black Stallion books occasionally boring, still remained interested in what they had to offer. Bobbi, on the other hand, was entering a new stage in life and required a corresponding relevancy in the literature she chose.

The final transcriptions from Meeting 5 further illustrate this point of matching personal growth with literacy growth. After all the students had finished sharing I read to them the first chapter from The Pigman, a modern realistic novel about two high school friends (a boy and

girl). I chose this particular book and chapter due to its seeming relevance to some of the values and attitudes we had discussed during our time together. In the opening chapter the main character talks about his high school experiences. From the opening line "Now, I don't like school..." to talk of bombs in the bathroom, smoking, fat teachers and rotten apple rolling during boring lessons, the group listened intently, laughed at appropriate times and urged me to read on and to not leave out "any of the good stuff". As I finished reading I asked the group for their response:

Researcher - Responses please.  
 Bobbi - I like that book!  
 Clint - I like that book!  
 Rusty - I want to take it!  
 Bobbi - He doesn't like school, like, he's sort of bad.  
 Clint - He's like I used to be.  
 Rusty - Can I take this book from you?  
 Researcher - Yes. (handing it to him)  
 Clint - He's not a goody-goody.  
 Mandy - Yeah, it's pretty good. (laughing)  
 Bobbi - I'd want to read it 'cause he's older than us but he's not an unreal person. We can relate to him.

As Rusty took yet another book home to read the group continued to talk and laugh good-naturedly about the passage I had read to them. The response offered by Bobbi: "We can relate to him." seemed to draw together some of the realities of personal reading. For Bobbi, in particular, personal reality did not include strange dwarves in purple cloaks fighting an army of mushroom people (reference here to The Gammage Cup). The stage of puberty Bobbi was now entering demanded a new set of realities and a desire to understand some of the confusing feelings she was experiencing. Where was she to find the assurance that what she was going through in school and in life was common for most adolescents her age? She had found some solace in the teenage series, Sweet Valley High, and had started to realize there were other types of books that dealt with the problems of school and growing up (ie. The Pigman).

Atwell (1984) suggests that "if we want our adolescent students to grow to appreciate literature, another first step is allowing them to exert ownership and choose the literature they will read" (p.161). Because this need and the complex social process involved in literacy acquisition was acknowledged our shared literature sessions were both purposeful and exciting. Our reading was an extension of our daily lives which involved: reading certain types of books to impress our friends (Clint's motivation at times), reading books connected with our personal interests (Mandy and Bobbi with the Black Stallion series), or using books as a method of opening conversations (discussion following Rusty's sharing of True Ghost Stories). Books are often the common ground of experience we share as well as being an important part of our world. During our personal reflections on literature the group came to see reading as a way of communicating and sharing with others as well as a functional activity and a source of pleasure.

An involved, self-directed pursuit of literature creates an environment where the learner can better recognize himself-as-reader. This sense of independence and of self helps the reader to better understand his own reading interests and enables him/her to grow and mature naturally. Therefore "the challenge for teachers is to create the same environments within their classrooms, classrooms where reading and writing are always seen as functional and purposeful, vehicles for learning, and natural and pleasurable extensions of our social worlds" (Cairney, 1987, p.91).

#### **HOME VISITS - ESTABLISHING A COMMON BASE OF UNDERSTANDING**

During our time together I had occasion to visit each of the students at his/her home. In attempting to seek a better understanding of the adolescents' experiences with school and reading I felt it necessary to discover as much about them as I could. Their earlier complaints about the system seemed to suggest both a distancing between learner and content and

learner and teacher. Was there a need for a more personal definition of teacher, student and content in creating a meaningful learning environment? As van Manen (1984a) says: "When I act towards a child I feel responsible that I act out of a full understanding of what it was like to be in this world as a child."(p.9). Prior to our shared literature meetings I "shared experiences" with the students in an attempt to better appreciate their uniqueness as individuals.

To begin, I will outline some of the insights about the students gained from the visits. The data collected served as a foundation for the analysis of the talk generated from our meetings together. For this reason, I will not delve into minute details of our time together, but more the overall impressions gathered. It is hoped that these reflections will point toward the need for the school to decrease the gap between home and institution.

From my time with Bobbi I discovered many things about her family and her life outside of school. Bobbi's room was somewhat typical of a young female teenager, decorated in pink with posters of popular media stars and offering evidence of her love of horses. As Bobbi showed me her pet shark in a large tubular tank, she talked about her horse and some of the ribbons she had won in competition. After looking through her personal library and making note of some of her literature interests we visited her younger brother's room and watched him play with his model train set. Bobbi seemed quite animated and more than willing to talk about her interests and hobbies.

On returning to the dining room, Bobbi, her father and myself sat down to talk over a cup of tea. Bobbi's father talked with me about Bobbi's experiences with school, making particular reference to her Grade 6 year. Bobbi had attended school until December of that year and then was removed to be taught at home. Bobbi's parents had apparently felt that she wasn't being challenged academically and they worried about

the poor attitude and lack of moral values being displayed in the classroom:

(Bobbi's)

- Father - I felt the tone of the room was having a negative effect on Bobbi.
- Researcher - In what way?
- Father - Well, with the lack of any real academic work plus the chaotic nature of the classroom, well, we just felt it wasn't the place we wanted our daughter.

I asked Bobbi how she had felt about last year's situation:

- Bobbi - I hated staying at home.
- Researcher - Why?
- Bobbi - 'Cause it was so boring!
- Researcher - Did you miss your friends?
- Bobbi - Yeah, I couldn't see anyone or talk to anyone except on week-ends or sometimes after school.
- Researcher - But your father said the room was pretty wild.
- Bobbi - Yeah, but it was kind of fun watching everybody goof off and the teacher freaking out.

Bobbi's comments further reminded me of the importance of the social aspects of school for the learner (Goodlad, 1984).

As I left, Bobbi asked me if I would like to come back next week to see the new horse her father was buying her. I told her I would meet her after school and we could go together. She agreed. On the day I went to pick up Bobbi I found her still in the class although school had been dismissed a few minutes earlier. She informed me she had a detention and that she would be another twenty minutes. I found out later from the teacher that Bobbi had been in an "odd mood" that day and had neglected to finish up her Math homework.

As Bobbi and I drove to her house she told me of how her horse had died on the weekend only a day after the "new" horse arrived. I could tell it was very difficult for her to stay composed and I offered my condolences as she explained the situation. After seeing her new horse and talking briefly

with her mother I left for home. As I was driving away I thought back to the detention Bobbi had served after school that day. I wondered if Allan knew what she had gone through over the weekend.

In my time with Rusty I made a list of all the interests and hobbies evidenced in his home and by his talk. Rusty talked continuously during our visit together and, like Bobbi, seemed pleased to receive the attention. He spoke politely and listened closely when I asked about something in his room and appeared eager to share his interests with me. I found out the following things about Rusty which, prior to my visit, I had not known:

1. He had spent two weeks in China the previous summer.
2. He did sketching and watercolours in his spare time.
3. He loved building models of boats and airplanes.
4. He had built a model of the Titanic and presented it as part of a class project in Grade 6.
5. He owned and had read the novels Frankenstein and Dracula and thoroughly enjoyed them.
6. He had spent 10 days last summer on a 130 foot cadet training ship and was going again this summer.
7. He had taken 4 years of horse back riding lessons when he was younger.
8. He read King Arthur books given to him by his father and drew some of the illustrations out of the books.
9. He had a weight lifting set in his room.
10. He drew and wrote cartoons in his spare time.

Rusty's interests were far more diverse than I had originally envisioned. He was a boy with a wealth of unique experiences and a keen interest in a vast array of subjects.

The time I spent with Rusty was both enlightening and absorbing. His mature manner and quick wit made the visit a memorable one. In the brief 45 minute time span I had discovered more about Rusty than I could hope to learn in months of immersion in a classroom environment.

On the way to visiting Mandy's home the two of us stopped by a neighbouring farm to feed and water her horse. Mandy kept her horse there as her own home was not large enough or set up to accommodate him. On arriving at Mandy's home we found her mother busily preparing dinner for a small gathering she was having that night. The house was warm and inviting and after a brief chat in the kitchen with Mandy's mom, the two of us went to her room. Mandy and I both laughed at her obvious aversion to neatness as she began to show me some of her "treasures". Mandy's room was filled with horse pictures, horse books, both fiction and non-fiction, and horse magazines. While her love of horses was not a surprise, the overwhelming amount of paraphernalia on the subject was enlightening. As well as telling me all about her books on horses Mandy pointed out a painting done by her father and some pictures of a close friend. Mandy spent some time telling me about books in the Black Stallion series, of which she had many. While her interest in these books had already become obvious from our prior talks, part of her conversation revealed something about her changing tastes:

- Mandy -                Yeah, I read 8 of these last year, but this year I've only read this one and I've started another.
- Researcher -        You're getting a little bored of them?
- Mandy -                Well, it's just that they get to sound a bit the same after awhile.
- Researcher -        So, you read other types of books then?
- Mandy -                No. I still like reading these ones.

I did notice some new books on Mandy's shelf of a more modern realistic fiction nature (eg. The One-Eyed Cat by Paula Fox). When asked about them Mandy said she had received them as presents but hadn't gotten around to reading them yet. I sensed Mandy's "stallion fever" gradually lessening as her interests and priorities in life changed. After being with Mandy for only an hour I felt I had come to know her better.

My visit to Clint's home was similar to the others in that I came to better understand the world he lived in. Clint actually lived in two homes as his parents had occasion to

house sit a beach front estate as well as live in their own modest home. While I didn't visit Clint at the estate he told me his time was spent there rambling around in its immense design, watching the satellite fed television and luxuriating in the sauna and whirlpool. Time, in his own smaller home, was spent doing odd chores, occasional homework and watching T.V.

Clint's room exhibited a love of rock stars and self created macabre drawings of horror film characters and mythical monsters. Clint told me he enjoyed playing his electronic video game machine and drawing pictures of "gross" people.

Clint's talent for drawing and active imagination mirrored the type of person he was. In his own words, Clint described how he most liked "goofing around with his friends" as he found it boring to just sit around and read or do nothing. I thought of how difficult it must be for him in the classroom, which was perhaps why he was seen as a behaviour problem by his teacher.

Tizard and Hughes (1984) assert: "If teachers knew more about the interest and skills that children display at home, they might be better able to see where the school could complement the strengths of the home" (p.257). For myself, the home visits provided me with a clearer, more authentic image of the adolescents I was observing. It allowed me to not only "peek in" to their personal world but to develop a common base of understanding between myself and the group. Coupled with their visits to my home, the distance between learning (the study) and learner was significantly decreased. Although our time together was far too short to take advantage of all the information and experiences we had shared, I could see the potential for connecting personal realities with the reality of schooling.

### ONE ON ONE - PRIVATE INTERVIEWS

Our last meeting together involved me asking the students six questions pertaining to topics we had covered (see Chapter 111 - Methodology). The transcriptions offered here will complete the talk we shared for the purpose of this research. This part of the study offers a reflective re-thinking of attitudes and perceptions already provided by the students. Much of what they had to say here were echoes or articulations of earlier comments and themes.

This was the only formal meeting where the subjects were spoken to individually. The responses were frank and sometimes dealt with opinion not clearly presented before. While their opinions and comments appear varied, the "single voice" discussed earlier on in the study, is evident throughout. The questions I posed will be presented as they were given, followed by a selection of student responses.

Question #1 - How do you feel you are treated in school?

#### Responses:

Rusty - He (teacher) talks so much and then doesn't give us long enough periods for some of the things we have to do.

and

Clint - We're treated like little kids.

and

Mandy - Well, things don't make sense because you barely use it (schooling). If you just learned the basics you'd do better. Like if you just learned how to divide, multiply, add and subtract and decimals I think it would be fine. And in reading, if you just learned to read a little bit. And then social studies you don't really have to do any social studies in the real world and then science, well, I guess if you wanted to be a scientist.

and

Bobbi - Well, things you do in school, some of them are important like math. You have to go to the store to buy stuff. But some of it is totally dumb like English and writing stuff. Unless you want to be a writer, I guess.

The group's comments harken back to the themes of oppression, inequality and lack of relevance in school. Trying to relate what happened in school to the way their personal world functioned was difficult for all group members.

Question #2 - What would you change about school and what would you leave the same?

Responses:

Rusty - I don't mind it (school) really because it's like as easy as the world. I've gone to so many schools and you don't really have to do much.

- also -

Rusty - I like it when we get to do reading. I like doing the questions. They're easy. So I can get them done before everyone else.

Researcher - So you get them done and then what do you do?

Rusty - Then we get to read our own stuff.

Researcher - You read your own novels? You don't go back and read the class novel?

Rusty - Well, he (teacher) usually wants us to but we never do.

Researcher - Did it bother you that some kids didn't finish the book and you did?

Rusty - Yeah, sort of. I know Jimmy didn't read it. He only read up to Chapter 2.

Researcher - How did Jimmy get away with not reading the book? How did he do the questions?

Rusty - I helped Jimmy a lot. Me and Jimmy worked together quite a bit. So I did most of his questions for him. Some people just ignored the book and did the questions.

Researcher - So, do you feel they enjoyed the assignment?

Rusty - No, they didn't even try to read it so they couldn't have enjoyed it because if they actually took the time to read it they might have enjoyed it more (the assignment).

This minor revelation of Rusty's concerning other people

in his class just "doing the questions" pointed to the importance of attitude and motivation on behalf of the reader. As Atwell (1984) contends, the power of ownership is a prime force in stimulating reader involvement. The general lack of involvement of Rusty's peers during this novel study underscores this need.

Clint's Response to Question #2:

- Clint - (I'd change) like reading. You'd be able to choose a book but you'd all (the class) have to agree on a book.
- Researcher - Why do you think everyone would have to agree?
- Clint - Because you can't really have every person reading a different book. It'd be really hard for the teacher to read all the books, right?
- Researcher - So you say that the teacher would have to know all the books.
- Clint - Yeah, but I don't think they'd do that.
- Researcher - Anything you'd leave the same?
- Clint - P.E., I guess, except we have to do it with the Grade 4's and that's sort of slows us down.
- Researcher - So you have to do the same skill everybody else is doing.
- Clint - Yeah, and we already know it so we're not learning anything.
- Researcher - Is it possible for the Grade 4's to work on one thing and you another.
- Clint - Um, no, cause there would have to be somebody over there teaching Grade 4 skills and somebody teaching us.
- Researcher - Couldn't you help the Grade 4's?
- Clint - No, we don't do that type of stuff.
- Researcher - What type of stuff?
- Clint - You know, help each other.

Clint's comments illustrate the transmission mode of teaching (Barnes, 1976) he experiences. The lack of novel choice, as well as the group P.E. instruction, suggest a teacher dominated environment with limited student input or collaboration. Clint is a non-participant in the learning process being relegated to a receiving role in a hierarchically designed system.

Mandy's and Bobbi's Response to Question #2

- Mandy - I'd leave Math the same. It'd be neat if we could change reading like if for projects you could think up your own instead of doing questions.
- Researcher - Do you read in your reading class?
- Mandy - In our reading (class) we don't read, we usually read the book at home and then bring it back. We usually have to write down questions and answer them.
- Researcher - What do you think about that?
- Mandy - Well, it gets boring.
- Researcher - Is there any difference between silent reading (U.S.S.R.) and a reading lesson?
- Mandy - In Silent Reading we get to read our own novels, the ones we want to read and in Reading lesson we read the books that he (teacher) chooses and we write down questions and we answer them. In Silent Reading we (are) only asked to read.
- Researcher - Which is better?
- Mandy - (laughs) Silent Reading!

and

- Researcher - So what's good or bad about school?
- Bobbi - I'm bad in school.
- Researcher - What makes you think you're bad at school?
- Bobbi - The teachers act like I'm stupid.
- Researcher - Can you give me an example?
- Bobbi - The teacher I had in Grade 4...when we did math she used to skip stuff. That's why I'm bad now (in math) 'cause she didn't teach us it...Like I'm really good at multiplication but not division. It was division she skipped.
- Researcher - How are you at something like geometry?
- Bobbi - We don't get that. I don't know what it is. Is it like shapes or something?
- Researcher - Yeah.
- Bobbi - I don't know. Math's just no fun.

Mandy's perception that reading one's own books was preferable to answering questions from a teacher directed novel reinforces the need for personal choice in literature selection. Bobbi's conviction that she was bad in math because a former teacher "skipped stuff" show the lack of

personal involvement in the learning process. It also illustrates the lack of relevance Math had in her own life. To Bobbi, being good at math correlated to knowing her basic facts ("I'm really good at multiplication but not division.") The rote methods of teaching computational skills caused Bobbi to see each of the operations as separate, isolated entities devoid of any interrelationship with one another.

Question #3 - Tell me about your reading class. What do you think about while working?

Responses:

Rusty - I sometimes daydream. I think about different things when I'm doing the questions because they're easy.

and

Clint - Well, we either read our novel or (do) the assignments for the novel.

Researcher - You didn't finish your novel though.

Clint - No, I didn't finish it. I just read the chapters he told us to keep up with.

Researcher - Why?

Clint - Why? 'Cause I couldn't get into the book. Like, I tried it and the first time I got up to Chapter 4 and we only had to read to Chapter 2. It's like I forced myself to do that and then it started getting really boring so I only read the chapter he told us to have read.

Researcher - By the way, how's The Outsiders going?

Clint - Oh, I like it. It's pretty good.

Researcher - Don't think you have to read it on my account, you know.

Clint - No, I like it. I'm up to the part where...(describes a part well into the novel).

and

Bobbi - Well, we answer questions and now he's (teacher) given us an assignment where we make up our own questions. I like doing his questions better.

Researcher - That's interesting. Tell me why.

Bobbi - It's harder to think of questions but he acts

like it's a treat to be able to do your own questions.

Researcher - So you find the reading (class) easy?

Bobbi - Yeah, basically. It's not fun, really, but it's easy.

All three students had created paths of ease in accomplishing the required work. Both Rusty and Bobbi preferred teacher questions because they were more straightforward and Clint understood that reading ahead simply created more work. They had, in their own way, rebelled against teacher selected novels by seeking the path of least resistance. Their feeling was - "get it

done with the least amount of effort and get it over with". It seemed that without ownership there was no desire and without desire there was no learning.

Question #4 - Tell me what you see as the main differences between your own reading and reading in school.

Responses:

Rusty - School reading you're told to do it and at home you're not told to do it. I guess you have to be told to do it in school or else you wouldn't do it.

and

Clint - We're forced to do it (in school) and I don't like being forced to do it...Even if you don't enjoy the book you have to read it and at home you can just read when you want to.

Researcher - With The Gammage Cup, because it took you so long to read it, did you forget what had gone on before?

Clint - Yeah, whenever we did the questions I had to always go back 'cause I didn't really take it in. It's like I just saw the words but didn't understand.

and

Mandy - I like reading my books better. The one he

(teacher) chooses are dumb sometimes.

and

Bobbi - Our reading is fun, his (teacher) reading's boring.

Rusty and Clint both commented on how schooled reading was imposed upon them while personal reading was motivated by choice and interest. Clint's final comment illustrates just how much literacy development is transpiring during a traditional reading lesson. The six week time commitment for this particular novel (The Gammage Cup) seems to have left little or no impression on Clint and one wonders as to the lost time involved in the name of "group instruction". The mundane drudgery of reading class, alluded to by the two girls, echoes Goodlad's (1984) findings on American Language Arts classrooms.

One interpretation of the group's responses is that a student's search for meaning and understanding leads him into areas motivated by choice and relevancy. If these things are not found then they will abandon the activity or formulate an easy method of getting it done. If the reading activity produces interest and meaning the readers' interest level will increase and they will search for personal connections and understanding, (Travers, 1978). By providing the freedom needed in literacy development the educator can, in fact, create a self-energized reader where the individual's current interests lead him/her into new choices and a growing awareness of self-as-reader.

Question #5 - Tell me about our meetings together. What was the experience like for you?

Responses:

Rusty - I liked the meetings. They were neat 'cause you can talk about things...We could talk about what we wanted to talk about.

and

Clint - I liked them because you could sort of talk

about what you didn't like...You didn't have to be afraid to say that you didn't like something.

and

- Mandy - It was fun 'cause you got to say the things you wanted to say.
- Researcher - Such as?
- Mandy - You didn't have to put up your hand and you got to talk when you wanted to talk and you (researcher) didn't ignore us.
- Researcher - What else about our meetings?
- Mandy - You listened to everybody and you didn't talk a lot and you let us talk more than we wanted to. And you didn't get mad at us.

and

- Bobbi - It was sort of fun because Mr. (teacher) never asks us about what we like and don't like about school...and I like being with a group.

The students enjoyed the apparent openness of our talks together. Instead of being required to imitate forms of teacher language (Barnes et al., 1969), where exchanges were patterned and of a non-personal nature, the group got to "try out" their own language by expressing feelings and attitudes towards things that were relevant to their own lives. Talking that is relevant to the learner's experience can provide a meaningful situation from which true learning can grow (Tough, 1973).

Our time together was built on collaboration and open, non-judgmental discussion. The interest I showed in their talk and literature selections was paralleled by their own enthusiasm for the meetings we shared. While our situation was one not easily transferrable to the classroom environment, the nature of the talk suggests avenues of compromise between teacher demands and learner needs. By allowing the students to direct the conversation from their own interests and by sharing in on some of the control of our meetings together, an environment of mutual participation was established. I felt the give and take in evidence at these times helped

demonstrate to the students their value as individuals and sources of knowledge.

Question #6 - Tell me what you thought about me visiting your home. Would you like your teacher to do that?

Responses

Rusty - I thought it was pretty neat that you came. It made me feel important sort of.  
 Researcher - Would you like your teacher to come to your house?  
 Rusty - I wouldn't mind (pause) actually I think it'd be quite neat if he came.

and

Researcher - Would you like your teacher to visit your home?  
 Mandy - No, it just wouldn't seem right. You'd think you'd have to be all neat and everything, like you'd put on your best manners.  
 Researcher - So you don't think you could be natural.  
 Mandy - No.  
 Researcher - Did you feel that way when I was there?  
 Mandy - No.  
 Researcher - How come?  
 Mandy - I don't know. You're not a teacher.

and

Bobbi - Yeah, well it was like you were saying before. You were saying that teachers should know more about you. Mr. (teacher) doesn't ask anything about you. It's kind of obvious that I like horses and he knows that but (mumbles something).  
 Researcher - What were your feelings when I visited your home?  
 Bobbi - I liked it...It would have been neat if Mr. (teacher) had done that because, like, so he knows what I'm about and where.  
 Researcher - Would you like to know more about him?  
 Bobbi - Well, not anymore!

Throughout our meetings together Bobbi often made reference to her dislike of being "invisible" in the class. Bobbi, more than the others, expressed a desire to connect,

not only with her peers, but also with her teacher. Her final comment: "Well, not anymore!" apparently grew out of frustration and a feeling of helplessness.

The group's positive reaction to my visits seemed to echo Bobbi's feelings on the subject. Mandy's comment: "No, it just wouldn't seem right" may have stemmed from a "them-and-us" attitude in that she felt something contradictory in a teacher getting too close to a student. She may have come to accept the current relationship as workable and was against disturbing the status quo.

The questions from Meeting 6 allowed the students and myself to reflect briefly on the process we had been involved in. It enabled me to reaffirm data from earlier sessions and to re-think my perceptions of their talk. In my opinion, the responses from this session held true to the overall themes the students had generated over the weeks together. My ongoing observations in the classroom also gave credence to the group's talk and added to insights provided. In finishing off *The Learner's Story*, I will attempt to re-visit the teacher and his classroom as well as to formulate a deeper understanding of the students-as-learners within that environment.

#### **A LOOK BACK AT THE TEACHER AND HIS CLASSROOM**

During the six week time frame of the study I had occasion to visit the group's classroom several times. Most visits were of an informal nature, such as waiting for the students to finish up an activity before joining me for the meetings. A few of the visits, however, involved direct observation of classroom lessons (a Christmas play practice, a Reading lesson and a P.E. lesson). Only during the P.E. lesson did I become personally involved in the activity.

Allan's classroom was both roomy and stark. The children were seated in rows spaced so that each child was positioned

several feet from the next. Allan's seating arrangement indicated an individualized, isolated form of instruction. Peer interactions were kept to a minimum and the study group members often referred to their teacher's reprimands for talking with one another during the class (eg. Clint-"Yeah, I was helping Bobbi and he (teacher) totally spazzes out"). My observations seemed to verify Clint's perception of the situation.

Allan is what Barnes (1976) would call a transmission teacher. Teacher talk was seen to far outweigh student talk and subject content and timelines were solely in the hands of the teacher. [A prime example was the Christmas play. Allan chose a play without consulting the class and subsequently encountered difficulties (behaviour) in keeping the students on task. He later admitted to me that next time he would allow input from the students in an effort to avoid similar problems in the future].

Subject matter was taught according to grade level and, as exemplified during a Math lesson, as many as four different textbooks (Grade 4, 5, 6, 7) were in use simultaneously. According to the study group, older students were seldom asked to help the younger ones and concepts or units were taught separately by grade. The lack of collegiality witnessed between class members mirrored Allan's teaching style. At no time was Allan seen to use peer tutoring, cross-age instruction or a collaborative learning method. In my opinion, this lack of personal involvement in classroom activities produced a lot of the negative feelings and comments shared by the group.

To further illustrate Allan's teaching I have attempted to recreate a group reading lesson Allan conducted with the Grade 6/7's. The lesson was intended to close the novel study of The Gammage Cup and provide an opportunity for the students to "talk" as a group. Knowing that my own study was on peer based discussion Allan made a point of inviting me to observe

this session. He said he wanted to get the students used to group talk in the hope of doing more of it in the future. The transcriptions that follow are from my own on-site written recordings. I've attempted to keep the wording of the conversational excerpts as close to the original talk as possible.

This particular reading lesson followed a fairly active P.E. period. The students entered the room noisy and excited but seemed to settle in quickly. When everyone appeared ready Allan instructed the Grade 6/7's to take out their discussion questions for today's talk. Bobbi, at this point, informed Allan that she had already gone over them, to which her teacher replied: "Re-read, Bobbi, Chapter 15 and 16 so when I come back we've got something to share". After a brief instruction to the Grade 4/5 group, Allan left the room to speak with Clint who had been removed earlier from the gym. While Allan was gone (six minutes) the Grade 4/5 group seemed to work quietly on their reading while the older students were seen to aimlessly flip pages of their novels, search around in their desks or attempt to attract one another's attention by making faces or calling out.

When Allan returned he instructed the Grade 6/7 group to gather their desks in a circle which they accomplished after much banging and exaggerated maneuvering. Allan began the session by expressing his disappointment in the group's physical treatment of the novels over the time they had used them. He told them that in future they must take better care of the books and try not to lose them.

After dealing with this book management problem, Allan began: "Okay, let's get started so we can finally get this book finished with." Other than my own sense that his students would probably wholeheartedly agree with his statement, I felt Allan was exhibiting some of his own frustrations with the novel study. Perhaps he too was experiencing some of the boredom and lack of interest alluded

to by the study group.

The subsequent group talk lasted approximately fifteen minutes. Each time a student responded to another student's comments Allan would interject and attempt to clarify and direct the conversation (eg. Allan - "I think what Jason is referring to here is the way the scenes were described in the book. Sometimes it's a little confusing").

During the talk with the Grade 6/7 group, Allan often looked over to the Grade 4/5 group while students were talking. On three occasions Allan interrupted group talk to deal with management problems on the other side of the room. At one point Allan told the Grade 4/5 group to talk quietly and work on their own which struck me as a contradiction in terms. This elicited the following response:

Ian - Mr. (teacher), but Dean and I don't understand this question. Can you come over and help us?  
 Allan - No, we're busy here. Just re-read the chapter. You'll find the answer.

The Grade 6/7 conversation seemed to falter slightly at this point as some of the students had forgotten what they were talking about.

Over the course of the conversation I also observed the following things:

- on four different occasions students who had their hands up to talk, while Allan was clarifying, forgot what they had wanted to say when finally called upon;
- Clint (usually the most talkative) didn't say anything for at least ten minutes of the talk;
- Bobbi and two others in the group (9 in the group) said nothing the whole time;
- comments were always directed through the teacher and not between students.

As Allan began to wrap up the discussion he asked the students their impressions of the book:

Clint - I didn't really like the book because I like books

- with real people in it.
- Allan - Yeah, it was kind of phoney.
- Mandy - I didn't really like it but it was better at the end, more exciting.

After this Allan admitted to the students that it was impossible to find a book that everyone would enjoy. He then added: "I can't possibly let you all choose your own books (in reading)". Allan didn't offer a reason for his comment and judging by the lack of student response his statement was seen to be accepted by the group.

The entire reading class lasted approximately 35 minutes. The actual time the students spent on reading was almost nil. Other than looking back through the novel for answers to the questions, no child in the room was seen to quietly read their novels. From the time Bobbi entered the room from P.E. to dismissal for lunch (45 minutes), she accomplished very little. Except for possibly listening to other student's responses in the group situation Bobbi did no work at all. Clint, on returning to the room, gave three 10-15 second responses during the group discussion but was otherwise seen to do nothing else during the 35 minutes he was part of the class. In all, student involvement during the class was brief and lacked purpose and enthusiasm. After the reading class was over, the students eagerly handed in their novels and joined together in groups to begin their lunch hour.

In Allan's classroom, communication was relegated to a "teacher talk-student listen" format and seemed to ignore the value of the individual. "The transmission teacher sees it as his task to transmit knowledge and to test whether the pupils have received it" (Barnes, 1976, p.142). Allan saw the purpose of learning as primarily one of acquisition and recording of teacher fed information. The textbook exercises, the prescribed Reading novels, the skills oriented P.E. instruction, all indicated a teacher dominated environment.

The physical set up of the classroom exhibited a lack of

understanding of the changing needs of the learner. Other than two small tables at the back of the room (which were only seen to be used during lunch hour) students conducted all of their activities at their desks. Moving around was kept to a bare minimum and was usually accompanied by reminders from Allan about time wasting. Exhibition of student work on the walls was minimal and outdated. The room did not project a feeling of comfort and students were seen to spend very little time there during recess and lunch or after school.

While Allan projected the image of an interested, sympathetic educator, in reality the environment he had created was mostly for his own comfort. His desk was positioned so he could clearly see his students and keep them on task. Allan tried to keep the noise to a minimum adhering to the age-old adage - "A quiet classroom is a busy classroom".

When the study was completed I interviewed Allan during one of his morning prep times. The following transcriptions were taped and helped me to gain a better appreciation of Allan's conception of his role as teacher. The first question I asked Allan concerned his impressions of the individual students in the study. His comments concerning them will be brought forth in the next section (Students Re-Visited). Afterwards I presented him with the following query:

Researcher - What do you see your role to be as a classroom teacher?

Allan - In this particular class it's one of converting from a group of negative, um, lacking in motivation kids, to those that are a bit more stimulating. I don't think I'm doing a wonderful job at stimulating because I'm not as creative as I should be. So what I do is I give them lots of self-esteem compliments. (We were interrupted here by a student coming into the room. After a brief exchange between himself and the student, Allan carried on.)

Allan - I use the term "to smash the negative feeling" and I've been doing that successfully. And,

also, to raise the expectations of the students because they're in a multi-grade class. I think the expectations are low because they (students) always work to the lowest common denominator...So basically what I'm saying is that I'm becoming a bit more heavy handed in setting expectations by saying they must be done.

Teaching is a relationship between teacher and learner (Seaberg, 1974). Forming a climate of trust is perhaps one of the most important tasks of the teacher. Listening to Allan talk I got a sense of a developing adversarial learning environment. His references to negative attitudes and his need to "smash the negative feeling" reminded me of the study group's own perception of the them-and-us attitude toward schooling. Allan's comments on providing self-esteem compliments seemed to be his way of assuring himself that he was at least being fair in his treatment of the students. The "positive" comments offered by Allan were, in my opinion, of an artificial nature and their patterned quality seemed to illustrate his background in psychology.

Toward the end of the interview Allan provided the following comment:

Allan - I'm lucky I'm experienced because I think the last teacher they had lacked experience and I'm sure the put-downs on whatever she tried had a negative impact on her. She probably took it personally - I don't. With these kids you can't take it personally. After having taught for awhile you realize that. You're just the figure and they're (students) looking for a chink in your armour and so I won't give it to them. So I think it's important to let them know that I don't personally care about how they feel about me or anybody else. We've got a job and we're going to get on with it. I'm constantly reminding them that nobody said we had to like it all - we're just doing it!

As Seaberg (1974) says: "Teaching is relating. A teacher relates to his subject matter, and he relates to the pupil. If he does not, he is not a teacher" (p.26). Allan

felt it was up to him to carry the entire burden of educating and stimulating his students. Personally, Allan was knowledgeable, energetic and possessed a love of life. As a teacher, I feel Allan attempted, very often in vain, to project a dynamic, determined image in an effort to superimpose his views and values on the students. Instead of taking pride in the students as individuals and pleasure in growing independence and creativity, Allan saw his role as directing and funnelling the learners into a pre-determined set of expectations. By hiding himself from his students and asking for nothing authentic in return Allan remained a stranger and a wielder of arbitrary punishments.

Teachers are frequently seen as having no lives of their own but are simply defined by the role they are expected to play in a classroom (Greene, 1973). More often than not, teachers accept this view as educators and overlook the realities of their own lives as individuals. By accepting this generalized definition of themselves, they do, in fact, view their own students in a similar light. The uniqueness of the individual becomes blurred as the mass instruction model gains strength.

#### **THE STUDENTS RE-VISITED**

In closing *The Learner's Story* I return now to the students themselves. In my time with each of them I came to a growing understanding of their uniqueness as individuals. I came not to see them as an average achiever, an above average reader, a slight behaviour problem, or a slow worker, but as four adolescents all with a unique story to tell.

The following descriptions are not of people who fit neatly into categories but of individuals who are struggling to find their own voice in a world demanding conformity and conventionality.

Clint

In Allan's words, Clint was "insecure and constantly demands attention to satisfy that need (to be liked)". Clint's exuberance and overactive spirit frequently put him on a collision course with Allan's need for control and compliance. All through his school life Clint had been labelled as a student that needed close watching. Over the years Clint had seemed to accept his role and take pleasure in the attention it afforded him.

From comments that Clint shared with the group, it was evident that he possessed a quick wit and a bright mind. His primary interests seemed to be active in nature, including bike riding, playing games with friends and as he said: "I just like goofing around".

For Clint, school offered the best and worst of things. His strong social desires were accommodated by those around him while the physical and authoritative constraints of the school put overpowering restrictions on his activities. Clint was not at school to perform for the system but to perform for his friends and be socially entertained. These two opposing forces resulted in Clint often being isolated or removed from group or class situations.

Frequently, in our time together, Clint made reference to the irrelevant nature of school (eg. "Another thing about school is, um, it isn't as good as having real life experiences because you learn more from real life experiences"). The lack of connection between his own personal world and that of the school possibly added to Clint's often rebellious attitude toward teachers and authority in general. Clint needed to touch, feel, see and interact with things around him and defined "fun" assignments as "building stuff like models or something" and being able to work with friends.

Clint will probably survive in the system until he's

older and something more relevant presents itself. Without regret or malice toward school he will establish a place for himself in a world which better suits his needs as an individual. Whether or not Clint uses the talents he possesses to their fullest is something no one can foresee. One could surmise that the longer those talents go unnoticed and unused, the less likelihood there is of them coming forth.

### Rusty

In Allan's words, Rusty can "push himself and if he feels excited about something he will get it done and do fairly well".

I have special memories of Rusty as he is a special person. A more articulate, creative individual you couldn't meet. Besides his rare talent for reading continuously, Rusty possesses an awareness about the world around him which is uncharacteristic of a boy his age. I see Rusty as the student we teachers constantly take credit for. Rusty is a student who is eager to learn and inquisitive about all things around him. Unlike Clint, Rusty doesn't see the necessity of constant chatter and socializing but prefers to be busily working on something (remember his comment preceding Meeting 3: "Aren't we supposed to be doing some kind of work?"). Rusty feels comfortable with himself and has unlimited ability to accomplish what he wants in life.

Rusty enjoys all types of reading, all types of people and is somewhat tolerant of teachers although he realizes that education is often lacking in relevancy. Rusty lives the important parts of his life outside school as was illustrated by my home visit. His attitude toward school is one of acceptance and occasional compliance. While he sometimes was seen to "bang heads" with authority, he was quick to back down and did so politely and maturely.

Rusty, in my opinion, is a gifted child and is therefore often overlooked in school. His ability to complete the "easy

assignments" (his words) given him resulted in the teacher directing his energies in other directions. Rusty is often left on his own to read quietly or daydream at his desk. Rusty will probably carry on through his school years in a similar fashion with a progression of teachers continually accepting credit for his successes. In reality, Rusty is the only one responsible for his accomplishments but he is intelligent enough to outwardly accept the arbitrary demands of the system and seek the course of the least resistance.

### Mandy

In Allan's words, Mandy was "slow and really lacking in drive and motivation and literal ability". Allan's perceptions of Mandy seemed to reflect an educator's tendency to judge people superficially.

Mandy is a quiet, down to earth individual. Her non-oral personality leads outsiders to view her as slow and a bit of a dreamer. In our time together I found Mandy to be an exceptional listener and a quick witted talker when given the time and space to share. Mandy is an avid reader and, in my opinion, quite literate. She often asked me why reading was taught the way it was in school ("Why isn't it more like our own reading?") for she really enjoyed her own reading but found schooled Reading fairly pointless. Interestingly, while this problem often left Mandy perplexed she exhibited no anger or resentment toward school. I would describe Mandy as a happy person and one who found it difficult to show bitterness to anything in life.

Like Rusty, Mandy is comfortable being herself and doesn't allow outside pressures to disturb her to any great degree. Mandy seemed to accept the irrelevant atmosphere of school and adjust by daydreaming or "losing" herself in a horse novel. When the conversation in the study touched on an area of interest to Mandy, her talk was animated and lively (this was particularly evident during the sharing of ghost stories in Meeting 5). At these times Mandy would smile and

laugh openly becoming lost in her recollections of a personal experience.

Due to her strong, secure personality, Mandy will not let teachers or school upset her or bother her as much as someone like Bobbi. Mandy finds enjoyment with the moment and only accomplishes activities she deems meaningful. Her messy desk and disorganized, incomplete classroom assignments illustrated Mandy's opinion of the lack of relevancy in school. Mandy will probably find peace and contentment in her life despite outside pressures and influences. Mandy appears to be one of those lucky individuals - a truly happy human being.

### Bobbi

In Allan's words Bobbi was "a frustrated learner. She's going through tough times because she's going through puberty now...she has a really negative feeling about school." In my opinion, Bobbi was indeed a frustrated learner. Due to a growing shyness and confusion with life Bobbi's school experience appeared unfulfilling and trying for her.

For Bobbi, school lacked any real connection to her perceptions of life. Bobbi's insights concerning the teacher's lack of trust ("'Cause he doesn't trust us" - her reference to the reason for novel questions) and the need for social time in school ("I don't mind coming to school to do work...it'd be better if we could come in and talk for awhile" - her reference to the need for time first thing in the morning to adjust) showed she was keenly aware of what she valued in life.

For Bobbi, more than any of the others in the study, the need to connect, not only with the subject matter but also the teacher, was strong. Bobbi wanted to learn in a trusting, collaborative environment free of competition and authority. She wanted her teacher to see her as a person ("I don't think he likes me. He never listens to me.") and to be authentic himself ("I don't like how he's so calm. He never gets mad.")

At the start of our meetings Bobbi was quiet and mostly sat staring into her lap. As our talk progressed she took an added interest in our discussion and contributed freely. Bobbi's shyness and sensitivity makes it difficult for her to "jump into" activities quickly and often results in her assuming the role of a non-participant (evidenced in the group reading lesson I observed). This withdrawal from activities or new situations is possibly Bobbi's defence against being embarrassed or hurt. During our talk on attitudes toward Reading and school, I sensed a bitterness in Bobbi's comments which seemed to mirror her inability to understand or cope with the school system.

As well as feeling drawn to Bobbi's plight as a learner I felt annoyed about what the system had done to her. Bobbi said at one point in our meetings: "I don't really want to learn things I just want to know it already." After the time we spent together, I began to better understand her comment. Bobbi correlated learning things with being in school. Up to this point school had offered her frustration, fear and a lack of reality. In accepting that truth she felt it would be preferable to simply "know it already". The process of "knowing it" held little fascination for Bobbi. School, to her, was a matter of survival and acceptance.

In more ways than any of us could appreciate, Bobbi's needs were not being met by the school system. In a lot of ways, Bobbi's story was the saddest of them all. I see Bobbi as a promising student who, through no fault of her own, will be forced to withdraw from the current educational system unless someone or something proves to her that education has something to offer. It will be up to Bobbi's future teachers to decide whether or not she will survive the ordeal of institutionalized learning. Without their help I fear Bobbi will fall between the cracks.

## THE PARENT'S STORY

Before closing off this chapter, I wish to include a final story - that of the parents of the study group members. The story embodies many of the same themes already described. It is intended not necessarily as clarification but more as an added reflection.

At the end of Meeting 1 I gave the students a questionnaire to take home for their parents. It was intended only as a minor backdrop to the overall study and a way of involving the parents. At that time, I had no idea just how relevant and revealing the parent's responses would be.

After all the responses had been returned I sat down to reflect on their content. The articulate, sensitive nature of the comments caused me to re-think much of the information being provided by the students in the study. Not until the study was completed and I began to analyze the data did I come to fully understand the significance of the parents' responses.

In presenting the parents' responses I wish to offer the questionnaire queries in the order they were given. The first question read: "How would you describe your child to me if I were seeking a greater understanding of him/her as an individual?" The response to this question, much like the home visits had done, provided a wealth of insightful, caring information about the adolescents. The touching manner in which they were written showed concern and love for each child and reminded me of Tizard and Hughes' (1984) research about the importance of family understanding and caring.

The images the parents presented of their child were vastly different from those formulated by the school. These children were not just students or learners; these individuals were unique beings who were loved and cherished by those close to them. The parents here concentrated on the positive and described any weaknesses with affection and understanding.

Their own words speak strongest:

Mandy

"Mandy has always been her own person. She's solid, determined when she wants or does not want something, likes her creature comforts, can be very solicitous when she knows someone is not feeling well, she has a strong sense of fairness and is not too hesitant to declare on someone's behalf or even to mediate in a dispute. She is generally quiet but observant, however, and she can become quite hilarious and rambunctious when encouraged.

She is very aware of the natural beauty around her and some of her most poignant observations are of the natural phenomena of the island. She's not afraid to stand up for herself in a conflict. She can also be quite stubborn which can lead to rash decisions which hurt her.

She's comfortable to be with as she's not too critical, not hyperactive, has pleasant manners and is not competitive. She enjoys riding her horse and is quite adept (at it). Her sense of balance on the water is amazing and people who have been out (sailing & water-skiing) with her have raved about her natural ability,

She is getting into puberty now. (She's) not too embarrassed in front of me but she is reserved. She's beautiful in a classical way, not cute, until she grins at you with her crooked teeth. She doesn't like to think of herself as beautiful and is not very clothes conscious either. Last, but not least, she's very attached to her family."

Rusty

"Rusty is my favourite son - also my only one. His positive attributes are fairly obvious: sunny, gregarious, absolutely unprejudiced in every respect and quite adventurous. Less apparent are his lack of self-esteem, some confusion about being truthful and his apparent need to "buy"

friendship. He's growing up, though, and I believe he is more and more ready to accept the responsibility that comes with increasing freedom."

### Clint

"I don't know which is harder - trying to write this on a reverberating ferry or to actually try to answer this question. I think you already know that he is basically a sensitive, kind and capable person. I wonder that he is somewhat lacking in self-esteem but wonder if that is the age. Clint is not a great finisher of tasks I think because he knows he can't be perfect but doesn't know he shouldn't expect to be. He has suffered from profound conflict in his life and I imagine this to have an effect (on him). I don't understand well enough to explain."

### Bobbi

(Note: The following description of Bobbi is only part of an eleven page typewritten response to the questionnaire provided by Bobbi's mother. Her response was by far the most in-depth, comprehensive account which I will refer to in more detail in closing off this section).

"Bobbi is very shy in unfamiliar situations. She can be very self-conscious and may appear extremely rude in an attempt to "disappear". Lately, though that rudeness is for real with people she does not respect, including adults and authority figures. In a way I admire that in her, from a distance, since I am the opposite in that regard and sometimes find I get myself into frustrating situations where I cow-tow and shouldn't. As her mother, I find this rudeness hard to accept and hope for her sake she can channel it into a more appropriate assertiveness.

I've always felt that Bobbi doesn't want to play by the

rules set up by others, whether it was learning to tie her shoes, practising the piano or learning division. She seems to want to invent them herself. Maybe that's because of a distrust in her environment from when she was little or maybe an overly involved mother yacked on too much about everything for years. In some ways that could be a good thing. She tries to think independently and rely on herself, but sometimes she takes the long hard road, narrows her perspective and gives up. Not in all things though. She seems determined to do and achieve things that really matter to her. For instance, her love of horses. She has read everything she could find on them, sent away for things from magazines, collected pictures and articles and decorated her room wall-to-wall horse. She has learned to care for her horse well and has established a disciplined schedule.

Bobbi is very affectionate and likes to cuddle. We give her lots of hugs and kisses which she laps up. She seems to need a lot of positive feedback and can get quite jealous when her brother gets it. There seems to be a lot of sibling rivalry between them, more on her part than on his, which always seemed a bit funny because they were so close and she was so loving toward him until she was 6 1/2 and he was 3. Then it changed overnight.

She may not admit to loving her brother or her parents, but I know she does. Birthdays and Christmas are very important to her and she always has something prepared for us, usually several very thoughtful and appropriate gifts.

As far as school goes, she will say she hates it. She is a very good reader, and very fast, reading beyond her years. She was bitten by the reading bug in Grade 3. She collected every Nancy Drew and Trixie Beldon (older copies) printed and still refuses to part with them. She loves to read before bed and would go on until midnight if we let her. Lately, she's been reading Sweet Valley High, a sort of Harlequin romance for teens. She's getting an early introduction into the teen

high school scene. We don't believe in censoring her reading but hope these books are not fostering an unrealistic view of life. She has read other things such as James Herriot, Ronald Dahl, Judy Blum, Danielle Steele (one book she got her hands on), to mention a few. She doesn't like to read true stories because she hates the heartbreak of death or anything sad, especially related to animals. I read her a terribly sad story when she was 5, it shocked me too, we weren't expecting what we read. After that she has been afraid of being touched that way again from a book. We are very happy with her reading abilities and feel it could be her ticket to anything she wants to do, in spite of her opinion about herself that she isn't smart. We think she is.

Home schooling for us wasn't the answer, but then neither was the school situation. Mixing Grades 4-7 is a terrible combination. Being the only girl in Grade 7 she has no peers, no competition, nothing to compare herself to, no incentive. When she was in Grade 4 she had one friend her own age and they competed all the time, especially in their reading. It was good for them both and encouraged their interest.

Bobbi has a very strong ego. She thinks of herself first before others in many instances. She will always choose the biggest piece of cake. She will sneak a goodie she can't resist, even at the risk of getting in trouble. First born? Insecure? Her brother is the opposite, which infuriates her and probably makes her feel badly about herself. Being an older sister to a brother three years younger, I understand her selfishness. She has a strong sense of self and I think she could get far with it, but I sometimes worry about how she treats others. Her brother I can understand but I sometimes think she steps on her friends. Maybe it's the small group of friends she has, all younger, who look to her as leader. Maybe that's a position easily taken advantage of. She can also be very loyal to friends and has developed some deep friendships in the past. She will not forgive a friend who has hurt her. She can hold a grudge for years.

I like Bobbi. I think she has a sweet and gentle soul with a lot of feelings, ideas and dreams. She has good common sense and instincts and I often ask her for an opinion that is honest and intelligent. She can be very hard on herself and it's these bad feelings that give her trouble, hold her back from enjoying things or doing her best. If she makes it through the next few teen years intact, (she does have a rebellious and outrageous side to her), I think she will do fine in life."

The descriptions of their children exhibit a compassion and caring not normally evident in the institution of schooling. While the two environments, home and school, may be vastly different, in some ways they are both involved with educating the young and directing them along the path of maturity. The information and insights provided by the parents, about their children, could only be used in a positive manner by their teachers. Perhaps the growing collaborative, collegial focus of learning in school should be broadened to include the parent. Those people who most care and love what is unique about the child as an individual should be involved in creating the best possible learning situation for that child.

In Question 2 a reflection was asked for concerning the parent's own experiences with schooling. Interestingly, a lot of the same "voices" of the institutionalized experience were heard that the students themselves had already forwarded. It reminded me that not much has changed in education over the years despite modern research and greater funding. Perhaps these reflections are isolated in nature but they do provide thoughtful inquiry into the institution of schooling.

#### Mandy's Mother

"I was not comfortable in school. I was a C student until Grade 12, then I bloomed under two teachers. I'm a student who pursues what interests her in class and often

found myself in conflict as a result. However, I also learned to persuade professors to agree with my pursuits especially in English Lit., which is my love. My intellect is one which is always striving for connections as opposed to a creative one."

#### Rusty's Father

"I remember the encouragement that I was given by my parents and teachers in developing my imagination through reading and artistic activities. I am doing the same thing for Rusty and I am very grateful to see the results in his writing and painting."

#### Clint's Mother

"My own educational experiences were very happy ones for the most part. I've always felt it was fun to learn and that one didn't go to school to get a job. My elementary school was very good for me. I believe I had an above-average number of very competent teachers. High school was a disappointment in comparison and consequently I wasn't as prepared for university as I should have been. After a very short stint at teaching and subbing (and the latter was certainly an education!) I returned to complete my degree in Psych(ology) and ended up as a computer programmer (proof that formal education didn't lead to a job - I only took one computing course and taught myself the rest)."

#### Bobbi's Mother

"My own history of school was far from perfect. In the 50's and 60's growing up in Connecticut, U.S.A. the emphasis was on learning the basics, and we did. That was fine, but it was the way in which we learned the basics which was objectionable. The system didn't consider the individual but catered to the system. Rows upon rows of desks, hours and hours of absolute quiet and stillness, year after year. Over the years, it wears down interest and initiative. By the end of Grade 7, mine was completely gone.

With kindergarten, I was thrilled to go to school. I

remember loving every day, absorbing everything, eager to learn it all. An inexperienced and a poor first year teacher in Grade 1 got me off to a confusing and slow start with reading, which was compounded by my mother's anxieties and expectations. Within that first year, I'd formed the opinion of myself that I was stupid and lacking in reading, even though my grades through primary school were A's and B's. That perception haunted me into my 20's. In other subjects, I listened well, absorbing easily, feeling capable, but thinking myself slow in reading, I never felt adequate. In my middle grades I would sometimes cry myself to sleep because I thought my poor reading would keep me out of college and it was that fear that probably steered me away from serious ambitions in that direction.

Of course lots of children have their secret fears and insecurities but the school system I went through did nothing to help me overcome them. Emphasis on reading then was speed. We had SRA reading programs that were timed. A buzzer sounded, you stopped reading a given short story and answered questions, half of which you couldn't answer for not having finished the story and the other half for the tension and anxiety it put on the slower reader. We also had a dreaded machine that would project a story on a screen in a darkened room, one line at a time. The machine blinked these faster and faster until your eyes blurred and nothing made sense. Then, of course, more questions on content. Even then, I never could understand why they had to connect speed with accuracy and content. What a relief when the class "bad boy" broke that machine while running it down the hall one day to the next intended class to be tortured.

As for life skills my school gave me very little. Naturally shy and coming from a loving but strict home where to discuss one's point of view was considered arguing and therefore disrespectful and fresh, school certainly didn't give any opportunity to express yourself beyond the confines of the "correct" answer.

School wasn't all bad. My best years were kindergarten, Grades 2, 4 and 6. It had nothing to do with the system but it was the teachers who made it interesting. They were teachers, I felt, who took a small interest in me. That's what I was looking for. Grades 7 to 12 were multi-teachers and classrooms and there was no real personal involvement with any of them, not for me in my school of over 2,000 students. Most of it was boring, but there were a few teachers whose enthusiasm for their own particular subject sparked my interest and curiously, with my phobia for reading, they were English Lit. courses.

I finished my last two years of high school in Canada. I feel my school didn't make much effort to see kids out into the world. Counselling consisted of a five minute interview with a wizened, nervous, soon to be retired teacher no longer capable of handling a classroom. At the time, piano was my passion and I'd decided to go to college for 2 years towards a B.A. in music, later to be transferred to university. I had my plans, based only on my own thoughts, but it might have been nice to have had more serious discussions with someone, examining other interests and capabilities I might have had. Not to blame them, I realize I probably presented a pretty sure and confident 18 year old as to the direction I was headed. But high school might have presented more variety and choices for life beyond Grade 12 and more chance for self-examination and realization.

After 1 1/2 years at college, having met Jim there, we both decided we'd had enough academics, which the music program was. Still being deathly shy, I discovered I couldn't take the stress of playing the piano in front of people, something I might have discovered 2 years sooner with more in depth counselling in high school.

My first steps into the work world were into office jobs throughout the city. Having had no training from school I had to start at the bottom and train myself on the job (typing,

switchboard, accounting etc.) It was not a career choice but it did bring in some money.

After Bobbi was born my life passion was little kids, mine in particular, and everyone's in general. I took a 2 year night school course on early childhood education at college, as well as had a second baby in between. I loved going back to school and I loved the subject. I got straight A's which I hadn't ever done or been interested to do before. What a different place school can be when you're eager! I got my certificate, did substitute work in many daycare centres throughout the city for one year and then we moved here. That was the extent of my career in ECE. As my kids got older I felt I wanted to go into teaching at a higher level. If life had been easier (not house building & 'stuck' on the island) I would have gone back to university some years back. I don't know that I have the same interest in teaching as I once did, or the same interest in everyone else's kids as I once had. But I would love to take classes again if I ever find myself off this island, not for a career change (well, maybe) but definitely for broadening my understanding of this world. 15 or 29 years ago I wasn't capable of appreciating what I would now."

The four experiences with education described here speak of similar attitudes and beliefs shared by the four adolescents. References to "good teachers", relevance to their own reality, and stimulation from personal interests, all point toward the meaningful aspects of learning. The constant talk about the importance of teachers lends support to other earlier arguments.

In Bobbi's mother's particularly eloquent writing she describes some of the pain and tension she experienced through her schooling. The vivid picture of the "reading machine" stirs images of cruel, inhuman conditions surrounding some earlier instructional strategies. Her relief at the machine finally breaking offers a humorous but condemning message.

All responses made reference to the experiential, affective side of learning. Clint's mother stated "that life itself is an educational experience", while Mandy's mother admitted she was "a student who pursues what interests her in a class".

These comments accentuate the point that educators need to provide the learner with activities that are relevant to that individual. Educators must allow students the time to explore their own avenues of interest so that they may connect new knowledge with their current understanding. Bobbi's mother's final comment illustrates the fact that all learner's possess an individual "clock" for the absorption of knowledge: "15 or 20 years ago I wasn't capable of appreciating what I would now." Think of the time that was wasted 15 or 20 years ago in teaching her what she wasn't ready to learn.

In the final question of the Parent Questionnaire, I asked the parents to think about what the future held for their child: "In an educational context, what do you want for your child and what is important for his/her future?" In all cases the parents stated they wanted their child to grow up in an exciting, interesting learning environment and to become the person he or she wanted to be. For their children they desired a freedom of expression and a recognition of themselves as individuals. In some cases they wanted their children to get the type of education they never received. I, too, had the same wish for them.

#### Mandy

"I want Mandy to have the skills to pursue whatever field, whatever lifestyle she is totally dedicated to. Finding out what she could dedicate herself to might be part of the educational process. Her desires come first, though, and are only to be complemented by the learned skills."

Rusty

"I expect him to become confident in his reasoning powers, to enjoy and develop his imagination and to appreciate and respect himself."

Clint

"I think the most important thing for any child is to grow up into an adult knowing that he can always learn something. I want Clint to be excited to learn and get a good feeling from it. I believe strongly that being an avid reader is important and am very concerned that Clint is not.

Other than this, I don't believe in "wanting" specific educational goals for a child, nor deciding what might be "important" for his future. Only time and Clint can determine what is important for him. Although I enjoyed university it isn't for everyone. I would like Clint to find an occupation and/or a vocation that will keep his mind active. I would like to see education assist in this though I don't know if "the system" can. I think perhaps systems have little to do with it but that the individual teachers have alot. No matter what system a teacher is in, if they are a "good" teacher, they will be effective.

The one thing that a system can provide, that can make it better, is variety and opportunity to expose the children to many things but not restrict him at an early stage. For instance, it seems as though to get into the Sciences today a student has to be immersed while still at the high school level - I believe this is wrong."

Bobbi

"I used to believe and trust in the system. I don't know anymore. I think for Bobbi it has so far failed, at least from the perspective we see.

When she started kindergarten, I remember my feelings at my first parent/teacher interview. What right did this person have, as well intentioned as she was, to sit in judgment of my 5 year old? Not the teacher's fault, I felt this unfair comparison being made between my child and the ideal, who doesn't even exist, and it made me mad. What made me even angrier was that before long Bobbi also compared herself to the ideal. She knew what she wasn't capable of yet the system was always pushing for it. When she was 4, 5 and 6, that seemed so unfair and damaging to a sensitive, self-conscious little girl. Now at 13, she's toughened up. She's learned that life is comparative and competitive, but being introduced to it too young had stunted her interest and made her fearful. I feel that fear of measuring up is what holds her back now in everything she attempts in school. To protect herself she has adopted the attitude that she just doesn't care and she blames school and teachers for her problems.

It could be that she hides things from us knowing that we care so much. Maybe she gets more out of school than we see but certainly, from what she tells us, she hates it. She is adamant about not going on to university or college and often threatens now to quit school at 16, though we think that is mostly exaggerated frustration. School is not taken seriously by Bobbi. The peer group is more important to her and, as you know, a peer group here is pretty much non-existent and what there is seems to have such a negative and depressing attitude. Part of that could be the "age" but I think it is a real shame that there is so little that's positive and stimulating.

Jim and I are very sad about her schooling. Bobbi was never a child outwardly thirsty to learn about everything, but she did begin her first years at school with a desire to do well. She used to play school with friends and her brother at home and was responsible for her brother learning so much before he went to school. She used to want to be a teacher. But those middle years shattered any interest she had. Mixing

grades 4-7 is just no good. She tried to grow up too soon. Confusion with four levels of teaching left her hanging and lost, especially in Math.

Bobbi often talks about moving to a bigger school, with more friends. Maybe that would work, more choices in peer groups, more stimulation from kids her own age with varied interests. Maybe larger schools are taken as a more serious institution. Maybe this isolated island life is too idyllic to represent life realistically and the value of a good education, the necessity of preparing for the future.

Maybe the fault is with us as parents. Maybe we are too anxious, maybe we have inhibited her. We feel we can't pretend we don't have a problem.

Think I'm getting off the topic...what I want is for Bobbi to grow up and feel she is in charge of her life. I want her to be able to choose intelligently from a wide variety of directions. I want school to present the possibilities not as something unobtainable except only for the top kids, but the possibilities open to everyone with interest, drive and a positive self-image.

I would like schools to take responsibility for standards of behaviour, common decency and courtesy, not just among kids but between teachers and children. Thinking back, some of my most hurtful school experiences had to do with callous, insensitive teachers' remarks. I think that sincere caring about children's feelings and self-esteem would go a long way towards developing happy, stimulated children who turn into content, self-assured and successful adults. I know Bobbi has suffered from teachers' thoughtless treatment. As I remember when I was little, Bobbi also wants to be liked by her teachers. She wants to think they see her as someone special. That would be the ideal but common courtesy would do.

I don't necessarily want Bobbi to go to university to

become something fancy, but I'd like her to finish school with the knowledge that she's capable if she wants to. I don't think higher education has to be related to college or university. I would be happy to see Bobbi continue learning about life and people and anything else that may interest her, in her own way, through her own reading, through experience, through life. I don't want her to be bored as she seems to be right now in so much that she does.

It seems the last 6 years of school are mostly boring and something we all must suffer through. I remember feeling it was so irrelevant. Kids still feel that. I would like to see kids by 13 or 14 years actually put to work as part of their education, (no small project to set up I'm sure) but given some responsibility for other real people and real life; ie. helping old people, disabled, school children, ESL, penal institutions, food industry, service industry, the arts, provincial and municipal government, etc., etc. etc. Why dump them on the street at 18 with no skills, no experience, no idea as to what even interests them. In our home we make a point of talking about what people do, how they live, but we can't take them and show them as well as the education system could if they looked at the child as the adult they could become. School could better prepare kids for life and make some valuable use of their energy and need to be useful. So much of that academic stuff is wasted on kids. Give them some hands-on experience. They need to do something and 6 hours a day, year after year, indoors with books and paper is not doing anything. Giving teens something meaningful to do would probably reduce the amount of trouble they can get into. Physically, they're mature at 13, yet we expect to hold them back from real life for another 6 years. It's unnatural.

Society would need to change to accommodate young people, but in the long run it would probably be a more healthy and holistic way to run things, where our youth are included in the world. As things are now we separate and categorize by age, race, sex, ability or disability, but things are

changing. As the roles of the sexes are now in transition, maybe the role of children should also be re-examined.

I leave it in your hands."

For a long time now the parents of the children we teach have left it in our hands. I have read back through these Question 3 answers several times and marvelled at their insight and emotion. Educational research has committed huge amounts of time, money and energy in attempting to create an appropriate, meaningful direction for schooled learning. In a few brief comments from grown individuals who have experienced "the system" the true nature of the dilemma and possible avenues of improvement have been intelligently forwarded.

Fullan (1982) says that "the closer the parent is to the education of the child, the greater impact on child development and educational achievement" (p.193). The awareness exhibited, particularly here in Question 3, shows that parents perhaps see the role of the school differently from the school itself. These parents wished for their children to be, above all else, interested and happy learners. They wished for the school to duplicate the joy they had experienced in watching their children grow from a new born to a unique person ready to take his place in a now institutionalized learning environment. The pain and disappointment in the system, tragically outlined by Bobbi's mother, shows some of the downsides of the school experience.

The parents perceived the solutions to such problems as complex but blatantly straightforward. Their children needed space to "enjoy and develop his imagination"; they required a system that would allow "her desires (to) come first"; they wanted a school to make them "excited to learn and get a good feeling from it". Most of all the parents wanted a school system that "could better prepare kids for life and make

valuable use of their energy and need to be useful." As Bobbi's mom included: "I think that sincere caring about children's feelings and self-esteem would go a long way towards developing happy, stimulated children who turn into content, self-assured and successful adults."

The words the parents scripted meshed so exactly with their children's beliefs and experiences that at times I felt the two had become one. Perhaps they had. Perhaps the voices of learners all over the world share similar experiences with institutionalized learning. The parents' words suggest that learning cannot take place strictly inside the walls of school but emerges from a personal image we all hold of the world around us.

As the title of Gold and Miles' (1981) book suggests: "Whose school is it, anyway?" Is the school not created for the betterment of the child, the definition of which must be formulated by the parent of the child as well as the system itself? Who would know best about the inner workings and needs of a child but his/her own parent? If the intellectual insights offered here by just four parents are any indication, then the schools would be well advised to relinquish some of their control not only to the child but also to the child's parent. If this seems a little idealistic, one need only to re-read the personal educational experiences of these parents to see that the school system continues to show little regard for the learner as an individual. The parent seems to know what's best for their child - now it's time for the school to share in that knowledge.

#### **A BRIEF POSTSCRIPT TO THE LEARNER'S STORY**

So ends The Learners' Story. In attempting to recreate the essence of our time together I have tried to use their words to describe the experience of institutionalized reading and schooling. By sharing literature together I have

endeavoured to bring to light alternate modes of responding to reading. The voices that you have heard were my own, Bobbi's, Mandy's, Clint's, Rusty's and Allan's. As the mediator of their talk I take full responsibility for any impressions given. I have analyzed their talk from my own biases and would remind the reader to peruse it accordingly.

The learners' voices spoke to me of frustration, oppression, irrelevance, distrust, connecting lived realities and sharing. The themes expressed by them joined together to provide a clearer picture of the learner as a unique individual. In seeking this awareness of learner-as-individual I strived to follow van Manen's (1984a) ideal of a pedagogue: "...the principle that guides my actions is a sense of the pedagogic good while being sensitive to the uniqueness of a particular person in a particular situation." (p.5) While attempting to come up to that ideal, I feel I have fallen short and yet I sense I have drawn closer.

In the final chapter of this study, I will try to bring together the ideas expressed here and provide some direction for the future. We, as educators, need to realize that the road to "the pedagogic good" is a journey that never ends. In seeking "the good" we may come to a deeper understanding of ourselves as individuals and consequently the uniqueness of the learner.

## CHAPTER V

## REFLECTING ON THE LEARNER'S STORY

## CONVERGING THEMES - QUESTIONS RE-CONSIDERED

In attempting to understand the students' world of reading, both their experiences with institutionalized learning and personally selected reading were explored. During the investigation of these two worlds certain themes emerged which enabled me to gradually piece together my own version of the adolescents' experience with reading.

Looking back on the study I feel I have been involved in something deeper and more penetrating than strictly educational research. I've made the lives of the students the object of the study while seeking the experience of institutionalized learning. By seeing their world from many different perspectives a sense of the living, as well as the learning world they exist in came slowly to light.

In telling The Learner's Story I was also remaking and reliving my own story. As I channelled their experiences through my own perceptions of the world a subtle change took place within that world. van Manen (1982) writes:

The important point is that all research and theory development which seeks to set up principles, norms, or values which have not been embodied in our spiritual or individual life histories therefore will fall short of the pedagogic call of our ways of being with children. (p.46)

Again, the themes extracted during the analysis were not intended to establish "principles" or "norms" from which definitive remedies or conclusions would grow. As the voices of the learners blended together to form their experience of the situation a text was created that told a story.

To begin the reflections of The Learner's Story I would

like to speak briefly about the vehicle of the research - talk. As Vygotsky (1962) proposed, language plays a vital role in the child's overall cognitive development. The means-ends paradigm of much earlier educational practice served to create a teacher-as-technician view of education placing the onus for communication on the classroom instructor. Teachers were seen as subject experts and were expected to maintain quiet control over their students and to administer content in an organized fashion. The more control the teacher assumed the less talk was evident from the student. Children's chatter was seen as idleness and the rally cry, as Allan (the teacher) had so eloquently professed, became "a quiet classroom is a busy classroom".

The talk generated during the meetings which form the basis of this study tapped affective attitudes of students seldom heard in a classroom situation. My non-threatening, non-evaluative role in the study allowed the students the freedom to openly express concerns and interests as well as to intently listen to the opinions of those around them.

The affective issues arising from the meetings grew out of peer communication and experiential offerings. While peer communication cannot be seen as an end in itself, it may provide a method of assisting students in better dealing with school and learning. As a leader-facilitator I tried to use my understanding of communication to aid the students in their learning process.

As I talked and listened to the group I began to get a sense that all educators need to ask themselves certain questions before deciding on specific teaching methods. One particular query is offered by Joan Tough (1977) following her lengthy study of talking and learning:

How can we provide experiences in school that not only challenge those children who already have considerable skill, but also provide many children with the essential experiences of dialogue that

can meet their potential for using language and extend their skills of thinking and communicating?" (p.240)

The "success" of the study rested primarily on the fact that each of the students was an active participant in his own learning process which was accomplished by open dialogue, both with myself and fellow learners. If one is justified in saying that learners make sense of new knowledge by projecting it onto what they already know then speaking stimulates this process. In our group talk students not only formed their own hypotheses for a problem but compared theirs against those of others and were motivated to evaluate them for themselves. As long as a teacher's intent is for students to understand new principles and make use of knowledge in connection with their former experiences then "talking to learn" (Jones, 1988) needs to play a central role in classroom life.

In conclusion, our conversation provided a myriad of engaging learning situations. The group exploration into attitudes and reading interests stimulated a highly focused, personally relevant inquiry situated in a supportive, sharing atmosphere. The talk seemed to afford a spontaneous, rapid form of expression releasing the students from tedious, time consuming "busy work".

What was the experience of institutionalized reading for the students? The group members expressed a common confusion as to the underlying purpose of schooled reading and other curricular content. Their confusion seemed to grow out of a school experience they had all shared. The institution of schooling left them with a feeling of lost helplessness, a sense of not belonging or contributing anything of themselves, and degrees of rebellion against the seemingly arbitrary dictates of a system beyond their control. Amid feelings of frustration and contempt the students endeavoured to fit themselves into the externally structured system.

After listening to the affective issues put forth by the

students, I reflected on what it meant for me and for them to be in this world. Every person possesses some sort of spiritual centre of security and meaning. It gives his life purpose and significance and this provides his existence with clarity and direction (Heidegger, 1969). When this centre is questioned a person feels his life is insecure and meaningless. Life becomes a collection of uncoordinated bits, merely pieces in a puzzle not yet joined. His existence, therefore, becomes a series of events and happenings that lead nowhere and so mean nothing.

In a sense, the students' lives in school had become fragmented and disjointed. The distance between learner and teacher and learner and content served to make most school activities meaningless and tedious. The group's requests for more relevance ["You don't really do anything (in school) because you're supposed to learn stuff...like when you're not in school you're supposed to use these things and then you don't use them."], equality ("Sometimes we can't get up to help each other. I feel like we're being strictly forbidden like a jail." and "We should work by respect instead of going by the rules."), and social time ("I don't mind coming to school to do work...it'd be better if we could come in and talk for awhile.") exhibited their need to be seen as unique individuals and not as an amorphous mass.

School and home made up these students' lives. They built those environments on values, experiences, emotions, reflections and faith. It was a place where they lived. As they lived they continually fitted pieces into the structure to form the whole of their existence. As individuals we all become quickly accustomed to new items and our definition of our lives grows and changes bounded by our concept of what is good.

The oppressive nature of schooling combined with the teacher dominated orientation of reading instruction took away the three motivating factors essential to meaningful reading -

ownership, time and response (Atwell, 1987). Over and over again I would hear the phrase "I like my own books better." The ability to choose one's own reading material seemed to be the driving force behind true enjoyment of literature. The students wished to place something of themselves into their pursuit of literacy.

In school and in reading teachers provide children with prescribed novels, teacher selected readings or predetermined study guidelines. Sometimes novels and assignments are provided the students; sometimes students are given "limited" book choice in conjunction with teacher prepared assignments; often students are offered lists of potentially "creative" forms of novel content feedback to help accommodate their individual tastes. These externally created activities are possibly interpreted by students as equalling out to the same equation: "He makes us do questions because he doesn't trust us" (paraphrasing a comment between Rusty and Bobbi). As Rusty pointed out: "I guess you have to be told to do it in school or else you wouldn't do it." The feelings of irrelevance and distrust embodied in these statements provides a realistic picture of what institutionalized reading is like for the adolescent.

The picture painted by the students of their school experience offered images of overpowering boredom, meaningless assignments and unnecessary evaluation. Their schooled world was preconceived and externally owned. Instead of being participants in the absorbing world of learning the students had become mere observers of those things being imposed upon them. By determining what was "good" for the child the school had removed the true essence of intellectual and emotional development. In removing the process of change and risk from the curriculum the teacher had turned reading into an act of subordination blurring the uniqueness of the individual.

In discussing their own personal world of literature a different form of learning evolved. As the students shared

their preferred readings, talk became an avenue of personal expression, group connection and reader awareness. Earlier expressions of frustration and irrelevance with schooled learning were replaced by enjoyable conversations about horses, monsters, mythical creatures, fear, love and pain. The real life context of our talk allowed each student to share with the others on an equal level and from their own unique perspective. While this study was not designed to show whether the students learned anything about literature through their talk, it does exhibit an engaging, active environment of shared books and personally relevant experiences. If true learning embodies interest and involvement then our shared literature meetings provided glimpses of that process.

The literature being shared held personal importance for each student and the peer based environment provided an opportunity for them to listen purposely to each other's interests. In a "normal" institutionalized learning situation passive learners are dependent on authorities to hand down the "truths" and teach them what is right and what is wrong (Belenky et al., 1986). During our shared literature meetings the students and myself gradually became aware of the diversity of opinion and varying perspectives that others held. In some ways an awareness was growing among them that knowledge was constructed, not given or fixed. The process they were involved in could not be described as merely a "technique". They were embracing a sense of togetherness and belonging not often evidenced in a classroom situation.

As an adjunct to these on-going reflections I wish to include an observation about the students' behaviour in school during the six-week period of the study. Through numerous casual meetings with Allan during the research period, I was informed that the behaviour of the four students had been seen to degenerate slightly. Allan said that they had begun to question some of his assigned activities and were not as willing to accept his explanations for certain classroom work. I apologized at this point for possibly "creating a monster"

and volunteered to speak with the students about it, which, subsequently, I did.

In reflecting on this incident I thought of Belenky et al.'s (1986) discussion of William Perry's work on epistemological development. Belenky and her colleagues describe Perry's depiction of the interpretive frameworks students use to give meaning to their educational experience. Perry outlines a movement that starts with "basic dualism, where the students view the world in polarities of right/wrong, black/white, we/they, and good/bad" (Belenky et al., p.9). As mentioned earlier these types of students are described as passive learners. From here "dualism gives way to multiplicity as the student comes to understand that authorities may not have the right answers" (Belenky et al., pp.9-10). It is possible that the students in the group were growing into or through this stage of awareness and were, therefore, less likely to compliantly accept and obey. In their own way the students were trying to put something of themselves into the learning process as their experiences with shared literature increased. A postscript to this observation is that Allan claimed to have witnessed a lessening of this "rebellious" attitude after the research had ended.

During our shared literature time we all expressed our personal tastes and opinions on reading. Certainly some of the subjects came to better recognize themselves-as-readers. The open, collegial atmosphere enabled the group to connect with one another and share lived realities. In constructing a personally relevant image of themselves-as-readers, the students did not build walls of security and inflexibility. They became aware of their own shifting tastes ["I still like 'em (Black Stallion books). They get boring after awhile...Some of 'em I like."], and those of others ("What about Sweet Valley High?" response: "Yeah, I like those ones!"). By using their own language they developed a rapport with those around them that facilitated a rapid, natural, non-judgmental exchange. Like the common foundation of the family

guiding the maturing child through a myriad of experiences (Tizard & Hughes, 1984) the shared literature experience helped the learners develop a sense of the world around them.

A final comment needs to be added concerning the importance of attitude toward learning. From listening to the students's comments on prescribed novel study books and assignments it became evident that little reader involvement took place without corresponding reader interest. Reading has been defined by Rubeck and Wilson (1974) as a "process of translating signs and symbols into meanings and incorporating new meanings into existing cognitive and affective systems" (p.33). As has been recognized, the reading act involves two components - cognitive and affective. The study group members seemed to possess appropriate cognitive skills but were lacking a positive attitude toward most schooled reading. As Clint said of his schooled reading experiences: "Yeah, whenever we did the questions I had to always go back 'cause I didn't really take it in. It's like I just saw the words but didn't understand."

It seems that cognitive material is generally present in most institutionalized learning environments but too often little emphasis is placed on the affective aspects of learning. By being an active participant in the learning process, making choices, developing personal strategies and using their own experiences the student's attitude toward learning would be of a far more positive nature (Thayer, 1976).

In providing the students with the power to make a difference, a difference they find to be significant, school can increase motivation and self-awareness (Cell, 1984). In this study, a hint of personal freedom was seen to flow through our talks together. The students' expressions of concern for their school experience, their enjoyment of peer discussion, and their growing interest in literature all served to create a dynamic, if not risky, learning situation.

The uneasy feeling of entering into this risky, authentic world of the learner put us on a level of co-participants in a growing, ever changing process.

Interestingly, this type of situation, while so important to the purpose of this study, embodies the conditions so often avoided by educators. An open, risk-filled environment forces both learner and educator to exist on more equal levels of responsibility and trust. For a transmission teacher such as Allan this can be an uncomfortable environment in which to be. On this level Allan would have to emerge as a more authentic individual while accepting the uniqueness of the students he was assigned to teach. As Rogers (1983) says: "Another risk is that if there were real interaction, some students would be bold enough to say that they found the class very uninteresting and having little relationship to the issues of real concern to them" (p.24). Under those circumstances it would be difficult for Allan to justify his earlier comment: "We've got a job to do and we're going to get on with it. I'm constantly reminding them (the students) that nobody said we had to like it all - we're just doing it!" Is this an adequate stimulus for learning? Is learning such drudgery and boredom that educators are forced to impose their will onto the students? In the process, are we creating a world for the learner or are we simply making a more comfortable environment for the educator?

These are questions, we as educators, must ask ourselves in order to better understand our own reasons for particular modes of instruction. To hear The Learner's Story we must first attune our ears to our own story. The classroom that is "home" to students for a better part of their lives needs to involve belonging, understanding and more of the true nature of "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 1969).

In order to build a house, although we must establish solid walls, we must also provide doors and windows; so both the

impenetrable and penetrable are essential to useful building. (Lao Tzu, 1958, p.19)

Through windows and doors of humanistic education will flow learning embodied by risk and change where learner and teacher exist on a level of equal footing. In the process the experience of institutionalized learning may better approximate the personal realities of the child providing a meaningful and productive educational environment. The central figure in any learning situation is the teacher. What role can he/she play in creating a "freer" form of learning?

#### **TEACHING - THE MEETING OF THE FOUR COMMONPLACES**

Joseph Schwab (1973) argues that "defensible educational thought must take account of four commonplaces of equal rank: the learner, the teacher, the milieu, and the subject matter" (pp.508-509). In this relationship there is a need to form a coordination between commonplaces otherwise a type of superordination or subordination becomes apparent (Tom, 1984).

According to Tom the four commonplaces of education intersect at teaching in that institutionalized teaching involves a teacher-pupil relationship in the act of studying certain content within a particular milieu - the classroom. Teaching, therefore, should not be viewed by the teacher as merely the most efficient means to accomplish prioritized goals but as a much more complex activity. In essence, teaching involves "a subtle moral relationship between teacher and student, an attempt to bring important content to the awareness of a student, and the ability to analyze situations and to use instructional skills appropriate to these situations" (Tom, 1984, p.11).

During this study the focus of the research was on the learner. The original query sought to discover what the adolescents experienced during reading instruction and personally chosen literature. The insights they provided were

brought to light by comparing their preferred world of reading to the schooled reality created by their teacher. To ignore the importance or power of the teacher, here, would denigrate the value of this study. The school may have provided the physical setting for learning but the teacher established the framework.

In our second meeting together the students were discussing attitudes toward school and schooled reading. The group was putting forth comments concerning school being "like a prison of work" and the fact that they couldn't even get up to "help each other". One interesting response was offered by Rusty: "We're not being treated fairly as human beings should." While making a generalized reference to school Rusty was also directing his comment to how his own teacher treated him. I wondered at this point if it were possible to separate the two. The teacher possesses the power to decide on appropriate methods, time management, behavioural patterns and evaluative structures. The teacher has the authority to create what he/she feels is a worthwhile learning environment.

Throughout the study direct and indirect references were made to how the teacher did things (eg. "He makes us do questions."; "He spazzes out if we even get up to help someone."; "I don't think he likes me."; "Classrooms are like a prison of work.") In putting these comments together and attempting to retell their story I became aware of not only the adolescents' experiences with school, but of how these experiences would be interpreted by the reader.

As mentioned before, interpretation of any text is necessarily through the eyes of the reader. The biases and personal baggage we bring to reading is, in a large part, the basis of this research. At the same time I feel it necessary to talk about the teacher in this story.

If you read this story and say: "Well, that's the way Allan teaches his class. My methods are totally different so

my students wouldn't have those experiences" I feel the true essence of this study has not managed to come through.

In all educators there exists some parts of Allan. Allan's way of being with children may be different from some but, as he revealed in our interviews, he sees his work as important and consuming. He, like all teachers, possesses an individual personality through which he sifts his perceptions of his role as a teacher and his decisions for learning. Allan views his effectiveness through his own eyes and judges his worth as an educator accordingly.

If we could place all institutionalized teachers along a continuum basing one extreme on the philosophies of A. S. Neill's (1960) Summerhill experience and the other on the militaristic, hierarchial system inherent in privately funded military schools, the vast majority of teachers would fall somewhere between the two. In other words, if we are not proposing a totally free, open learning environment (ie. Summerhill) or an oppressive, adult dominated learning situation then we must find ourselves somewhere in between. By placing ourselves along this continuum we also embody part of what Allan stands for as a teacher.

In Erich Fromm's forward to Neill's (1960) Summerhill he speaks of the levels of authority inherent in most learning situations. He describes how educators adopt either an overt or anonymous authoritative structure depending on their personal preference:

Overt authority is exercised directly and explicitly. The person in authority frankly tells the one who is subject to him, "You must do this. If you do not, certain sanctions will be applied against you." Anonymous authority tends to hide that force is being used. Anonymous authority pretends that there is no authority, that all is done with the consent of the individual. While the

teacher of the past said to Johnny, "You must do this. If you don't I'll punish you"; today's teacher says, "I'm sure you'll like to do this." (Neill, 1960, p.x)

All educators are guilty of similar acts. To be a teacher it is necessary to cohabit with dozens of other individuals in often less than desirable physical environments. The moral relationship teachers enter into with their students requires them to make decisions and to create strategies to best meet the needs of not only the learner but also of themselves. It is the rare educator who, like A. S. Neill, can exist in an environment of nearly complete freedom where male teachers are permitted to attend class shirtless and students are free to play in lieu of lessons. The acceptance of this fact should create an awareness of the difficulties of control in institutionalized schooling.

Any teacher who wishes to be more than just a technician or an imparter of information cannot ignore the difficult matter of moral choice (Greene, 1973). By being with young children he/she is involved in more than just classroom teaching but also with "perpetrating and remaking a distinctive way of life" (Greene, 1973, p.181). In Chapter 2's analysis of the historical context of literacy development, the influence of society's perceptions of "the good" was brought forth. The system we call school drives the machinery of learning. In attempting to establish a balance between the power of the institution and personal needs of the learner it seems as though the emphasis has been placed on the system itself.

Allan, like all teachers, is saddled with the responsibility of imparting society's definition of "the good"; in the process Allan seems to have lost sight of the students he teaches. Allan made moral choices for what, how, where and why the children should learn. He chose certain content over others according to personal tastes and curricular dictates; he positioned students in rows to

accommodate his view of learning; he established behavioural objectives according to his perception of student performance. Allan made choices that he felt best suited the needs of an institutionalized learning situation. He, like all educators, often found himself compromising freedom for conformity, relevance for content coverage and camaraderie for control. Allan, like all educators, struggles to exist in an imperfect structure surrounded by an imperfect world.

What is needed by educators is a growing awareness of the externally conditioned environment in which they teach. To pretend to be free from biases or totally justified in our instructional techniques is to ignore the reality of schooled learning. As society's definition of "the good" changes, questions of guilt and responsibility will naturally be raised by teachers working within the school system.

For me to tell Allan to allow his students to choose their own reading material or work cooperatively together would be to impose my moral values on his. While one teaching method may be more effective than another, my externally imposed suggestion would, in a sense, emulate the same one-sided, teacher dominated nature of Allan's classroom. Like the students in the study, Allan must be allowed to create his own personal awareness of teaching initiated by a desire to learn and to care for his students.

There is probably no way for the individual teacher to choose the right blend of diverse educational fragments to create an all encompassing whole. Just as different learners require unique strategies, so do various environments demand changing priorities. An open, eclectic teaching approach can be as inhibiting as a structured, programmed one. What is important is for the teacher to decide what makes sense for him/her. The educator can only attend to different philosophies as openly as possible and screen new views through a caring perspective. He/she must be constantly thinking about what he/she is doing and measuring successes

against learner's response and input.

Finally, when reading *The Learner's Story* it is important to view Allan as a reflection of all teachers. We, as educators, are involved in a similar, universal process called schooling. How we exist in that environment and how we allow the students to exist depends on an awareness of self and thus an understanding of why we do what we do. In coming to a deeper awareness we may also better appreciate the experience of schooling for both ourselves and the learner. Teaching is, after all, a moral relationship of the two.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

The data obtained in this study illustrate some of the negative outcomes of controlled literacy and institutionalized learning. In J. MacDonald's (1988b) paper on curriculum and consciousness he cites a need for social change in order to liberate the school's instructional practices. He sees the need for the curriculum to relate more to the personal needs and experiences of the students and to allow them to seek relevance and meaning in their work and cognitive growth. MacDonald's view illustrates the problems experienced by the adolescents in this study in their pursuit of reading enjoyment.

While the development of meaningful education is a complex procedure, steps need to be taken toward the creation of manageable, student-centered classrooms. The feelings of oppression and helplessness expressed by the students in this study should cause us to seek answers to such questions as : "What constitutes a good classroom learning situation?" or "What role can both the student and teacher play in creating a more individual, personally relevant form of learning?". Researchers, quoted throughout this paper (Barnes, 1976; Hurt et al., 1978; Goodlad, 1984; Johnson et al., 1984; Atwell, 1987; Jones, 1988) have studied the oppressive side of institutionalized learning and formulated various means of

liberation.

Clearly there is a certain value in reading as a subject but only if teachers and administrators come to realize that children generate more meaningful thought if allowed the freedom to relate what they need to their own interests, needs and values. The voices in this study spoke of the needs of learners. As Bobbi said: "I don't like it when people force me to read"; and as Mandy added: "Most of the stuff I'm interested in isn't in the novels he gives us". Both comments can be viewed in a broader context in describing all aspects of an institutionalized curriculum. How often is this sense of arbitrary control experienced by students in a classroom? If learners grow by being interested and involved then a corresponding environment needs to be created to facilitate such learning. As MacDonald (1988b) states:

Our activities, efforts and expectations should, in other words, be focused upon ideas, values, attitudes and morality of persons in school in the context of their lived experiences; and our efforts should be toward changing consciousness in these settings toward more liberating and fulfilling outcomes. (p.161)

The students studied here wanted to be, as Rusty stated, "treated fairly as human beings should". Rusty's words showed that students want to be seen as individuals first and students second. In accomplishing such a feat an identical transformation by the classroom teacher is required. Research is needed to assist the educator in a liberation of self if a parallel emancipation is to be granted the learner. We need to establish an environment where teachers do not justify their approach by saying "nobody said we had to like it all - we're just doing it!" (Allan's comment) and where students do not view their learning as a "them-and-us" adversarial situation.

In looking at the institutionalized nature of learning for these students it becomes evident that research is needed

that facilitates teacher awareness of the social and physical constraints inherent in institutionalized schooling. School is not a microcosm of society but an artificial, demanding environment which can virtually eliminate the learner's intimate, personal needs for literacy development. Rusty's comment, "I feel like we're being strictly forbidden like a jail", may provide a revealing analogy to some present classroom practices.

Government - run penal institutions may be one of few environments in our society where similar feelings of oppression, frustration, helplessness, irrelevance and distrust are also experienced (others may include mental institutions and old folks homes). If this is the case, educational studies that accept these realities, while trying to seek possible remedies, will prove to be the most beneficial to the learner.

In our shared literature meetings (3, 4, 5) feelings of connecting, sharing lived experiences and recognition of self-as-reader all helped to ground our activities in the realities of the learner. In talking about their own world of reading the students became absorbed in talk and shared openly with peers. Atwell's (1987) work with junior high students points to the need for further research into providing learning environments where students are given ownership, choice and relevance in school activities. Clint's "classic" quote: "Another thing about school is it isn't as good as real life experiences" suggests a return to a more active personal sense of literacy development and learner growth.

The experiences with unexplained happenings in Meeting 5 illustrated the value of peer talk and a sharing of lived realities. From that talk the students shared books, created peer interest in other novels (eg. Bobbi borrowed Rusty's novel that day) and came to see themselves more clearly as readers (eg. Researcher-"Are you growing out of these books?". Bobbi-"I guess so. They're sort of all the same and the topic doesn't really excite me any more. "). In listening to and

sharing in their talk I came to better understand such phrases as "talking to learn" (Jones, 1988) and saw the need for continued study into the relationship between communication and education.

Time (or lack of) plays an important part in every classroom environment. Teachers feel pressed to "get through" the curriculum while students often feel confused and rushed in many of their activities. Questions need to be asked about how class time is being spent (such as in Goodlad's 1984 study). As was evidenced in the study group's novel work (The Gamage Cup) much time, in and out of class, was devoted to it's examination. Rusty read the book on the first day and did little more than re-read it for teacher directed questions for the next six weeks. Jimmy, Rusty's friend, failed to even read the novel, relying on Rusty to answer the questions for him. The time wasted just between those two students over the six week novel study period amounts to a multitude of unretrievable hours. If we are to use class time wisely research needs to point toward a more relevant, meaningful, and thus involved, atmosphere of learning.

If learners are to be treated fairly, equally, and with concern for their intellectual and emotional growth then we must strive to eliminate the oppressive "jail-like" environment forced onto us by the institutionalized nature of learning. We, as educators, need to listen to the voices of these students and ask how we ourselves would want to be treated in our pursuit of literacy. As Atwell (1987) says: "My students approach written language expecting the same sense and satisfactions as I do, as all literate humans do" (p.254). To grow closer to this ideal, as teachers such as Atwell have done, continued research into areas of humanistic, learner-centered education is needed. As well, by becoming increasingly aware of the institutionalized restrictions present in today's schools, educators will be better able to transform the classroom into an arena for meaningful interaction, relevant learning and productive cognitive and

affective growth. If researchers and teachers are prepared to accomplish this task a great deal of the effort used to motivate and interest learners in reading and other subject areas will be unnecessary.

In some ways the results of this study have lent weight to the findings of earlier researchers as well as provided a more personal sense of the experience of institutionalized reading for the learner. The voices heard here should provide increased motivation for those in pursuit of meaningful and relevant learning environments in our schools. It should also illustrate some of the more liberated forms of learning available to the classroom teacher while reminding him/her of the risks of such open approaches to education. If this study merely forces the educator to re-think some of the strategies used in the classroom then something of value will have been accomplished.

#### **LISTENING TO THE VOICE OF LEARNING**

Through our five formal meetings together I developed a sense of what the experience of schooling was like for the students. I also gained an insight into their preferred world of reading and their uniqueness as individuals. If, as Tough (1976) says, all educational processes are based on communication then the five of us learned together through our talk. I became aware of the lack of real life experiences we offer the children when the talk in schools is teacher dominated. There appears to be a need to look carefully at how we, as teachers, make sense and hold students accountable to our way of making sense.

Part of the strength of this study comes from the corroboration received from the private interviews and the parent's responses. By comparing these three parts of the study I felt a consistent voice emerged.

The responses from the students when interviewed

privately paralleled many of the themes already forwarded earlier on in their talk. Rusty's interview comment: "He (teacher) talks so much and then doesn't give us long enough periods for some of the things we have to do" mirrored the group's talk on the externally controlled nature of the school experience. Clint's comment: "Yeah, and we already know it so we're not learning anything" again illustrated the irrelevance and the non-participatory style of many classroom activities.

The positive aspects of peer talk and shared literature were further confirmed during the private interviews by comments such as Mandy's: "You didn't have to put up your hand and you got to talk when you wanted to talk and you (researcher) didn't ignore us." Also the value of students and teacher coming to a closer understanding of one another was corroborated by Bobbi's response to her feelings about my home visit: "I liked it...It would have been neat if Mr. (teacher) had done that because, like, so he knows what I'm about and where."

The parents provided an equally enlightening verification of the findings of this study. Their ability to see their children as unique individuals illustrated how the parents saw the growth of the students in more positive terms than was evident in the classroom situation. The parents' constant references to "good" teachers having a profound effect on their own school experience further underscored the importance of the teacher's role in facilitating worthwhile learning situations. Bobbi's mother's response articulated much of what had already been expressed by the students themselves.

Throughout the course of the study there seemed to be little doubt as to the honesty and truthfulness of the learner's voices. The same themes brought forth by the students as a group were present in their private talk as well as in their parents' words. Observations of the group in and out of their classroom only seemed to add credence to the

affective issues they had raised. At no time during the study did I feel I was a participant in anything but an authentic sharing of lived experiences and personal realities.

The voices in this study spoke to me of a need for change and a new definition of institutionalized learning. How that change will come about remains in the hands of concerned educators and humanistic researchers. As Bobbi's mother's final comment stated: "Society would need to change to accommodate young people, but in the long run it would probably be a more healthy and holistic way to run things where our youth are included in the world." In seeking this "better place" Bobbi's mother speaks of the need to replace oppression with freedom and the voice of the institution with that of the learner.

The true nature of knowledge is not embodied in informational acquisition and definitions, but in change. Education needs to be open to change while remaining closely attuned to the needs of the learner. In changing, a true awareness of learning will grow, providing relevance and communication - talk which serves to remind man of his distinctiveness and his being of one mind with others (Heidegger, 1969).

#### **AN EPILOGUE**

My interpretation of the experience of institutionalized reading and learning for the learner has ended. I hope, for the learner's sake, it has only begun. By interpreting the school situation, the adolescents' talk, as well as responses from teacher and parents, I have offered one version of the experience and lived in its emergence.

In retelling the story I have reshaped myself and provided avenues for further personal reflection. During the time I spent immersed in the research and its subsequent analysis I looked at my own past and reflected on what it

meant to be both a teacher and a student. While I know that the next "schooled" world I create will lack perfection, I do think it will possess an openness and an understanding not evident in my past environments.

The research on educational theory often presents the complexities of the institutionalized learning dilemma. The voices heard here exhibited it in far more simplistic, down-to-earth terms. In its simplicity lives its value. In that vein, I would like to leave with a simple poem by Cullum (1971) that reveals the hard edges of a child's sensibility. In coming to care about children we must look for a child's recognition of beauty, his potential for joy, his stubborn expectation of understanding and community. And his need for love.

Don't you see my rainbow, teacher?  
 Don't you see all the colours?  
 I know you're mad at me.  
 I know you said to colour the cherries red  
 and the leaves green.  
 I guess I shouldn't have done it backwards.  
 But, teacher, don't you see my rainbow?  
 Don't you see all the colours?  
 Don't you see me?

I want you to come to my house,  
 and yet I don't.  
 You're so important,  
 but our screen door has a hole in it.  
 And my mother has no fancy cake to serve.  
 I want you to come to my house, teacher,  
 and yet I don't.  
 My brother chews with his mouth wide open,  
 and sometimes my dad burps.  
 I wish I could trust you enough, teacher,  
 to invite you to my house.

(Albert Cullum, 1971)

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APPENDIXConsent Forms

## Parental Consent Form

I will allow my child to participate in the research conducted by Adrian Gowing through the University of Victoria, as outlined by the researcher. I realize that my child's participation is completely voluntary and that all data and information will be available to me both during and after the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Student's name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Parent/Guardian Signature)

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 Teacher Consent Form

I, \_\_\_\_\_, consent to participating in this research concerning four of my students' experiences with institutionalized reading. The design of the study has been thoroughly outlined to me and I understand my involvement in the study is completely voluntary. Complete access to all data and writings have also been promised.

I am aware that I will remain completely anonymous in the data and in the final report of this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Name)

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Author

  
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Aug. 22/90.  
(Date)