

Nurturing Strong Poets: Helping Students
With Learning Disabilities Write Their Personal Narratives

by

Karin Farquhar
BSc, Simon Fraser University, 1992
PDP, Simon Fraser University, 1993

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

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

Students with learning disabilities are vulnerable to dropping out of school. While the reasons students leave are complex, research has identified factors that are within the teacher's purview. This project is informed by research suggesting that classroom experiences should engage and empower students. Learning is meaningful when students are actively engaged and valuable when it enables the learners. Students, when they leave school, should then see themselves as able to determine their own destinies, responsible for their own actions, and capable of creating meaningful futures of their own. This project combined Barone's (1993) metaphor of *strong poets* with an aesthetic assignment. The assignment endeavoured to help students gain new insights into how they viewed themselves and their futures. Results suggest that the use of an ideal image, like *strong poets*, combined with an aesthetic project has promise as an instructional approach that likely engages students and helps them to portray themselves as empowered.

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Acknowledgments

Everyday, parents entrust schools with the care of their children. It is no simple thing to have faith in the teachers you may have met only once or twice. Thank you, for trusting me with your children, as I know past experiences can make this very difficult.

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Chapter 1

The Starting Place: Introduction

Rodger loved going to school, even during high school. He loved the way classroom dialogue pushed his thinking and challenged him to see things in new ways. Teachers observed that this avid reader, with a natural curiosity about all things historical, often made poignant contributions to class discussions. Many lunch hours would find him deep in conversation with his History teacher debating an alternative interpretation to some historical event. Rodger was also skilled with his hands. His final woodworking project earned him provincial bragging rights. There was no doubt that Rodger was a talented, creative, and intelligent young man. Incredibly, Rodger barely completed high school with the minimal requirements for a graduation diploma. Organization and written expression were his nemesis. Rodger had been diagnosed with a learning disability in elementary school. He gladly accepted help from his teachers and from support staff, but often left assignments half done or lost them completely. When asked to write anything, even with the aid of a scribe, he struggled to gather his jumbled thoughts into a coherent paragraph. His teachers and parents were thrilled, along with Rodger, when he graduated and found employment with a cabinetmaker.

It's been five years since Rodger graduated. Two years ago he visited me to ask if I could help him update his resume as he had lost his job with the cabinetmaker. There had been a misunderstanding between Rodger and his employer. Rodger had missed a deadline and was unable to explain to his employer how he had become distracted with another project causing him to unintentionally miss the completion date. Too

embarrassed and unable to put his thoughts into words, Rodger had just shouted back that he didn't like his job anyhow. Rodger had loved his job.

Early one morning last week, I saw Rodger again. This time he was sitting on the floor outside of the public library. He looked like his clothes could use a good wash and had it not been for his distinct silhouette as he hunched over his book, I would have mistaken him for a homeless person. I spoke with him briefly; he was still out of work and had no prospects for work. What happened to this promising young man? Surely he still possessed the same bright, creative intellect and nimble fingers. And what of the other Rodgers who pass my door every year and do not graduate?

Not all students are equally successful in completing high school. Students with learning disabilities lag behind their peers in graduation rates (BC Ministry of Education, 2006). Even as adults, dropouts continue to lag behind their peers. Individuals who have not completed high school are more likely to be unemployed and, if they are employed, they tend to earn less than peers who have graduated (Bowlby, 2006; Canadian Council on Learning, 2005). This failure to complete high school could stem from a lack of knowledge on the part of the individuals with learning disabilities of their own strengths and weaknesses paralleled with corresponding strategies to allow them to learn and work at their best. This inability to articulate and negotiate conditions that maximize strengths and support weaknesses limits their ability to participate in and contribute fully to their community.

The philosophy of education that I adhere to is one of empowerment. Students, when they leave high school, should see themselves as able to determine their own destinies, as responsible for their own actions, and as capable of creating futures of their

own. I wish for my students to have a sense of themselves as *strong poets* (Barone, 1993). “A strong poet is someone who refuses to accept as useful the descriptions of her life written by others.... The strong poet plots her life story toward her own ends and purposes” (Barone, p. 239). As strong poets they embark on the authoring of their individual life narratives by continuously revising, redescribing and reinventing themselves. Strong poets plot their life stories toward their own emergent ends and purposes.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of my project was to examine the use of an aesthetic class project centered on the theme of strong poets to promote self-advocacy in students with learning disabilities. In the context of this project the term *aesthetic* experiences are those common, everyday ethereal moments that lift our spirits in appreciation of the beauty that surrounds us. “Aesthetic qualities such as balance, rhythm, tension, and form are found in the most elemental activities of the human animal” (Barone, 1993, p. 237). This aesthetic project required students to co-author a children’s book by writing their own personal narratives onto pages of the children’s book. I was interested in enabling students to see that how they judged their own lives mattered and to see themselves as able to set the course for their own futures. In Barone’s words, I wanted these students to become strong poets. Strong poets are individuals who not only choose their own paths in life but those who know that there are multiple options for their paths open to them. Furthermore, strong poets are reflective, taking measure of their own lives and know that their own reflections have meaning. I believed that by encouraging students to see school and success as episodes they could, and should, want to take charge of, they would be more

likely to complete high school and perceive themselves to have the potential to be more successful as adults, whatever their personal definitions of success might be.

Significance of My Project

While my project was very narrow in scope, its implications could be broad. The aesthetic class project was comprised of students from two sections of the same special education course that I taught. Each autumn, our school offers two blocks of Learning Strategies. Learning Strategies is a locally developed course offered exclusively to students diagnosed with learning disabilities. The classes are blended with students enrolled in Learning Strategies 10 and Learning Strategies 11 working together. The numbers beside the course name do not necessarily indicate the grade level of the students but rather they indicated the grade level of the course. For students to be enrolled in Learning Strategies 11, they should first have completed Learning Strategies 10. Students in the Learning Strategies 11 course might currently be placed in either Grade 11 or 12. Only students enrolled in Learning Strategies 11 completed the aesthetic project and, from that group, only students in Grade 12 were asked permission to have their work samples used as data for this project. However, the application of a project such as the one used here, could benefit students in any educational setting.

Self-advocacy, empowerment, and engagement are issues that can impact all teaching situations whether a traditional Mathematics class, a special education class, or even a grandparent sharing a family recipe. This project could be used by other educators to guide them in the implementation and assessment of an aesthetic project focused on empowerment and engagement in their own settings. All students, I contend, could feel empowered and competent as they leave high school.

The Project

My work centered on the completion of an aesthetic project with two Learning Strategies 11 classes. Students were also asked to complete both pre- and post-assessments emphasizing their perceptions of themselves as learners. While the issues explored in this project could be applicable to limitless situations, the project itself had a very limited scope. Only two classes completed the aesthetic project along with the pre- and post-assessments. These classes were neither randomly chosen nor were they representative of the school's demographics. Only students previously diagnosed with learning disabilities were permitted to take the Learning Strategies courses. Furthermore, recruitment of participants to submit work samples was limited to Grade 12 students from within those classes. A further limitation of the work was that it considered only one unit within the Learning Strategies 11 course. It is possible that other units in the course may also have influenced how students saw themselves as learners, how empowered they felt, and to what degree they were willing to engage in the aesthetic project.

Organization of Chapters

In Chapter 2, I review the literature that informs the background for this project. I begin by focusing on protective factors that can increase the likelihood that students will complete high school. Next, I delve deeply in order to define what I believe to be the purpose of education. The chapter ends with the application of Barone's metaphor of strong poets in the design of an aesthetic class project that could amplify protective factors while addressing what I believe to be the deeper purpose for education. Chapters 3 and 4 describe the process of creating, collecting, and analyzing data. I separated this

discussion into two sections, as the students involved in the class were not all included as participants in this project. Chapter 3 chronicles the class-wide process of developing and implementing the lessons in which the data was created. Chapter 4 recounts my process of collecting and analyzing the data to look for examples of empowerment and engagement. This chapter also includes the data from the students' Strong Poets Projects. Chapter 5 chronicles the methodology used for the analysis. The findings from these analyses are then summarized in Chapter 6. The last chapter, Chapter 7, offers reflections regarding the project, proposes recommendations for further work, and draws conclusions from the work as a whole. Readers familiar with *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* (Suess, 1990), which became the book that students co-authored in the project, will notice that the chapter titles correspond to phrases from this book.

Chapter 2

Flying with the High Flyers: Review of Literature

A Need for Change

Students with learning disabilities do not graduate from high school at the same rate as their peers. Provincially, in 2006, 84% of students without diagnosed special needs completed a Dogwood Certificate within six years of their entry into Grade 8, but only 68% of students with diagnosed learning disabilities graduated in the same time period (BC Ministry of Education, 2006). Based on retention rates between grades in the same report, it seems that students with learning disabilities remain enrolled in public education up to high school, and it is only at the high school level that students with learning disabilities begin to withdraw from school (BC Ministry of Education, 2006). It is important to note that this report presents limited data; it does not indicate levels of achievement as students' transition between grades. So it may be that some students are actually moving up to higher grades without meeting the learning outcomes at the lower grades. While many individuals with learning disabilities graduate within the six-year limit reported by the Ministry of Education, the discrepancy between graduation rates for students with learning disabilities and non-disabled students remains a concern. Failure to complete high school is worrisome, as dropouts are twice as likely to become unemployed (Bowlby, 2006; Canadian Council on Learning, 2005). Clearly many influencing circumstances are outside the control of classroom teachers, but teachers can familiarize themselves with the factors that are within their influence to give students the best opportunity for completing high school.

Risk Factors and Protective Factors

In reviewing the findings of several researchers, two recurrent themes can be discerned as to the reasons why students, in general, leave school: alienation and disengagement (Canadian Council on Learning, 2005; Morrison & Codsén, 1997; Heath, 1970). Alienation and disengagement are risk factors or behaviours that could lead to negative outcomes like dropping out of high school, and these are within the teacher's purview. Heath used strong words to describe some of the negative experiences students may have in school that can lead to feelings of alienation and disengagement.

Yet, increasing numbers also seem to be deeply bored and apathetic, even gloomy and despairing, resentful, purposeless, uncommitted and privatistic... Of their schools they think: irrelevant, boring, repressive, joyless. The more articulate students say they are prisoners of a dehumanized "system" that makes them feel like "niggers." Increasing numbers repudiate requirements, grades, achievement, and competitiveness. (1970, p. 516)

While Heath's analysis may be dated, her description of student experience is echoed in "Francesca's" words posted in *Your Stories* (LD on Line, 2009).

...after awhile I got sick of sitting in a corner not being able to do the work the rest of the students were doing that I started to sit by myself during breaks and I would not do any group work preferring to do work on my own even though the other students wanted to work with me...so the next time I had that class I would just head to the toilets and lock myself in crying my heart out because I could not complete any of the work and I just wanted to leave school for good after awhile I started to take days off school. Francesca, Age 16 (Francesca's Story, 2009, ¶4)

Morrison and Codsén's (1997) comprehensive meta-analysis of high school dropout behaviour in individuals with learning disabilities attributed the cause of alienation and disengagement (lack of bonding) to the disconnection between school practices/curriculum and the individual student's needs. Francesca's choice to sit by herself and avoid working with her peers is an example of alienation. She is certainly

disengaging from school when she locks herself in the bathroom or skips school.

According to Morrison and Codsen (1997), teachers can incorporate practices that are more likely to keep students in school. These would be the protective factors. Protective factors that schools can control include consistent rules, positive relationships with significant adults, and an understanding of the individual's learning disability (Morrison & Codsen, 1997). With regard to an "understanding of learning disability," Morrison and Codsen (1997) are careful to spell out that this understanding includes the child, the parents, and the school. Furthermore, to be understood, the disability is not only acknowledged and addressed but also seen as circumscribed – a child is not defined by her learning disability (Morrison & Codsen, 1997).

When I learned this was due to a learning disability, I was upset. I felt that no one in the world was like me; I was the only one who had a disability. Having a learning disability made me feel like I didn't belong, stupid and humiliated. I was scared to tell my friends for fear that they would not like me anymore. All through third to fifth grade, I kept my disability a secret. Emily, Age 14, (*Alone in the World*, 2009, ¶3)

Emily's story speaks of the need to understand herself and to be understood by others around her. Her story also highlights the importance of a further protective factor affecting emotional adjustment: self-esteem. As a result of being diagnosed with a learning disability, Emily feels that she is stupid and this perception overshadows any other talents she may have. Emily does later tell a friend of her disability and finds her friend to be supportive. Even so, at this point in her story her self-esteem needs to be addressed. Morrison and Codsen (1997) also outlined risk and protective factors outside of the teacher's control, but the scope of this project is limited to factors that are within the teacher's influence.

The education of youth with learning disabilities should thus focus on strengthening protective factors and minimizing risk factors within the classroom. The protective factors to be strengthened are consistent rules, positive relationships with significant adults, understanding and circumscribing of the learning disability, and promoting self-esteem. Risk factors to be minimized are disengagement and alienation. These factors are not generally learning outcomes in most course curricula, but instead form the very foundations of educational purpose.

The Purpose of Education

I have the pleasure of teaching a unique course specifically designed for students with learning disabilities. Learning Strategies 11 is a locally developed, Board/Authority Authorized course focused on providing opportunities for students with learning disabilities to perceive themselves as empowered and designed to help them to better understand their own disabilities, to develop appropriate learning strategies, to improve organization skills, and to practice self-advocacy (Renyard, 2005). As *empowerment* is a central theme to my praxis and my project, I next examine what I mean by it and what factors influence my definition of empowerment.

Defining Empowerment

My ideas of empowerment come from the example of my parents, from feminist thinking, and from the work of Paulo Freire. The example of my parents not only influenced how I saw the world as a child, but their example further taught me how the actions of one person could promote the empowerment of another. To further support my

definition of empowerment as it applies to education, I draw upon the work of Freire and several feminists specifically Lather, Trethewey, and Wang & Burris.

My parents spent most of their working lives as missionaries for the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in South America. The scope of their efforts encompassed the spiritual and physical needs of the people in the communities in which they worked. In Paraguay, their mission was a hospital that treated and rehabilitated leprosy patients. In Peru, the initial focus of their work was to provide food and medical support to flood victims and later, with the help of CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency), they oversaw the construction of irrigation canals and potable water service to isolated communities. In all of their work, their intention was always to help others by giving them the skills and resources they needed to become independent.

Paraguayan leprosy patients were not only cured of their infection, but efforts were also made to equip patients so that they might regain the independence that they otherwise could have lost. Once the spread of leprosy infection in patients was halted, the work of education and rehabilitation began. Most patients were able to return to their home communities knowing how to prevent further infections in areas of their bodies that had suffered permanent nerve damage. Some patients had to undergo rehabilitation, which might include adapting to prosthetics, to regain independence in their professions and/or self-care.

After the crisis of the aftermaths of the flooding in Northern Peru had been addressed, the local people asked my parents to help them develop infrastructure that could help them with their daily physical needs. Once Peruvian villagers had a regular source of water to irrigate fields, they would be able to grow their own food and provide

for their own families without the assistance of foreign aid. The provision of potable water to the village would decrease the likelihood of disease and infection. My father often made reference to the proverb about teaching a man to fish. “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime (Confucius).” In all their work, whether attending to spiritual or physical needs, my parents always stressed the importance of empowerment. People should be able to care for themselves after the foreign helpers had left. From my parents, I learned that I should strive to provide opportunities for others to seek empowerment making them independent of the support of aid workers. In my role as special education teacher, that would mean students should become independent of their teachers and educational assistants. However, empowerment is about more than a supply of resources or a set of skills. It is also about recognizing the rights of individuals to participate in decision-making about their circumstances, which is so well articulated in feminist thinking.

The feminist stance to which I adhere, is one in which all individuals can have an opportunity to be heard and be acknowledged as having power (Lather, 1998; Trethewey, 1997; Wang & Burris, 1994). Inequities in power can be delineated not only by gender, but also by any designation of difference, which in this case is the diagnosis of a learning disability. Feminist researchers maintain that knowledge is more complete when it is shared, when it seeks out the voices of all members of a community (Eichler, 1988; Lather, 1998; Wang & Burris, 1994). In working with students with special needs, particularly those diagnosed with learning disabilities, I have come to see that the source of the knowledge about learning disabilities needs to shift. Most information presently comes from researchers in education and psychology, and very little of this knowledge

comes from the very students diagnosed with the learning disabilities that the research seeks to help.

Freire's seminal work, titled *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), also values the voices of the individuals, but he further asserts that the very act of recognizing the knowledge held by each of us has an emancipatory effect on the individual. When individuals see that their own perceptions of truth matter, they grasp the transformational power of the knowledge that they hold (Freire, 1970). As students with learning disabilities realize that their understandings of themselves and their circumstances matter, they will hopefully become more conscious of the potential power they hold to determine the course of their individual paths. Education, according to Freire (1970), is meant to provide opportunities for others to seek empowerment in the realization that knowing is not about memorizing and reciting but about critically considering information and using it to re-consider one's own reality.

In the front of my classroom I have a large display quoting Sir Francis Bacon: "Knowledge is Power (1597)." I believe these words still ring true today. By learning from the example of my parents and the challenges posed by feminist educational researchers Eichler, Lather, Trethewey, Wang & Burris, and theorists like Freire, I have come to see my profession of teaching as one that should strive to educate in order to make it easier for students to identify themselves as empowered. By my definition, empowerment is a process taken up by an individual to break free of the need for constant support or approval from others and a process in which an individual makes his or her voice heard by others. As a part of this empowerment, the individual is enlightened to

recognize the important contributions he or she can make to society. The Learning Strategies 11 course is a perfect place to begin this work of nurturing self-empowerment.

Empowerment in the Classroom

The Learning Strategies course is offered for full credit at the Grade 10 and Grade 11 levels. The course description is composed of general outcomes based more on skill development strategies than content. While such an open-ended course description gives the teacher great freedom in lesson design, the teacher is also challenged to ensure integrity, rigor, and relevance in the course. My lesson planning generally begins with skill development strategies, as these are the goals of the course, and then I consider the content material to weave into these strategies. I feel that determining the content is a great responsibility and must be approached in a focused and thoughtful manner. The content holds power in conveying to students the true purpose of education. For example, the choice of reading material can address a range of concerns: the reading level of students, student interests, the role models presented by the characters and, also, the deeper message or moral of the writing. Therefore, a clear conception of the purpose of the lesson should be established to provide coherence and continuity throughout the course as a whole.

Identifying the purposes for education is so immense a topic that the discussion here will be limited to the work of three theorists: Eisner, Schwandt, and Broudy. Eisner (2002) speaks of the power of education in influencing the development of the mind within a cultural context. A teacher then needs to, consider the culture of the classroom she creates with, and for, her students within the broader context of society. She should

try to ensure that the classroom culture encompasses the protective factors that are predicted to keep students in school, and mitigates the risk factors believed to increase the likelihood of students withdrawing from high school prior to graduation.

Broudy (1974, 1976) postulates that general education has consequences for the manner in which students see themselves, the ways students take measure of themselves, and the possibilities that students see for their future lives. A special education class for students with learning disabilities ideally helps students to understand their disabilities, encourages students to measure themselves based on individualized standards, and promotes multiple positive images of them in the future.

Schwandt (1998) views education as a moral enterprise in which students continually interpret what they learn into an ever changing, humanizing understanding of self.

To understand what it means to educate (and what it means to do educational inquiry) is to participate in the cultivation and acquisition of practical wisdom. Therefore, as a process of this kind, education is interpretation, [sic] it involves self-understanding, and its purpose is to make us more human. (Schwandt, p. 411)

The purpose of education as envisioned by the theorists naturally encompasses the protective and risk factors identified by Morrison and Codsens (1997). By embracing a view of education in which the goal is to help students better understand themselves within their own cultural contexts, the classroom teacher can also increase the likelihood that students will stay in school and graduate.

Strong Poets and Aesthetic Projects

One practical approach to promoting self-understanding in students with learning disabilities would be to choreograph classroom experiences that allow students to reflect

on who they see themselves to be, and who or how they wish to be. This project of self-narration and self-advocacy through the co-authoring of a children's story offered a classroom experience centered on the themes of empowerment and engagement. By opening spaces for such experiences within the mandated curricular instruction, teachers can create opportunities for students to story themselves and to become conscious of their own storying. Barone (1993) urges teachers to nurture *strong poets* in their classrooms. Again I call upon Barone's words to define this compelling metaphor, "A strong poet is someone who refuses to accept as useful the descriptions of her life written by others.... The strong poet plots her life story toward her own ends and purposes" (1993, p. 239). He portrays the life story created by a strong poet as original, consciously shaped and reshaped, to "construct who it is she wants to become" (p. 238).

Goodson also sees the storying of the self as an ongoing individual construction, but he adds that this self-narration is not narcissistic; instead it is coupled with "location and collaboration" (p. 11, 1998). This location is the historical and geographical social context in which the self exists. The poets are not without a context; where, when, and with whom they are, impacts who they believe themselves to be. This influence of the context on the perceptions of self then limits the autonomy the poets have in defining themselves. I believe this kind of knowing oneself and being the poet of one's own narrative is exactly the kind of self-understanding Morrison and Codslen (1997) meant when emphasizing the importance of understanding one's learning disability as a protective factor. Barone (1993) suggests that teachers expose students to strong stories, encourage students to write their own stories, and employ aesthetic projects to create spaces where self-storying can occur and where strong poets can emerge.

When planning this project, I believed it would be most effective and meaningful if it were a seamless extension of the curriculum and practices already in place in my classroom. Teachers are, after all, contractually obligated to teach the curriculum as prescribed by the authorities, and parents expect them to teach this curriculum. Furthermore, I believe that student engagement is more likely to occur when experience is authentic and natural. My Learning Strategies class already had writing and reading strategies as part of its mandate. Therefore, an aesthetic writing project centered on a fictional piece of literature was a natural fit. Focusing students on an exploration of who they were, how they choose to see themselves, and who they wished to become was simply an enhanced approach to promoting a better understanding of their learning disabilities and becoming more articulate self-advocates. My intention was that this aesthetic project would create spaces where self-storying was practiced and strong poets could emerge. While I was looking for an example of an aesthetic project that would fit comfortably into the Learning Strategies 11 course, a colleague suggested I read Sumara and Davis' *Unskinning Curriculum* (1998). In this article, the authors use a multilayered approach whereby they parallel their theory with examples from Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992). The illustrative classroom example in the article involves students writing their personal responses to a novel right onto the pages of the book. Inspired by Sumara and Davis' example, I chose the co-authoring of an evocative piece of children's literature as a project for my own class.

In the selection of a children's storybook to use for this project I considered carefully the pictures and the text so they would reflect the intentions of the project. Dr. Seuss' *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* (1990) fits the purposes of the Strong Poets Project

perfectly. The illustrations are simple yet bold. The colours and images used underscore the emotions behind the words. *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* is the story of the hopes and dreams one has for the future interwoven with the pitfalls and frustrations we all encounter. This story was a natural fit for my class project, as I would be asking my students to examine who they believe themselves to be at this time, to anticipate who they wish to become in the future, and to reflect on what they might do if they encounter resistance in achieving their goals. An additional benefit of using this book was that I already had a co-authored example of it. In a graduate course with Dr. Hurren, I had used *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* to tell my own emergent story of self. With delight, I anticipated the marvels my students might create in composing their narratives. Readers familiar with this book might have observed that my chapter titles echo the words of Dr. Seuss.

The next three chapters outline the process of implementing, collecting, and analyzing the pre- and post-assessments and the co-authoring project. I chose to present the methodologies employed in the implementation phase and the data analysis as two separate sections, as they included two different groups of students. Chapter 3 examines the implementation phase including the methodology for this phase. The process for data collection is outlined in Chapter 4. I chose to also present part of the data, the Strong Poets Projects, in this chapter, as I felt it would lend the reader a greater appreciation of the voices of the student participants themselves. Chapter 5 describes the methodologies used to analyze the data. The findings of this analysis are presented in Chapter 6.

Chapter 3

The Great Balancing Act: Working with the Classes

Methodology for Implementation

My project asked students to engage in the aesthetic co-authoring project described in the previous chapter along with a pre- and post-assessment of the students' understanding of themselves as learners. These elements were used with all of the Grade 11 and Grade 12 students in Learning Strategies 11 as part of the regular course instruction. Pre- and post-assessments were already components of the course as they enabled me to evaluate students' attainment of the state learning outcomes for the course, which are to:

- fully understand their learning disability
- recognize their unique learning style and how to “tap” into it
- become self-advocates with the knowledge and understanding of their learning disability to become successful, independent learners (Renyard, 2005)

The co-authored book became a core component of the students' Grade 12 Graduation Transitions Portfolios and simultaneously served as the final project for Learning Strategies 11. My choice of methodology was based on three factors: 1) the availability to participants, 2) the protection of participants, and 3) the potential the research had to inform educational practice, especially my own praxis.

My professional work is predominantly with students who have been diagnosed with a learning disability. As mentioned earlier, part of my teaching assignment is a locally developed course called Learning Strategies 11. This course is designed to help students with learning disabilities understand their own learning/working profiles, develop skills to compensate for areas of weakness, and become advocates for learning/

working environments that best fit their needs (Renyard). The course is unique and, thus, if I wished to reflect on the effectiveness of an aesthetic project in fostering strong poets, I was limited to working with my own students. Permission to use the pre- and post-assessments and the co-authored work in my project was requested from both the Grade 12 students and their parents. I also kept my own journal of the process of orchestrating the project but was careful not to name individual students in my reflections. Protecting the students I taught was my first priority. Thus my project focused on documents that could be collected after the course had ended and recruitment was limited to Grade 12 students as I would not be in a position to be their classroom teacher again. Students and parents were however, informed of my intentions to recruit some of them to share their class work with me to use as data for my own project prior to the commencement of the Strong Poets Project during the Learning Strategies 11 course.

Assumptions and Limitations

The data to be collected as part of this project was limited to four sources; my research diary, student pre-assessments, student post-assessments, and the co-authored works produced as part of the aesthetic projects or Strong Poets Project. By nature each of these sources expanded and contracted the knowledge that could be produced in this project. What follows is an examination of the assumptions made about each data source and the potential limitations of the data that was collected.

The use of a research diary assumed a lot about my ability to be reflective and non-judgmental. My observation would doubtless be coloured by my perceptions and my desires. The intention was that my diary would be a record of my observations and

experiences as I prepared for, and worked with, my students to develop their co-authored stories of themselves. The diary was a record of the context in which the work took place and my reflections of this work throughout its progress. This record though limited by my ability to see and notice all that had occurred still provided valuable information.

Altricher claims that research diaries facilitate “the shaping of a plan by recording the context of the original aspirations enabling us to keep its purposes clear in the course of development” (2005, p. 26). My dairy helped me to stay focused on the central themes of empowerment and engagement as I grappled with the logistics of managing a class of students diagnosed with various learning disabilities all who were simultaneously creating aesthetic projects of their own.

The use of both the pre- and post-assessments assumed that students would be honest in their responses and would put forth equal effort in both of these assessments (Appendix A). The assessments were both presented in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (McTighe & Brown, 2005; CAST UDL Toolkit, n.d.) and differentiated ways (Tomlinson, 2003, 2005) so that all students had a fair and equal chance at expressing their perceptions of self fully. The same survey was used for the pre- and post-assessment so that comparisons in responses could be made.

The aesthetic project entailed the co-authoring of a children’s book by each student. The co-authoring that students participated in was the transcribing of their own narratives on the pages of a published children’s book. As with other classroom assignments, students were provided with criteria and examples to guide them, and they were assessed during the course based on this criteria. So, while each student created an individual project, these projects were not completely open-ended. Students were free to

express their views of themselves in their own words but they were required to do so in order to meet fixed criteria for the assignment. The use of an example of a co-authored children's book could be both a catalyst and an impediment to student creativity. An example would allow students to see what they were trying to achieve, yet it could limit their inventiveness to only what they saw in front of them. I believed that the potential of inspiring students with an example outweighed any possible limitations posed by such exposure.

Finally, it was important to recognize that all of these documents were gathered in the midst of an entire course and it was likely that other events within the course might also have impacted the outcomes of the project and post-assessment. Some of the other events in the course that could have increased the likelihood of self-advocacy and self-empowerment included, but were not limited to, a review with each student of his or her own Individual Education Plan (IEP), class discussions about learning disabilities and learning strategies, meeting and learning about other people with learning disabilities, and role play involving self-advocacy. All student documents gathered were components of the course designed to draw out specific information.

Preparing the Data Sources

In designing the pre- and post-assessments I wanted a simple tool that would allow me to compare how students described themselves at the beginning of the course and how they described themselves after they had completed their co-authoring project. I was specifically looking for description of self as learner. I kept the questions few in number with a considerable amount of white space on the pages to ensure that the task

felt manageable to students. The language used was direct, and allowed students to answer the questions independently, especially those with reading disabilities. To further support students with reading disabilities, I also read the questions aloud for the whole class during both the pre- and post-assessment sessions. To accommodate for difficulties with written output and/or personal preferences, students were also given the option of answering several questions with pictures. Students were told that correct spelling was not required. I could always talk to them later if I was unable to make out individual words. Computers with text-to-speech and speech-to-text programs were also available in the room for students to use. The first few questions were selected to draw out the students' prior knowledge and to acknowledge skills that are not traditionally demonstrated in the classroom. Students were already familiar with Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (2006) prior to the pre-test and were encouraged to draw upon those descriptors in their responses. Questions were designed to be open-ended so that students could be creative in their answers and to ensure that they would use their own words and ideas in describing themselves. My goal was to design an assessment tool that could reveal individual students' perceptions of self as learner while allowing each student to share thoughts independently.

Similar considerations were applied to the design of the co-authoring assignment, the Strong Poets Project (Appendix B). Students had access to computers, their peers, and me for assistance in editing the narratives. Some students typed out their drafts as they found it physically easier to write using this technology and, for two students with severe writing expression difficulties, I scribed sections of their draft narratives. However, the final project was to be written by hand, as I felt this personal format of expression would

be more meaningful to students who might wish to retain the project as a keepsake. The Strong Poets Project had three mandatory topics: a definition of strong poets, a description of self as learner, and an entry contemplating sources of assistance for future predicaments. These sections were mandatory as together they might summarize what students had hopefully learned as part of the Learning Strategies 11 course. Students were expected to complete four additional sections of their choice. Several alternate topics were suggested but students were also encouraged to create topics of their own. To ensure that students did not put a lot of effort into writing something that would not meet the intended learning outcomes for this project, I asked that they discuss new ideas with me first. The Strong Poets Project was designed so students could summarize their learning in the course and would appreciate how some of their learning, particularly the need for self-empowerment, could be of value in the future.

Teaching the Unit

Strong Poets Project

On the first day, I began with a brief, oral overview of the Strong Poets Project with the two Learning Strategies 11 classes. By using my own co-authored book as an example, I told students that they would be writing their own thoughts and ideas into the story, to both summarize what they had learned in this course, and to use their stories as documents for their Graduation Transitions Package. I opted not to show students my own book on the first day so that their imaginations would not be limited by the confines of my example. As a bonus, this project could also become a keepsake for students to enjoy as adults.

Telling the students about my own book was surprisingly emotional for me. I had long intended to use it with my class but still my hands shook and my voice quivered as I went on with the lesson. I hadn't been this nervous in a classroom since my student teacher days. Writing my own story into Dr. Seuss' (1990) book had been an emotive experience in which I revealed much of myself. As I co-authored Dr. Seuss' book, I recounted my own emergent story of becoming a strong poet by breaking the mold of the expectations others, and, subsequently, I had for my future. The thoughts and struggles I revealed were deeply personal. As I wrote I found that I was coming to understand myself, and my relationship with others around me, in a new way. Before beginning this unit with my classes, I had allowed very few people to see my book. But here I was about to invite my students to browse through some of my most intimate thoughts and experiences. I had to trust that the students would respect my work. My desire in sharing my example was to build a mutual trust with my students. If I was willing to risk entrusting students with my deepest thoughts, then hopefully they would see that my intention was to reciprocate this same degree of trustworthiness when they in turn entrusted me with their deepest thoughts. Freire (1970) might say that I was coming to trust my students to partner with me in a humanizing endeavour. We were embarking on a new adventure where together we would reflect upon, and examine, the selves we were becoming.

Next, I read out to the classes my prepared script, explaining that at some point I might be asking the Grade 12 students for their final projects and pre- and post-assessments to use as part of my own Master's work (Appendix C). This disclosure might appear as a power-over conflict that could sway students to produce work accordingly.

However, to be ethically responsible students and parents had to be informed of my intentions at the start of the class project. (The project itself posed no ethical conflict as it adhered to the regular curriculum of the Learning Strategies 11 course.) Immediately after learning of my intentions, students began to offer me the use of their projects. I thanked them, but clarified that it was still too early to seek consent. I expressed that I wanted to be careful with the power-over relationship I had with them and that, as this was to become a public document, I wanted to adhere to stringent conditions that would protect their confidentiality. Several students, because of their ages and/or estrangement from their families, insisted that they could grant me permission on their own. Again, I expressed my desire to err on the side of caution emphasizing a greater concern for the student's privacy than gathering a substantial amount of data. At any rate, it was much too early to worry about recruitment. What a delight and what a responsibility it was to have students be so eager to entrust their creations to me. The remainder of the first day was spent introducing the book students would be co-authoring and the concept of strong poets.

The book I selected for this project was Dr. Seuss' *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* (1990). Truly a book for all ages, this story gives advice for balancing life's ups and downs by making conscious decisions to govern one's own behaviours and attitudes. Dr. Seuss begins with the potential that is innate in each individual.

You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself
any direction you choose.
You're on your own. And you know what you know.
And *YOU* are the guy who'll decide where to go. (Seuss, 1990, p. 2)

Students in both classes were a bit hesitant when I first started to read but soon they were showing signs of active listening. Several students leaned forward in their desks while others craned their necks to better see the pictures. As we came to the pages about the *waiting place* (pp. 24 - 25), I heard murmurs from students about how much they too hated this state of suspense. One class even asked the Grade 10 students, who were on the other side of the room working on their own projects, to work more quietly. I had used a new blank copy of the book, so students could focus on Dr. Seuss's words on the first reading and appreciate why I thought this story was so fitting for high school graduates. When I finished, students in both classes asked to see my own co-authored Dr. Seuss book, which I promised to bring in later in the week. Several students were so excited about the project that they asked me to help them buy their own copies of the book, as I would only be able to photocopy selected pages to stay within copyright laws. With the introduction of the children's book a success, it was time to move on to the metaphor of strong poets.

The concept of strong poets proved to be the most challenging part of the lesson. To help students understand this idea, I gave them a paragraph from my writing to work with (Appendix D). First I read the passage aloud while students highlighted key ideas. Then students worked in pairs to discuss the phrases they chose before they shared their selections with the class. This was followed by a class conversation about the metaphor of strong poets. Finally students were asked to write their own definitions of strong poets. As this was their first attempt at defining strong poets, I emphasized that this was a complex metaphor that they were to change to create their own definitions. They would have several chances to revisit their definitions over the course of the unit making

amendments as their interpretations evolved. As the students left class that day, they left their first drafts for me to review.

When I read the students' first interpretations of strong poets that evening, I learned something about my own writing. Read as a group, the students' definitions described strong poets as self-promoting. Some definitions went so far as to say that strong poets only cared how they saw themselves, implying that the opinions of other people did not matter. To understand how this could have happened I looked back at the passage from my work, which had been their introduction to strong poets. Now I could see that while making a positive contribution to society is central to my own definition of strong poets, it was not evident in the passage I had shared with the class. My passage needed to change. The teacher was being taught. I was engaging in a genuine dialogue with my students where the students' representations were causing me to reconsider my work (Freire, 1970). In the follow up lesson, I presented students with this inadvertent omission in my passage and its apparent subsequent influence on their work. I asked students to consider where other people fit into their definitions of strong poets. Most students made attempts to address this omission that day. Some came back to their definitions several times over the course of the project.

During the second lesson, students were given the Strong Poets assignment outline (Appendix B). The outline described the mandatory and optional sections that students would transcribe onto the pages of Dr. Suess' book to complete their co-authoring assignment. The assignment outline also clarified the learning outcomes for the project and specified the grading criteria. Three sections were mandatory: defining strong poets, describing yourself as a learner, and identifying resources that you might call upon

for help in the future. Together these three sections formed the core of the project as they asked students to reflect on how they perceived themselves presently, and to identify what choices they might make now and in the future to change their circumstances. Students were required to complete four additional sections of their choice. One of these options was for students to creatively design one section, with my approval. One of the most popular optional suggestions made by a student was the bucket list. This was a list of things to be achieved before dying or “kicking the bucket”. The inspiration for this idea came from Rob Reiner’s movie, *The Bucket List* (2007). After exploring the learning outcomes and the grading criteria, students moved on to independently working on their draft narratives.

All follow up classes were student driven. Students were free to choose to work by themselves, or with others, to develop passages for their projects. Students had access to Dr. Suess’ book and occasionally to my own co-authored copy of his book. I provided largely oral feedback and conferred daily with each student to ensure everyone had a plan and was progressing. I was very conscious of the effect my feedback could have, striving always to draw students out, rather than to influence them with my own ideas. Overall, the project took longer than anticipated, about ten class periods. I made the decision to extend the time as students initially struggled to understand what they needed to do. The metaphor of strong poets took longer for students to comprehend than I had anticipated. Several subsequent class discussions were focused on clarifying this metaphor. A few students also appeared to need time to trust that there was no one correct way to complete the assignment and that they were free to express themselves as they chose. Later in the

unit, I was moved to add another day to let students complete their projects as they were so engaged in it that they even chose to work on the project when they had other options.

As the days went on, students became more and more self-directed and engrossed in their work. Anecdotal comments from my Teacher on Call and my Educational Assistants highlighted how engaged the students were and how proudly students shared their creations with others. When students asked adults to look at their work, they were generally not asking for help editing, but instead they were excited to share what they had created. Not one of the coloured photocopied pages for the final project was lost and all students eventually completed their projects.

Pre- and Post-Assessments

The pre- and post-assessments were completed separately from the Strong Poets Project. Near the end of September, students were asked to complete the pre-assessment. I intentionally waited a few weeks before administering the pre-assessment. By the end of September the classes had already discussed what learning disabilities were and had completed several assignments connected to Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (2006). The delay also gave students an opportunity to become familiar with each other and with me. Timing the implementation of the pre-assessment in this way was intended to allow students to feel safer, and to give them additional language for their reflections. I coaxed students repeatedly during the pre-assessment to ensure that they completed all sections, even helping a few reluctant individuals, by giving them suggestions. The post-assessment took place during the last days of the course, at the end of January, just as students were completing the Strong Poets Project. This time I did not read over

student's comments during class or push them to give detailed responses. I merely asked that they complete all sections.

Assessing/Marking the Projects

The Strong Poets Project constituted the final project for the Learning Strategies 11 course and so had to be assessed in order to determine each student's final numerical mark for the course. I knew such a creative and open-ended project could be difficult to assess. To ensure that I would be consistent in assessing the student projects and to help students better anticipate how their work would be assessed, I gave them a project outline detailing the criteria to be used for assessment during the second lesson (Appendix B). The project outline explained the components of the project that were mandatory and the manner in which the projects would be scored in order to determine the overall mark for the assignment.

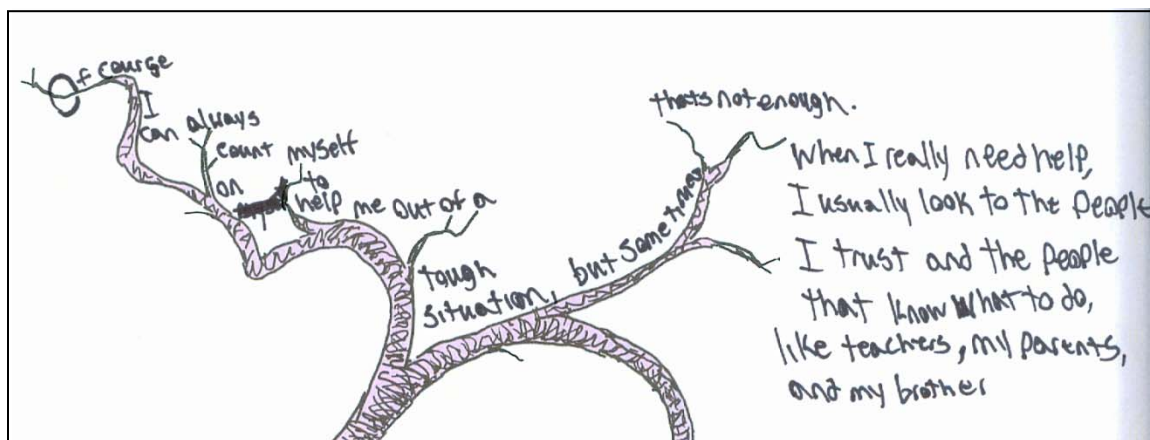


Figure 1 Student work sample depicting non-standard form.

Projects were to be neatly presented on the pages of Dr. Seuss's *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* (1990). Students were further expected to complete a minimum of seven sections, three of which were compulsory. The three compulsory sections that students

had to complete were to define strong poets, to describe themselves as learners, and to identify resources or people they could call upon for assistance in the future. The remaining four sections were negotiable. All sections were to be complete in paragraph form, though the paragraphs did not need to be presented in a traditional format. For example, Figure 1 shows a paragraph that a student chose to present in a non-standard form. The paragraphs were scored based on the Grade 10 Writing Personal Views or Response Quick Scale found in Appendix E (BC Ministry, 2009) with an emphasis (70%) on the *meaning* aspect. The strong weighting on meaning reflected accommodations made for the writing disabilities several students were diagnosed with, and to emphasize the importance of the narratives themselves over the conventions of written expression. By predetermining the assessment criteria, I attempted to fashion a tool that could gauge student success in completing the seven narrative sections of Strong Poets Project with original text.

Despite all the preparatory work of shaping clear unbiased marking criteria, I found assessing the projects to be one of the most difficult aspects of the project. I had waited for the majority of the projects to be completed before assessing the projects, believing that I would be more consistent if I marked most of the projects at the same time. This decision left me with many projects to read in one night. Surprisingly, I was unable to mark a single project that night. Just as my own co-authoring had revealed much of myself, so the students' stories revealed much of them. The first night was spent in awe, mesmerized by the students' candour.

The stories students unveiled in their books moved me to tears. One girl had sarcastically begun by naming herself the doctor who had authored her book. Her

parents' great aspirations were for her to become a medical doctor but she had other aspirations. This has led to many a battle in her family, even in front of her teachers. Later in her book, she wistfully told of her modest dreams for her future, anticipating that they would never become reality, as she would likely be forced to fulfill her parents' plan. Another student described himself as the only resource he could rely on in the future. His family, he believes, has already proved that it is not interested in his future. I was forced to stop marking that night and simply read the books to hear each child's story. Sometimes in reading the projects, I laughed at the funny stories that students told of their childhood antics. At other times, I cried as students recalled experiences of being called "stupid and slow" for not keeping up with their peers. As I read the, at times, humble and, at other times, ambitious goals students set for their futures I found myself rethinking my own priorities. Gratefully, I had the exam break to mark the projects. I gave myself over to my anecdotal comments for a few days before I grappled with the numerical mark.

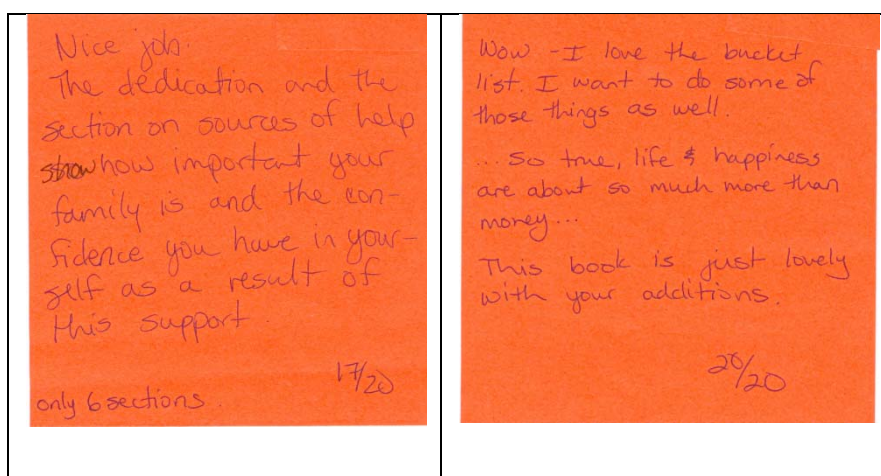


Figure 2 Examples of assessment feedback for Strong Poets Projects.

Following the criteria given to the students at the onset, I highlighted the Quick Scales, weighing meaning subsections the highest. When students missed sections or provided too little information for a section I reduced their marks. No students lost marks for neatness, as all work was legible even though it was all hand done. Each student's score was recorded on a sticky note along with anecdotal feedback (see Figure 2). The anecdotal feedback consisted mainly of my personal responses to the student work along with short notes listing reasons for reductions in marks. The sticky note in Figure 2 shows how I noted the reason for the loss of three marks, but by using larger letters and more words I emphasized the strengths I saw in the student's work. Now that the course was over and the assignments scores were entered it was time to collect data for my own project.

Chapter 4

The Gang: Data Collection and Data

Data Collection

The work samples used as data for this project were collected in an ethical manner. The selection of participants, the timing of collection, and method of collection were chosen intentionally to minimize any potential power-over conflicts. Only students in Grade 12 were asked to contribute their work samples to this study, to ensure that I would not be in a position to be their teacher in the future. Recruitment began after all course marks had not only been submitted but had also been made public through report cards, to safeguard that students would not be treated differently based on their decision to participate or not participate in the study. Finally, as I would remain the case manager for these students until the end of June, a colleague was asked to solicit students for participation and to request permission from parents for their children's participation in my project (Appendixes F & G). Only five of the Learning Strategies 11 students were in Grade 12 this year. All five were invited to participate. One student was absent the week that students were recruited. A second, though eager to participate, was unable to get parental signatures, as he was not living with his family at the time. The remaining three students granted full permission.

A registered psychologist had previously diagnosed the three participants in this study with a learning disability. All three qualified for, and used, adjudication support during provincial and school examinations: two had access to both a reader and a scribe, while the third had access to a scribe only. These students have participated in the development of their Individual Education Plans (IEPs) throughout their high school

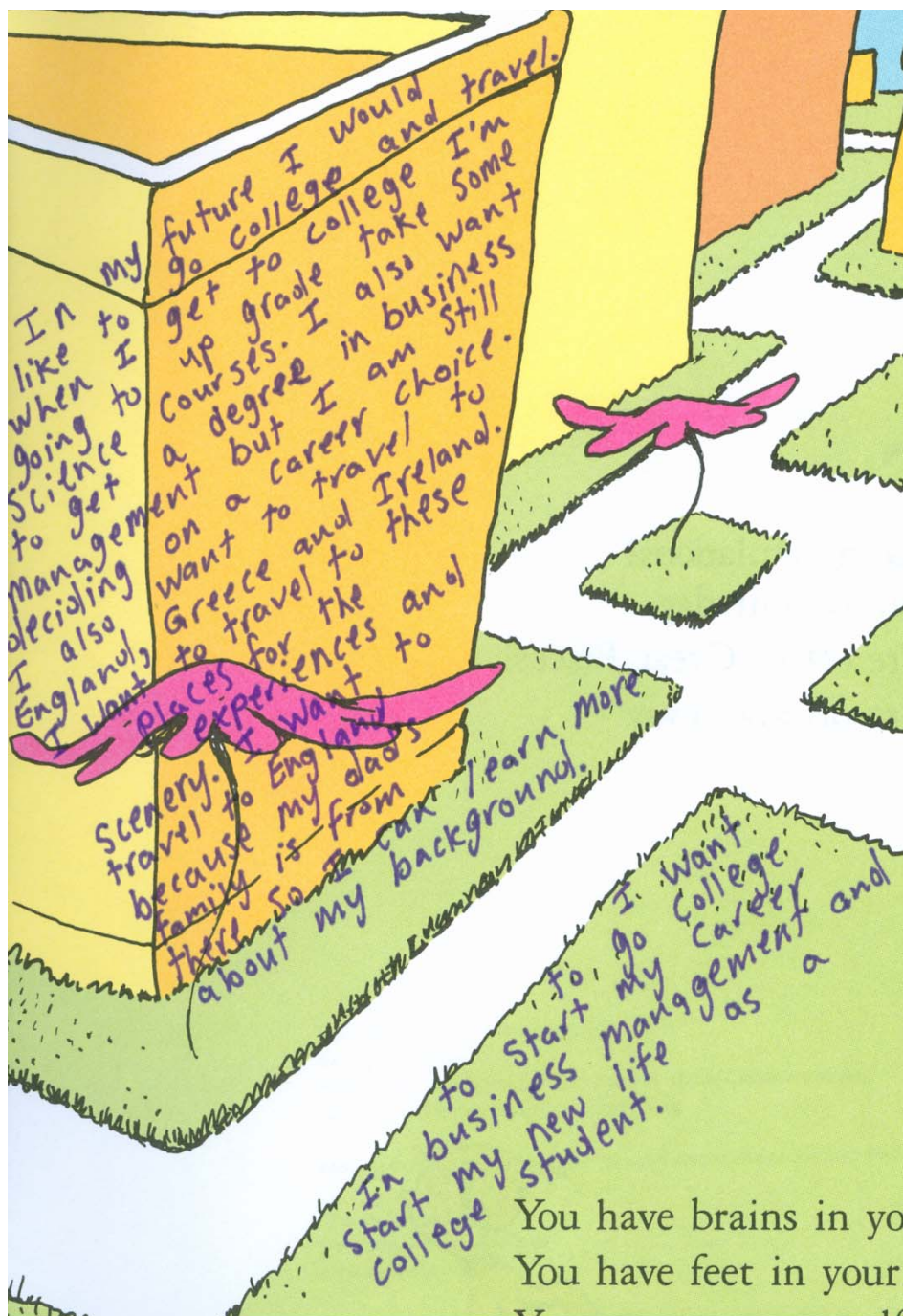
years. Each IEP outlined the individual learning strengths and needs of that student as determined by the psychometric testing and suggested adaptations that would allow students to learn in their best modalities and support students in acquiring skills or strategies to mitigate their weaknesses. The work samples collected from these students were composed in ways that considered individual student's IEPs. Students were given ample class time to complete the projects. All text was read aloud to the whole class when it was initially introduced and reread to individual students as needed. All three students asked the teacher and/or educational assistants (EAs) for help in editing their narratives before they were transcribed into the final co-authored children's book. To help compensate for challenges with fine motor coordination and penmanship, students were given the option of making drafts first on black and white photocopies and then tracing them onto the coloured pages using a light-box.

Data

Words cannot do justice to the visual delight that the students' narratives became in the completed Strong Poets Projects. Therefore, their work is presented here followed by a short vignette about each student. The number of pages students used for their projects varied and so the number of images presented here for each student's story varies. Dave used only some of the photocopied pages he had been provided. As he did not complete the required number of entries, his story has the fewest images. Sara and Lauren both chose to purchase their own copies of Dr. Seuss' book resulting in more images than the number I was able to photocopy for the class under copyright regulations. Following each student's work is a short vignette that provides the reader

with a fuller picture of the student. I authored these vignettes myself but asked each participant for feedback to ensure his or her own story was told accurately. To protect their identities the participants were all given pseudonyms. In the course of reviewing her vignette, one student observed that she would never have chosen the pseudonym I had selected. Together we settled on *Lauren* as her new pseudonym.

Sara's Story



You have brains in your
You have feet in your

strong parts who does. Things on their own instead of other people telling you in life I will have difficult times, making plans on your own is the best thing to do. What ever I do for a career I would look back at this book I made in high school and read it for what I wanted to do for a career. In my life I never had a lot of money but I made it. I enjoy my life the way it is if I get a successful job I would still love my life as a child it would be my memories and life.

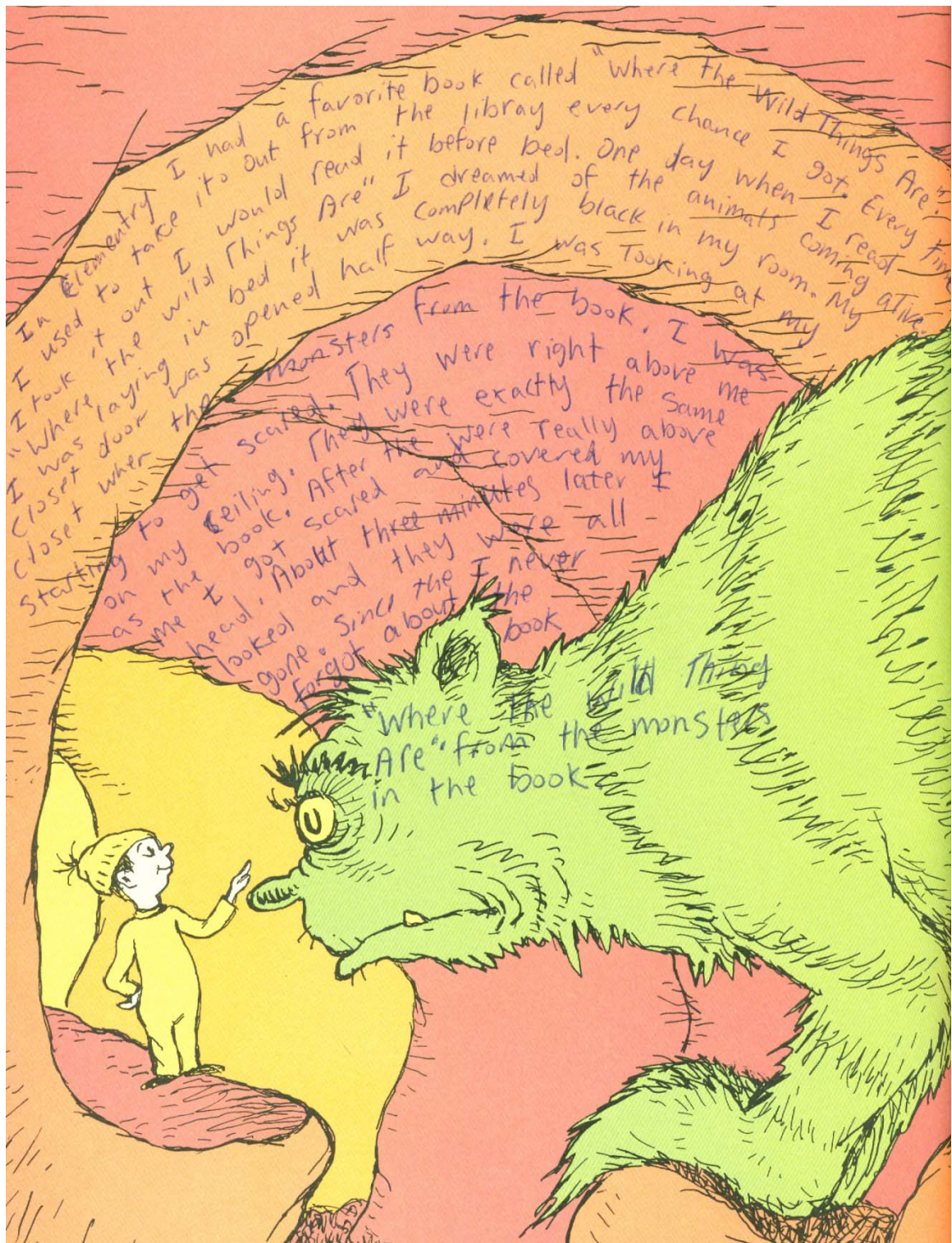
I am learner. I've been a learner since I was an elementary student. In elementary I had a teacher to help guide me throughout my reading spelling and tests for my classes. During my school years I've had IEP meetings with my parents and teachers to discuss how I am doing in school. IEP meetings are important it helps my parents and I to see what I improved on and what I should improve during my school years also outside of school. In order to help my self I read over my work check my grammar and ask someone to read over my work. I also like to write out my notes while the teacher is speaking, so I can review them for test and exams. I am a learner I've been a learner since elementary throughout

Except when they don't.

Because, sometimes, they won't.

Middle school and high school, if I didn't get an IEP teacher and the meetings to discuss my learning disability I would have had a hard time throughout my school years and also to come.

I'm afraid that some times you'll play lonely games too. Games you can't win 'cause you'll play against you.



I pick motto because I would like to adopt or sponsor a child. In this world there are too many places that need help to survive. If I could help one child right now it would make a difference in that child's life. I wish there wasn't a lot of places were people live in provide in the world. All in all I would be very interested in adopting or sponsor a child.

When I get my own place I would like to get a dog. I really like animals I have two cats and they are so cute. But I want a dog. My favorite type of dog is a Huskey they're big fluffy and really cute. I would like dog to have different colored eyes. But it would be fine if they were the same. I would like to have a young dog so I can teach him or her tricks. All together I want a young Huskey puppy with different colored eyes but it not I'll love it the same.

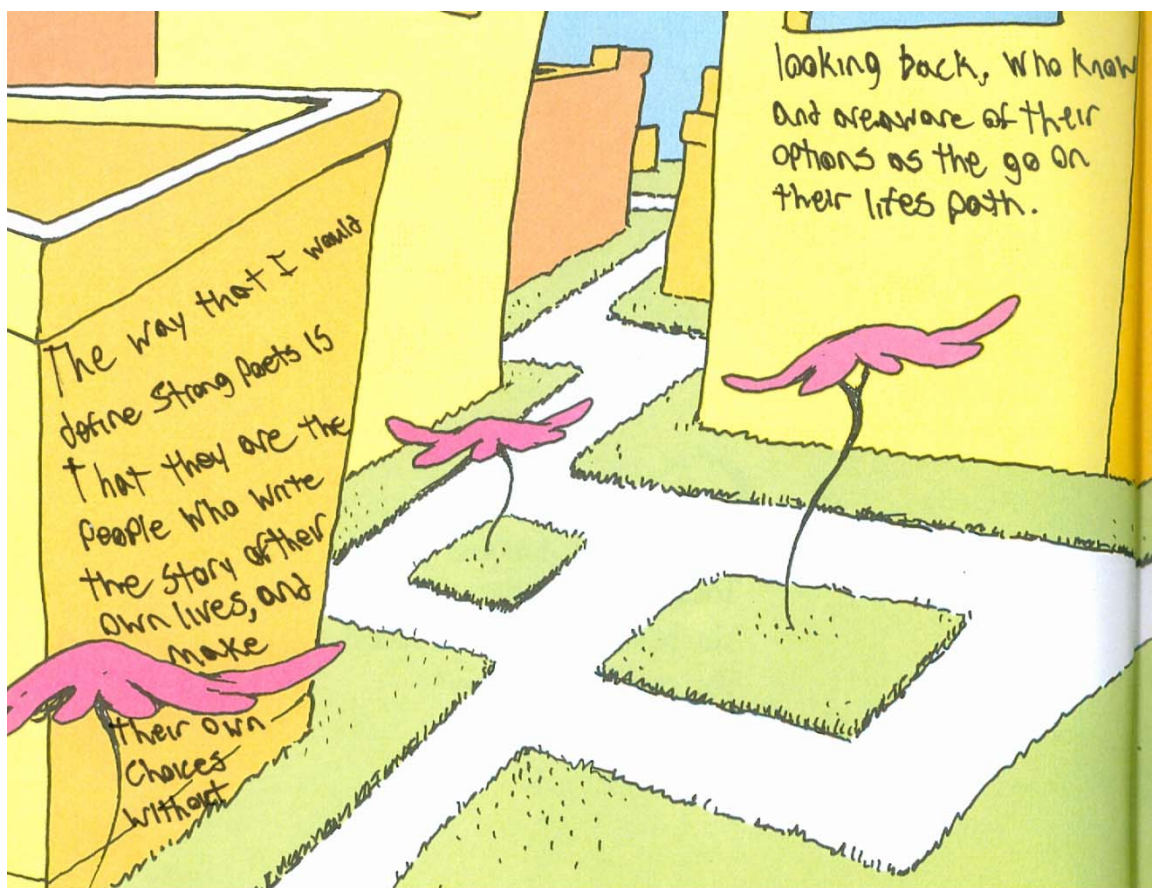
A Vignette of Sara

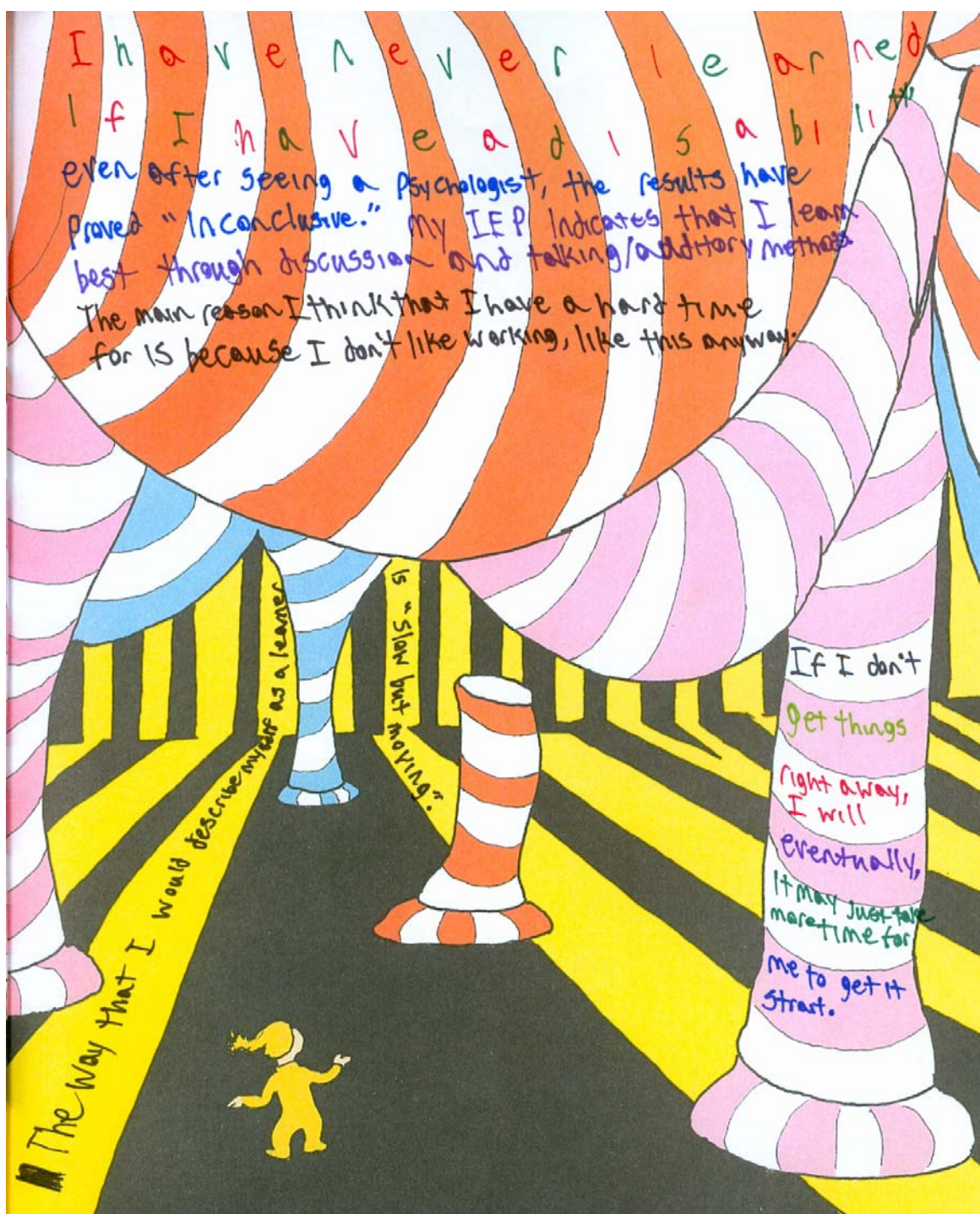
Sara here. Did you like my book? I think it already tells you a lot about me. Other people might look at my life and say that it's simple, but I would say that it's joyful. I'm proud to be part of my family including my aboriginal community. It's not something I have to wear written on my shirt or anything, it's just part of who I am. Knowing about where I come from, my English side too, makes me feel connected. It grounds me. My family isn't rich in money ways but we're rich in laughter, shared time, and love. That's what I want my future to be like too, full of strong relationships.

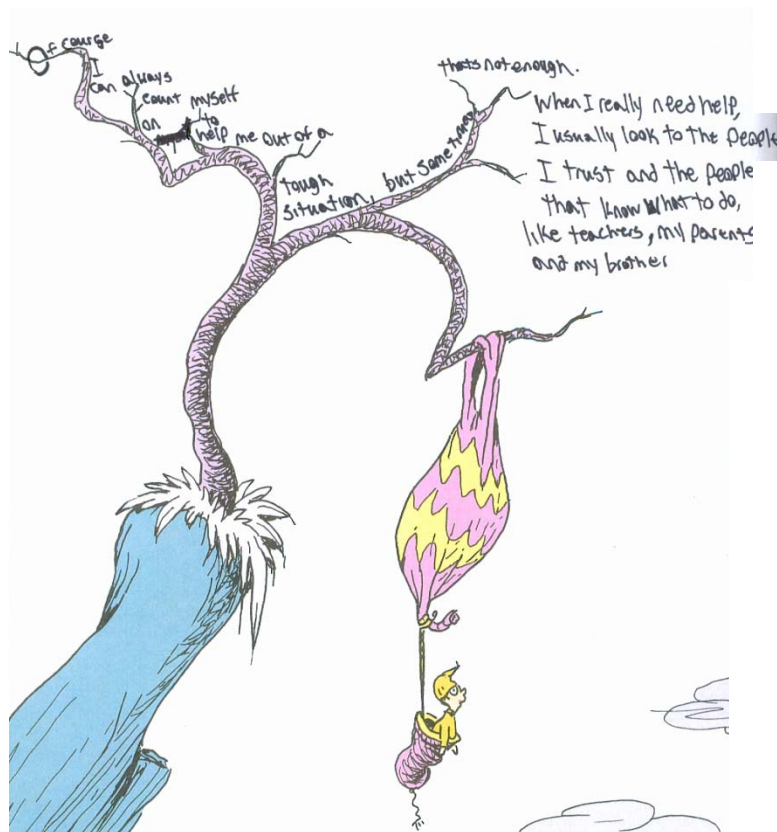
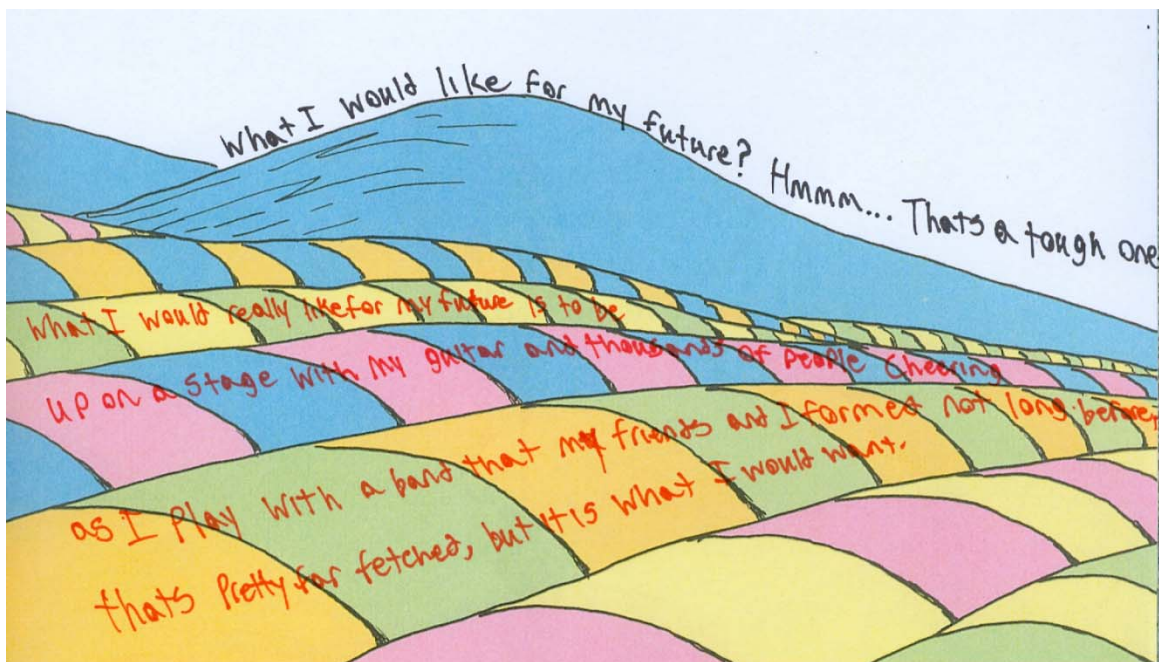
I've had to work hard to get through school. Lots of people have helped me but now I know that I'm the one who has to help me the most. Each year at the IEP meetings we talk about what I'm doing well and what I still need to do better. I think I'm getting better. I am graduating in a few months! In the future, I plan to upgrade my schooling because I want to go to university. I know I can do it. I've got big plans for myself as far as an education and a career are concerned, but the other things I want for my life are simpler. I want to have strong relationships with those around me, maybe even with a dog of my own. Good relationships with friends and family are what will help me in the future. They give me the confidence to believe in myself and to dream of big adventures for my future, like traveling around Europe.

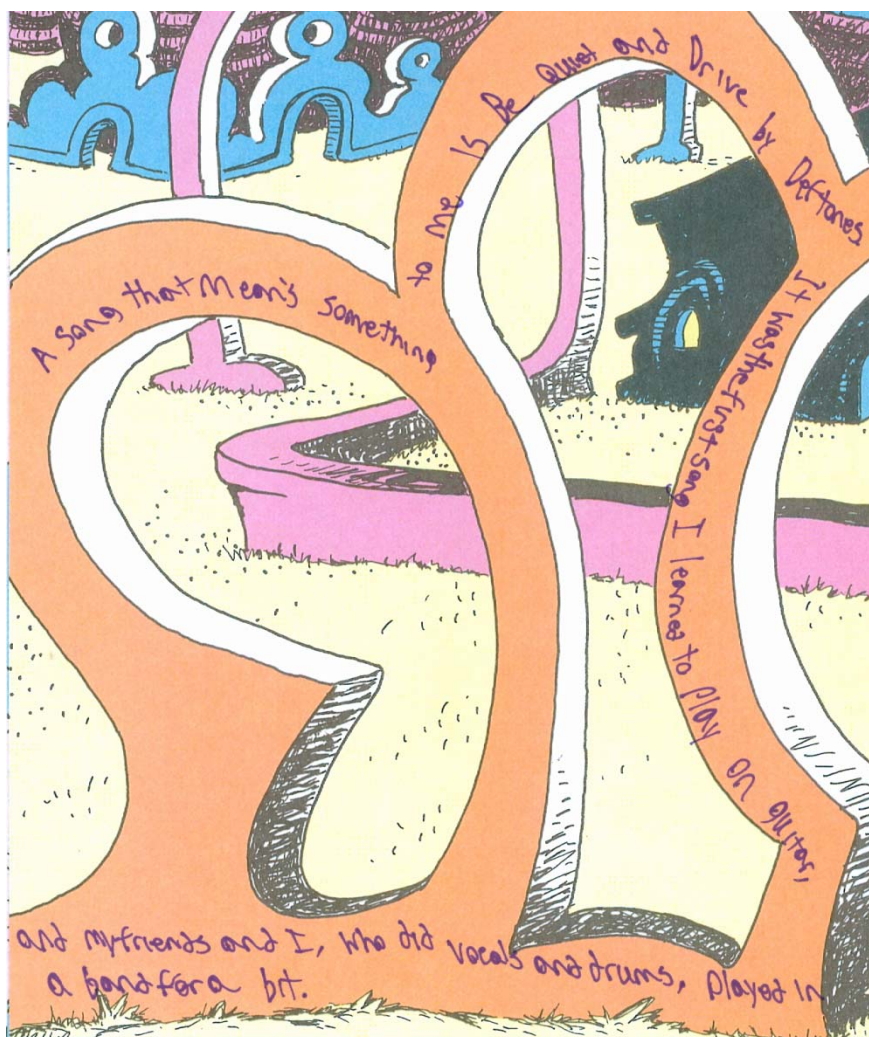
Dave's Story

I Dedicate this book to my family, for without them, I would be nothing. If I was to dedicat my book to someone, It would have to be My entire family, not just one Person there are too many People that are just that Important to me I could never choose.





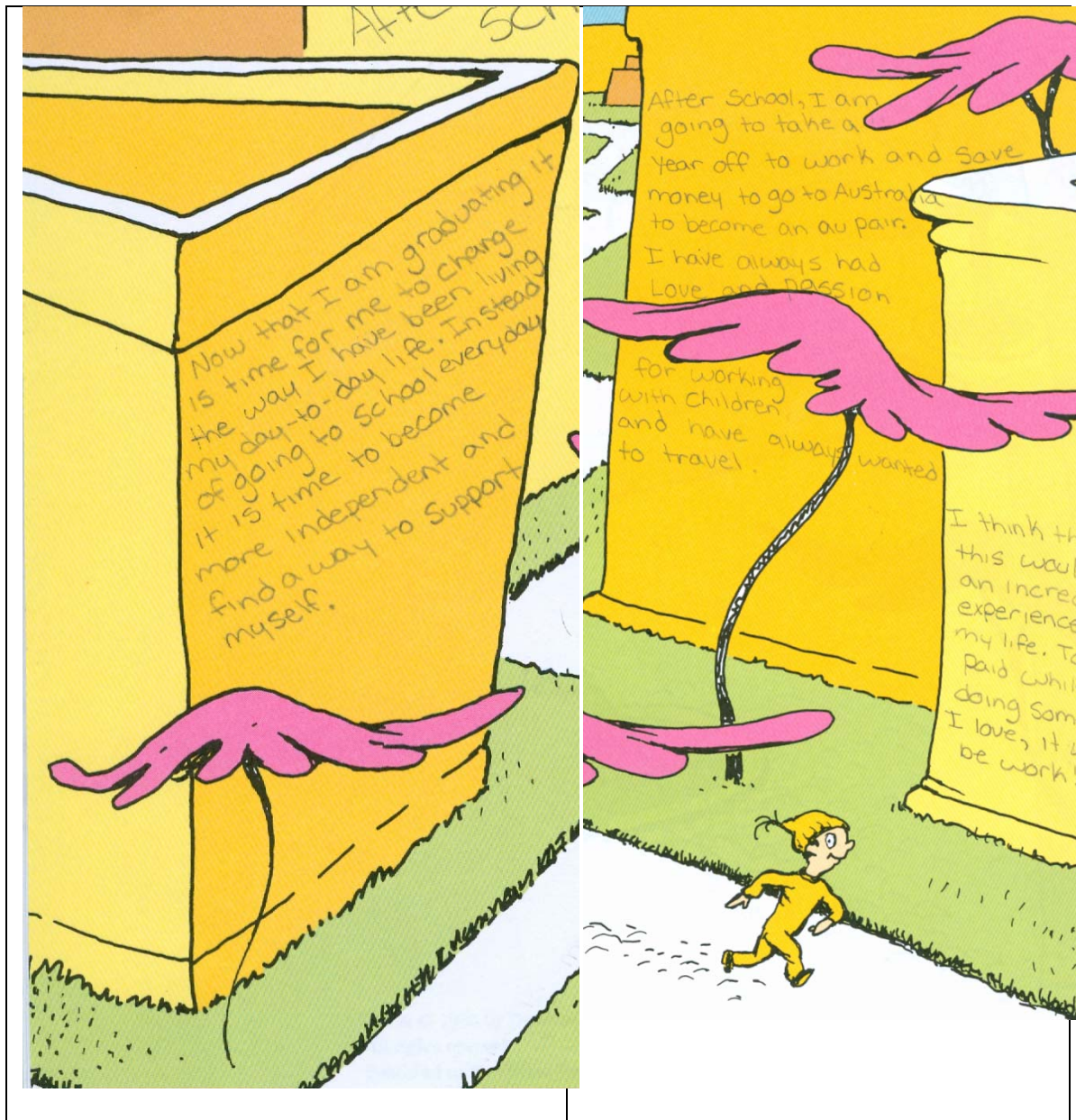


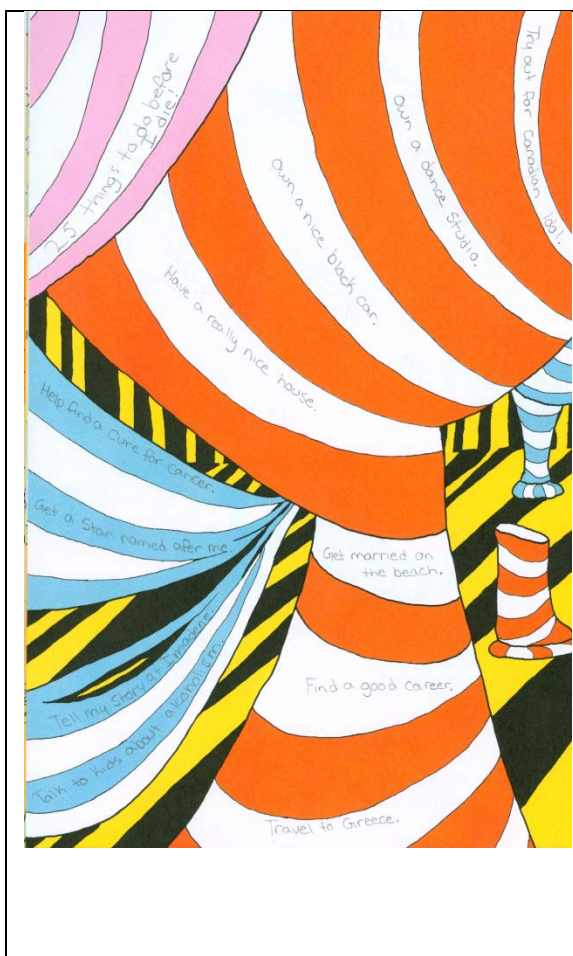
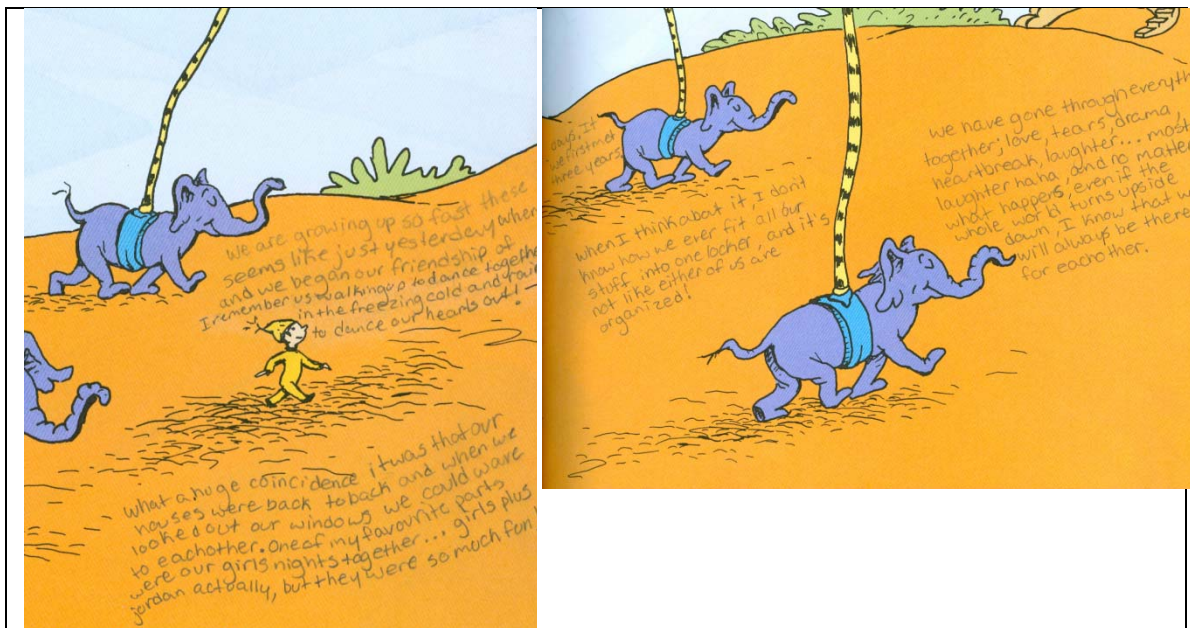


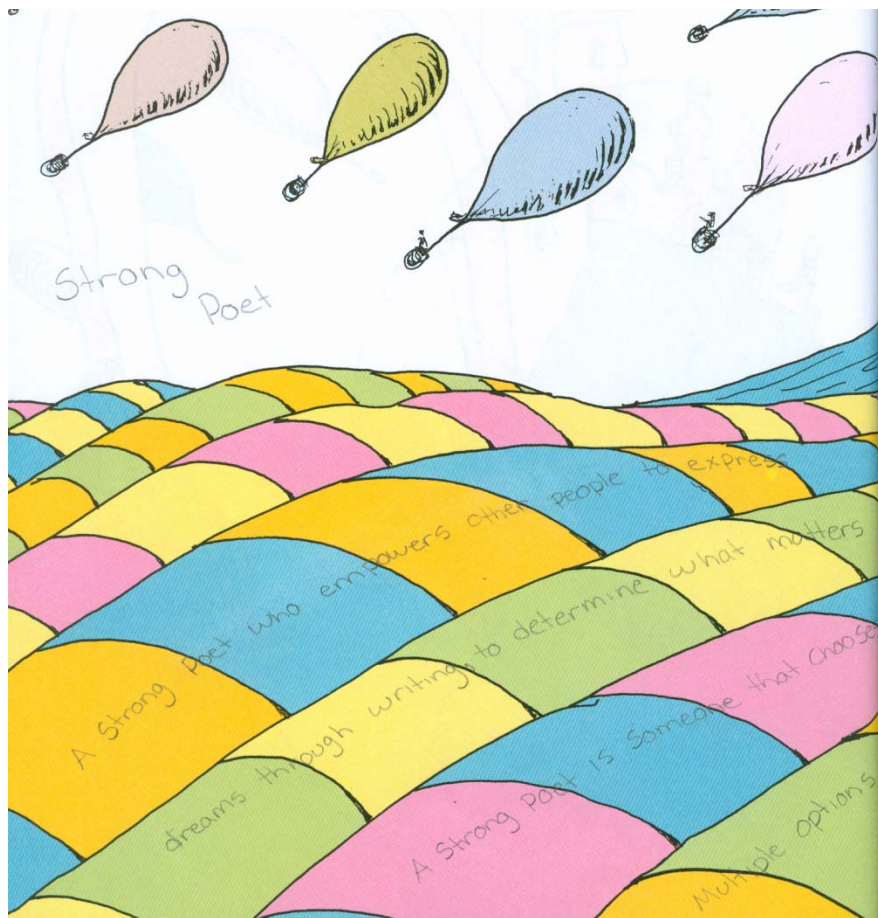
A Vignette of Dave

I guess I'm a pretty typical teenage boy who's about to graduate from high school. My favourite things to do are to hangout with my friends and to play my guitar. My friends and I have a band. When we play music together, I can do my two favourite things at the same time. Sometimes we make videos in our spare time. We've made some pretty good ones that we've posted on Youtube. I can't wait to be done with school. I mean, I guess it's okay but some parts are a real struggle for me. I know that Mrs. Farquhar says that I have a learning disability but I disagree. Maybe, the name doesn't actually matter. I do have a hard time getting started with my work and completing work on time. I know the stuff most of the time. I just can't figure out how to get it out and on the page or into the right words to answer the questions, but I know I'm smart and I'll be okay. I just have to get through the schoolwork. If things get really crazy, my brother helps me out. Somehow, he can say things in a way that I get and then the assignments make sense. My dream for the future is to be a musician. I want to entertain people and, yeah, I want the fame. But, you know, if that doesn't happen I'll still be okay as long as I've got my friends to jam with, I'll just close my eyes and imagine the audience.

Lauren's Story









When I was in grade eight I found out one of the hardest things I have had to cope with throughout my life so far. I was told that I could and most likely have acute lymphomic leukemia (cancer of the blood). When I was told this, I had to take many tests and make a lot of doctor's appointments. It turned out that I would need to go to the Children's Hospital in Vancouver for a bone marrow biopsy. When I arrived there my best friend Shay was there to support me. Shay also had cancer and survived it. When they called my name in, I remember looking at Shay and her looking back at me. All she said was, "It will be OK, go!" I had never been that nervous before. Walking into the surgery room I saw all the tools and doctors standing around. I could feel my heart beating hard and fast. As I lay down on the bed they told me that I would only be half asleep throughout the surgery. As they put the facemask over my mouth and the blood pressure band around my arm, the nurse told me I would feel the armband getting tighter and would be asleep in no time. It took about three minutes for me to be put under. I remember looking

Except when they don't. at my Mom and Dad and telling them I loved them a lot. The doctors had a hard time getting down to the bone, so they had to call down a special doctor to help. I could feel a lot of pressure going into my back. After the procedure was done I had to wait for my results. After three hours the doctor came in and told me good and bad news. He had said that I did not have cancer but I could have it later on in my life, and that I most likely would have lupus. Till this day I have to get my blood tested every three months and get other test done on a regular basis. It is something that is very hard to deal with but it makes me a stronger person and makes me realize not to take anything for granted.

A Vignette of Lauren

My name is Lauren and I'm LD. Ha, ha. That sounds like it could be AA for LD kids. Well, I do have a learning disability among other things. I'm okay with having an LD now but it wasn't always easy. Other kids don't seem to care about it now like they did when we were younger and they teased me. I attend my special ed. classes now and nobody says anything. I know the classes have helped me and have taught me to help myself. But I've had to learn to be strong from other things, too. I've had some serious health issues, some of which will be with me my whole life. That's really made me grateful for what I have. My strength comes from my dad and my friends. My dad is always there for me. He's the kind of dad a kid can talk to and have fun with. He makes efforts to make me feel special too, like throwing me the best Sweet 16 party ever! My friends, especially my BFF, help me in other ways. They make life fun but they also know how to listen and how to simply be there when I need them. I don't know how much more

time I'll get but my future is bright. I'm going to grab hold of what I have and live it to the max! I'm going to leave a positive mark with my life by playing it forward.

Chapter 5

The Mind-Maker-Upper Makes Up Her Mind: Methodology for Data Analysis

The approaches used for analyzing the data, though open-ended, were based on feminist principles. As suggested by my committee, I spent time considering the data in different ways before I settled on a specific method. While I was studying the different data sets, the same questions kept running through my mind. What was the data saying and not saying? How could it be scrutinized to answer my purpose of (a) promoting positive, powerful images of self and (b) engaging students in writing and directing the stories of their own lives? The goal of my project, and my work as an educator, was to encourage students to give voice to their own stories as they chose to tell them. It became evident that my methodology needed to reflect this underlying theme of empowerment.

While my research was not defined by gender, its goal was to promote the self-empowerment of a marginalized group, which is also the goal of feminist research methodology. In their work with Chinese women, Wang and Burris (1994) regarded the women as the authorities on their own lives. Similarly, I regarded students with learning disabilities as authorized to construct their own knowledge according to their own standards. My data analysis sought to give the students voice by leaving openings for the data to reveal the student's views of reality (Lather, 1992). In this way I came to employ feminist, qualitative research methods to seek out pattern and meaning within the text (Lather, 1992). Feminist research is very conscious of the potential biases the researcher brings to the field. Consequently, an emphasis is placed on self-reflexivity (Lather, 1992; Burns & Walker, 2005). Self-reflexivity is the constant, conscious questioning or self-critique a feminist researcher engages in throughout an investigation to ensure that she is

not imposing her own biases or preconceptions onto the work. Having worked with students with learning disabilities for several years I realized that I needed to consider how my assumptions and presuppositions could influence my work.

Though I tried to remind myself time and time again throughout the project to let the students' voices lead me, I knew it might not be enough. As a result, I took active steps to help mitigate the impact of my own assumptions on the research. First, I immersed myself with the students' work to inundate my thoughts with the students' words and images. I read and reread the students' narratives. Then, I considered the manner in which students had placed their words onto the pages. Did they follow straight lines or were their lines freeform? Did they press hard? Was color used? Were illustrations added? By spending so much time poring over the students' work I began to appreciate the nuances of their work. To further ensure students were portrayed precisely, I wrote short vignettes about each participant. By depicting the students in my own words, I hoped to verify the accuracy of my interpretations of their perceptions as represented in the data. These vignettes follow each student's Strong Poets Project in Chapter 4. Focusing on each student in this way forced me to think about how they might want to introduce themselves to the readers of this project. I also asked the students to edit my vignettes to verify their authenticity. The students found the vignettes to be accurate asking for only two small changes: Lauren asked to change her pseudonym and *go to* was changed to *attend*.

By following feminist research methodology, a way opened for me to seek out the voices behind the words. Finally, I had settled upon a methodology for examining the data. The data analysis was separated into two sections:

- First, I deliberated about the notion of empowerment. The documents provided by the three participants were probed in an effort to identify instances where students presented themselves as having the attributes of an empowered individual.
- Secondly, I used both the co-authoring assignments and my journal to consider the question of engagement. This time I looked for manifestations of student engagement both in the manner in which students had conducted themselves during the process of creating their Strong Poets Projects, and in the resulting narratives they had fashioned. Findings regarding student actions in the course of creating their projects consider the behaviours of all students enrolled in Learning Strategies 11 in the term. Specific comments regarding the final products reflect only the documents collected from the three participants.

Chapter 6

Oh, the Places They'll Go: Findings

Chapter 2 of this project proposed that students with learning disabilities would be more likely to complete high school if teachers employed practices focused on strengthening protective factors and minimizing risk factors. The protective factors to be strengthened were consistent rules, positive relationships with significant adults, understanding and circumscribing of the learning disabilities and promoting self-esteem. The risk factors to be minimized were disengagement and alienation. By framing my project around the notions of empowerment and engagement I hoped to examine how an aesthetic project centered on the liberating message of the strong poet metaphor might address some of these factors. The message of self-empowerment would be central to promoting the protective factors of understanding of the learning disability and self-esteem. Engagement addressed the risk factors of disengagement and alienation. In my analysis, I scrutinized the work samples to see if students were presenting themselves as empowered; but the use of words that exhibited notions of empowerment could just mean that students were mimicking my words in an effort to earn good marks or high praise. Consequently, I had a second focus for my analysis: engagement. I believed that if there was evidence of student engagement in the development of their projects then students were more likely to have not only written narratives about empowerment but that these narratives reflected what they believed to be true.

Empowerment

The metaphor of strong poets is premised on an understanding of self. Strong poets are not only those who take over the writing of their life narratives but also those who reflect upon their past acts and current circumstances in order to make wise decisions for the future (Barone, 1993). The perception of self as strong poet is founded on a sense of empowerment. The exploration of the data found that the participants did indeed present themselves as empowered individuals. Students demonstrated their sense of empowerment through: (1) their positive attitudes, (2) their knowledge of themselves as learners, (3) their ability to identify a support base, (4) their visions of themselves as successful in the future, and (5) their conviction that they could make the lives of others better. The following sections illustrate how three participants demonstrated their perceptions of self as empowered through quotes and examples from their work samples.

Positive Attitude

Empowered individuals believe in themselves and have a positive self-image. In this project students demonstrated a positive attitude through the words they wrote and the pictures they drew. In the pre- and post-assessments Sara drew only pictures of smiling people. Dave's descriptions of himself were upbeat. "Make me do it over and over [again], I will eventually be able to do it (Dave)." But it was in their Strong Poets Projects that students showed the greatest joyfulness. Sara proclaimed that despite financial hardships her family endured in the past she was happy. "I love my life." Her anecdote about reading *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) conjured up visions of a happy, safe childhood. Lauren was equally overt in presenting herself as happy. Her page

on her BFF (best friend forever) hinted at shared secrets and adventures. Her lengthy and touching account of her health trials ended with a feisty declaration, “It is something that is very hard to deal with but it makes me a stronger person and makes me realize not to take anything for granted.” Dave was subtler in portraying himself as happy. He hinted at a positive self-image by dreaming big dreams of performing on his guitar for an adoring audience. His seemingly random use of the phrase “good times” (see Figure 3) allowed the reader to imagine the smile on Dave’s face as he played his favourite song with his friends. (Dave’s full entry can be found on page 46). Based on these examples, I observed that Sara, Lauren and Dave presented themselves as happy individuals with positive attitudes.

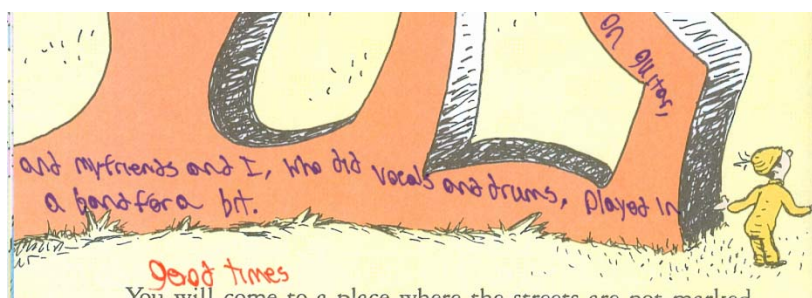


Figure 3 Dave’s *random* insertion of “good times”.

Knowledge of Self as Learner

Morrison and Codsen (1997) observed that students diagnosed with learning disabilities were more likely to remain in school if they understand their learning disability and understood that this diagnosis was only a small part of who they are. The designation of learning disability should not circumscribe the individual. The students in the Learning Strategies 11 course had all been diagnosed with a learning disability, many several years before they entered high school. Two participants in this study were

diagnosed in elementary school and one, Dave, was diagnosed in middle school. All three were enrolled in learning assistance programs following their diagnoses, so Learning Strategies 11 was not their first special education experience. Considering the findings of Morrison and Codsen (1997) it was important to find out how these students perceived themselves as learners.

Each of the students indicated that their difficulties keeping up in school led to their diagnoses. Dave said his struggles were with attention and getting his work started. Lauren's troubles were with reading and spelling. Sara, who was less consistent in describing her needs, identified specific concerns with study skills and essay writing. The students' descriptions of their individual learning needs were in agreement with those diagnosed by the district psychologists. For example, the provincial exam adjudication allowances for each student correlated perfectly with needs they identified. Dave was allowed to write his exams in a separate setting and with extra time to accommodate the extra processing time he needed and to decrease distractions. The allowance of a reader and a scribe for Lauren, addressed her diagnosis of dyslexia, which impacted both her reading comprehension and written expression. Sara's difficulties with written expression qualified her for a scribe. The students not only understood the troubles they had with school tasks, they also recognized how these could be managed.

The students regarded special education intervention as something that helped them become successful in school. Sara attributed her school success to her IEP meetings and her learning assistance teachers. "...if I didn't get an IEP teacher and the meetings to discuss my learning disability I would have had a hard time throughout my school years

and also to come.” Lauren’s experiences with pullout help were initially negative but her perception changed as she came to see the benefits of this intervention.

Middle school was really hard for me. I got teased a lot because kids said I was stupid and handicapped. I went to special classes to get help on my work but didn’t like them because of what kids would say about me. But as I got older I noticed that I needed the special classes and I started wanting to go to them. Because I am a slow reader and have trouble spelling the classes have really helped (Lauren)!

In his Strong Poets Project, Dave revealed that his IEP indicated that he learned best through discussion and auditory means. Later in the post-assessment he internalized these recommendations by proclaiming that he learned best through talking and discussion. Not only did students show that they understood themselves as having difficulties with specific tasks as identified in their IEPs and/or diagnoses, they also made clear the benefit of these adaptations and interventions to support them. All three presented themselves as capable. For example, Sara planned to earn a degree in business management after upgrading in college.

Identify a Support Base

Alienation has been identified as a risk factor for students who might drop out of school. Therefore, one can argue that it is important that a student feel connected to others and be able to identify individuals they can turn to for support. In their Strong Poets Project, the students listed clear sources of support ranging from counsellors to teachers but all identified their friends and family as their main support base. Dave started his book by thanking his family for the role they played in his life. “I dedicate this book to my family, for without them, I would be nothing.” In naming potential sources of help in the future he again named his family, particularly his brother, as people he trusted

to be there for him. Similarly, Sara described her family as central to her support base also singling out an individual sibling. In Sara's case she identified an older sister as one of her greatest advisors. Lauren too, portrayed a friend and her family as strong champions for her in the account of her medical challenges. I suspect that those experiences are what make her so confident about their continued support in the future. Lauren urges us all to remain confident in the face of adversity, "So the next time you're in a slump remember your options because you have many people that love you!" The trust in the solid foundation of support from friends and family demonstrated by all three students in their Strong Poets Projects suggests that they are connected to others. These connections could potentially protect them from alienation and likely bolstered the confidence they demonstrated in themselves.

Visions of Self as Successful

This project was focused on the image of strong poets, individuals who not only believed that they could set their own goals for the future but individuals who had a conviction that they could achieve these goals as well. The three participants in this project all aspired to great things in their futures. Dave candidly shared his big dream of playing guitar for adoring fans.

What I would really like for my future is to be up on a stage with my guitar and thousands of people cheering as I play with a band that my friends and I formed not long before, [that's] pretty far fetched, but it is what I would want (Dave).

When I spoke with Dave to go over his vignette we also spoke about his extravagant dreams. He agreed with the vignette, he would indeed be happy without the fans but he might still imagine them when he was performing with his friends in their band. Sara's

big plans were to get a degree in business management and to travel extensively; but she also had more modest aspirations like getting a dog and sponsoring or adopting a child. She devoted an entire entry to each of these goals. Obviously these modest dreams were just as dear to her. Travel was also part of Lauren's plans but her career choice remained vague. She just wanted to do something she loved. That way "it wouldn't be work." Sara and Lauren also made bucket lists, things they would like to do before they die. Here in her list of "25 things to do before I die" Lauren listed many wishes both big and small. Lauren longed for simple things like a big walk-in closet, getting a puppy and getting a tattoo. Getting married on the beach, having a really nice house and owning a dance studio were among her grander goals. But Lauren's list did not stop there. She also sets her sights on meeting President Obama and curing cancer. She admitted in class that these were unlikely to happen but she wanted to include them as she felt they reflected things that she felt strongly about and so should be included. In all that they envisage for the future, students wrote only of things they would like to achieve in their lifetimes, not one student indicated that their future was bleak or restricted in anyway. Even Dave, as he reflected that his wishes might not come to be, persisted because that was what he truly wished for. These three students presented themselves as individuals who had big plans for their futures and felt that even if the plans seemed grandiose they would still aspire to them because they could possibly happen. These were three young people who presented themselves in the project as empowered and expressed optimism about their futures.

Make the Lives of Others Better

Philanthropy is the privilege of those who are competent to improve the welfare of others. By aspiring to help others Sara and Lauren further demonstrated that they believe themselves to be empowered. Both girls described things they wanted to do to make the lives of others better. A full fifth of Lauren's bucket list was devoted to others. She wanted to cure cancer, make people laugh, talk to kids about alcoholism, sponsor a child, pay it forward (repay a good turn by passing it on to the next person) and tell her story at Imadene (a Christian camp on Vancouver Island). In her bucket list Sara also included sponsoring a child. Later in her co-authored book she devoted a whole entry to the prospect of sponsoring or adopting a child. Sara decried the state of the world, "In this world there are too many places that need help to survive." But rather than despair, Sara planned to take action, "If I could help one child right now it would make a difference in that child's life." By their examples, Lauren and Sara put many adults to shame. Not only did these girls see themselves as empowered to seek their own destinies, they wished to share what they had with others less fortunate than themselves to make their lives better.

The Strong Poets Projects and the pre- and post-assessments contributed by Dave, Sara and Lauren attested to their conceptions of themselves as empowered. The students demonstrated positive attitudes. Their writing showed a solid understanding of themselves learners. Citing their family and friends as their biggest advocates, these three young people showed that they each had a strong support base. As for their futures, Dave, Sara and Lauren depicted themselves as successful. They had high aspirations for their

futures, daring to dream big while expressing contentment with more modest achievements as well. In their writing, these three students did indeed present themselves to be empowered individuals. They were strong poets. Strong enough to even *pay it forward* and help others proclaim their own power.

Engagement

The second focus of my project was to assess the engagement of students in such a project. Researchers have identified disengagement as a risk factor in students dropping out of school (Canadian Council on Learning, 2005; Morrison & Codsen, 1997; Heath, 1970). It was also logical to suppose that for education to be effective the students must be engaged. So, the Strong Poets Project, no matter how eloquently orchestrated, could only be deemed successful if students became engaged in the work. My journal entries and the very projects completed attest to a high level of engagement on the part of the students. Evidence of this engagement came from the on task behaviour of students, their eagerness to share their work, their concern for the safe keeping of their projects and the creativity demonstrated in their projects. The observations of student engagement considered the actions of all of the students in Learning Strategies 11 not just the three participants who contributed their work samples.

My journal observations document the degree of on task behaviour in class and the eagerness of the students to share their work. These observations of student behaviour were echoed by my teacher-on-call (TOC) and my educational assistants (EAs). My school operates on a semester system with the first semester ending in January. In other years, I have found the last few weeks of the first semester to be times when my students

are easily distracted, making it challenging to keep them on task. This year was an exception. Students in Learning Strategies 11 were eager to work on their co-authoring projects, even choosing it over other alternatives. My TOC also remarked on the high level of enthusiasm for the project in her end of day report. On the few occasions EAs were in my class, they were met by students who were keen to share with them their co-authored creations. While students were all developing their own piece of work, they would often choose to work with a peer. Most days I would see students poring over each other's work and discussing the contents. Yet no students copied another's work, the intention of this collaboration appeared to have been to celebrate each other's accomplishments. As we neared the end of the unit, and the term, several students asked to take their projects home to work on them. Upon returning their projects, many students proudly related an account of their experience in showing the books to their families. "My mom cried when she read that section," said more than one. All students immediately wanted to know what I thought of their final project as they handed them in, even if I had already read and reread their narratives as students developed them during class. But their questions were not about the marks their books would earn rather they wanted to know how I *felt* in response to their books. Based on these observations students exhibited behaviours that demonstrated a high level of engagement. But maybe they had just behaved this way in front of me and only shared stories they thought I wanted to hear? Was there other evidence to support my own observations?

Students handled the pages of their final projects with great care. At the beginning of the project I had made a point of telling students that they would all only receive one coloured copy of the pages to work with. I did not want to have to spend too much more

money making additional copies. My students commonly lose handouts, sometimes within minutes. (How do they do that?) But this time, over the course of more than a month, not a single page was lost! At the conclusion of the course, I offered to keep the projects along with the rest of the Graduation Transitions Portfolios in my filing cabinet for students, so they would be safe for the future graduation interviews. All of the students left their work with me, many stating that they were apt to lose it otherwise. Most students have come to see their project, now that the course is over, but only one took her project home. She returned it a few days later. Undoubtedly these pages are important to the students. The concern that students have exhibited for the safe keeping of their co-authored works was another sign of their engagement. Students would not have cared so much about a project they did not feel was of value to them personally.

The great variety among the finished projects, both in what was written and the manner in which the words were presented on the page, confirmed that students were engaged. No two projects looked the same. Students wrote their sentences in lines, curves, waves, and even circles (see samples in Chapter 4). Some planned their layout carefully on black and white photocopies, sometimes a few times over, before transferring them to the coloured pages with the help of a light box. Others simply started to transcribe their text freehand directly onto the coloured pages. They used pencil, pen, and coloured felts. Title pages were changed to name students as co-authors, small additions appeared in curious places, and one student even rearranged the order of the pages. Having had two to three years to get to know these students, I could hear their individual voices in the words as they told of struggles they had over come, dreams they had for the future, references to past events, dedications to special people, and

frustrations with their experiences at school. Sometimes the message was clearer in the words that were not written; not choosing career paths parents had often spoken of in our prior meetings, not mentioning certain individuals in a list of others, and, sadly, minimizing their hopes in case they were too high. Evidently, these students were engaged in the Strong Poets Project. The sheer creativity displayed in their finished works attested to it!

Chapter 7

Moving Mountains: Reflections, Recommendations, and Conclusion

Reflections and Recommendations

The findings of this project certainly have implications for my personal practice but they may also have implications for other educators. It is my intention to retain many aspects of this project in my continuing work with students diagnosed with learning disabilities. Opportunities exist for sharing this work with educators both at the grassroots level, colleagues within my school, and also in more formal settings like workshops and teacher education. In reflecting on the ways in which I could use aspects of this project to the benefit of my future students I have identified three features to focus on: the pre- and post-assessments, the aesthetic project, and the metaphor of strong poets.

The pre- and post-assessments are valuable tools as they can provide the teacher with crucial feedback to direct teaching as it is occurring and to reflect on the effectiveness of a course as a whole. Using student assessment in this manner to direct instruction rather than to rank students is what many educational theorists now call *assessment for learning* or formative assessment (Black et al., 2004; Clarke, 2005; Earl, 2003; Earl & Katz, 2005).

Assessment for learning occurs throughout the learning process. It is designed to make each student's understanding visible, so that the teacher can decide what they can do to help students progress... In *assessment for learning*, teachers use assessment as an investigative tool to find out as much as they can about what their students know and can do, and what confusions, preconceptions, or gaps they might have. (Earl & Katz, 2005, p. 29)

Faults with the pre- and post-assessment tool used in this project were that it had not been field tested and that I was not consistent in the administering of the assessments. I intend

to rethink the questions in hopes of drawing out even more information from students next year. If my intention is to compare the two assessments to look for changes, then I need to be consistent giving the same degree of guidance during both assessment sessions. It is also important to note that this assessment tool cannot measure all that students learned during the Strong Poets Project. Its design was limited to only consider students perceptions of self as learner while the Strong Poets Project encompassed many other learning outcomes, particularly self-empowerment. Strength of the assessment tool was that it was designed with universal design, UDL, (McTighe & Brown, 2005; CAST UDL Toolkit, n.d.) and differentiated instruction, DI, (Tomlinson, 2003, 2005) principles in mind. By allowing for a variety of methods for students to respond to the assessment it enabled students with severe learning disabilities to participate more fully. I recognize that the use of pre- and post-assessments can improve my teaching as I gain more information about what students know, believe, and understand. This knowledge can help me refine my lessons to improve student learning.

The aesthetic project proved to be a powerful episode in the Learning Strategies 11 course. As I checked in with students from Learning Strategies 11 in the first weeks of the new semester they kept bringing up the Strong Poets Project. “You have to do it again.” “Keep that project.” “It’s the best thing we ever did.” The added bonus of using the aesthetic project for completing the most challenging section of our school’s Graduation Transitions Package all the while creating a keepsake was not lost on a single student. While carrying out the project with the classes was a joy for me personally, what really convinced me of its value were the findings of this project. I found that students were overwhelmingly engaged when given the chance to explore and demonstrate their

own feelings of empowerment. Next year's Learning Strategies 11 class will include some of this year's Learning Strategies 10 students, making it ideal for the aesthetic project to take a new form. In this way students can feel that their projects are unique to them. The low tech/hands-on approach of this year's project was successful, so maybe next year's project should be another form of altered book?

The strong poets metaphor was a difficult abstraction for students to grapple with but the idea of individuals making responsible, reflective choices to direct their own lives is a powerful one (Barone, 1993). Next time I will teach this section differently, possibly starting with the two words *strong* and *poet* themselves. Maybe exploring the metaphor in a constructivist way and letting students come to their own definitions in a more organic fashion would make their definitions more meaningful and their connection to the metaphor more personal. Using the strong poets metaphor stimulated conversations about personal empowerment among my students and as this is a central theme of the Learning Strategies 11 course, I will continue to make use of this metaphor.

While this project was focused solely on students diagnosed with learning disabilities, the struggle to keep students in school through to graduation is not unique to this demographic. Educational researchers (Bowlby, 2006; Canadian Council on Learning, 2005) argued that empowerment and engagement are protective factors that increased the likelihood of students staying in school. This Strong Poets Project gave students opportunities to be engaged in their learning and opportunities to produce work that spoke of their sense of personal empowerment. I would like to share the potential of aesthetic work such as this with other educators. At the grassroots level, I am presently involved in an aesthetic project bringing together the Life Skills students in our school

with several students from our Film Making classes. The Life Skills students have all been diagnosed with moderate to severe mental handicaps and are on the School Leaving Certificate program. The Film Making students have no special education designation and are on the Dogwood Graduation program. Together, these students are engaged in an aesthetic project creating a class video about the Life Skills program at our school. Hopefully, as other teachers see the success of such a project, they too will seek out further opportunities to include aesthetic projects in their practice. I am not alone in my desire to bring aesthetic projects into the classroom. I have already been asked to present my work to student teachers at Vancouver Island University and anticipate sharing the success of the Strong Poets Project with teachers in my school district during a professional development day next year. The more teachers can share the success of their students with powerful concepts like strong poets, the more we can mutually inspire each other to seek out spaces where our students can be engaged and can learn to become empowered.

Conclusion

Students diagnosed with learning disabilities are less likely to complete high school (BC Ministry of Education, 2006) and, thus, are more likely to be unemployed than their peers (Bowlby, 2006; Canadian Council on Learning, 2005). Teachers can take action to promote high school completion for these students by taking steps in their classrooms to minimize risk factors while maximizing protective factors. In this project I identified two specific concepts stemming from this discussion of protective and risk factors to examine in my own practice. I chose to focus on student conceptions of self-empowerment and student engagement during one unit in my Learning Strategies 11

class. The project students engaged in was an aesthetic undertaking in which students wrote their own narratives onto the pages of Dr. Seuss' *Oh the Places You'll Go!* (1990). Two central themes for these student narratives were the student's conceptions of self and the metaphor of strong poets as proposed by Barone (1993).

This project found that students described themselves as empowered in the work samples examined. In their writing, students demonstrated empowerment through their positive attitudes, their knowledge of themselves as learners, their ability to identify sources of support, their visions of self as successful in the future, and their belief that they have the power to make the lives of others better. Furthermore, the students exhibited signs of engagement through their comments throughout the unit and even after the unit had ended. The non-verbal actions of the students also attest to their engagement; they were focused during class sessions, they took meticulous care of their projects, and their final products showed how much creativity each of them used to make theirs unique. It is possible for teachers to orchestrate experiences for students that can increase feelings of empowerment and encourage students to engage in the classroom. Hopefully, by opening such spaces within the classroom, more students will choose to stay in school and graduate. In this case the means for orchestrating this space for strong poets to emerge was an aesthetic co-authoring of a children's book. There are many other possibilities for teachers, and educators in general, to allow openings for the aesthetic to inspire poetic work to emerge from their students.

By the culmination of [such aesthetic work], a student may have discovered new options for interpreting the world and new possibilities for living. She may have gained greater control over her destiny. She may have redescribed her self [sic]. With the guidance of a wise and empathetic teacher, she may have written some mighty strong poetry. (Barone, 1993, p. 242)

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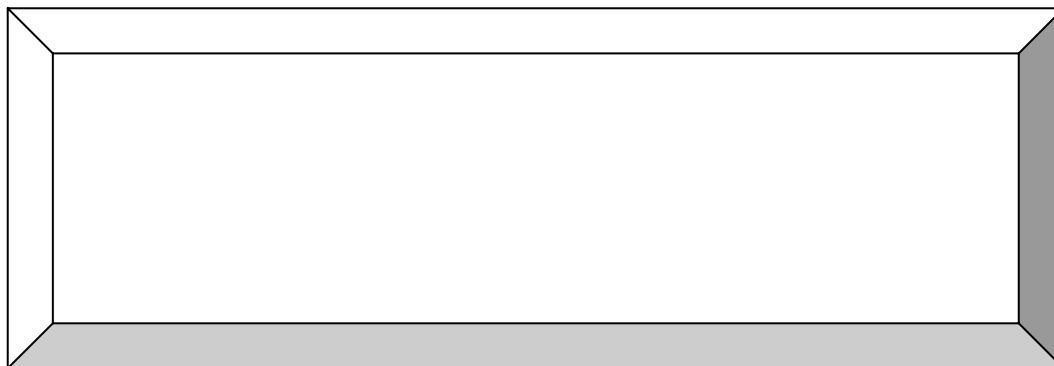
Appendix A

Name:

Date:

Pre-Assessment: A Little About Me

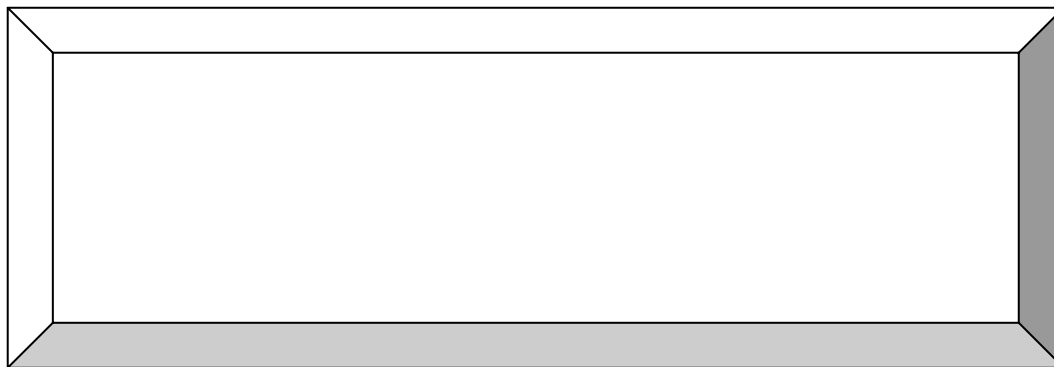
Draw two or more things you like to do outside of school.
Circle your favourite thing.



What skills do you need to be able to do your favourite activity?

-
-
-

Draw a picture of one thing you do not like to do.



What skills could you improve/learn to be able to do this thing better?

-
-
-

Name some things you do well at school.

Circle your favourite.

-
-
-
-
-

What skills do you need to be able to do this thing?

-
-
-

Name one thing you are having trouble doing at school.

-

What skill could you improve/learn to do this thing better?

-
-
-

Tell me about yourself as a learner. How do you learn?

*Remember you can use the Mac preferences to have the text read to you and Audacity to add voice files for your answers. Readers/scribes are also available for those of you who need them.



Strong Poets

Be the author of your own story.

- last thoughts (you as the poet of your life)
- your own idea (Ask Mrs. Farquhar if it's okay first.)

Learning Outcomes:

- I can describe my self as a learner
- I know that things may not always go my way BUT I can draw upon resources to help me
- I can write creative, focused paragraphs
- I will complete the "Who Am I?" portion of my Graduation transitions

Marks:

- Each section must be in paragraph form
- Work must be neat
- Quick Scale: Performance Standards (on back)

Meaning (70%)
All others (30 %)

Strong Poets Sections:

(Italics are the 3 mandatory sections. For a passing mark you must complete at least 7 sections in total. Higher marks will be given for additional sections or additional detail like more paragraphs per section.)

- *define strong poets*
- *describe yourself as a learner (define Learning Disability, use IEP, Learning Styles, etc.)*
- describe something you have done
- describe something you have overcome during your years at school
- describe something that was a challenge for you
- describe how you learned that you have a learning disability and how you felt about it them compared to how you feel about it today
- describe what you would like for your future
- what may stand in your way
- *what resources/people can you call upon to help you (include yourself)*
- pick a quote/motto/song/etc and explain it's importance to you
- dedicate your book to someone and explain why you chose them



Appendix B

Appendix C

Student Script: Prior to Strong Poets Project

Script for class prior to commencing work on the strong poets/co-authoring assignment:

As many of you already know, I am working on my master's degree in education. The degree I am working on is with the University of Victoria in the department of Curriculum and Instruction. This winter I will be working on my final project. From having me as your teacher, you should already know that I am very interested in empowerment (making sure you have the skills and knowledge you need to be powerful adult). Another theme in my teaching is one of self-advocacy, speaking up for yourselves to make sure that things are in place for you to show your best work. My project will involve me asking some of the grade 12's in this class to let me use their final project for this course for my own project. I will be contacting the grade 12's and their parents for permission to use their work in February after this course is over and the course marks have been entered.

Appendix E

Grade 10 Writing Personal Views or Responses Quick Scale

The Quick Scale is a summary of the Rating Scale that follows. Both describe student achievement in March-April of the school year. Personal views or response is usually expected to be checked for errors but not revised or edited.

Aspect	Not Yet Within Expectations	Meets Expectations (Minimal Level)	Fully Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
SNAPSHOT	<i>The writing shows problems with style, form, and mechanics that obscure purpose and meaning. May be too brief to meet basic requirements of the task. Reflects little knowledge of the conventions of writing.</i>	<i>The writing is generally clear and conversational, with a beginning, middle, and end. However, development is uneven, and the writer uses a limited repertoire of language, sentences, and techniques.</i>	<i>The writing is clear and logical, with some evidence of depth or maturity. Meets the requirements of the task with a sense of purpose and control and with some variety in language, sentences, and techniques.</i>	<i>The writing creates an impact on the reader, with a sense of vitality and finesse. It exceeds requirements of the task and features some complex and mature language, ideas, and techniques. Few, if any, errors.</i>
MEANING • ideas • support • connection to reader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ideas are not developed • may be very short, with few examples and details • problems obscure any sense of individuality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ideas are generally straightforward and clear; unevenly developed • some relevant examples, details • may connect to own experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ideas are fully developed and show depth in places • supporting details and examples are relevant • personalizes the topic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ideas are fully developed with some originality, maturity, and individuality • details and examples often show some subtlety • tries to elicit a specific response from the reader
STYLE • voice and tone • syntax • vocabulary • rhetorical or stylistic techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • often uses inappropriate tone or language • simple sentences and coordination • basic vocabulary; errors in word choice • disjointed and awkward 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • generally colloquial • limited repertoire of sentences • straightforward vocabulary • little evidence of deliberate techniques 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • appropriate tone and level of language • varied sentence types and lengths • varied and appropriate language • some attempts to use effective techniques 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • style and tone help to accomplish purpose, add impact • wide repertoire of effective sentence structures • precise, concise language • takes risks with a variety of techniques
FORM • beginning • organization and sequence • transitions • ending	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • opening usually introduces the topic • structure may seem illogical or random • may seem disjointed because ideas are not linked with transitions • omits or provides ineffective ending 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • opening establishes purposes • sequence is generally logical but may lack sense of direction • transitions awkward or missing in places • conclusion is often mechanical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • opening establishes context and purpose • sequence is logical • transitions help to connect ideas clearly • conclusion focuses on the purpose; tries to provide a resolution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • engaging introduction • sound structure; seems effortless and natural • smoothly integrates elements such as dialogue, examples, explanations, and anecdotes • conclusion provides a satisfying resolution
CONVENTIONS • spelling • sentence structure and punctuation • usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • includes frequent noticeable errors in basic structures and language that may interfere with meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • includes noticeable errors that may distract the reader but do not interfere with meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • may include some errors; these are generally not serious and do not distract the reader 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • few errors; these do not distract the reader (may only be noticeable when the reader looks for them)

Appendix F

Recruitment Script for students

As Mrs. Farquhar told you at the start of the Strong Poets Assignment, she is working on her master's degree in education. The degree she is working on is with the University of Victoria in the department of Curriculum and Instruction. Right now she is working on her final project. From having her as your teacher, you should already know that she is very interested in empowerment (making sure you have the skills and knowledge you need to be confident adult). Another theme in her teaching is one of self-advocacy, speaking up for yourself to make sure that things are in place for you to show your best work. Her project involves her asking some of the grade 12's who took Learning Strategies last semester to let her use their final "Strong Poets" project as data for her own project. Let's carefully read through the consent form to make sure you truly understand what she is asking you to do as a participant. Your parent/guardian will also need to agree to let her use your data.

Appendix G

Parent Letter: Recruitment

Dear Parent/Guardian,

This is Karin Farquhar your child's Learning Strategies 11 teacher writing. As you already know, I am presently working on my Master's degree in education. The degree I am working on is with the University of Victoria in the department of Curriculum and Instruction. This winter I have been working on my final project.

As a teacher I am very interested in empowering students through education. To me empowerment means that students have the skills and knowledge they need to be confident adults. Another theme in my teaching is one of self-advocacy. This wish is for students to speak up for themselves to make sure that things are in place for them to show their best work both in school and in the workplace. My project involves me asking some of the grade 12's in Learning Strategies 11 to let me use their final project for this course for my own project.

The final project for Learning Strategies 11 involved students writing about themselves as learners with a particular focus on self-awareness and self-advocacy. It served as the final project describing their learning throughout Learning Strategies and can, hopefully, will become a tool for them to use as they leave high school and move on to other pursuits. Students may also choose to use this project as the "About me" portion of their grade 12 Graduation Transitions conversation. While students were carrying out their final project during the Learning Strategies course, I kept a diary of my actions and instructions as their teacher. Now I am interested in looking at the students work samples.

My interest here is to see how students described themselves and their learning to see if the goals of the Learning Strategies course have been met. Do students fully understand their learning disability? Can they recognizing their unique learning style and how to "tap" into it? How does their writing show that students see themselves as self-advocates with the knowledge and understanding of their learning disability to become successful, independent learners?

Now that the course is over and all marks have been entered, I am asking the grade 12's and their parents for participation in my Master's project. I am asking for permission to use three work samples from Learning Strategies: the pre-assessment, the final project, and the post-assessment. The attached permission form outlines that details of my project and describes how your child's privacy will be protected. Please read it carefully.

Sincerely yours,

«GreetingLine»
kfarquha@sd79.bc.ca