



## TEACHING AND LEARNING RESEARCH EXCHANGE

# Opportunities to Learn: Engaging Students in Conversations about Literacy

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# Framing the Research

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## PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this action research study was to document upper elementary and high school students' understandings of their own literacy practices and their perceptions of opportunities to become engaged in literacy at home and school. Involving students in conversations about literacy learning helped us as teachers in this study to explore creative and innovative ways of encouraging students to describe their literacy practices, engagement and opportunities to learn, and to use literacy in various contexts.

## VALUE OF THE STUDY

This study opened a dialogue about literacy engagement and opportunities to learn between classroom teachers at upper elementary and high school levels. The teacher conversations were especially important in the evolution of this study. The “grand conversations” enabled teacher researchers to come to know the “funds of knowledge” about literacy held by their students as well as by each other. Through our regular conversations, we were able to go beyond sharing teaching strategies and develop greater understandings of the ways in which multiple literacies underpin all our lives. We also came to understand that learning and teaching contexts have many commonalities across grades.

## BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

In the last 15 years, research into literacy learning has tended to focus on issues of teaching method, fuelled by unproductive arguments about the role of phonics in classroom instruction. More recently, concerns about older students' lack of interest in reading and resultant “aliteracy” (being able to read but choosing not to do so) have resurfaced. Many classroom teachers regard student motivation to read as an important issue (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006). From both common sense and evidence-based perspectives, reading motivation is substantially correlated to reading achievement (Guthrie et al, 2006).

## A SITUATED APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING ENGAGEMENT

Research studies into reading motivation have typically examined the issue from an individual cognitive or psychological perspective (for example, Cox & Guthrie, 2001). Along with much other research, studies of literacy have now taken a “social turn” with the concept of literacy as “situated” in multiple experiences and events rather than as a series of decontextualized skills. Our study conceptualizes reading engagement and opportunities to learn as socially situated and capable of being understood by students (Pflaum & Bishop, 2004) as well as teachers. Teacher researchers in this project used their professional and academic knowledge to understand how students in elementary and secondary schools perceive invitations to participate in literacy activities.

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following questions guided us as we began the research.

**How do upper elementary and high school students understand themselves as literacy learners?**

- **What literacy practices do they use at home and at school?**
- **What engages them fully as literacy learners?**

**What do students perceive as opportunities to learn literacy?**

- **Do students regard literate practices at home and school as equivalent opportunities to learn?**
- **What is the range of literate practices at home?**
- **What is the range of literate practices at school?**

As the study progressed, we reflected on our own experiences as literacy learners and literacy teachers.

## PROGRESS OF THE STUDY

The teacher team from Prairie Spirit School Division (12 literacy teachers at the grades 4, 6, 8 and 10 levels), as well as four support staff and one university researcher, met face to face four times during the 2007-08 academic year. At our first meeting, we had academic and professional discussions about “engagement” and “opportunities to learn” and the role of students’ background understandings for both of these. We also set up procedures for Learning Support Facilitators (members of the research team) to help with consent forms and permissions. We brainstormed ideas for gathering a wide range of data on students’ literacy interests and attitudes. By the end of the first meeting, we had developed a list of potential interview questions that participating teachers could use either in a survey or in interviews. Teachers in higher grades seemed more comfortable in using more formal methods of gathering information about students’ literacy interests, attitudes and opportunities to learn at home.

By the second meeting (in November 2007), many teachers were ready to share their experiences so far. They had used different methods to collect information on students’ literacy, including “literacy biography bags” (see Appendix 3) as well as informal conversations. We had an excellent discussion on boys and literacy, and carried out a jigsaw activity on readings about engagement and adolescent learners.

What we did not do at this point, but perhaps should have, was be explicit about ways to modify classroom practice based on the data already gathered.

# What We Found from the Surveys and Interviews with Students

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When the information from the range of classrooms was collected, we organized the data to further understand student and teacher perceptions of their engagement in literacy at home and school. The following sections are intended to convey the voices of both students and teachers, without extensive commentary or analysis, since the purpose of the study was to share ideas and practical solutions.

## GRADE 4 STUDENT RESPONSES

- *Where do we see people reading?* School and library were the most common responses.
- Most students remember being read to by parents, but not much anymore; they are usually encouraged to read on their own.
- *What do they like about reading?* Learning new things, interesting, learn facts, fun, funny, “If it’s a good book you feel like you want to share it with someone,” and they’ll pass it on.
- *What do they not like about reading?* When the words are hard, when it’s a long book, when it’s boring, “Sometimes when I have a book I don’t really like, I still want to find out what happens.” “Sometimes when a good part ends in a book, I feel sad because I have to keep reading to find another good part.”
- *What does someone have to do in order to read well?* Most responses were around decoding – read big words, spell, sound out, a couple said use imagination.
- *What does someone have to do in order to write well?* Many responses on letter formation and legibility, holding the pencil properly, some said have good ideas.
- *Why do you read?* Many said when there’s nothing else to do, when I’m bored, some said it’s fun, to get ideas, learn things.
- *What sort of things do you like to read?* Majority said fact and information books, adventures, series.
- *How do you feel when you’re reading?* Most common response – it depends on the book.
- *What’s happening in your brain when you read?* “I imagine what’s happening and I imagine it’s me doing it.” “I feel like I want to be that person, like in a movie.” “I just read and I don’t think anything, I just read the words.”
- *Importance of reading?* Get better at it, you can read harder books in school, get a good job – when questioned further about occupations involving reading, students responded with teachers, authors, librarians.

## GRADE 4 TEACHER'S COMMENTS ON HER STUDENTS' RESPONSES

Their teacher commented very thoughtfully.

*I think I had expected more in-depth, perceptive responses. With grade fours I got more surface responses that dealt with the more mechanical or physical aspects of reading and writing. Upon reflection, I realized that I have not done enough modeling of the strategies that I use as a reader – the metacognitive strategies of connecting, questioning, inferring. This will be an avenue that I pursue in the classroom.*

*It became very apparent that the majority of my students prefer information books. I interviewed 14 boys and 5 girls, so that may have been a factor. Also, they enjoy reading series. When I consider that their responses to "What don't you like about reading?" this makes sense. They don't want to start a book that is too hard or that they find boring. A book in a familiar series is a safe bet because they know what they're getting. Maybe their confidence will grow as they get older and experience more books. All the more reason to continue to read aloud to students and expose them to new authors and themes!*

## GRADE 8 TEACHER'S COMMENTS ON HER STUDENTS' RESPONSES

I gave them a written questionnaire and had each student record answers to the questions. Later I will be choosing some students to interview orally and more in depth.

- The responses to what each student liked to read were as varied as the students themselves - newspapers, skateboarding magazines, romances, fantasy, Dear Canada series. This just shows the importance of providing a LARGE variety of reading materials.
- Very common answers to the question about how you feel when you are reading, though - almost half mentioned that they feel as if they are "in" the story - like they are a part of what's happening. Now how to change this individual experience into a social "peer" pursuit? Maybe have them read first-person stories and create skits where they are in role as their character and meet other characters from the other students' books?
- Many mentioned reading before bed in their rooms.
- Weird common response - many students reported that what they disliked most about writing was that it "hurts" - that their hand gets sore from writing. What's up with that? Are we not teaching writing skills enough so that they can avoid writer's cramp?
- My favorite response from one of the boys, "I like the fact that a book doesn't need batteries or a power cord."
- My biggest "aha" moment from our last meeting was the challenge of how to turn reading into a social and active pursuit for my middle years students, knowing how middle years students learn best and what their particular needs are. I am still thinking about ways to do this, and would be interested in talking about ideas for this with other grade 8 teachers.

## MIDDLE YEARS TEACHER'S SUMMARY

- Technologically-based literacy is extremely important and enjoyable. It is easily accessed both at school and at home. Students see it as a fast, stress-free way of communicating.
- Schools are the central means of providing rich literacy lives for students. Resources come from the school and there does not seem to be much positive encouragement from home.
- Many see family members reading/writing, but only as outsiders. It is not something that students and families do together, although that was not always the case.
- Fathers/male role models seem to play a very small role in literacy growth for boys.
- Although students are involved in technologically-based literacy, there are interests beyond this.
- Students see literacy as a means to an end. It is a way to do well in school and get a good job. In my class they do not see themselves as life-long readers/writers.

## MIDDLE YEARS TEACHER'S REFLECTIONS

In preparation for my interview with each student, I held a class discussion about the books that were important to each individual in my grade 8 class. The girls immediately jumped in and identified these texts, while the boys sat back with apparent indifference. However, perhaps because of the girls' enthusiasm, the boys soon jumped in and offered books that they too felt were significant. To my surprise almost all of the volumes identified by both genders were fiction, whereas I would have expected more of the lads to offer non-fiction volumes as their choices.

The reasons provided for giving these books positions of prominence in their lives were as varied and as thoughtful as one would expect from a group of adults. For instance, students favoured some texts for their ability to reflect accurately the lives of their student readers. Others liked the books for their social commentary, as was the case in which a story about a battered daughter made one class member realize how lucky she is. We need not fear the disappearance of morals in this generation, as another text was identified as a cautionary tale, warning about what can happen in the area of teen pregnancy. Consistent with this was another book chosen for its message that we shouldn't like people for their looks alone. Also identified as strong inducements to read are suspense and excitement, as students experienced, for example, with the *Harry Potter* series. Yet others love a book because it was originally the gift of a special person. In contrast to those who privileged certain texts because they reflected their lives were those who offered the opposite: those fantasy books which – at least on the surface – whisk us away to imaginary worlds of splendour. Never underestimate the appeal of subject matter in prioritizing favoured texts, as one boy's pick was a book about dogs, while another preferred one about animals because they like dogs and animals. I suppose the most interesting and poignant reason was that given for choosing Dr. Seuss books. My students offered these as holding enduring significance because they were the first that the students were capable of reading on their own – a breakthrough that obviously is still vividly and fondly recalled.

The second part of the discussion involved a survey of the sorts of reading to which students are exposed. I was surprised to discover that a number of the magazines and comic books that I read during my own misspent youth are alive and well, and being read – probably as I write – by others who are right now wasting their own youthful years. Mere weeks away from joining the ranks of quinquagenarians, I am quite reassured to see that this great tradition continues! The other pleasant surprise is that young people still read the little comics that come with Fler brand bubble gum. To my fond – and fading – remembrance, this was among my own first experiences of reading and looking back over the chasm of the intervening years, I still recollect that main character of these comics was a young lad named Pud. As you can see, my reading discussion became something of a trip down memory lane: plus ça change . . .

## SUMMARY

- Boys seemed to be less enthusiastic about sharing their reading interests than girls.
- Fiction seemed to be a more popular choice than non-fiction.
- Students' choice of reading material was dependent on a variety of reasons: personal interest, strong connections, an escape to another world
- Out-of-school reading included magazines and comics.
- Exploring students' literacy lives resulted in the teacher reflecting on own literacy life.

There is a distinction between thinking of reading as a mechanical process and reading as a personal passion. Some students seem to view reading as a process of decoding. Teachers recognized that reading needs to be more than just an exercise in decoding, but we also need to create opportunities and environments where reading is a personal journey and part of a larger community.

# Literacy Teachers' "Grand Conversations" about Their Own Literacy

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Many of our regular discussions would qualify as "grand conversations," but for our last meeting we made a particular point of interviewing each other and writing about our own literacy lives. The questions were provided by Angela, the university researcher, and answered quite faithfully by everyone present.

Below are some selected musings from this rich data by a range of teachers, followed by a thematic analysis.

## HOW DO YOU THINK OF YOURSELF AS A LITERACY LEARNER?

- I believe that I learn more about what I can do as a writer and a reader the more I challenge myself with texts and forms of writing. I enjoy doing this, but I always feel as if I need to give myself the initial "push." Stepping out of my comfort zones in both reading and writing helps me to expand my knowledge base and my literacy experiences. By putting myself into the lives of the characters, in both fiction and non-fiction, I gain empathy and in some ways confidence.
- With me, and I'm sure with the others in this teachers' group, this is a bit like carrying coals to Newcastle. I've "seen the light" long ago and am an inveterate reader. For me the law of inertia means that I'm often on the couch reading. Heck, I even read billboards when I travel in my car – not the safest activity while driving, I admit. The advent of the computer, especially the internet, has been like a Vegas jackpot for me as it has allowed me to obtain additional reading material about subjects that interest me.
- My background as a literacy learner stems from the time in my life where I learned I "hated" reading. I "couldn't read" in grades 1 and 2, "hated reading" by the time grade 12 rolled around. By university I figured I better get this "reading thing" figured out. I did. Now, I can't sit at a table or in the bathroom or at bedtime without something, anything, to read. When I didn't read I felt out of the loop.
- Upon reflection around this project, I guess I realize that I'm an enthusiastic literacy learner. I have so enjoyed the sharing amongst the teachers involved in this study. I feel I have contributed, but come away with so many more ideas.
- I am beginning the process of learning more about non-traditional forms of literacy (interact, text messaging, etc.). Also, I am developing literacy skills with regards to reading strategies.
- I love a "good" story, rich language, different perspectives and learning. I read constantly, watch movies when I am able and listen to books on tape while I travel around on my busy days. During the school year, I read a great deal that is school work related. Reading and writing is what "we" do. Sometimes the learning curve is steep. There are times when the current (ideas) materials don't fit into what I'm comfortable with.... then I question myself as a literacy learner/teacher. It is a constant balance between old, new, invented. I am not a quick reader. I need lots of "think" time. When

I was younger that made me feel that I was not as literate as the people around me. I am not a natural speller – a huge stumbling block in my early years. Now, I think it makes me a better teacher.

- I think of myself as a “lazy” literacy learner. By that, I mean I struggle with traditional approaches to learning literacy and to reading. These approaches are too static for me, and I have always loved to read because it was dynamic and filled with energy. The imposition of rigid structure upon a reading experience kills the experience for me and, I believe, kills it for all others. I learn about the world by doing, talking and reading and reflecting and then doing it all over again. I think it is important that we view literacy as an opportunity to “pen” ourselves and our classrooms to possibilities rather than trying to close them down for the sake of control.

## WHAT IS YOUR ROLE AS A LITERACY TEACHER?

- As a literacy teacher, I feel that it is my opportunity to share literacy and my love for it with my students. I see myself as someone who can open windows of opportunity (because windows are more exciting than doors) for young readers, by helping them hone not only their reading skills, but also by helping them to know where to find good books, where to find good literature that isn't a typical story and how to share their appreciation for a type of literacy with others. I also see myself as someone who can learn about literacy from my students as well. I've been turned onto some great books by kids in my class. That excites me a lot.
- I try to read all summer long to become familiar with what my children and my students are readings (lots of young adult books). I always make sure in the summer to read one contemporary (Atonement) fiction, one classic (Anna Karenina) and one trashy pirate novel! (Love's Lusty Life). I'm learning new technology all the time.
- Now, I try to make every effort to engage students so that they do not fall “out of the loop,” “out of the know.” Being in this group has made me hungry for information about engaging students in literacy.
- I have grown. Many years ago when I started this whole teaching gig, my focus was simply to get the kids to learn the basics. Novel studies a-plenty, and grammar sheets galore! During the last year with this group, I have reflected time and time again on the things I have done with the students that were and are beneficial to them as learners and have not given myself enough credit. The word “technology” is such a critical one that I find myself searching at night, before the next day's lesson on how the students can learn from it. Tying this into every subject has made a difference for the whole student body in the respect that they now themselves rely on the computer for so much.
- First I hope that my genuine enthusiasm for the act of reading, the fact that I was long ago seduced by literature – and the concomitant pleasure and information that I have derived – make me a worthy role model for my students. My goal is that my open, very public “lust” for literature helps to motivate them to enter, maintain their places – or even accelerate their positions on the literacy highway. Where I do fall short is in providing the opportunities to read in my classroom and this will need to be remedied next year.
- To inspire a love of learning and literacy in my students by creating opportunities to explore new things, by sharing my enthusiasm for reading and my passion for languages, by providing opportunities for

student success and lasting accomplishments and by providing strategies and reinforcements for use by my students.

- My role as a literacy teacher has changed somewhat. However, I still feel like I'm doing a taste sample and mulling over the flavour rather than actually cooking the meal. I've tried little snippets of things people have suggested in this group. I'm very interested in incorporating more technology in the classroom. I'm becoming much more aware of what I'm doing, not just doing it.
- As a special education teacher, I feel pressure to "make" readers/writers/communicators from kids who have difficulties in these areas. This need for skills is juxtaposed with the need to understand content, be critical thinkers and effective communicators. The dilemma is where to focus! (Or how to do both!)
- My role as literacy teacher – to keep learning, to promote the idea of life-long learning. The power of a good book – a good story – cannot be measured. I want the students I teach to view themselves as readers; I want to model an appreciation of literature. I want them to laugh and cry along with me as we share a good book, then to seek out another book on their own.
- My role has changed in the respect of listening, simply listening to them as they reply to questions from me and sometimes the students. The literature circles that I had been doing previous to this year weren't guided enough by me in the beginning. I had always given them too much freedom and this had a negative effect on their peer learning.
- To provide meaningful literacy opportunities for my students. This has changed through our conversations because I realize what I find meaningful is not necessarily meaningful to my students. I need to figure who they are as readers, not just through a reading questionnaire or interest inventory but through conversations with them.

## HOW HAS YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THIS CHANGED THROUGH THE CONVERSATIONS IN THIS PROJECT?

- I've gained some great insights from the others in this group. I've listened as they've spoken about using technology to enhance their students' literacy lives. The concept of blogging about Macbeth has really engaged some of my less interested students. The discussion we have online and the comments they leave are quite deep and thoughtful....even the short spoken ones.
- I have learned through this project the importance of asking questions of the students with regards to their engagement with literature. I have made a much more conscious effort to do this. This is one of the primary roles of the literacy teacher. Another role of the literacy teacher is to be a role model. For many of my grade 7 students, I was the first male teacher they had ever had for English Language Arts. This was the same group that had only three students out of nineteen report being read to by a male when they were younger. It is critical that they see me read, write, etc.
- I believe it is our role as literacy teachers to open and to learn. What is it that we enjoy about reading? How many of us, while reading a book, wait with anticipation for the chapter questions because they will help us understand the book better? We read and we think and we talk about what

we read. I believe that we need to create that environment for students – a place where reading fits more with who we are as people and as a community. We may not read at the same “level,” but we are still able to engage in dialogue about what we bring from a book and how it has shaped our perspective.

- The discussion here has to be very helpful in terms of discovering what others are about in their classrooms. As well, I have benefited by broadening my understanding of some of the issues associated with literacy through the exploration of some of these in this group of people who share a commitment to advancing the cause. What this project spurred was having me discuss in greater depth with my students the books that were important to them. Again, I need to sustain this in future years.
- My understanding of my role as a literacy teacher hasn't really changed, but my understanding of myself as a literacy learner has – by participating in this study, I realize I have so much more to learn in the areas of research and technology and engagement, and the time to share insights and ideas was invaluable.
- Being in this group has made me hungry for information about engaging students in literacy. Coming to these meetings is like going to a five-star hotel/restaurant. Everything tastes so delicious and there is so much to choose from. I like to get away from the mashed potatoes and pot roast at school.
- This group reinforced my suspicion that comfort level and trust are the beginning point to student engagement. Many ideas shared here will help build trust and then extend/enhance student engagement.
- My understanding of literacy has grown (and shifted) because of involvement in this project. The area of technology is huge – and it is not an area in which I feel a great deal of competence. I have really appreciated the opportunity to meet in grade-alike groups and discuss how other teachers meet the literacy needs of their students.
- I have learned through this project the importance of asking questions of the students with regards to their engagement with literature. I have made a much more conscious effort to do this. I have also gained an appreciation of using technology to engage. Earlier in the year I did PowerPoint poetry with my grade 9 class, and it was one of the best/most rewarding experiences of our year.
- My understanding of this has changed in that I have a greater respect and value for conversations with others about literacy. When children talk about their literacy and share their ideas and feelings about literacy, they become more courageous in the process. It takes some of the fear and misunderstandings about literacy out of being literacy learners.

## WHAT DID YOU GATHER ABOUT YOUR STUDENTS AS LITERACY LEARNERS THAT SURPRISED YOU?

- I was really surprised that some of my kids who profess to hate reading can really get into the deep concepts and themes of a Shakespearean play (Macbeth) when they are interested in the plot. The movie-style violence of this play enables these students to visualize the action...which gets them into the minutiae of the plot. It is a very sneaky way to get them engaged. I was very pleased by this result.

- Amazed how many readers there still are...
- The last reading “at school” was teacher directed and they are not doing it on their own at school.
- They all want to be readers even though they may hate it or find it difficult.
- They recognize the value of reading.
- They don’t know how to retrieve information.
- Finding out what they are actually interested in when you take the time to talk to them one on one.
- How few students can recall a male teacher or male figure read to them.
- The fact that the kids are still reading “stuff” that we read as kids...the good stuff stays around.
- I found out that the majority enjoy reading biographies and true life stories that shock them a bit. I guess they learn from the mistakes of teenagers in the story and try to find their own paths in life.

## HOW HAS WHAT YOU LEARNED ABOUT YOUR STUDENTS AFFECTED YOUR PRACTICE AS A LITERACY TEACHER?

- They will read if they are engaged (if it is a topic of interest).
- Our job is to make connections for students.
- We need to give them time to read.
- I strive to find out more about my students’ out-of-class interests before choosing my literature now. I also look more at the make-up of my class (heavy male to female ratios, etc.). I allow myself to look silly if it helps to get a point across to the kids, as well. (Having fun with the kids is key for me.)
- I was able to provide more meaningful materials to my students and choose a novel to read aloud called, *Untwisted*, written by Serge LeClerc. The students really enjoyed this novel, and the cool thing is that they met this man and heard his presentation about his struggles in life and how he changed and became a Christian two years ago.

## WHAT ARE YOUR LITERACY GOALS FOR STUDENTS?

- My main literacy goal is to instill in each of them the thought that “they can read this and understand it.” So many kids today give up when they feel that something is too hard or above them. The more kids enjoy something, the more they are willing to try other new things as well.
- We want them to be “literate adults.”
- We want them to be comfortable with communication.
- Strategies to lean on forever.
- Empower them to know how to ask or to compensate if they cannot read.
- Want students to share and create enthusiasm for literature.
- Being able to share, learning how to share, being comfortable sharing.
- More of an openness to reading...
- To become more independent readers.

# PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS TO ENHANCE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

- Just taking the time to gather student interest information from my students and seriously applying that to what I chose to read and write about with them is going to be the most important thing that I take from this experience.
- To figure out who they are as readers at the beginning of the year by having conversations with them about what they read, their likes/dislikes and why they read or don't; then use that information to provide meaningful reading and learning opportunities for them.
- Give the students other opportunities to be literate other than reading (e.g., viewing, writing, listening, representing, etc.).
- Guided discussion.
- A regular routine of “reading aloud” at any grade level. Stop and model how the teacher is thinking to show the students how (strategies) they understand. This creates opportunities for conversations with the students about the literature. Also it models comprehension strategies.
- Having individual one-on-one conversations with students about their reading habits and literary choices at the start of the year. This engages the students and gets them talking about literature. Taking the time to talk with them honours who they are as readers, and lets them know that who they are as readers is important. This encourages them to contribute to class and informs you about their likes and dislikes which helps you choose reading material suited to them.
- Students have opportunities to talk about what they are reading on a regular basis. For instance, spend some time every Friday giving the students five minutes each to share their reading to the class or a small group.
- Teachers talk about books they are reading and share what it means to them, and it connects to students. Students start entering into conversations with teachers about literature, and this models the importance of reading and the relationships and community that can grow out of reading.
- Have the students involved in peer-to-peer conversations about what they read. A modified version of literature circles helps them to practice and use strategies of comprehension and to practice appropriate social skills.
- Integrating technology into curriculum...using PowerPoint to explore poetry. Students write poems rich in imagery...and then use the software to present their poems at a literacy night.
- Have boxes of books that are organized according to themes...for example, a “hockey” box of books or a “Nancy Drew” box of books. Read-alouds – students are hearing the story without the worries of decoding; free to think and discuss.
- Reflection logs – i.e., thought logs, post-it notes as part of a novel or shared reading experience – students are given time to reflect and connect to something personal or familiar.
- Setting a climate of trust in the classroom as a first step – encouraging risk-taking (talking about multiple intelligences, using literature to make a point; e.g., *Grammar Experts are Great Big Snobs*; as teachers, modeling how we learn – modeling challenges we have when reading and writing; modeling ourselves as risk-takers); space and time for talking with students.

- Literacy Bags – finding out about students’ literacy lives outside of schools.
- Finding alternate ways of students representing their learning – not always writing.
- The opportunities I provide are: literature circles, reader response journals, web pages, teacher read-alouds, as well as novel studies.

## PRACTICES THAT DO NOT ENGAGE STUDENTS

- Needing to provide a mark.
- Not providing time to read and to share.
- Forgetting to integrate other areas into literacy.
- Not giving them opportunities to engage in literacy activities forces them to read books they are not interested in.
- Should students read aloud? Must be handled carefully and with respect and concern...never force them to read in front of the class.
- Too many guided novel studies... too many chapter questions and work sheets. Be wary of getting stuck in routines and over-harvesting routines or approaches.
- My home reading program – many of the writing activities that often go with this; counting the number of books.
- Some homework activities that feel like extra work.
- DEAR or SQUIRT time – how can we encourage independent reading? How can we make this time valuable? What is the teacher’s role during this time?
- What do we do to connect home and school reading?
- I think after having conversations with my students about what they read or don’t read and why I don’t think a novel study truly engages every student in a class. It’s impossible to find one book that will be of interest to all.

## WHAT DO YOU NEED TO DO TO PROVIDE MORE OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN FOR YOUR STUDENTS?

- Need to get more books/literature in my classroom.
- Talk/share with students.
- Take students book buying (especially your reluctant readers).
- Be open and aware of the other literacies and integrate them into the classroom.
- The importance of building relationships.
- Using the computer more and integrating technology more...using “You Tube” to provide context to what they are reading.
- Asking a lot more questions of the students about “why they liked something”. Trying to encourage conversation by talking to the students a lot more.
- An appreciation for the diversity of reading that students are engaged in.
- Slow down and take time to think about reading.

# THEMES FROM THE “GRAND CONVERSATIONS”

## LOVE OF READING

- I’ve “seen the light” long ago and am an inveterate reader. For me the law of inertia means that I’m often on the couch reading.
- When I didn’t read I felt out of the loop.
- I love a “good” story, rich language, different perspectives and learning. During the school year I read a great deal that is school work related. Reading and writing is what “we” do.
- I believe that I learn more about what I can do as a writer and a reader the more I challenge myself with texts and forms of writing.

## TECHNOLOGY

- The advent of the computer, especially the internet, has been like a Vegas jackpot for me as it has allowed me to obtain additional reading material about subjects that interest me.
- The word “technology” is such a critical one that I find myself searching at night, before the next day’s lesson, on how the students can learn from it.
- I have learned through this project the importance of asking questions of the students with regards to their engagement with literature.
- I’ve gained some great insights from the others in this group. I’ve listened as they’ve spoken about using technology to enhance their students’ literacy lives.
- Making use of computers and data projectors – e.g., visit websites, watch You Tube videos – show the students a visual of what they’re reading about and connect with the world around them.
- Using technology for pre-reading – show pictures of what they are going to read about.
- Using the movie after a book – to show them how they were interpreted and hear students make comparisons.
- Integrating technology into curriculum...using PowerPoint to explore poetry. Students write poems rich in imagery...and then using the software to present their poems at a literacy night.
- Using the computer more and integrating technology more...using You Tube to provide context to what they are reading.

## TEACHERS SEEING THEMSELVES AS ROLE MODELS

- First I hope that my genuine enthusiasm for the act of reading, the fact that I was long ago seduced by literature – and the concomitant pleasure – and information that I have derived make me a worthy role model for my students.
- My role as literacy teacher – to keep learning, to promote the idea of life-long learning. The power of a good book – a good story – cannot be measured.
- I have learned through this project the importance of asking questions of the students with regards to their engagement with literature.
- Another role of the literacy teacher is to be a role model. For many of my grade 7 students, I was the first male teacher they had ever had for English Language Arts.

- Setting a climate of trust in the classroom as a first step – encouraging risk-taking (talking about multiple intelligences, using literature to make a point – modeling how we learn – modeling challenges we have when reading and writing; modeling ourselves as risk-takers); space and time for talking with students (Q4).

## **INSPIRING AND LISTENING TO OTHERS**

- To inspire a love of learning and literacy in my students by creating opportunities to explore new things, by sharing my enthusiasm for reading and my passion for languages, by providing opportunities for student success and lasting accomplishments and by providing strategies and reinforcements for use by my students.
- My role has changed in the respect of listening, simply listening to them as they reply to questions from me and sometimes the students.
- I believe it is our role as literacy teachers to be open and to learn. What is it that we enjoy about reading? How many of us, while reading a book, wait with anticipation for the chapter questions because they will help us understand the book better? We read and we think and we talk about what we read.
- As a literacy teacher, I feel that it is my opportunity to share literacy and my love for it with my students. I see myself as someone who can open windows of opportunity (because windows are more exciting than doors) for young readers.

## **TEACHERS LEARNING MORE OF THEMSELVES**

- My understanding of my role as a literacy teacher hasn't really changed, but my understanding of myself as a literacy learner has – by participating in this study, I realize I have so much more to learn in the areas of research and technology and engagement, and the time to share insights and ideas was invaluable.
- Being in this group has made me hungry for information about engaging students in literacy.
- My understanding of literacy has grown (and shifted) because of involvement in this project. The area of technology is huge – and it is not an area in which I feel a great deal of competence.

## **STUDENT INDEPENDENCE**

- Allowing students to choose books so that they “feel they are transported into the book” (create these opportunities by giving them time to read).
- Giving them choice and variety in their assignments after reading a book.
- Give the students other opportunities to be literate other than reading (e.g., viewing, writing, listening, representing, etc.).
- Having individual one-on-one conversations with students about their reading habits and literary choices at the start of the year. This engages the students and gets them going about talking about literature.
- Students have opportunities to talk about what they are reading on a regular basis. For instance, spend some time every Friday giving the students five minutes each to share their reading to the class or a small group.

## **READING ALOUD OR IN GROUPS**

- Reading aloud to students allows many of them to see the visual in their head or make a movie in their head through enactment and explanation.
- A regular routine of “reading aloud” at any grade level. Stop and model how the teacher is thinking to show the students how (strategies) they understand. This creates opportunities for conversations with the students about the literature. Also it models comprehension strategies.
- Have the students involved in peer-to-peer conversations about what they read.
- Read-alouds – students are hearing the story without the worries of decoding; free to think and discuss (Q4).
- I was able to provide more meaningful materials to my students.

## **MAKING READING INTERESTING TO STUDENTS**

- Not giving them opportunities to engage in literacy activities.
- Forcing them to read books they are not interested in.
- Too many guided novel studies... too many chapter questions and work sheets. Be wary of getting stuck in routines and over-harvesting routines or approaches.
- Allowing students to choose books so that they “feel they are transported into the book” (create these opportunities by giving them time to read).
- Giving them choice and variety in their assignments after reading a book.
- Give the students other opportunities to be literate other than reading (e.g., viewing, writing, listening, representing, etc.).

## **INDIVIDUALS STILL READ**

- Amazed how many readers there still are.
- They all want to be readers even though they may hate it or find it difficult.
- They recognize the value of reading.
- The fact that the kids are still reading “stuff” that we read as kids...the good stuff stays around.
- I was really surprised that some of my kids who profess to hate reading can really get into the deep concepts and themes of a Shakespearean play (Macbeth) when they are interested in the plot.

# Insights and Inspirations

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## SHARED VALUES

Since teachers had volunteered for this study, it is not surprising that they were enthusiastic about the value of literacy, although several shared some of their own early struggles with becoming a reader. In some ways they were surprised by their students' own understanding of literacy's importance for their current and future lives, even though the teachers did not perceive all their students as avid readers. Teachers were delighted that many students were still "hooked" on old favourites or new series, and that many students loved reading informational books.

## CHALLENGES

It became clear to all teachers in the study that there was a gap between their pedagogical uses of technology and students' engagement with literacy through technology. Some did not feel confident in this area. This was one of the areas where teachers were planning to make immediate changes.

It was also clear from the student data and the conversations that increased engagement in literacy for students would be enhanced through more activities that promote student autonomy – book and assignment choice, for instance. Teachers themselves, in their recollections of their own literacy lives, recognized the need for choice. Student autonomy, differentiated instruction and assignments, although theoretically valued, seem more difficult to translate into classroom practice. Classroom discussion, led by students and involving less teacher talk, is a challenge and there was a realization that this was an area many wanted to work on. There was also the realization that this does not just happen but takes modeling and time to create that culture. Teachers felt much responsibility in being good role models by reading to students and planning activities that engage students. The challenge is to gradually release some of that responsibility to students in order to create independent readers and thinkers and to model and practice ways of interacting and understanding many types of text.

It was also evident from the data that literacy tends to be associated with English Language Arts and less with other curricula. Although there was evidence that informational text was read by some students, conversations revolved more around fiction.

It also seems that teachers recognized the symbiosis between themselves and the students as readers. Teachers recognize the importance of bringing their literate lives into the class and to demonstrate to the students the passion they have for reading. This in turn motivates students to also share and identify themselves as readers who are connected to a larger community. This creates an opportunity for teachers to be learners, exploring, modeling, discussing and reflecting along with their students.

The challenge for teachers and teacher educators at all levels is to invite the multiple literacies of our homes and communities into the classroom, so that all our students are invited to take up irresistible opportunities to learn in school and expand the view of literacy not only as a set of skills one uses at school, but also as a disposition and a way of understanding the world.

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# Appendices

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## APPENDIX 1: THE STUDENT PROFILE QUESTIONS

- What are some favourite things you do in and out of school?
- Tell me about hobbies you have.
- What was the last reading you did? Where did this reading material come from?
- In what places/situations do you see other people reading and/or writing?
- Do you remember being read to? By whom? Does anyone read to you now?
- How have you been encouraged to read and write?
- What do you like or not like about reading?
- What do you like or not like about writing?
- If you read, where are the places you do this?
- What do you read? (Magazines, fiction books, non-fiction books, newspapers, computer screen, text messages. . . other)
- When do you choose to read?
- When you are reading or writing, do you do other things at the same time? Describe an example of this.
- Why do you read?
- Why do you write?
- Would you like more time to read and write at home and at school?
- What sorts of reading material would you like to have available?
- On a scale of 1-10 (10 being the most enthusiastic) how do you feel when you're reading? Try to describe this feeling.
- On a scale of 1-10 (10 being the most enthusiastic) how do you feel when you're writing? Try to describe this feeling.
- How does reading help you? How does writing help you?
- How do you think reading will be important to you in the next two years? In the next ten years? In the next twenty years?
- How do you think writing will be important to you in the future?

# APPENDIX 2: LITERACY PROJECT STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

- What are some favourite things you do in and out of school?
- Tell me about hobbies you have.
- What was the last reading you did? Where did this reading material come from?
- In what places/situations do you see other people reading and/or writing?
- Do you remember being read to? By whom? Does anyone read to you now?
- How have you been encouraged to read and write?
- What do you like or not like about reading and writing?
- What does someone have to do in order to read well?
- What does someone have to do in order to write well?
- If you read, where are the places you do this?
- What do you read? (Magazines, fiction books, non-fiction books, newspapers, computer screen, text messages. . . other)
- When do you choose to read?
- When you are reading or writing, do you do other things at the same time? Describe an example of this.
- Why do you read?
- Why do you write?
- Would you like more time to read and write at home and at school?
- What sorts of reading material would you like to have available?
- How do you feel when you're reading? Try to describe this feeling.
- How do you feel when you're writing? Try to describe this feeling.
- How does reading help you? How does writing help you?
- How do you think reading and writing will be important to you in the next two years? In the next ten years? In the next twenty years?
- How do you think reading will be important to you in the future?

Comments: comfort level of participant, willingness, focus, demeanor

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## APPENDIX 3: LETTER TO PARENTS

### RE: LITERATURE AUTOBIOGRAPHY BAGS

*Dear Parents,*

*Last week I sent home information on a research project centered around student engagement in reading. I was trying to think of a fun way to kick off our literacy project, and I came across an article on Literature Autobiography Bags. These “Bio Bags” look like a fun way to capture the students’ interest in this project. Here’s what we do:*

*I am asking students to prepare or assemble a collection of literature that is significant to them, to place these in a bag or backpack that also holds some special meaning, and to bring these to school to share with classmates. The following list will help you think of some things to include: books, comics, magazines, letters, cards, notes, news clippings, journals and diaries. Each article should be special in some way. All items will be handled carefully and returned home after your child has presented to the class.*

*Today I presented my “Bio Bag” to students and told a brief story about each item as I pulled it from my bag. I included everything from my favourite childhood books to my own children’s notes and letters. I think the class especially enjoyed checking out my grade 4 report card!*

*I am confident that the process of selecting, sharing and reflecting will help students realize the impact that literature has had, and will continue to have, upon their lives. I also expect to generate a strong sense of classroom camaraderie as students share what is special to them.*

*I am hoping to start presentations next week, and have a few students present each day, so please have your child prepare their Bio Bag on the weekend and send it to school next week. If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to call. Thanks so much for your interest and assistance on this project!*

*Cindy Krueger*





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