

Pedagogy in a New Tonality

**Teacher Inquiries on Creative
Tactics, Strategies, Graphics
Organizers, and Visual Journals
in the K-12 Classroom**

Peter Gouzouasis (Ed.)

SensePublishers

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in the K-12 Classroom*

Edited by

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BARRIE BENNETT

FOREWORD

Although most of us rarely think about it, we would agree that without ‘students’ we would not have ministries of education, teacher unions, faculties of education, and school districts. Given those stakeholders exist because of students, one would think those stakeholders would work collectively to make a difference in the life chances and learning chances of students. Unfortunately, collaboration between stakeholders is rarely the case, which begs the question, why wouldn’t they work together? Anyone who has worked with a group of students for approximately six hours a day for 200 days, year after year, understands the complexities of the teaching and learning process. And tangentially, logic would tell us that all stakeholders should be working together to increase the life and learning opportunities of students.

Over the last 29 years I have been involved in working with districts on long-term systemic change in Canada, Australia, and Ireland. I’ve experienced the complexities, frustrations, and successes of attempting to create partnerships between stakeholders. This text represents one of those ‘rare’ success cases.

In the present foreword, I situate the efforts of Dr. Peter Gouzouasis in collaboration with school districts, specifically the North Vancouver School District, by sharing the stories of a few systemic change projects that I have been involved in over the last 29 years. These examples illustrate failures and successes.

In 1982, I was involved as a participant teacher, and later as a consultant, in a systemic change project that focused on instruction with Edmonton public schools. After six years, we had 154 schools (of 197) with teachers and administrators working in teams involved in the project. Even though the project was voluntary, no school ever left the project. As part of the project, we tried to connect with the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta; however, they took no interest in our project.

In 1999, we started a project with the teachers’ union in Western Australia. The union’s leaders were clearly progressive in understanding the importance of assisting WA teachers to become effective practitioners. The union eventually formed a partnership with the ministry of education in Western Australia to create a statewide project to support teacher professional development. This is the most effective union/ministry project I have experienced. For whatever the reason, and 12 years later, we were only marginally successful in eventually connecting to the teacher education programs in the local universities in Western Australia. They were invited right at the start to be part of the project’s initiation, but unfortunately they never committed themselves to being part of the project.

In contrast, the Ontario Institute of Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) created a partnership with the York Region District School Board (YRDSB). YRDSB worked initially on an instructional intelligence project for two

years—this project involved approximately 600 teachers working in teams with their principals. In the third year, YRDSB and OISE/UT created the Doncrest Option that involved 65 students doing their B.Ed. program at Doncrest Public School in YRDSB. The program was team taught by faculty from OISE/UT and YRDSB. That partnership is now in its ninth year. The B.Ed. students were placed with teachers who were involved in the project. The key benefit was the development of a common curriculum, contemporary assessment practices, and instructional language between the associate teachers and the B.Ed. students. Importantly, YRDSB has hired over 200 teachers from the Doncrest B.Ed. option. In addition, a number of teachers from YRDSB went on to do graduate studies on various aspects of the project. Moreover, they now co-ordinate this option.

This text embodies one of those rare occasions where university and school district stakeholders make the decision to work together, over time, for primary, middle school, and secondary students, as well as teacher-graduate students. In 2004, Dr. Peter Gouzouasis, from the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia, met with representatives from the North Vancouver District School Board. The meeting focused on enacting one of the conditions of North Vancouver School District's five-year project—to work with a local university to begin researching aspects of their project.

The focus of the five-year project was on instructional intelligence. Instructional intelligence implies exploring ways that curriculum, assessment, instruction, how students and teachers learn, change, and systemic change intersect and play out over time. In this text by Dr. Gouzouasis, you will read examples of research by teachers exploring the complexities of the teaching and learning process—how they enact aspects of being, and becoming, instructionally intelligent. You will learn what happens when universities and school districts work together to make a significant difference for students of all ages.

Barrie Bennett

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PETER GOUZOUASIS

TOCCATA ON BECOMING ARTS BASED TEACHER RESEARCHERS

Trusting the Processes of Our Journey

Teaching matters. Above all else. And we must not let ourselves off the hook in regards to continually improving our teaching. The research base is clear: the most important factor that affects and improves student learning is quality teaching. (Wilhelm, 2009, p. 36)

Teacher inquiry has become increasingly important since the latter part of the 20th century. As such, this book is for teachers and about teachers. It involves stories of practice and the journeys that dedicated, creative practitioners undertook in their quest to become reflective-reflexive practitioners. It is a collection of stories about their dedication to continued learning, and moving beyond the typical, everyday practices of K-12 teachers through their discoveries of how creative, arts-informed pedagogy may be applied in a variety of teaching and learning contexts. Creative pedagogy was the artistic force that breathed life into our research projects. We nourished ourselves and shared our knowledge with the students we taught. We breathed creativity and life into curricula and unit designs. With those perspectives in consideration, the roles that teachers play in learning about how creativity informs praxis dramatically changes both the curricula we teach and our pedagogy. As we changed and evolved into creative practitioners, we lived both our learning and our inquiries. We breathed new ideas both in and out. We moved outside of the “black box” of creativity in teaching and learning—we played in, around, over, under, and with the box of creative instructional tools until the boundaries of the traditional boxes of teaching and learning evaporated. I recalled and laughed at the song of Malvina Reynolds, “Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes made of ticky tacky...” and we left the ideas of those cynical lyrics in the circular file cabinet that sits under our desks, never to be recycled.

Robert Fulford (1999) believes storytelling is “how we explain, how we teach, how we entertain ourselves, and how we often do all three at once. They are the juncture where facts and feelings meet. And for those reasons, they are central to civilization” (p. 9). For the group of talented teachers who have contributed to this book, it is also how we learned and conducted our inquiries. Jeff Park (2005) believes, “Writing is both an individual act and a social construction ... Writing in the expressive function is writing on the edge of self and the world” (p. 8). The stories we share in the present collection of research papers were collaborations, between me and the teachers, the teachers and their teacher peers, and the teachers and their students. Given that situational context, our research was more than what is typically considered as action research. Both traditional and “experimental”

forms of research (Sparkes, 2001) informed our inquiries. In place of traditional action research, we used the lens of artography (Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008; Irwin & deCosson, 2003). To extend our understandings of traditional forms of narrative research, we explored poetic representations, autoethnography, and autobiographical work in social science research, especially in arts based educational research (ABER).

... for teaching to assume the mantle of a profession a central tenet of that practice is the ability and willingness of its members to inquire into their own practice, into easy of improving and developing their practice consistent with the unique contexts in which they work and with an appreciation of current trends in education. (Clarke & Erickson, 2003, p. 3)

As a young teacher in the 1970s, I always wondered why so much of what teachers did in their classrooms was not valued as research by stolid academics that edited journals that now lie dormant and dusty in the bowels of university libraries. I believe we have arrived at a point in history where our professional understandings have matured to the extent that we can find overwhelming value in the systematic study teacher-learner experiences, and acknowledge that stories in the form of teacher inquiry is fecund, living research (Lewison, Seely Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). We revel in the notion that our inquiries are embodied in a professional approach to practice (Sachs, 1997), and in the use of “self” as a legitimate way of writing research (Etherington, 2004). That said, I do not believe that “heaven knows, anything goes” (with apologies to Cole Porter), to the extent that arts-based educational researchers have been accused of “navel gazing” and other related activities. Instead, what we trust you will read is that our stories are more rooted in “mindful gazing” and “star gazing.” We reached for the stars and made the seemingly impossible—dramatically changing our praxis by infusing it with research and creative instructional tactics, strategies and graphics organizers—possible.

With criticism from traditionalists in mind, when we begin to question why, how, how long, when, and what we do in the curriculum, as well as why, how, how long, when, and what we do (in)form pedagogical perspectives, we begin a regenerative journey for answers. That said, most meaningful research poses as many questions as answers, and most dedicated practitioners end their day with as many questions about how they taught and what the children learned as answers to what worked and did not work in their quest to improve teaching and learning. We look to theory and research to help guide our emerging perspectives. We take risks and live with tensions as we examine our teaching practice in a transparent, critical manner. Ideally, teacher inquiry is a dialectic—an endless cycle of reflection, inquiry, and action (i.e., reflexion). And reflexivity is not the final step in the teaching, learning, and research process. Rather it places the creative, teacher-learner in a position of trying and applying the inquiry process in both old and new contexts, then beginning the process of questioning one’s practice, inquiry, and actions anew. Kim Etherington, in her quest to understand how practitioners become researchers, believes that

“Reflexivity is a skill that we develop ... to notice our responses to the world around us, other people and events, and to use that knowledge to inform our actions, communications and understandings” (p. 19).

Becoming a reflective-reflexive practitioner involves an intense commitment to both teaching and learning—it is a lifelong endeavor and not one that merely ends because one believes that they *are* a “master teacher.” Becoming (Allport, 1955) is a never-ending process, and to *become* a master teacher means that we never truly attain the ultimate endpoint or final goal (i.e., there is no *telos*) of *being* a master teacher. Thus, by its very nature, the cyclical process of learning to become a reflective-reflexive practitioner never ends. We strive to constantly become better at our craft. Moreover, our human need to ask questions is unending. We possess the potential to always learn, and through our commitment to lifelong learning—working with children, learning with peers, keenly observing, tinkering, honing our craft—we may begin to design our personal, unique, research infused, creative approaches to teaching and learning. Even though much of the creative pedagogy we explored and applied in these inquiries seems to lead us to specific, particular outcomes, the uniqueness of each story is inevitable. “Each person is an idiom unto himself, an apparent violation of the syntax of the species” (Allport, p. 19). Those perspectives have implications for the kinds of theories, research methods, and teaching approaches that are required to understand creative pedagogy and the individualistic nature of both learning and teaching.

We are told that every stone in the field is unique, every old shoe in the closet, every bar of iron, but that this ubiquitous individuality does not affect the operations or the progress of science. The geologist, the physicist, the cobbler proceed to apply universal laws, and find the accident of uniqueness irrelevant to their work. The analogy is unconvincing. Stones, old shoes, bars of iron are purely reactive; they will not move unless they are manipulated. They are incapable of becoming. (Allport, p. 21)

When people ask if I play guitar (and I’ve been studying and performing music for 47 years) I always respond, “Yes, I’m a lifelong learner.” I will never stop learning—that is my commitment to myself as a dedicated educator and to teaching and learning with my students. That notion also aligns with Allport in that, “It is the unfinished structure that has this dynamic power. A finished structure is static; but a growing structure, tending toward a given direction of closure, has the capacity to subside and guide conduct in conformity with its movement” (p. 91). That perspective is enhanced with the acknowledgment of tension, between the individual and the collective, as well as between what is thought to be known and the unknown, as we imbue ourselves with the exploration and implementation of creative pedagogical approaches.

How, What, Why We Learned

“Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique,” wrote Palmer. “It comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.” (Thompson, 2009, p. 15)

That we learned in a professional community, made strong relationships with peers in our cohort and in our home schools, and learned our new craft in our schools working alongside our students (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 165) was a hallmark of this group of practitioners. Our classes usually met on Saturdays. We experimented and learned in the same ways that we planned to teach in our classrooms. Rather than rely on traditional, transmissive lecture and examination techniques, we discussed and unpacked our research and professional readings using all of the tactics, strategies, and graphics organizers that we used in our classrooms. We assessed our own learning using these same approaches. We made mistakes, we regrouped and reorganized, we redesigned our plans, and we practiced. We learned that the more teachers play with creative tactics, strategies, graphics organizers, visual journals, and variations of those constructs the more that learning (and teaching) transcends the commonplace and becomes a magical experience. Not only were we as teachers transformed, so were our classrooms and the students who walked alongside us.

All of the creative pedagogy we designed, explored, and applied led us to a place of rejuvenation and renewal. All of the teachers whose research is included in this book became leaders in curriculum and pedagogy and have been acknowledged as such by their peers and school administrators. Many have become administrators and curriculum leaders in their school districts. I believe that we went beyond becoming good technicians to *become pedagogical* in our practice and daily lives.

“Instructional Intelligence” as Creative, Arts-informed Pedagogy

I say that you make a great, a very great mistake, if you think that psychology, being the science of the mind's laws, as something from which you can deduce definite programs and schemes and methods of instruction for immediate schoolroom use. Psychology is a science, and teaching an art, and sciences never generate arts directly out of themselves. An intermediary inventive mind must make the application, by using its originality. (James, 1899, p. 2)

Instructional intelligence (Bennett & Rolheiser, 2001) is a creative endeavor from the perspective that these tactics, strategies, graphics organizers, visual journals and collaborative learning concepts are strongly influenced by arts-based teaching and learning constructs. “Intelligent instruction” and “intelligently designed instruction” are intelligent, per se, because they are informed by numerous sources—brain research, the arts, social sciences research, psychology, and best practice. In that manner, it takes us “Beyond Monet.”

Over the past 15 years, brain research has revolutionized the ways we understand human development and learning. In perhaps the most striking work, researchers have revealed that the study of music changes the neurobiology of the brain and enhances sensorimotor and cognitive capabilities in humans (Schlaug, Janke, Huang, Staiger, & Steinmetz, 1995; Hyde, Lerch, Norton, Forgeard, Winner Evans & Schlaug, 2009). It is but the tip of the iceberg of how social scientists will change the ways they think about outmoded, dualistic notions of nature and nurture

in human development (LaMonde, 2011). On a related note, to an arts educator, the ways we design learning environments (i.e., both the space and the lessons, units) and teach music, dance, drama, and visual art can profoundly change and influence the ways that teachers (re)present mathematics, language, social studies, and science (Sarason, 1999). Moreover, for Grade 11 students' music achievement predicts academic achievement in Grade 12 (Gouzouasis, Guhn, Kishor, 2007). We also know that the arts are meaning makers in their own right and that visual, kinesthetic and musical representations are powerful forms of human expression—artists and the arts in general possess the power to change not only the ways that we think and learn, but also the physiological structures of the brain itself (Wan & Schlaug, 2010).

To extend that notion, basic pedagogical principles from the arts have strongly influenced the ways that teachers sequence their teaching. For example, since 2000, I have taught adults and children to play with computers the ways that I teach guitar—we learn to *play* guitar and *play* computer. When one approaches a computer as a form of music instrument, a learning tool, one can borrow much from music pedagogical principles. Metaphorically speaking, learning a simple chord progression is not unlike learning a simple progression of steps to record a voiceover for a movie clip. Rarely do two people learn to play an instrument the same way and with the same learning outcomes. Learning to create a digital movie is not a “click here, now move the mouse here, now drag this object and drop it here” step-by-step, group process. Learners frequently move at their own pace, discovering short cuts, making mistakes, and creating their own unique expressions. Discoveries are shared with learning partners or small groups and reapplied in either similar ways or in unique variations.

The ways that I teach everything are influenced by the ways that I teach and learn through music and movement. Play and imagination are the foundation of creativity (Singer & Singer, 1990). Since creativity may be considered as encompassing both divergent and convergent thinking, practitioners who play with and implement creative, arts informed tactics, strategies, graphics organizers, and visual journals enable all forms of creative thinking, across the curriculum, for both themselves and the learners.

The arts are a matter of the heart. Science is thought to provide the most direct route to knowledge. Hence, “aesthetic modes of knowing” is a phrase that contradicts the conception of knowledge that is most widely accepted. (Eisner, 1982, pp. 23–24)

From yet another related perspective, teachers need to be as accomplished as performers as are successful artists. The more a teacher is aware of the inherent creativity of the arts and artistic pedagogy, the more they can harness and transform their practice. Through the ongoing development of an artographical (Gouzouasis, 2008) practice, the teachers who have contributed to this book were challenged to think like artists, and to embrace their artistic selves not only in ongoing coursework, but also in the ways that they approached their classroom inquiries. For some teachers, the challenges created tensions between what they

initially believed constituted research and what they learned, as well as between their personal notions of self as science or mathematics teachers and ideas rooted in the science of teaching.

While science is thought to provide the most accurate and direct route to knowledge, the arts are devalued and submerged as mostly a matter of the heart. Thus, “aesthetic modes of knowing,” as well as artistic ways of seeking, knowing and doing contradict commonly accepted notions of knowledge acquisition (Eisner, 1982, pp. 23–24).

Some may consider that there is a scientific aspect of pedagogy, but for me, pedagogy is the *art* of teaching and learning, and as an extension of that notion, teaching may be considered a performing art (Sarason, 1999). I *perform* when I’m teaching. Whether it is music, research methods, the psychology of music, or instructional intelligence constructs, I consider it all under the umbrella of creative pedagogy. The ways that I teach everything are influenced by the ways that I teach and learn through music, movement and music and movement activities. As William James once said, “The art of teaching grew up in the schoolroom, out of inventiveness and sympathetic concrete observation” (p. 3). Metaphorically thinking, the art of teacher inquiry is rooted in the classroom and as such is imbued with the inventiveness and creativity of teachers and students.

My junior high school classroom methods professor once asked our class what we believed to be the most important aspects of teaching. I blurted out, “Playing with the kids, having fun learning, performing!” and she thoughtfully paused before responding, “No.” I was puzzled and silenced. The conversation went on to emphasize knowing the curriculum and other factors that I likely tuned out after my idea was rejected. While I placed my beliefs in the back of my mind, it haunted me throughout my teaching career. Sarason’s brilliant book (1999) confirmed and reinvigorated my ideas, and influenced not only my leadership in and the creation of the Fine Arts and new Media in Education cohort (FAME; The University of British Columbia, 2000–2010) but also the Curriculum Leadership Instructional Intelligence masters program cohorts (2005–2010) from which this research is born.

The state of mind which enables our actions to promote growth and generate awareness is so bound up with the flux of the moment that it is hard to analyze. The bond between the teacher and the taught, and the dancer and the dance, is at once intimate and tenuous, ever changing, ever bonding, and always new. (Morningstar, 1986)

Codetta

The title of this book refers to *pedagogy in a new tonality*. Tonality is defined by the organization of pitches in a scale. Traditionally speaking, most Western music is written in diatonic tonality, and a diatonic scale is made up of 7 pitches separated by half steps and whole steps. If one imagines a piano keyboard, when

one plays from the note C, and ascends seven steps on the keyboard to C', the space between the pitches are whole-whole-half-whole-whole-half. That relationship between pitches creates the sound of what we call major tonality. Regardless of the key signature, all major keys have the same arrangement of pitches. Major tonality is overwhelmingly used to compose popular music and folk songs in the West. Depending upon one's vocal range, one can sing any song in 12 different keys; a singer can change the key (i.e., starting pitch) of a song, but it still sounds like the same song. However, there are 6 other diatonic tonalities—dorian, phrygian, lydian, mixolydian, aeolian (natural minor), and locrian that can be played across 12 key areas (e.g., A natural minor, D natural minor, G natural minor, etc.). When the composer Gustav Mahler drew upon the French folksong “Frère Jacques” (“Bruder Martin” in German) as the theme of the third movement in his *Symphony #1 in D major*, he changed the tonality of the song from major to aeolian (i.e., D natural minor). Unless one listens very carefully, one would never notice that the theme is a transposition of a traditional folksong from major to minor tonality. That seemingly simple shift in tonality—also referred to as mode—changes the character, mood, and feeling of the theme, as Mahler's extra-musical, loosely based dramatic idea is that of a procession in a hunter's funeral.

In jazz, all tonalities—and the scales that emanate from those tonalities—have specific, interesting functions and complex applications. By the mid-1950s, jazz musicians were experimenting with the implementation of different tonalities in composition and improvisation (e.g., Lenny Tristano in New York City, Dennis Sandole in Philadelphia, and other early innovators that they influenced). By the early 1960s, “modal music” (i.e., music composed in dorian, phrygian, lydian, mixolydian, aeolian, and locrian tonality) dominated the music soundscape (see Miles Davis's Quintet and subsequent groups that were formed by members of Miles' band).

There are at least two reasons why this book is a tonal, and not merely a “keyal,” shift from tradition (with all due respect to Suzanne Langer's notion of a “philosophy in a new key”). First, the research inquiries that are storied in this book exemplify a radical shift away from descriptions of traditional, transmissive approaches used to teach in the K-12 classroom. The authors embraced change and challenged themselves in their own learning, in their teaching, and in their student's learning. Metaphorically speaking, they did not simply sing the same songs in different keys. Secondly, because we used non-traditional, “experimental” modes of conducting research, I believe we have composed our inquiries using alternative—dorian, phrygian, lydian, mixolydian, aeolian, and locrian—tonalities.

This book is not finished, in the sense that I am now working and learning with my third group of dynamic, creative teachers in our pursuit of changing our praxis. Our journey is truly ongoing and defined by trusting the process (McNiff, 1998), imagining transformation, embracing change, designing creative teaching and learning, inventing new variations of instructional tactics, strategies and graphics organizers, designing new applications, and improving learning. We are already playing with creative classroom tactics, strategies, and graphics organizers in a variety of keys and tonalities. This book is for my colleagues in the classroom and

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many other teachers who will follow us in the quest to not only improve their practice, but radically transform it—to free themselves from the stifling boxes of traditionalism and emerge as teachers who revel in the ongoing quest of becoming creative, reflective, reflexive, artistresearcherteachers (Gouzouasis, 2008).

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PART 1

STORIES OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND CLASSROOM CONFLICT

MARGARET PAXTON

THE HEART OF TEACHING

A pedagogy of community in the classroom

Prelude

The concise Oxford English dictionary offers this definition of the word, community, which come from Latin *communis*, or ‘common’: a group of interdependent plants or animals growing or living together or occupying a specified habitat. I like this biological perspective on community as a way of describing a classroom environment, for a classroom *is and should be* a place where a group of interdependent people are *growing* and *living* together. I wonder how teachers can enable students to be part of this kind of community, to become interdependent and place pure self-interest aside at times, for the greater good of the group. Is teaching just a form of manipulation? What motivates some children to want to learn more than others? Is teaching just means of indoctrination? Why do we seem to value compliance more than nonconformity and individualism? These are some of the big questions that I wrestle with as I near the end of my second decade of teaching. These are the questions that intrigued me the most when searching for an appropriate line of inquiry for my research project. I believe that it is possible to build a community within a classroom. I believe we can create learning environments in which students and teachers are truly interdependent, in which the motivation for the group to succeed is as strong as the interest in individual successes.

Setting the Story

SEPTEMBER 12TH

Today the students wrote letters to me to introduce themselves. I liked the last line of Luke’s letter.

Dear Mrs. Paxton,

Hi my name is Luke. I like to play hockey and skate board. I have two dogs and three cats. My two dog’s names are Jinger and Triesie. My three cats names are Mocha, Daisy and DJ. I have 2 sisters and 1 brother. My two sisters’ names are Coral and Dirdre. My brother’s name is Sean. This letter is almost about my life.

Your student, Luke

As a teacher of twelve and thirteen year olds, I am always looking for ways to work smarter, not harder. Early in my career, I would leave school at the end of the day exhausted, dragging my marking bag to the car, dreading a long night of ticking and x-ing papers and projects. As well, too much of my energy was being spent managing my students, trying to control their behaviour, so that I could “teach.” On occasion, I caught glimpses of a different way of practicing teaching and learning. I saw that there were fragments of time in the school day when there was a hum of learning and active engagement in the room, when we were all working together on something that really mattered to everyone. It was what Csikszentmihalyi describes as a state of flow: “joy, creativity, the process of total involvement with life” (1990, xi). In recognizing the potential of flow in the classroom, I began to seek ways of creating more of it, but I also realized I would need to change my patterns of teaching. I would need to find ways to inspire students to work together with a common goal, and to learn to satisfy their own natural curiosities. My enthusiasm was buoyed in a summer institute with the North Vancouver School District. In their text, Bennett & Rohlheiser (2001) state, “Teachers are involved in one of the most complex, demanding and important professions in the world – a profession where changes emerge in the blink of an eye ... To respond to the ever-increasing demands and complexity, teachers must be aware of and act on the science within the art of teaching – a challenging task” (p. 3).

Through the integration of an art and science of teaching, I believe one finds the essential, creative, *heart of teaching*. Bennett & Rolheiser (2001) describe the absolute necessity of creativity. “There is no guarantee,” they argue, “that a teacher who is knowledgeable, has an extensive repertoire of instructional practices, and is kind and caring will necessarily be an effective teacher” (p. 5). It is the ability to be imaginative, to be spontaneous, and to teach intuitively, that characterizes an effective, creative teacher. Throughout my graduate courses, as I read and listened, and read and listened again, I realized that many educators shared my desire to teach with a sense of flow—with a sense of creativity.

From Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1972) I learned that with creative teaching, “the drive is no longer the teacher’s but the children’s own ... the teacher is at last with the stream and not against it: the stream of children’s inexorable creativeness” (p. 82). I liked everything about Ashton-Warner’s description of teaching “organically.” She wrote about “the preservation of the inner resources, the exercise of the inner eye, the protraction of the true personality” (p. 87). I, like Ashton-Warner, appreciate “unpredictability and variation; I like drama and I like gaiety; I like peace in the world and I like interesting people, and all this means that I like life in its organic shape and that’s just what you get in an infant room where the creative vent widens” (p. 87).

I craved a more creative practice, but also a more cooperative one, in which students did not merely “work in groups,” but worked collaboratively. From Johnson & Johnson (2004) I learned that since 1896, over six hundred studies have been conducted on cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning, with the results indicating that achievement, quality of relationships, and

psychological health all show gains when cooperative learning is taught and positive interdependence created. They believe that “humans are small group beings” and that “the social competencies necessary for interacting effectively with others are central to quality of family life, educational achievement, career success, psychological health, and creating a meaningful and fulfilling life” (p. 40). Johnson & Johnson argue that cooperative community, constructive conflict resolution, and civic values are three essential conditions for social and emotional learning (p. 41). My own experiences taught me that when these conditions are in place, at least to some degree, the practice of teaching is less of a Sisyphean struggle, for we are all engaged in pushing the rock up the mountain together.

Once community is established in a classroom, a remaining feat to accomplish is delivery of the curriculum. What time is left for learning about the Ancient Greeks, exponents, and quotation marks, when we are simply trying our best to get along? Wrigley (2003) proposes pedagogy of hope, in which, “curriculum is reshaped, remade, reborn, recoded in what we do with kids in classrooms” (p. 92). He speaks of the importance of meta-learning, or learning how to learn, as superceding the prescribed curriculum. That fits with my desire to empower students, to give them the confidence that they can learn what they need to learn, when they need to learn it, just as a castaway learns what he needs to learn to survive.

I taught my students that their survival depends on the satisfaction of basic human needs. Some of these are physical needs: food, water, protection from danger, and so on. But there are also psychological needs: freedom, fun, power, and most of all, belonging (Glasser, 1984; Bodine, Crawford & Schrupf, 1994). Teaching students about these four needs enables them to think about their behaviour in a new way. They learn that they are always working toward satisfying these needs in either positive or negative ways. They learn that in order for us all to survive and thrive together, the needs of others must also be considered as well as their own.

The aforementioned authors inspired my new hope for a creating a classroom environment in which the members of the community (including me) worked together, learning how to learn. I decided to document the process of building community in a classroom. Having been assigned to a new school, with a fresh sea of faces, it was the perfect opportunity to put into practice the many strategies, tactics, rituals and belief structures that I had been practicing in a more piecemeal fashion over the past few years.

The Research Project

OCTOBER 3RD

Today we discussed the advantages of sitting in groups, or “pods,” as opposed to sitting in rows. Students said it is quieter in rows, but not as much fun. I think back to what my Tribes trainer said, “If the amygdala is happy, kids will learn.”

The present research project began on the first day of school and ended in the early Spring. My elementary school is in the northern end of Squamish, in a working-class neighborhood. Most families own homes or townhouses. The population is more stable than transient. Ten per cent of our population is Aboriginal. My class consisted of 28 students, evenly divided between Grade 6 and 7, with 17 boys and 11 girls. Four of my students had severe learning disabilities and behaviour difficulties. One student suffered with an undiagnosed mental illness, suspected to be bi-polar disorder. Eight of the students lived with one parent. Reading assessments indicated that 20 of the students were reading at grade level, while eight struggled with fluency and comprehension. No students received support for E.S.L., although two spoke another language at home. I was clear that this group was not without its challenges. However, my first impression was that this was a class with great potential, for they smiled at my attempts at humor and appeared to be interested in what I had to tell them.

In conducting my research, I collected evidence about my teaching practice and my student's learning through observations (recorded in a journal), informal discussions with students in large and small groups, and with reflective "exit slips" upon which students wrote their thoughts or feelings about a particular activity. Every two weeks, I took time to sit and write a reflection, focusing each time on one particular aspect of my practice. I also referred back to letters that my students wrote to me on the first day of class, in the first hour we met, in which they told me a bit about themselves and their hopes for the year. As I got to know the students better, I found it very interesting to return to these letters, as I could view them with a keener, more informed eye.

I spent a number of hours each week searching for and reading other authors' words on the topics of community building, cooperative learning, multiple intelligence theory, differentiated instruction, and autoethnography as a qualitative research method. For my everyday teaching, I relied heavily on two resources: *Tribes* (Gibbs, 1995) and *Beyond Monet* (Bennett & Rolheiser, 2001). I was also very interested in the use of storytelling as an educational tactic (Egan, 1986, 2005).

I returned again and again to the following three questions: (1) Which strategies, tactics, and activities help to build inclusion and improve students' feelings of safety in the classroom? (2) How can I effectively model compassion and cooperation in my teaching? (3) What are some of the stumbling blocks to building community I will encounter, and what can I do to overcome them? My hope was to complete a project which would help me to solidify the thinking/feeling, or intuitive parts of my practice with clarity of purpose and direction for myself as an ever-learning professional, but also an authentic research document which might be of interest to other teachers.

Using an autoethnographical approach, I recorded my observations of the students' participation in activities that encouraged them to practice cooperation, attentive listening, and mutual respect. I reflected upon my own participation in these activities, as well as how my praxis evolved throughout the year. I chose an autoethnographical approach for a number of reasons. I knew that I would struggle

with the feelings of self-indulgence and fear of narcissism. Indeed, this is a criticism on the research methodology that Holt (2003) describes. He states that the two challenges researchers must overcome to justify the method are (1) representation and (2) legitimation. The researcher must be seen to be representing the social world accurately and truthfully—which is difficult for others to verify—and at the same time, interpret the data in a manner that ensures validity, reliability, and objectivity.

When we are conducting research on children in classrooms, it seems only fair to acknowledge that classrooms are very messy places indeed. How can one possibly measure a child's creativity, imagination, or resiliency? What is an accurate rating scale we could use for friendliness, tolerance, or trust? Surely, it is the practice of reflection that allows one to determine what words, actions, tactics, and strategies have had an impact upon students' learning. In *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, Dufour & Eaker (1998) quote the philosopher, Kierkegaard, "Life must be lived forward, but it can only be understood backward" (p. xv).

In using an autoethnographical approach to my inquiry, I hoped to document the process of community building in my classroom in a rigorous, honest, and authentic way. It is a way of taking full control and responsibility for what occurs in class, and to reclaim, as Tierney (1998) puts it, "through self-reflective practice, representational spaces that have marginalized those of us at the borders" (p. 66). Instead of placing myself as a researcher standing outside the classroom looking in, autoethnography allowed me to be a participant, in the midst of the sometimes chaotic, often messy place we call school, and allowed me to tell the story of the process from a participant's point of view.

Stories, however, are easiest to tell and understand when told within a framework. In school, we call it "story structure," and we have students map it, chart it, and describe it sequentially. In this project, I also sought a structure that would make the story more meaningful and accessible to readers. In *Discovering gifts in middle school: Learning in a caring culture called Tribes* (2001), Jeanne Gibbs cites the work of John McKnight (1992), who describes five indicators of community: Capacity, Collective Effort, Informality, Stories, and Celebration. These are the headings I employ to organize my narratives of teaching.

Capacity

NOVEMBER 4TH

We began a new class tradition today – taking turns giving and receiving compliments. I thought the kids would hate it – think it cheesy. But they really rose to the occasion and gave each other sincere and thoughtful comments. I keep reminding myself – I need to provide frequent and authentic opportunities for the students to practice these interpersonal skills.

In my discussions with other administrators, we speak often about building capacity in our teachers. In planning professional development opportunities and staff development days, we attempt to assess the needs of teachers and provide

in-service activities that will help to strengthen and enhance their skills and knowledge. In the classroom, how often do we take inventories of the variety of strengths, weaknesses, aptitudes, gifts of our students? One of the first activities I did with my class was, "This Is My Bag." I thought that if I encouraged students to think individually about their own capacity, that they might find some commonalities, the beginning of community.

"My name is Mrs. Paxton and this is my bag." Out of my bag I pulled, one by one, a number of treasures: a photo of my children and our dog, a running trophy, a seashell from Tofino, a stuffed rabbit, and a favourite book. As I removed each item from my bag, I explained its significance and how it represented a part of me. I asked the students to bring in bags of their own over the next few weeks and most were very excited about doing so. They liked the ritual of beginning with, "My name is ... and this is my bag," and ending with, "My name is ... and *that* was my bag." The audience politely and spontaneously applauded after each presentation. Presenters were very trusting in passing around their stuffed animals, video games, trinkets and treasures; every item was handled with respect. After every "This is my bag" presentation, I asked the class, "What did we learn about your classmate that we did not know before?" Two students, too shy to speak in front of the class, presented privately to me at lunchtime. The Korean children were adamant that they had brought nothing to Canada worth sharing. One girl just kept "forgetting" her bag. It was hard for me to imagine being so reluctant to reveal a bit of oneself to others, but I told them that I hoped they would reconsider, and bring in their bags sometime during the school year.

Another activity helpful to inventory the notion of capacity was the Life Map. On a large piece of paper, students "mapped" their own lives, recalling important events and many "firsts" such as "the first time I rode a bike," "my first day at school," and "my first ski trip." They added colour and photographs, and pictures cut from magazines. During the times that they spent creating their life maps, they were fully engaged and happy. They talked quietly to each other. They giggled and shared. They complained when I told them it was time to stop for lunch. In the sharing that came later, students were amazed at the similarities and differences they found between each other. It was as though some had never imagined that their peers had lives, families, and experiences similar and different from their own. Whenever we formed new groups, before any learning task or activity took place students got out their life maps and shared with their new learning partners. This seemed to be a necessary ritual to set a tone of mutual understanding for the new group.

In attempting to recognize the capacities of individuals and groups, I have also used the multiple intelligence inventory from the Tribes (TLC) middle school resource. Students completed the scoring of their own multiple intelligence checklists, and we discussed the eight different strengths that all people each possess in varying degrees. One student observed that musical intelligence was his "weakest strength." I like this oxymoronic phrase, "weakest strength," for it implies that there is still hope. After discussing our strengths, I gave each student an apple, farm fresh, some with a leaf on the stem. I told them that they were to

study their apple intently and memorize its features so that, later, they might be able to pick it out of a pile of apples. They could not mark their apple in any way. After several minutes of intense study, they brought their apples to the window ledge and lined them up. I mixed them up like a magician with cups and balls. I then gave groups of four large pieces of paper and asked them to complete a Venn diagram explaining how apples and people are alike and different. Their ideas were very creative. They came up with many similarities and differences that I had not anticipated, beyond, “We both have skin and flesh, but apples grow on trees.” They said things like, “We are both vulnerable to disease and predators,” and “We both reproduce with seeds!” In collating their ideas, it struck me that this had been a great opportunity for all of us to practice creative thinking, and what fun it was for us all.

I thanked them for their participation and then took my own apple and cut it crossways through the middle. “Wow!” some exclaimed who had never seen the star shape inside. I said, “This star is like the brilliance in each of you, and the seeds you find within the star represent your potential.” I thought a few eyes might roll with that statement, but they looked at me evenly. “And,” I continued, “you might be able to count the number of apples that fall from a tree each year, but who can count the number of trees that come from a single apple seed?” With that, I gave them an exit slip to be completed before lunch. They were to write a one-sentence reflection on the morning’s activities. Then they got to find their apple and eat it with their lunch. Some students wrote, “That was cool,” and “I liked it,” but the words that made me smile were Luke’s, a very cool seventh grader. He wrote, “Mrs. Paxton uses very unusual teaching methods.” I was pleased, because he had not dismissed me, or my teaching methods, but compared them to what he was used to, without judgment. Coming from him, it was a fine compliment.

Collective Effort

DECEMBER 22ND

Today was our last performance of the play. I asked students to fill in a reflection sheet. Sammy wrote, “Before the play I thought I could never remember my lines. But now I think it’s a piece of cake.” Way to go, Sammy!

I found that my students are greatly motivated and enjoy learning activities in which we had a common goal. I have taught them some games that do not require much skill or fitness, but strategy and thinking, such as Group Rock, Paper, Scissors and Line Tag. The key to these games is that everyone must cooperate and communicate for the game to progress. They must work together, or it is not fun for anyone.

Another means by which to practice collective effort is with a whole class play. For years, my classes have been performing abbreviated versions of Shakespeare’s plays. We invite other classes to come and watch the performances. I have been told that the plays are now something that younger students look forward to doing

when they get to my grade seven class. This year, I decided to write a play based on C.S. Lewis' (1994) the *Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. I was not sure if this particular class was ready for Shakespeare, and I wanted to give them practice working together on a story with which they were already familiar.

We cast the play as a group. Students were invited to "audition" for several parts and we quickly reached consensus as to who would play what role. Those who possessed stronger reading skills and more confidence in public speaking generally won the larger roles, such as Lucy, Peter, Edmund, and Lucy. Other strong readers, who did not wish to act, took the parts of the three narrators. Several students, with weaker reading skills, but more dramatic flair than others, were enthusiastic about their roles as Aslan, the White Witch, Father Christmas, and the Beavers. My quiet and shy boys decided to be the heroic mice that free Aslan from the ropes that bind him on the Stone Table. My most challenging student, Leslie, who struggles with bi-polar disorder, took on the role of Maugrim, the Wolf, as she loves to growl. Once the play was cast, the rehearsals began in earnest. During rehearsals, everyone read along. I insisted on this, because inevitably, someone cannot make a performance, and it is often a shy and quiet student who raises his hand to say, "I can play that part, Mrs. Paxton. I know it by heart."

The atmosphere in the classroom during rehearsals was intense. There was an urgency felt as students began to memorize their lines and movements. There was a spirit of teamwork as they coached and prompted each other. There was shared laughter at the funny mistakes and the "over acting" of some of the players. There was mutual joy when at last we were in our costumes and ready to perform. Student attendance was almost perfect during these weeks leading up to and including the performances, for they sensed the importance of everyone's presence and participation. We felt deep and collective pride when the performances were finished and the audience's applause rang in our ears.

I have many times experienced surprising outcomes of our dramatic productions: the revelation of a child's gift in acting, or in designing sets, that would otherwise lie undiscovered; the ability of one student to mentor another while keeping their dignity intact; the spontaneous gratitude children express for being allowed to learn this way. I do not feel I can adequately describe the importance of this collective effort in helping to build community in the classroom. The process of preparing a play for performance, allows students to work creatively and to use their kinesthetic, artistic, intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences. I realize, now, that there are many more ways to allow students to "work" in this way, in a state of flow. It need not be a play—perhaps a fundraising campaign for charity, the creation of a mural or giant sculpture, or a "political" campaign to persuade some authority to action. What excellent rehearsal for real life.

Informality

FEBRUARY 28TH

The class loves it when we have discussions that take us in many different directions, and that, in their minds, distract me from the work that needs to be

done! Today, the students got talking about wars, all kinds of wars. They don't know much about any of them, but are fascinated by the subject. After a lengthy discussion, Jazmin said, "Today I learned that people fight about the dumbest things." How true.

Gibbs describes the state of informality as existing when "transactions of value are based on consideration; care and affection take place spontaneously" (p. 82). Among teachers, I believe, there is often a fear that informality will lead to chaos. I also feel that fear, especially when I am attempting to relinquish some control that I have traditionally held to the students. I sometimes fear that if they're left to their own devices, my students' choices will not be appropriate, and their decisions may not be inclusive and kind. However, I have found that when given some structures, guidelines, and boundaries they inevitably solve problems in sound and creative ways.

There are several ways of creating these structures. The first is with the Four Agreements (Gibbs, 1995). When I meet my new students in September I always feel nervous. I hope to make a good first impression so that they will go home to tell their parents that they are glad to be in my class. I have learned that I can calm my own fears at the beginning of the school year by trusting myself. I trust myself to make this place safe for each one. I know that I do not have to rule through inciting fear. I do not have to control with threats and power struggles. I can be *myself*, and as I lead, they will follow. If they do not choose to follow, I can only be patient and hope that they find their way on the trail I have set. Still, I think that those first few hours together can make all the difference in the world. A teacher can either set herself up for success or for endless struggles in her initial choice of words and actions. The students want to know what the year has in store for them, what to anticipate, and what they might have to steel themselves to endure.

This year I told my new students something that amazed and delighted them. I said, "In our classroom, there are no rules and I give no detentions." There was a ripple of giggles and whispers. "But!" I continued, "I *do* invite you to agree with me, that we will treat each other, our selves, and our belongings with respect. Any "rules" that we could ever make will be covered by that agreement." There were nods of understanding. This is what I love about grade sixes and sevens: one does not have to explain every little thing. "Also," I continued, "we will learn about the other three agreements: Listening Attentively, The Right to Participate and Pass, and Appreciation/No Put Downs. All of these agreements fall into the bigger one of Respect, don't you agree?" More nods. "And as for detentions," I said, "if you need extra help with math or reading, I will be here after school to give you that help. If you need extra help with time management, because you do not get your homework done, I will be here after school to help you. And if you need extra help to learn to manage your behavior, I will also be here after school. So I may ask you sometimes, to stay after school, not as a punishment, but to get the extra help you need." I said all of this with a big, benevolent smile, and they love it, because they know exactly what I mean.

On our first day together, I was keen to begin building inclusion. I wanted to begin with the Name Wave, so I had the students to push some of the desks aside and stand

in a circle. I explained that the Name Wave was a way for us to get to know each other's names. It began with me saying "Mrs. Paxton" and performing a gesture, a circling of clasped hands in front of me. I asked the student to think of a gesture to go with their names, and one by one, they were to say their names, perform the gesture, and the other students were to echo it, one by one, around the circle. Although everyone was cooperative, it did not go as well as I had hoped it would. The students were still too self-conscious, they got antsy waiting for their turn, there were so many of them, and it took too long. A few took me up on my offer to pass and so their names were not circulated. When we did this activity in Edmonton with twenty-five teachers, it felt like a big hug as others repeated my name and gesture around the circle. Here, it felt awkward and uncomfortable. I realized that many of the inclusion-builders I hoped to use would have to wait until there was more safety and trust in the room. The students were not all happy to be there and eager to learn. Many were fearful, anxious, embarrassed, and reluctant to be part of the group. I resolved to move more slowly and carefully in the days ahead.

A much more successful activity was the creation of personal shields. We brainstormed adjectives that described the people we admire. Words like brave, athletic, smart, determined, funny, friendly, trustworthy, and honest filled the chalkboard. I showed the students samples of family shields, with mottos and symbols that represented the family's values. I instructed the students to choose two or three of these positive adjectives to describe themselves and gave them an outline of a paper shield. I asked them to make their names and the words they had chosen big and bold, and to then add pictures or symbols of things they liked. Everyone was very keen to begin and fully engaged. It was only a day or two before they were all complete, cut out and ready for display.

I mounted the shields on the bulleting board in the classroom, including mine. When the parents came to "Meet the Teacher" they eagerly sought out their child's shield. Some laughed and some marveled. One mother sighed. Her son's shield was illustrated with little fighting guys with swords and robots and spacemen. She said, "He does that to cover up who he really is and the fact that he is all about bunnies and love. He thinks he has to draw these things to be cool and fit in. When he brought it home to work on I said, 'Oh dear, Daniel, they are going to send you to the counselor's office.'" I tried to reassure her that what he was doing was normal, developmentally speaking. She expressed her fears for him, but also her hopes. She said that he was very happy in my class and that he was, for a change, happy to come to school. She said, "Did you notice how he signed his name on those paper pencils in the foyer?" I had not. Our librarian had given each class a large paper "pencil" already labeled with the teacher's name, and asked us to have the students sign it. She then made a display of the pencils in the front hallway, with the words, "Brackendale Elementary School, Home of the Sharpest Students!" Later that evening, on my way out, I looked at our pencil. Daniel's name was printed as small as could be, tucked inside the capital M of Mrs. Paxton. It gave me goose bumps, both then and even now, as I reflect upon that moment.

Transactions of value are the risky exchanges of thoughts and ideas and feelings. We express ourselves with the hope that we will be heard, will be taken

seriously, will be accepted and will be valued. Part of the art of creating Informality is in allowing students' voices to be heard and acknowledged frequently. I tried to establish some rituals that allow this to happen in a non-threatening way. Every day we took part in a "community circle" in which everyone was invited to speak in turn. Sometimes it was simply a word, sometimes it was a sentence, other times, an anecdote. Of course, students had the right to pass. It was hard, as a teacher, to resist the urge to say, "Come on, now! Everyone *has* to participate!" I had to give up that power, and be patient with those who chose to pass. Sometimes they simply needed more time, and after everyone else had had their say, they were composed and ready.

To further encourage learning conversations, I began the year with learning partners. Pairs of students sat with their desks touching, in two rows of five pairs and one row of four. During lessons, I frequently posed an open-ended question, then said, "Turn to your learning partner and tell him or her what you think." This allowed some rehearsal and preparation for answering the question. I found that more students were willing to raise their hands and provide an answer or idea when they had had time and opportunity to practice. Think/Pair/Share is one of the simplest, yet effective strategies to promote student engagement and learning (Bennett & Rolheiser, 2001). Still, some partners wore each other out. Boys were reluctant to sit with girls, and vice versa. No one wanted to sit with Lindsey, as her tantrums and hypersensitivity were tiresome.

On the first of November, I asked the students if they would like to continue sitting in pairs, and many replied that they would like to try groups of four—just what I was hoping. I wrote their names on popsicle sticks and we formed groups by drawing sticks. This strategy was their choice, arrived at after lengthy debate and discussion around the pros and cons of teacher-created versus student created, versus randomly formed groups. I was very proud of them for coming to that decision, but they may not have done so if I had not given them some structure. I said that whatever means they chose had to be fair and ensure that no one's feelings could be hurt by exclusion. Care for others' feelings was the deciding factor. After going through this process, I was amazed to see my adamant grade six boys, who said that they could never, ever work with grade seven girls, were now sitting in their groups—a mix of grade sixes and sevens and boys and girls, resigned to do their best because they owned the class's decision, having had a voice, a "say," in the process.

When observing students working in these groups, I noticed many examples of "care and affection" that I know would not have occurred had the students sat in rows. For example, Carys helped Lindsey with her multiplication, pre-empting the usual explosion of frustration. James, a grade six boy, helped Donna, a girl in grade seven, to find the circumference of a circle, allowing me to help other students in need. Meagan helped Henry, from Korea, with his spelling. She did this spontaneously, without any prompting from me. I was in awe of my students' common acts of generosity and kindness. Schaps, Battistich & Solomon (2004) reviewed many studies before concluding that students need "frequent opportunities to help and collaborate with others" (p. 190). This is one of the four

key components they regard as essential in a caring community of learners, along with respectful, supportive relationships among students, teachers and parents; frequent opportunities for autonomy and influence; and emphasis on common purposes and ideals.

Stories

MARCH 5TH

I love reading stories to them more than anything. I love when they cry out, “Read us another one! Read us another one!” Reading and listening together makes the words seem animate and important. When we finished our whole class novel study, they mourned. They did not want the story to be over. The act of sharing literature aloud so that even the struggling readers are part of the experience is like sitting at a banquet together and feasting!

More than anything, my students loved stories, both from fiction and “real life.” Shared stories seemed to satisfy some deep need, some raw hunger in their bellies. When we had a few minutes before recess or lunchtime, they begged for a story. Sometimes I read to them from my ancient, battered book of Grimm’s *Fairy Tales*. They loved the gory ones best. They delighted in hearing how the one of Cinderella’s wicked step sisters cut off her toes, and the other her heel, in order to try to win the prince, and how the witch in Hansel and Gretel was pushed into the oven and “burned to ashes and bone.”

The students also loved picture books, and there are so many that are appropriate for intermediate students. They were moved to tears by *The Faithful Elephants* (1988), filled with moral outrage by *Rose Blanche* (2001), and *Teammates* (1990), delighted by the possibilities of *Westlandia* (1999), and provoked into thoughtfulness by *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* (1984). Sharing stories aloud helped me to both activate my students’ imaginations, provide topics for class discussions, and model what good readers do: visualize, predict, ask questions, draw inferences, and so on.

I have found that stories are the best means by which to gather and hold their collective attention, even if it a simple anecdote about me and my daughter getting ready for school. We shared stories constantly, throughout the day. During social studies, I told them how I once mummified a chicken and how it mysteriously disappeared, leading to legend of “The Curse of Tutanchicken.” In science class, I told the story of Galileo, who was persecuted for his new scientific theories. Cries of “That would never happen today!” were countered by, “Or would it?”

In *An imaginative approach to teaching* (2005), Kieran Egan continues his discussion of teaching as story telling. He writes, “The great power of stories, then, is that they perform two tasks at the same time. They are, first, very effective at communicating information in memorable form, and, second, they can orient the hearers’ feelings about the information being communicated” (p. 10). A statement Egan makes near the end of his book conveys even more distinctly the need for storytelling in a classroom community. In explaining how successful teachers hook

their students into content through storytelling, he concludes, “Teachers who do find that emotional engagement typically find themselves energized rather than drained by the end of the day. And their classes have more children who are themselves imaginatively engaged, and that in turn energizes the teachers further” (p. 215).

Gibbs describes stories as “reflection upon individual and community experiences (that) provide knowledge about truth, relationships, and future direction” (p. 82). More than anything, the act of sharing of stories helps to build community because it requires all of the behaviours that enable people to function in a community: attentive listening, taking turns, practicing restraint, participating, respecting others ideas and opinions, and most importantly for school: making meaning.

Celebration

APRIL 12TH

Aaron never gets more than ten or twelve words out of twenty-five correct on a spelling quiz. I always say, “Never mind.” I tell him that being able to spell well is not a sign of intelligence. Something got into him this week. He must have studied like the dickens. He got twenty-three words correct. Even though it was not a perfect score, everyone recognized his accomplishment. Andy, my severely learning disabled student, was the first to stand and lead a spontaneous ovation. We all stood and applauded, until Aaron was red in the face, but so pleased with himself.

The fifth indicator of success is Celebration. In functional communities, people socialize, and in doing so, “the line between work and play is blurred and the human nature of everyday life becomes part of the way of work” (McKnight, p. 90). Celebration, I have learned, is not merely about parties. I think it is more about reflection, and can happen many times a day. It is a ritual acknowledgement of something important that has taken place. In the course of conducting my research, I have found a number of ways to celebrate student learning in the classroom.

This year, I began each morning in a new way. As I opened my classroom door, and the students filed in, I attempted to make eye contact with each one, say “Good morning” and their name. Most made eye contact with me and returned the greeting. I was afraid that my Korean students thought this making of eye contact is inappropriate, and so I did not insist on it with them. Some of my shy students tried to sneak past without participating in the greeting. Sometimes I let them go and sometimes I pulled them back. One day I was flustered and in a hurry, and forgot to greet the students one by one, as I hurried to unload my piles of books and marking on to my desk. “Hey!” someone exclaimed indignantly, “You didn’t say good morning to us!” So I ushered them all outside again and began the day properly, celebrating the fact that each one was at school, ready to learn (or not).

In March, I thought that perhaps I should end the day in a similar fashion, and so I began standing at the door saying “goodbye.” I have observed that primary teachers do this more frequently than by intermediate teachers, and it is rarely practiced by secondary teachers. The effect I noticed is a sense of closure. Even if a

student and I had a disagreement during the day, saying goodbye to them somehow conveyed, “Everything is okay. I care about you. Tomorrow is another day.”

Other ways in which we celebrated were through applause, awards, and public praise. As the school year progressed, I found that the students celebrated spontaneously when someone had experienced success. In previous years, I would “drag” classes into clapping for a fellow student. Now, they do it without any prompting: when Justin arrived on time for school for the first day in months, when Daniel scored high on his spelling test; when Lindsey publicly apologized for calling Rachel an idiot; when Sandy recited all of the twelve times tables in under three minutes.

I have tried to find ways of celebrating the behaviours that I want, and ignoring those that I don’t. Recently, only a handful of my students completed a homework assignment, a character chart for our novel study. Rather than lecture the rest, I decided to give “Homework Completion Certificates” to those who had done their work on time, in a little ceremony at the end of the school day. I thought that perhaps this would be seen as silly by both the recipients and the rest of the class, but the next day, I retrieved a voice mail message from one recipient’s mother, thanking me for recognizing her son in that way, and telling me how proud he was of his certificate. It made me realize that no matter how old and “mature” we become, we still enjoy recognition of our achievements.

What impact has Celebration had on the sense of community in the classroom? I cannot prove that it has led to greater academic achievement or improved test scores. That is another research project. I do believe it has served to heighten the importance of social competency, for I have observed evidence of increased confidence and what Gibbs describes as social competence, “trust in others, perspective taking, sense of personal identity, awareness of interdependence” sense of direction and purpose” (1995, p. 49). Through daily, small acts of celebration we are reinforcing what Watkins (2005) calls the “hallmarks of community,” namely, agency, belonging, cohesion and diversity. We are saying, “Everyone can be successful at something and we will acknowledge that success. People can improve and we will acknowledge that improvement. We all belong and despite our differences, we are equally important and deserving of respect.”

Précis

MARCH 17TH

I have been teaching grade sixes and sevens since my practicum in 1991, in two different districts and six different schools. This class, by far, has been the most fun and the most professionally satisfying. The students make me feel like a good teacher. What has made the difference? Are these kids special or have I changed?

Much of the evidence I have gathered about the practice of community building has been anecdotal and based on my own observations. I would also like to recognize the voices of my students. I began to use exit slips as a means of

encouraging reflection on a particular activity, and now use them frequently at the end of the day as closure. We called them, “I think, I feel, I learned slips” and the students are free to write whatever they wish and give them to me without putting their names on. The following are some of their words.

- *Today I learned more about that black bears eat acorns.*
- *This morning I learned about a peleon and we discussed humoruse stuff.*
- *I learn English and I feel now I am not shy to talk with Canadian and foreign. I think Canada is good to improve my English.*
- *I think today was good because I just made good friends with Luke and Nicole. At first I didn't like them. Now I think their cool.*
- *I learned that are (sic) class is really funny sometimes.*
- *I think it is fun to be goofy in class. I feel that it is great to have plays in class. I learned it is ok to have a calm down time.*
- *I thought it was funny when we all started to say “are.”*

The last comment was in reference to one of the funniest moments we have shared as a class. I was enthusiastically telling a story and at one point my brain was searching for a word. I stalled and stuttered in the middle of a sentence. “You see, sometimes people are, are, are...” David, my little mimic, repeated, “Are, are, are!” like a seal. Suddenly the room was full of little seals crying, “Are, are, are!” We laughed and laughed. They still tease me about it months later. It is one of my favourite examples of how we have grown together as a community: the fact that we have such shared, inside jokes, that no one from the outside would understand.

To conclude, I would like to return to the three questions that guided my inquiry. The first was: Which strategies, tactics and activities help to build inclusion and improve students’ feelings of safety in the classroom? There is an endless array of strategies described in many excellent resources. No single strategy, however, is worth its implementation without the sensitive consideration of students’ needs and strengths. I learned that the first step in building community is to help students get to know themselves, with activities such as This is my Bag, the Life Map, and the Personal Shield. Once they have reflected upon whom they are and what they value, they are primed to consider the qualities and interests of others. It takes a long time to build mutual trust and respect, but the time invested is paid back when the teacher can put her energies into teaching, not managing, and when students can help each other. Learning in the classroom becomes not one teacher helping thirty students, but thirty-one teachers helping each other, positively interdependent (Johnson & Johnson, 2004).

I also asked, “How can I effectively model compassion for others in my teaching?” My inquiry has reinforced for me the importance of modeling. In the past, I would lecture. I now model reading strategies. I model thinking skills. I model practical things like how to fold and cut and paste, rather than assuming that they come to me knowing how to do these things. I model good manners. When my most challenging student has temper tantrums and calls me names, I try to model patience, compassion, and most of all—forgiveness. I saw the effect this has had on my students. They know that there are bottom-line behaviours that cannot

be tolerated, but they also know that everyone may be forgiven. This aspect of forgiveness plays a huge role in establishing the positive interdependence that is crucial for cooperative learning. I tell the students, “We are like a team. When one of us is successful, we are all winners.”

My teaching practice has changed dramatically as I have begun to contemplate these two questions. The use of the various strategies, tactics, and activities I have learned over the past few years has certainly made teaching more enjoyable. I cannot help but remember an occasion years ago, when I told my class to answer some questions on Ancient Egypt out of the text book. There was so much frustration in the room, so many hands waving in the air, so many who could not read the text, that in the end, I wrote out the answers on the board for them to copy. I am very grateful to have found much more effective methods of teaching, for my own sake as well as the students’ sake. I *feel* differently now, when I step into the classroom—more optimistic, calm and patient, less tense, less fearful and discouraged. In giving away some of the control and decision-making power to the students, I actually feel more in control, more balanced.

When I asked, “What are some of the stumbling blocks to building community?” I thought that one might be student attitude toward cooperative learning and community building. What if they hated it? What if bad experiences with group work in the past limited their ability to buy in? I also feared that one or more students might sabotage the process, making it impossible for others to feel safe. Another prediction was that parents might object to too much time being spent on the “soft” curriculum, and not enough on the prescribed one. It may be the particular make-up of this particular class and their families, but none of these scenarios, to my knowledge, have arisen. The greatest impediment to building community in the classroom has been time. It feels that there is too little time to accomplish everything that I wanted to, both in the overt and covert curricula. I console myself by rereading Terry Wrigley’s (2003) words in *Schools of Hope*:

Curriculum is reshaped, remade, reborn, recoded in what we do with kids in classrooms. Pedagogy re-mediates, frames and rearticulates what will count as knowledge in classrooms. So no matter how we theorize or “fix” the curriculum – either centrally or locally – it won’t make much difference if our pedagogy isn’t up to scratch. (p. 92).

Like a pedagogy of hope, a pedagogy of community seems to me to be not only reasonable, but an essential part of school. My practice has changed dramatically since I began to teach with community in mind, to the point that I do feel I am working smarter, not harder, I am enjoying my students’ company, and I am finding my professional life more fulfilling. Through emotional engagement with my students, and in allowing them choice in and responsibility, I have witnessed the power of the creative, imaginative, and compassionate potential that exists in every student.

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LISA OTTENBREIT

LINKING STUDENT LITERACY

Building Community Through Cross-age Tutoring for Reading

Any genuine teaching will result, if successful, in someone knowing how to bring about a better condition of things than existed earlier. (John Dewey)

Making Connections

I delight in the resultant power of people coming together. When people connect for the purpose of learning, there exists a luxurious, alchemic potential for greatness. One of my greatest fascinations as a teacher is to walk into the classroom on the first day to face a myriad of personalities, shapes, and sizes all assembled together for the purpose of change and growth. It is that initial moment of potential, in the spirit of dynamic possibility, that I derive my challenge: how am I going to bring these 35 unfamiliar, possibly reticent, individuals into one, cohesive, supportive, collaborative group? One of the most valuable things I have learned in my seventeen years of teaching is that a sense of belonging, that sense of valued participation, is a critical ingredient for creating connections from disparity. It is when we reach out to one another that we can enable and promote strength and grace. In the words of the inimitable bell hooks (2000), “When we drop fear, we can draw nearer to people, we can draw nearer to the earth, we can draw nearer to all the heavenly creatures that surround us” (p. 213).

It is with this goal of making “heavenly” connections that I initiated a cross-age reading program called *Reading Rounds*. I was aware of a group of Grade 9 students (all male) enrolled in a Literacy support class who felt marginalized and unsuccessful due to their inability to read effectively. I also knew of a teacher at a nearby elementary school who was finding her young readers struggling to make sense of the words on the pages. So I brought them all together in the spring of 2006, and Reading Rounds was born. The results of this “experiment” grew into an initiative that will hopefully continue long after I have retired from North Vancouver School District (NVSD44). What resulted from one school reaching out to another in the spirit of promoting reading to struggling learners was a connection that reaches far beyond the classroom. I believe it promoted community by linking students through literacy. This paper examines the insights gained from and learning outcomes of the second exploration of a Reading Rounds session in which I was involved.

Assessing Background Knowledge

The effects of cross-age tutoring for literacy learning have been extensively researched and documented (Cohen, Kulik, & Kulik, 1982; Labbo & Teale, 1990). There are important implications for students and teachers when it is clear that older students who struggle to read can benefit from being placed in the role of a reading mentor with younger, emergent readers. The positive outcomes of cross-age “buddy” reading programs are manifold: older students gain the opportunity to examine and strengthen their reading comprehension strategies, they build competence as a role model, and they develop confidence as a learner while the younger students benefit from small group explicit reading comprehension instruction and authentic, meaningful reading practice (Gensemer, 2000).

When a well planned, low-cost, cross-age tutoring program can be offered between two schools, there are not only increased opportunities for literacy learning for all students involved, but also benefits in the increased development of social skills and community. North Vancouver School District has excellent potential for establishing cross-age reading programs as “schools in North Vancouver are organized into ‘families of schools’ with each of seven secondary schools serving a geographical catchment, or attendance, area made up of a number of elementary schools” (Catchment Areas, 2005).

Where students from elementary “feeder” schools pair up with older students in the neighboring high school, this fosters a heightened awareness of a “family of schools” model and a greater knowledge of the schools included within that family. The younger students, in visiting the older buddy readers, become more familiar with their future high school and the older students delight in their roles of responsibility and leadership with their younger peers. Initiatives, focused on literacy, instructional intelligence practices (Bennett, 2001) or otherwise, that link the elementary schools to their “mother” school also help to promote richer connections between students, teachers, administrators, and the surrounding community.

A qualitative examination of the sense of community developed with Reading Rounds provides a valuable source of information about the relationships that can develop between students and teachers within a family of schools. *Reading Rounds*, which began in March 2006, involved a class of Grade 9 students who were identified as struggling students from a local NVSD secondary school and who were paired with a class of Grade 2 students from a nearby elementary school. As researchers have documented great gains for both tutees and tutors, even when the children being tutored or the tutors themselves are from special education backgrounds (Topping, 1987), there was less trepidation with the implementation of a buddy reading program with these two groups of students who represented a wide range of challenging needs.

With the present reading initiative, the older students acted as reading mentors to the younger students, but in some cases, ironically, the Grade 2 children were more proficient readers than the Grade 9 adolescents. In other words, the reciprocal teaching that occurred was not solely limited to the older students teaching the younger students. In a cross-age tutoring situation, older students often develop in

areas beyond literacy and language development such as self-esteem, confidence, risk-taking, and initiation (Urzua, 1995). With Reading Rounds, both groups gained from this experience together as they built knowledge, and a sense of accomplishment. Further examination of the perceptions from the journal responses of the students and feedback from the teachers involved, with regards to their awareness of building community in this cross-age tutoring experience, reveals a sense of connection extends beyond the classroom setting.

One of the major goals of NVSD44 is to strengthen connections between elementary schools and the central high school in each family of schools, with a focus on creating “safe and caring” schools or “tribes” (Gibbs, 1999), and I would propose that Reading Rounds is an excellent means of supporting that district plan. From that perspective, the purpose of this inquiry is to elaborate the successes of Reading Rounds. Specifically, I explored the question of how *Reading Rounds* helps to create community between students, teachers, and the school community.

Reading Rounds

Prior to meeting their younger reading buddies, the Grade 9 students had three classes to learn about their roles and expectations as reading mentors. Equally important was the explicit instruction about reading strategies that they would be modeling for their younger counterparts. As District Literacy Facilitator, this opportunity to teach and review reading strategies with the older students allowed me to learn more about their personal reading strengths and weaknesses. This process with such at-risk middle year students revealed that there is a further need in NVSD44 to create and provide effective reading programs for struggling readers.

To facilitate successful reading with these two disparate age groups, I purchased highly interesting and visually engaging picture books that the older boys would equally enjoy reading with the younger students in their small groups. (NB: A list of the books, most of them fractured fairy tales, may be obtained from the author). I worked collaboratively with the Grade 9 and Grade 2 teachers to discuss the program and prepare the students for the rounds. It was decided that the Grade 2 children would walk from their elementary school (rain or shine!) to read with the Grade 9 students in the high school library for six sessions, once a week for six weeks, during which they would read a picture book aloud together and focus on one reading strategy which would be explicitly discussed and practiced. The initial information outlining the Reading Rounds that the older students received was in the form of a handout (NB: available from the author).

During our three “preparatory” classes, the Grade 9 students were taught the twelve reading strategies as outlined in *North Vancouver's Reading 44: A Reading Framework* document (NVSD, 2004) and offered the opportunity to practice those reading strategies. The Grade 9 students also had the chance to read and discuss a variety of the picture books with peer partners. They were also given a brief lesson on how to read expressively to others. All of this “front-end loading” and reading practice was necessary as each of these boys, for various reasons, struggles to read

fluently. Practicing to read aloud with a partner helped to diffuse some of the anxiety they initially felt about their reading skills and the effect they would have with the younger students. It also provided us with a sense of which students were more nervous about the project. It should be noted that, in future, more than three lessons would be more effective in providing the guided instruction that many of these students need. The following journal entries, written prior to meeting their Grade 2 buddies, reflect an anticipated sense of failure for these Grade 9 students.

It is interesting to note that this young man, despite his trepidations, had one of the most successful experiences with Reading Rounds. Further entries from other students included the following comments (copied exactly as they were written).

To improve in my reading skills, I could be louder, expressing myself a bit better and making voices to sound like the characters. Today when I was reading, I felt that I did a pretty good. I also feel that I could have improved a lot. And I soon will.

I think I need to use different voices for every character. I also think that I should read louder and slower so the kids could understand. Making it more exciting so the person I am reading to don't get bored. I also should practice the words that is difficult to say. I think I need to make more eye contact to the person I read to.

What I think I need to approve on is reading a bit slower and finishing the last words to a line instead of mumbling the last few and skipping to the next line. I also should think about making my voice change for every character and each character will have its own voice so it will be like a movie but other then that I don't think I need to improve on anything els other then getting a few words mixed up so mabey I should practice those.

These particular entries reveal hesitation and insecurity about their performance with the younger peers. These adolescent boys were rarely successful in school and had assimilated their feelings of inadequacy. The wonderfully ironic element of reading with the Grade 2 children was that the younger children never noticed any shortcomings of the older students. Building relationships through connected experience allowed for the older students to transcend their learning difficulties and bond with these younger people of their community.

Observations

The following section provides an overview of each of the Reading Rounds sessions including the weekly reading strategy focus and instructional plans. My personal observations for each visit focused on (1) the interactions of the younger students as they walked to the high school and (2) the social connections and learning outcomes that resulted each week with the older boys. Grade 9 students wrote the journal responses after each session with the Grade 2 children. These responses offer powerful insights to the reading experiences for these adolescent boys. I have presented the comments of Jeff, Cole, Tyler, William,

Shane, and Hesam pertaining to connections that they made with the younger students, and their reading experiences in a sequential fashion in an effort to illuminate the growth and changes in their attitudes, their self-esteem and their growing fondness for their younger peers (NB: they are presented exactly as they were written, in the same order each time reflections are noted; names have been changed for the sake of anonymity). Clearly, connections were made that were obvious and meaningful.

WEEK ONE READING STRATEGY FOCUS: PREDICTING

Instructional Plan

The older students will ask what the younger students predict about the story based on the front cover visuals. As well, twice throughout the story, at an opportune place in the story, the older students will stop and ask each of the younger students to predict what is going to happen next. Post-reading discussion should include whether the students' predictions were correct or not. Student journal responses were as follow.

Today the Grade 2s came to read. I had three boys we readed "The Three Silly Billies". I tried involving all of them during the reading. I also tried using the things that Mrs. O told us like predicting. One of my kids readed really well and one was not as good. One of my kid read slowly. But he did a good job. One kid cheated when we were predicting he kept going ahead. All the kids did a really good job. They were really friendly. I also met my old teacher Mrs. Bondar.

Today the Grade 2s came to read and I really enjoyed myself. I feel that I had a lot of reading experience. I never really knew I could express myself in reading this much, but I finally tried and I feel I did pretty darn good for a newbie.

Today the Grade 2 come to read before they came I felt ok about. I had three kid there names were William, Ethan, and Trisha. William was more talkative while Ethan was semi-talkative and the girl Trisha was shy.

Today, the Grade 2s came to read. I felt really tired today to I let the kids read and when they made a mistake I corrected them. My partner, Tyler, wanted to read some sentences but this kid beside him kept wanting to read. I didn't care but Tyler probably wanted to read. We had four kids in our group. One wants to read the whole book, two is just noisy, three and four are shy and doesn't want to read. I was actually kind of surprise that they could read that well. If they keep reading like that, they won't need us to help them.

Today the Grade 2s came to read but I didn't like reading all that much because when I was done I was starting to lose my voice and my throat was hurting. I hope next time I am reading shorter books so my throat doesn't hurt but otherwise it was good because the kids were really good and

predicting lots and I think they were having a good time because they kept on wanting me to read more and more.

Today the Grade 2s came to my school. I think they were really nice and funny and cute. One of them had troubles reading but I like that fact that he wanted to read even though it wasn't his turn. I think one of the kids I was reading with will be really good at reading in a couple of years and I think he will probably be the smartest. I think it's fun to do this every 'Tuesday. I like things that are different.

Personal Observations & Reflections

Today, I was with the older boys in the library prior to the younger students' arrival. The Grade 9s were nervous and apprehensive about the experience. This was quickly dispelled as in marched a long line of adorable children who were so enthusiastic and accepting. There was a wonderful energy in the library as we introduced the program, organized the small groups and conducted introductions. I observed the change with the older students as they immediately realized that Grade 2 students are, overall, quite charming. The students quickly settled down to reading and the other two teachers and I mingled around the room offering help if needed. The Grade 2 children were very focused in their reading and I think that this was encouraging for the older boys. When they finished their books, they had conversations that were allowed them to get to know one another. Some of the older boys had been students at the same elementary school and had siblings who attended the same school, so there were many discussions around these coincidences. I noted that the reading became secondary to the blossoming friendships.

WEEK TWO READING STRATEGY: VISUALIZING

Instructional Plan

Once during reading and after reading the whole story, the older students will ask the Grade 2s to draw a quick picture they have in their heads of their "movie version" of the story. Have each student present and speak about their "mind movie." Student journal responses were as follow.

This week in buddy reading I had a new person in my group his name was Alexander. He was a really good drawer all of them were. It was hard keeping them in control but I did it. One of my buddies was coping the picture from the book and the other two were making their picture from there head. I think Alexander did a really good job making pictures in his head. All of them did a really good job of paying attention when I was reading the book. One of my buddies made a really good connection when I told them what the title was he told me if *Jim and the beanstalk* and *Jack and the beanstalk* were the same story. I wasn't really sure what to say to him

because I ever read Jim and the beanstalk before. Amir one of my buddies made a good prediction when Jim finish helping the Giant Amir said that the giant was going to eat Jim because he was happy again. I like my group a lot because they pay good attention.

Today I think my buddies drew pretty well. They did not draw nearly as well as I can draw (I don't mean to brag) but they did draw pretty doggone good. I also think that they listening skills was absolutely fantastic, and that really impressed me because most other kids I work with are not as good as my buddies were. Mine were probably the best listeners I could possibly have. They were not very talkative, but they were very interested in me I think, and also, I hope. I am like totally looking forward to next Tuesday, I absolutely cannot wait. Even talking about it makes me want to do it more.

I had three kids in the group. Ashlegh had good pictures and Jin was quiet but had good pictures too but one wasn't. Eugene had good pictures and he loved to read so he read two pages in the book. They called my name when I came to the table. I think they are getting to know me.

One of my buddies was actually doing a great job. He was focused on me when I was reading the story to them and did what I told him to do. Though, two of the buddies were though. They weren't really focused on me when I was reading the story to them but they all did drew lots of good pictures and I think they all did good job drawing.

My reading buddy's were super good drawers one of my buddy's named Ceci was a fantastic drawer probably even better then me and they were doing great they were listening and predicting and had no problem drawing or thinking of what to draw. I think they did a super job and they weren't copying the from the book and they were coming up with there own idea's and if I had to mark them out of 10 I would give both of the 10 out of 10 because they were excellent drawers and picturing what they were going to draw they weren't talkative and they were listening with eyes and ears and following along together with the spare books they had and what really impressed me was they both remembered my name without the name tag. And I am really happy I got those two girls for my reading buddy group because I wouldn't pick any other kids there because the ones I had were perfect.

I think there really good at reading and there really smart some of them!

Personal Observations & Reflections

Today as the Grade 2 children entered the library, they quickly checked out where their older reading buddies were sitting and RAN to them at their tables! It was so delightful to see the looks on their faces as they connected to these older boys. We took some time to sort out who was with whom, but once again, they settled down with their books to read and draw. Today was a little more frenetic as there were

papers and crayons to manage, but I think the older boys were happy to see the children again and to have them so focused. Many of the older students are not familiar with being “leaders” and Reading Rounds places them in a position of responsibility that they seem to enjoy. The younger students regard them with awe and it is this “unconditional” admiration that is wonderful for the older boys’ esteem. I witnessed several occasions when the older boys were referring to reading strategies to engage the children. I hope this reciprocal teaching will help to support their personal reading challenges and enforce the importance of explicit instruction. I also noticed that the other teachers really seemed surprised at how much the children were enjoying themselves. Both of these teachers have been very supportive and they like coming together Reading Rounds – it provides an excellent opportunity for collegial sharing.

WEEK THREE READING STRATEGY: CONNECTING

Instructional Plan

Using sticky notes, the younger students will be asked to find places in the story where they connect to either something in their own lives, another book they have read, or a “world” connection. Discussion after reading should include sharing their various connections. The older students are encouraged to share their ideas of their text-self, text-text, and text-world connections as well.

Personal Observations & Reflections

Today, we learned, after we arrived at the high school that there was a power outage due to the incredible wind storm the night before. It was so disappointing to make the effort to get to the high school, only to arrive in a library that was pitch dark. The Grade 2s had practically RUN all the way to the school in their excitement and I was sorry to have to tell them that Reading Rounds would have to be cancelled that day. The decision was made that we would convene in the classroom to await the principal’s announcement about early release. It was eerie walking along the dark corridors, lit only by emergency lights, and I was worried that the younger children would be frightened by the expansive hallways and lack of light. They were rather hushed as we assembled into the classroom and they all sat in the “big kids” desks while the older boys huddled at the front of the room. To distract the younger children, I asked if they had any questions for the older boys about “life in high school”...to our surprise they had MANY! They queried about the size of the desks, what the lockers were for, and what big kids carried in their backpacks, amongst other questions. Tyler came forward and “entertained” the kids by emptying the contents of this backpack and patiently explaining each of the items and what they were for. Tyler has written output issues and had a NEO keyboard in his backpack that was very fascinating for the younger children and he proudly explained its use and why he needed it. As teachers, we all observed an interesting phenomenon in that darkened room that day: the students were all becoming friends. The reading strategy we had planned to focus on was

“connecting to text”, but we connected in other ways. It was magical to witness! As it turned out, the principal did ask everyone to leave the school and Reading Rounds was not held, but all was not lost, because it was a visit that changed these students from reading partners to true reading buddies!

WEEK FOUR READING STRATEGY: FINDING THE MAIN IDEA

Instructional Plan

After reading, the younger students will be asked to discuss the main idea or lesson of the story. They will then be asked to write one or two sentences on a slip of paper about what they think was the main idea of the story to share with the group. The older students will be coaching. Younger students who cannot write well can verbally or visually represent their ideas. (NB: The original plan for this week was replaced by the previous week’s lesson that had been cancelled due to the power outage).

Today reading was very easy because I got to read a very short book. We got a lot of confusion during the beginning (around) who was in my group but we sorted that out. My buddies made a lot of good connection with the book. One of my buddies made a connection with other book called frog prince. Other connection was somebody liking motorcycles. I had to read one book twice because we finish to fast the second time I let the little kids read the book and I think they did a good job reading it. One of my buddies was very good reader I had no problem with him. Other one need more help than the other. During the end they kind of got bored and started to play around with my nametag also at the end Mrs. O ask Grade 2s which book they like the best. I think I need to stop more often and ask questions what that little part was about and ask what was going to happened next.

Today my reading buddy and I did some rocking fantastic reading. We read “The Three Silly Billies” and “The Paper Bag Princess”. They were pretty da*n good, especially the “Three Silly Billies”. It was very funny and cool. Anyway, 4 the connections, with ze “golden stickiest”, my reading buddy wats her face, um Sara I think or somsing like zat. Anyway, she inserted her “golden sticky” on this big page with a bear family who was just about to cross this bridge, because it reminded her of her own family, and I placed mine on the last page of the book where it said under construction, because I am going 2 build a toll booth when I grow up as well and um ya that about covers it. (P.S. read the book for more information).

Today in buddy reading, it was annoying to me because my head hurts and reading to the buddies when my head hurts it’s really hard to focus. But my buddies were paying attention to me and respected me so it was easy to read for them. I didn’t really feel good today. If my head wasn’t killing me, I would probably able to read lot better than how I read today.

Today went really fast and was easy because one of my buddy’s offered to read today and then the other one wanted to read so barely had to read and

connection thing went really well and there was no problem with that and one of my buddy's was such a good reader she was just speeding threw at a good pace and not making any errors. I thought the connection thing was a good idea because it was making the Grade 2s thing hard about the book and then the thing that they connected with so I thought it made them focus a bit more and the color and shape of the stick helped because they were really attracted to the sticky and one of them wanted to keep it and take it home. And next time I could maybe do a bit more predicting because I didn't do much of that this time because I was doing the connection thing.

I think it's good that they come to high school before they become a Grade 8.

Personal Observations & Reflections

Today's lesson was focused on making connections. The objectives facilitated discussions around the books and how they connected to their lives which in turn elicited stories about their own lives that they shared with the group. I think the older boys did a wonderful job managing the sometimes rambunctious children in their small groups. Now that there is a high comfort level with the Grade 2s, we saw more behavioral challenges than in the past few sessions. Having three teachers and two aids in the room helps to keep things under control, but I also saw the older boys stepping up to this challenge and doing a great job. We only intervene if there is difficulty. Often I see the older boys managing to keep the Grade 2s on task and focused on the activity. They are reading so much! Some small groups are getting through more than three books during the session. It is so exciting to see them read, read, read!

WEEK FIVE READING STRATEGY: SUMMARIZING

Instructional Plan

After reading, and using a story summary graphic organizer the students will discuss the story and make a summary in their own words. The older students will fill in the worksheet with the younger students' ideas.

Today it was a very easy day for all the big kids because there wasn't a lot of little kids. So that meant we had to have smaller groups. I only had two little kids in my group and they were every good. We read "Who's Afraid of Grannie's Wolf." It was an every good book we took turns reading. At the end we had to say a summary in are own words. They did a very good job about that. I think both of them need to read louder. When Mrs. O came and read they got more excited about the book. I'm very excited about the Christmas party next week.

Today I had some fun reading with my hey ya buddies. I read the stories "rumpelstilskin" and "princess smarty pants". Both of these books are very good books and my buddies and myself really enjoyed them. Today, my

buddies were paying very good attention and were focusing much better than last time and I really appreciated them giving me that type of behavior. That way thing went smooth and I could manage to read to them just fine.

Today, in buddy reading, I didn't really feel well so I read the book fast and my buddies didn't even care. We read the same book again! This is our third time! My buddies listened well but they didn't answer any of my questions though it was okay. Even though I was tired my buddies paid attention.

Today my reading was easy because I only had to read one book and my buddy did the rest. I don't think she could improve on any thing because she was so good and she had no problem reading. She didn't stumble on any words and she was speaking clearly. She even summarized at the end of both books. When we were done she memorized what we read and we predicted on one of the books because the other book we had already read. I think my buddy is getting better at reading ever time she comes. Today she was reading really big words and I was surprised she could read them.

Personal Observations and Reflections

This week I walked with the Grade 2s to the high school. They LOVE the walk! They almost run all the way. It is a challenge to keep the group together because half of the kids run while others want to stop and pick up every rock! The beauty of this walk is that it offers the kids exercise and fresh air and some of them need this very badly. It also teaches them about the surrounding area and the route to the high school. We chat with the kids as they walk along and today I learned all about their pets, their favorite video games, their friendships, and their daily lives. This time allows for building connections that are outside of the classroom and that shines a light on the things that are important to them. It is a wonderful chance to get to know the students on a personal level.

WEEK SIX

The last Reading Rounds session was turned into a Christmas celebration. I gathered a number of Christmas books and the children were free to choose their own text. By this time, they were having so much fun together that it almost seemed a shame to spend the time reading. They wanted to chat and spend time together. There were no journals after this class; the observations are mine only. Moreover, I have included the observations of the Grade 9 and Grade 2 teachers respectively.

Personal Observations and Reflections

Today was our last day of Reading Rounds. A grey drizzly day, I said a little prayer for sun, but unfortunately this request was not granted. Jewel had asked that I walk them to and fro and this was a first for me. After dropping off the Christmas

books and materials required for the Christmas craft at Carson, I zoomed off to Queen Mary to join the Grade 2 children in their march up to the high school. It was interesting to see the children as they readied themselves for Reading Rounds. Usually I merely greet them at the school and then walk them back, but today I was provided a glimpse into their preparations for leaving the elementary school on their journey. There was lots of chaos as the students put away their chairs and tidied the classroom before they donned their jackets and lined up at the door. I was reminded of how much time in school is spent lining up and “getting ready.” It took this Grade 2 class a solid 15 minutes to get themselves to the point where they could depart.

There were several students who did not have appropriate outerwear for the walk in the rain and cold, but seven year olds don’t seem to mind the cold as much as I do ...The walk was not uneventful. As I lead the pack and the classroom teacher brought up the rear, I walked along with a First Nations boy who told me about how he used to play football. Another boy was trailing too closely behind him and this was annoying enough for the first boy to extend his leg back and kick the student who was bothering him. There was a great wail of despair and tears! Jewel came forth and reprimanded the First Nations child who was most indignant and stormed off. That was the end of the journey for him! The teacher took him and the other sobbing child and marched back to the school while I carried forth with the others. Sadly, I had not wanted them to have to end on this note, but I am aware that there is a history of behavior/conflict with both of these students and I respected their teacher’s decision.

We finally arrived at the school, gathered in the library and were just sitting down to read with the buddy readers when the fire alarm sounded! What timing! There was a flurry of commotion as coats were grabbed and students – both Grade 2 and 9 – were corralled out of the school to the sidewalk out front. The younger students were quite concerned and there were lots of questions: “Is this real? Is this a fire?” One young girl was disappointed when we told her it was merely a prank! The kids were all very excited and it was quite the challenge keeping them all together, but then Tyler took over. Quite handily he began playing a game with the children to keep their minds off the situation and to keep them engaged. What a star! By far, this Grade 9 boy has shown that he has incredible talent with younger people. He is incredibly learning challenged and yet he demonstrated remarkable leadership and confidence with the younger students. We were fortunate to have his talents today! One thing I noticed when we were all rushing outside was that the older boys were watching out for the younger ones. They really stepped up as responsible leaders in that hectic situation. I was thankful for the extra help, as Jewel had not returned from her walk back to Queen Mary with her “trouble makers.” Again, the sense of community was significant as the older students were curious as to why the “little kids” were at the school and several of them recognized neighbors or family friends. The students have now experienced a power outage *and* a fire drill. They have experienced the high school setting at its most frenetic.

Once back in the library, the children chose their Christmas story and they were able to read at least two stories with the big buddies. It was lovely to see them so engaged and so focused. One of the older boys was missing today and so I approached an older, senior student sitting on the back couches and asked him to read with the younger kids. He was most enthusiastic and he started right in reading with the two little girls in his group. His teacher walked over and told him that he would get extra credit for doing so – he beamed! I hated to interrupt the reading only after fifteen minutes as the students were really enjoying themselves (as seen in the photos) but we had lost so much time with the false fire alarm that we had to end promptly, disregard the Christmas craft due to not enough time, and move directly to the thank yous. Tyler and Jeff spoke for the older boys and thanked the younger students and myself. The younger students handed their thank you cards and treats to the older boys and there was a lot of praise and a feeling of warmth from all. Finally, little William, often an easily distracted, unfocused Grade 2 student asked to pass around the donuts to the older students. He seemed so proud to be able to provide the older boys with their snacks. I would have to say that I am sad to see this project end. Both teachers have stated that they will absolutely want to continue Reading Rounds next fall. I think they enjoyed it even more than the kids.

Making Inferences

The importance of the collegial capacity for this project cannot be underestimated. Working with both the Grade 9 and Grade 2 teachers to coordinate Reading Rounds was essential for the successful outcome of this project. Their reflections reveal a connection that was made on a collegial level that might not have been possible without an opportunity to collaborate on a cross-age reading program like Reading Rounds. Their comments show that building community comes from teacher leadership and a desire to work with others when improving education. Thomas Likona (1988) reminds us that “to build a sense of community is to create a group that extends to others the respect one has for oneself ... to come to know one another as individuals, to respond and care about one another, to feel a sense of membership and accountability to the group” (p. 421). The observation from the Grade 9 teacher is below and the Grade 2 teacher’s response follows.

SECONDARY TEACHER REFLECTION

“Reading Rounds has always been a fabulous, community building experience for everyone involved. Professionally, it is always a pleasure and an insightful learning experience to spend time peering into the daily life of a colleague. Furthermore, seeing my future students at such a young age and hearing about where they are in their literacy development is interesting and valuable. Collaboration and communication between colleagues within our family of schools (in particular because of the socio-economics) is paramount if we aim to provide a learning continuum and raise life long learners and responsible citizens in our diverse and needy community.

I believe Reading Rounds does just this—provides collaborative, communicative opportunities, encourages life long learning and literature appreciation, and certainly builds community and responsible citizenship. We know that when students enjoy their time at school, they go to school more often. Sharing in the Reading Rounds experience is an opportunity for the older students to remember where they've been and how far they've come, while it is a vision of the future for the younger ones. Personally, I love watching my older boys interact with the younger students. It is an opportunity for me to see them shine in such a way that they might not have the opportunity to in my classroom. At Reading Rounds, my boys are the experts and the successful feeling of being the authorities is written all over their faces. They always look forward to spending time with their buddies!”

PRIMARY TEACHER REFLECTION

“Reading Rounds allowed for the creation of a special and motivating environment in which the Grade 2 students felt excited and special to be apart of. Further, the Grade 2 students looked forward to pairing with their “big buddies” and increased their reading volume and time on task because they wanted to be able to “do a good job for their buddies.” As a teacher, I felt this to be a wonderful connection between my former students and my present students. This opportunity afforded me the opportunity to get to know a high school colleague and to discuss many aspects of literacy regarding our students. It allowed both of us to give feedback to students and one another and to determine strengths and weaknesses. Reading Rounds allows for a meaningful and real life connection between elementary school and high school. Many of the Grade 2 students will be going on to Carson Graham Secondary. This experience affords them the opportunity to become familiar with the layout of the high school and an introduction to behavioral expectations within the new setting.”

Finding the Main Idea

It was evident from the data collected and the observations of those involved that what started out as a buddy reading initiative grew into a small reading community. When we attempted to bring two disparate groups of students together, there was a spark. When two teachers came together to wonder and learn there was accomplishment. Reading Rounds was merely a vehicle for connecting students in a school family that resulted in a rich appreciation for one another. The supportive environment provided by the administrators, teachers, and students of both schools played an important role as well.

This cost-effective, buddy-reading program can improve reading attitudes, increase motivation and self-efficacy, and provide authentic opportunities to perform strategically in a structured and safe environment for students—not unlike the adolescent Grade 9 boys in this study, who are often abandoned by the regular school system. It behooves district administrators to closely examine the benefits of programs like Reading Rounds if they wish to strengthen connections in their

families of schools. In the future, it would be important to study the positive impact on the younger students in terms of their perceptions toward reading, high school, and the effects of linking students through literacy.

Summarizing

I return to the introductory words of John Dewey that would suggest that effective teaching, indeed, genuine teaching inherently requires a change. With Reading Rounds, Grade 9 students who typically struggled to read grew to embrace their individual strengths in leadership and responsibility for teaching reading strategies to younger children. As a result of their own teaching experiences, they were able to articulate some of their own reading issues and identify specific strategies to improve upon. They became more familiar with common language used to identify particular reading strategies as outlined in *Reading 44* such as “predicting” and “visualizing” (NVSD, 2005). Struggling readers are often denied opportunities within school settings to participate in authentic, affirming and non-threatening language interactions that can scaffold their learning (Cazden, 1983). Reading Rounds provided a situation when these boys could shine. This socially based reading experience may have helped both groups feel better about school, although this was not measured. The older boys’ journal entries and comments from their teacher revealed an improved attitude about the significance of reading and academic growth.

There are many considerations for future reading initiatives, including allowing for more time in preparing the older students for their tutoring responsibility. Some recommendations for a well-designed tutoring program might require certain factors deemed necessary for high-quality implementation, according to researchers with the U.S. Department of Education’s Planning and Services.

- Close coordination with the classroom or reading teacher
- Intensive and on-going training for tutors
- Well-structured tutoring sessions in which the content and delivery of instruction is carefully scripted
- Careful monitoring and reinforcement of progress
- Frequent and regular tutoring sessions
- Specially designed interventions for children with severe reading difficulties

It might also be important to include the parents of the students in an effort to increase the role of literacy support in the children’s homes. Successful community building through literacy initiatives should ideally involve teachers, students, administration, district support staff, parents and neighboring public libraries.

The sense of familiarity and community that grew from the Reading Rounds experience resulted from the strengths and sensitivities that the older boys brought to their teaching roles. In her research on mentoring programs, Gensemer (2000) found that “cross-age tutoring is most successful since older students are seen as role models” (p. 3). In the present inquiry, the Grade 9 students were often reading with Grade 2 children who were equally delayed in their literacy development and

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the Grade 9 students' insight to this lack of fluency allowed for greater empathy and non-verbal communication. The tutors' sensitivity to the needs, abilities and struggles of the younger students, enabled them to take chances, modify tactics and implement reading strategies effectively which gave them a higher sense of purpose. The relationships between the peer tutors were deepened by a common understanding of what it means to have difficulty and from this understanding grew an unspoken bond of trust. It is this deeper connection that is possible when a cross-age reading program can exist between two schools that share common experiences.

Engaging in rich, collaborative and cooperative learning experiences can make a difference to a school, and on a broader level, an entire school district. North Vancouver School District embarked on a remarkable journey with its commitment to the Instructional Institute and the creative strategies, tactics, and skills inherent in this pedagogical approach. Through further commitment to engaging literacy initiatives, it is my hope that the enlightening responses that were collected in this qualitative study will inspire and encourage other families of schools in NVSD44 to adopt a similar cross-age reading program that can benefit middle year students and primary students who struggle with their literacy development. Elementary schools and neighboring high schools can support one another by linking students together through literacy initiatives such as Reading Rounds.

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