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Learning to Read, Learning to Love It: A Shared Literacy Vision

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Learning to Read, Learning to Love It: A Shared Literacy Vision

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Chapter I: Introducing Theory to the Love of Reading

1. The Little Princess: How My Love of Reading Came To Be

> "Never did she find anything so difficult as to keep herself from losing her temper when she was suddenly disturbed while absorbed in a book. People who are fond of books know the feeling of irritation which sweeps over them at such a moment."
>
> -- Frances Hodgson Burnett, *A Little Princess*

> "Where does reading fit in?"
>
> -- Daniel Pennac, *Better than Life*

The first time I heard *A Little Princess*, Sara Crewe entranced me with her ability to imagine, to tell stories, much as she did her fictional classmates. I let myself fall into the book as another pupil at Miss Minchin's Seminary for Girls; I transformed into the imagining wide-eyed listener of Sara's countless stories. I listened as my elementary librarian read us Sara's story, and one day I proudly placed the annotated children's version on the library desk with every bit of my second-grade confidence to check it out by myself. *A Little Princess* became one of the first stories I had been read and then chose to read on my own. As my elementary years passed, I recall proudly counting up the total lines bearing my name on the library card inside that book's front cover. When I visited my elementary school library this past January, I went straight to that shelf. The book no longer had its place there, but I touched that special shelf, feeling eager to grab the book now making its home there, settle down quietly in this now-miniature library, and disappear again into someone else's tale. What was it about this story that so captured me? And how does even the thought of that book's spot in the library hold such power over me that I can hardly resist grabbing another book from one of those elementary shelves? The answer to both of these questions may come down to the sentiment that clearly has driven all of my intellectual life: I love reading, and thanks to a mix of early influences, I was lucky to have been encouraged to do so.

Reading has always been a part of my life, and though Sara Crewe happens to be a key character who taught me the value of imagination and storytelling, numerous other characters taught me to love reading, since it meant that I could befriend them, enter their world, and even recreate that world on my

own during my playtime. Books were given privileged time in our family, and I was given books consistently. Favorite books were read again and again, my parents never begrudging me a story. I loved listening to stories, reading on my own, and even pretending to read when I could not quite figure out all of the words. My preschool and kindergarten classrooms built upon the foundation that my family had given me, and my kindergarten teacher gave me further opportunities to imagine through reading and writing. As I got older, I began to put into words what I had felt from the beginning of my exposure to books: these pages not only created new worlds where before nothing existed, but also challenged me to explore my own world in a way that not many other things did. My reading let me turn to look at the world around me with changed eyes; my parents describe my toys as peripheral to the imagined worlds and scenes I created while playing make-believe. They recall that my kindergarten teacher expected her students to say to themselves confidently, "I am reading, I am writing." I wanted to learn to read because it meant I could read and imagine anything on my own; I understood that reading had value because of the encounters with reading I had on a daily basis. These encounters happened both at home and in school and stressed that reading could be personal or shared, easy or hard, joyful yet challenging. Reading could give one the opportunity to escape, to find something new, to create, to be curious, but most importantly, to learn always from any environment. The teachers and family members around me gave pure, unmediated reading the highest position and value in my intellectual life.

Eventually, as an older student, I sought out experiences to share my love of reading. I started working with elementary students, and during this time, I began to feel that the learning atmosphere in the current system was somehow different from what I had experienced. I started questioning the ways in which reading was valued and taught as a subject meriting a student's love. The love of reading seemed absent from many of children's encounters with books; reading work in classrooms often felt disconnected from allowing children to enjoy books as imaginative building blocks. What were reading encounters like in these schools compared to what I once experienced? I questioned the worth of a love of reading, an attitude towards reading that I had never before doubted as extremely important to the education process: why should a love of reading be instilled in young students especially as they begin to

learn to read? What comes from a love of reading that might not occur should that love not be conveyed, supported, and nurtured? I looked back at my family's involvement, wondering, who needs to be involved in instilling this love? Only after many hours spent in elementary classrooms, in libraries, in conversation, in silent reminiscing, in community programs, did I finally realize that I wanted to question the kinds of reading encounters that literacy programs encourage in the current educational atmosphere in Putnam County. I sensed something missing, or something out of place, in some literacy environments that I had seen. Was the love of reading still there? More significantly perhaps, was a love of reading still deserving of having a central place in curricula and programs design? I could not answer these questions, and after so much work in educational atmospheres, I felt that greater intentionality with this work would allow me to begin to engage effectively with these questions.

My own questions about instilling a love of reading come up right as struggles are happening in Indiana over who controls the educational system and what kind of system that leader is controlling, over who should fund what kinds of education, over what students should or should not be learning. While those tensions are consuming state legislators, schools in such counties as Putnam that perhaps already have their own educational challenges to handle still must maneuver state requirements for testing while balancing decreasing budgets. Of four school corporations in Putnam County, I have interacted with students and educators in the Greencastle Community School Corporation (GCSC) and the South Putnam Community School Corporation. I have spent the most time in two GCSC elementaries; the Greencastle Community School Corporation reports a free/reduced lunch rate of 47.8%, and the school I have worked in for the past four years qualifies as a "severe need" school with a reported rate of 50.2% (1; AdvancED 7). This community allowed me into these school systems to offer the classroom assistance I could as a college student; I consistently felt drawn into both the challenges and strengths of these schools, especially as they taught their children to read. Therefore, it made sense that my thesis allow me to engage with the local community of educators and parents alike. I imagined a thesis in which I could use my research practically in the community in which I had volunteered and resided for most of four years. My questions about a love of reading led me to understand that even though so much attention might be

focused on education right now, much continues to be lost as educators work to translate policy to realistic classroom models that empower young students as lovers of reading. If, as I believe many educators would agree, a core goal of education is to give students opportunities for empowerment—whatever those might look like—then it is essential that classrooms or learning atmospheres, and specifically reading encounters in those spaces, be sites for such empowerment. My thesis asks about the reasoning for and creation of reading encounters that instill a love of reading; it asks how the idea of empowerment through reading applies specifically to early literacy learning spaces in Putnam County. Finally, it asks who is involved in that empowerment and how.

2. We Imagine, We Tell Stories

"Everything's a story–You are a story–I am a story."

-- Frances Hodgson Burnett, *A Little Princess*

Thinking about the traits that make a "strong" reader often turns the conversation to a focus on the foundational reading skills, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension (Armbruster iii). Research has proven that reading instruction in these areas most successfully produces children who know how to read. However, while these areas are certainly vital to building readers, another part of building a strong reader is instilling a love of reading solely for its own benefit. How do children who may just be learning how to read for themselves also develop a love of reading? Why is that love of reading so important? The love of reading, or as Nancie Atwell calls it, the "pure pleasure of the personal art of reading," sets up the student for success in all further academic endeavors: it develops a student more capable of engaging critically with a text, body of work, or set of ideas (Atwell 44). Richard Murnane, Isabel Sawhill, and Catherine Snow propose that literacy for this century must depend on a "new definition of literacy. . .—one that highlights the skills that children will need to deal with the new demands" (6). A 2011 report by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities offers just such a "new definition": an ability for "critical and creative thinking" appears in a list of 21st-century skills now identified as crucial for high schools to begin incorporating ("Reinvesting"

28). Described as a "habit of mind" needed for high school students to be successful in post-secondary education or in the work force, critical thinking blooms in students who are expected to examine, question, and explore ("Reinvesting" 16). In promoting a love of reading even as students are just learning to read, educators and families encourage students to find the value of reading, laying the foundations for the student's willingness to engage in opportunities to examine a text critically and patiently, processing nuances and implications as she goes.

Furthermore, the love of reading promotes curiosity and thoughtfulness, an appreciation of the written word and all of its uses. Often, a book opens up the world for exploration to a student who could be experiencing any number of life situations: the book offers a way to understand reality but also a way to get glimpses beyond that reality. This ability of a book to open up a new world cannot be underestimated, even alongside such an important goal as encouraging critical thinking. The lover of reading has the patience to go beyond the mere comprehension of the text while someone who may not love reading only has the willingness and mental focus just to understand the sentences. Both Herbert Kohl and Nancie Atwell explore this power of books to take children beyond their own experiences while still encouraging their skill of critical reflection. Kohl stresses critical reflection, aligning himself with the theories of Paulo Freire on transformative education. This reflection allows students time to apply the text's meaning to their own lives, to see themselves in the characters or events of the text. The student who does not love reading, or who has no regard for reading, will not be able or willing to take this next step of critically reflecting on the reading; unless prompted by a teacher or other authority figure, the student is likely to go no deeper with the text than what might be required by a test. The key, however, to reading that really influences a child is the dialogue and reflection that happen after the reader has finished the text; these next steps are possible only with a patient, committed reader who respects both the value of a text and of spending time with a text. Thus, the love of reading is what lifts the reader from the normal task of reading a text solely for comprehension and recitation into the deeper undertaking of understanding the text as related to one's own life.

In allowing a reader to understand her own life through reading, the love of reading also fits into the context of an argument in favor of arts education. The roots of arts education also form the roots of the love of reading. Both arts education and a love of reading instill, support, and nurture students' abilities to understand their own lives in a more meaningful way. In their essay "We Begin as Poets," Kieran Egan and Michael Ling frame their support for arts education by addressing first a problem with the "basic skills" approach (93). They point out that this model identifies children's deficits of "mature" skills, ignoring the "specific intellectual capacities that reach their peak in our early years" (94). These capacities are usually called "the imagination" and include skills such as "metaphoric fluency," which relates to both language development and artistic activities (94-95). These authors depart from the basic skills approach to defend explicitly instruction and curriculum that are rooted in encouraging those imaginative capacities. Those instructional and curricular designs align exactly with the methods behind an arts education approach. Egan and Ling express it most poignantly:

> If we look at children's imaginative lives, rather than their slowly-accumulating logico-mathematical skills, we do not see intellectual activity dominated by the concrete, the simple, the indefinite, the empirical, and so on. We see prodigal metaphoric invention, talking middle-class rabbits, titanic conflicts of good and evil, courage and cowardice, fear and security. . . . We see, that is, the kinds of intellectual activity that are central to the arts. (95)

Childhood intellectual activity is also the activity central to the arts; therefore, finding a basis for education using the arts makes sense. According to Egan and Ling, educators who strive to base their curricula on young children's imaginative "tools" can expand the chance for those children to be "intellectually flexible, creative, and energetic in modern societies" (95).

Egan and Ling dissect the nature of the intellectual benefits of language development to show that these, too, align with all of the benefits promoted by arts activities. Since language development proves a dominant focus in early childhood education and development, examining the specific lessons it teaches children gives educators a backdrop for thinking through the advantages of arts education. Language

development revolves around the notion that telling and sharing stories matters a great deal in a society; we might see language as the force that makes stories possible, and stories signify a society's methods for "orienting our emotions" (96). Stories bring together societies, operating as a bank of shared values, memories, or histories. Language provided early societies with the ability to first share stories, and language development, as seen by Egan and Ling, necessarily also brings students the capacity to hear and tell stories. Thus, language development also endows children with many other skills that all find roots in storytelling. Language development for young children includes learning that images can be expressed through oral or written language experiences—experiences that take forms such as "rhyme and rhythm" and show the way language tools are used (96). Egan and Ling point out that rhyme began in societies that needed to preserve stories but were without writing; now, rhyme still allows young students to both become acquainted with the ways words work and imagine pictures from words they hear (96). Imagining the pictures that begin to make up stories also works in another way during children's language development. Children develop a sense of binary conflicts such as good/evil or "security/fear" from exposure to story structures (96). Additionally, children gain the ability to consider stories, experiences, and their lives in terms of these abstract conflicts (97). In one swift move, the authors then powerfully align these intellectual facets of the most basic language development with exactly the same "tools of understanding" that structure the arts (97). They write: "With metaphor, story, binary–opposition and mediation, affective abstraction, image–generation from words, rhyme and rhythm, we are beginning to construct our inventory of 'basics' in education" (97). Deftly making the correlation between language development and arts education, the authors assert that these "basics" of primary language development match the imaginative "basics" used in the arts. Arts education develops children's ability to tell stories through creating art, just as language allows students to tell stories through creating writing or speech. The arts, like language, give opportunities for students to make "a statement about how one finds the world and oneself" (97). Another way to frame that idea might be that the arts, like language, allow students to imagine and then tell stories about themselves, their lives, and their relationship to the world around them. The authors end their argument by noting, "if we can recognize the arts as elaborations of

the skills and capacities of 'language' and 'storytelling,' then we can see how important are explorations in these various domains" to young people's development (97). The basic skills instilled throughout language development are mirrored by the imaginative, artistic skills used in all forms of artistic expression: centering instructional thought on this parallelism leads to a valuable argument for curricula that reinforce language development using imaginative storytelling and artistic expression.

Egan and Ling's argument then also applies to the reasoning for curricula that focus on instilling a love of reading through joyful, wonder-filled encounters with books. Egan and Ling make the case for the foundations of artistic expression as ways in which we "find and experience ourselves and the world" (97). I propose going one step further to assert the similar power of early and joyful reading encounters to influence a child's meaning-making of the world. As shown by the existence of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, ideological support for arts education continues to grow. That document affirms that arts education instills the traits needed to flourish in modern society, namely creating students with strong skills in "problem solving, critical and creative thinking, dealing with ambiguity and complexity" ("Reinvesting" 16); its arguments for arts education could also strongly support instructional design that allows time for simply enjoying good books and initiates pleasurable, unmediated, child-centered reading experiences. A love of reading and time devoted to enjoying independent reading encourage students to spend even more time with stories: imagining them, changing them, reflecting on them, creating them. Reading experiences focused on the student, and on encouraging a personal love of reading, prompt students to make stories personal as well. Only through a focus on the student's journey with reading a book can a story become a meaningful, affective tool. The students find connections between the stories and their lives, while learning to manage their emotions towards the stories. Those kinds of reading experiences instill the same skills as arts education, which are the same as those inherent in the early language development of children as they begin the educational process. The authors offer one key to drawing on the "basics" of language development and the arts: approaching "teaching as storytelling" significantly emphasizes meaning-making through an emotional connection to the curriculum (98). I see "teaching as storytelling" as a way that reading encounters can joyfully engage

young readers. "Teaching as storytelling" asks, Where is the "emotional resonance . . . within the content?" (98). If reading encounters and experiences become moments filled with emotional connectivity—meaning found because of the child's emotional connection to the lesson, text, or conversation—then it seems that both reading and language would become more valuable to the child. Stories elicit emotion, and allowing that emotional experience during personal reading time could then give greater value to a certain topic or content area when encountered by a student during other classroom time. If approached through a "teaching as storytelling" lens, reading encounters could create personal experiences with stories, not lessons of emotion-less skills. This approach does not exclude the importance of skills, but it does place them necessarily in relationship to all of the implications of a focus on storytelling: the heart of instruction reaches not to fill students with merely skill-based knowledge, but rather to urge emotional connections, creation, and exploration. This focus transforms children into the center of their own education, reinforcing the skills they already hold and the ways their minds already function. As another author writing on arts education explains, "In order for children to learn, they must be able to relate what they are to learn to their understanding of the world, to their human sense" (Walsh 106). If reading encounters focus centrally on being relatable to children, on reaching them where they are, on being organically generated by their understanding of the world, children can experience "artistic endeavors that are worthy of their capabilities" (108). Literacy programs can strive to be worthy of the creative, impassioned, curious, connective, imaginative, constructive, conceptualizing minds of their young learners by seeking to focus simply on those learners. What a dramatically different perspective, and yet how crucial it is to recognize the remarkable capacities of the minds of our young readers!

3. The Mission

When asked about how they first came to love reading, many people will answer, "because someone read to me." This answer shows that it is a community's responsibility to ensure that children today are getting the chances to have someone who will read to them, who will share a story and the passion that comes with reading. It is a responsibility of anyone working in the literacy field to attend to

those who will be sharing stories with children. It is a responsibility of those involved in young children's education to work together to make sure that reading experiences are happening and to engage in reading to children. It is an educational community's responsibility to collaborate with families and each other, to do everything it can to make young children's reading experiences—with whomever and wherever—ones that encourage a love of reading, a valuing of reading, and finally, an understanding of what reading offers.

Programs or schools working to instill a strong love of reading might find in the current system and state of education that meeting these responsibilities presents certain challenges. Atwell states that most educators would agree on this goal for children: "to become skilled, passionate, habitual, critical readers" (44). However, Atwell sees difficulties that prevent this view from resonating with instructional design as deeply as it should. The love of reading is at the center of this debate for Atwell, and although it might be easy at first to agree that a love of reading should be a central goal of literacy programs, it perhaps becomes less simple to translate that goal into actual program, project, or curricular design. Understanding the challenges of designing and running programs that focus on a love of reading requires knowledge not only of the current educational system, but also of the particular challenges that might exist in the locations of the programs themselves. I believe that only through thoughtful conversation about the design of local Putnam County public elementary schools' literacy programs and reading/writing curricula can I begin to understand the current atmosphere of literacy work in this community. Likewise, Putnam County literacy programs outside of the schools provide another aspect to consider about community in which they operate – its needs, challenges, priorities, strengths. These community literacy efforts make up a vital part of the literacy work of the community; indeed, both school and community literacy programs provide powerful opportunities for children to encounter reading and books. Furthermore, the realization that these programs all in the end strive to provide positive reading encounters should be enough to prompt a desire for collaboration. My reflection on my own upbringing as a reader gave me entry into thinking about the kinds of reading encounters that most benefit students. However, my involvement in local schools finally prompted me to engage with these educators

about the ways in which local programs work to provide joyful, pleasurable and encouraging reading encounters to create lovers of reading. I first strove to understand the literacy landscape as it exists in Putnam County, and specifically in Greencastle, before further developing conversations with educators across the literacy landscape to strengthen the collaborative capacity of the community to foster literacy programs and family partnerships that will grow students who love to read.

4. Of Children and Imagination: Transforming Young Students' Experiences

"Imagine you are creating a town," I said, "Imagine that you get to decide what to put in your town." The students watched me as I paced the front of the classroom. "Imagine that you are building a new community. What is important to you that you include in it?" It did not take long for the students' hands to start shooting up: they wanted zoos, parks, flower shops, candy shops, vets' offices, schools, ferris wheels, pet shops, fire departments, and radio stations. The students could hardly contain their chatter as they start drawing these community places, describing in length for me how their pet shop meets the needs of the new town, or why a zoo belongs next to the school in this new community. They thought of every detail, and all it took was one simple request from me that they imagine. The depth and range of their imaginations needed very little prompting: they were eager to begin their imagining, and even more eager to share it with me. They could articulate why they chose a certain thing to put in their community, and they never questioned whether their imagining was valuable. They never asked me, why are we doing this imagining, or why does it matter? For them, using their imaginations needed no explanation—it made sense to them. They loved the imagining and the creation it allowed: we finished the class by hanging up pictures of the community spaces and taking a "tour" of the entire newly created town. This encounter with a classroom full of imagining second graders reaffirmed my hope that every classroom every moment of every school day can support and, what's more, expect its students to use their imagination, because the benefits of doing so will outweigh any difficulties every time.

The use of imagination in a classroom and the emphasis it places on the students' experiences fit into a reading-specific context. When imagining a space in which students learn to read and to love

reading, I recalled my own preschool and kindergarten classrooms. I remember that I was encouraged to create in, interact with, and ask questions about the environment that was totally new to my four and five year old self. I was expected to "write" or draw in a journal during preschool; I was consistently asked to talk about my writing with my family and about the books I chose from the library. We held a special event for every letter of the alphabet, pretending as a classroom that we were walruses, leprechauns, dancers, and pilgrims depending on the letter. Through these memories I understand the traits of a classroom that prompts students to both imagine and start loving reading: we were expected to engage with our learning and reading, imagining ourselves into stories, creating new stories, and reflecting on stories through circle time with our teacher or silent writing time. One model of education captures many of these elements that I recognized in my early learning environments. Paulo Freire's work in education led him to develop the transformative or critical education model. Transformative education emphasizes the creation of learning environments in which students become "the subjects of their own learning" (McCaleb 12) and "active, critical co-investigators" (Freire 97, McCaleb 14). Education is viewed as the process by which students "understand and move beyond their experiences" in order to see their role in making the world a better place–one way in which transformation happens as a result of this form of education (McCaleb 15). Freire further explains that co-investigation allows both students and teachers to "deepen their critical awareness of reality and, in spelling out those thematics, take possession of that reality" (Freire 97). Given a role as co-investigators, students are pushed to develop their voices in the learning community alongside other students, teachers, and community members. By being allowed to express their reality in a classroom of ongoing dialogue and reflection, students experience the joys of searching, discovering, and creating (McCaleb 12-13). Classrooms become spaces for inquiry and reflection in which students take full ownership of their learning. Freire's thinking stresses the ownership of each individual, and the agency that each student needs to create his or her own experience of learning.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* his crucial text describing the critical or transformative model of education, Freire defends the right of every individual to be educated through a "humanizing pedagogy," a model that frees both oppressed and oppressor to become agents of change in their own lives (Freire

55). The phrase "pedagogy of the oppressed" can be deconstructed to show Freire's ideology: "of" signifies that this pedagogy comes from the oppressed (33). That small simple preposition implies ownership—exactly what Freire demands that all people must have over their own learning, and furthermore, over their own lived experiences. The pedagogy cannot be "of" the oppressors, because they too are stuck in a system of oppression from which it takes a "radical posture" of "solidarity" to escape; if the oppressor owns the pedagogy, then the implication is of a pedagogy not done with the oppressed but *to* them, *for* them—an attitude that can lead to "false charity" (29). As discussed by Freire, the banking model of education creates this kind of system, in which those in authority—the oppressors—assume both ownership and management of teaching to, imposing knowledge on, and creating a curriculum for another group seen as deficient in some way. A pedagogy of the oppressor structures this system. In this arrangement, Freire explains that the oppressors' existence is such that asking "why" becomes dangerous; the pedagogy of the oppressor creates a fear of taking risks that might upset the current "regime" that makes possible their dominant status (44). Sadly, this idea seems to be present in the current educational system: asking "why" is often a risk, frequently one not seen as worth taking. Freire puts forth the nature of the risk: "the oppressed, who have adapted to the structure of domination in which they are immersed, and have become resigned to it, are inhibited from waging the struggle for freedom so long as they feel incapable of running the risks it requires" (32). This feeling of incapability would only perpetuate the system that creates it—a static, stagnant system that in the end dehumanizes each group, distorting the "vocation of becoming more fully human" (28). This phrase finds a central place in Freire's framework.

Being "more fully human" embraces several facets as a core aspect of the transformative model. For Freire, to be more fully human means to have the power to make change in the world. It means having the freedom to consider reality critically through inquiry, through dialogue (61). It also means having opportunities to create (60). He links these ideas to the critical model of education as built upon the notion that a pedagogy of the oppressed alone gives humans the freedom to reflect, create, have agency, and transform their world. For Freire, humans must struggle to transform into what he calls a "real humanist," identified more by "his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a

thousand actions in their favor without their trust" (47). For an educational atmosphere, the "real humanist" as a teacher would trust students to have a leadership role in their own education. Allowing students a part in shaping the direction and mode that the class takes builds a trusting relationship. Student reading and writing opportunities impact students more meaningfully when they become spaces of student questioning, choice, and dialogue since students will realize their power in those spaces. Freire admits that often, in educational settings, "false generosity" takes the place of genuine acts of love (29). This form of generosity derives not from the oppressors' love, but from their attempts to respond to the weakness of the oppressed. False generosity can take the form of pedagogy *for* the oppressed, instead of pedagogy *of* the oppressed, which acknowledges their ownership; those caught in false generosity might approach students or families as deficient in certain forms of knowledge or education, instead of recognizing them as co-participants engaged in a learning process alongside teachers and community members. In an educational framework, false generosity is not leveling, but maintains the divide between the oppressed and oppressor.

Freire answers this artificial generosity and the problem of pedagogy that encourages a divide between students and teachers with an argument for solidarity. This solidarity comes through sharing experiences of critical learning, reflection, and conversation to enact positive change on the world. Freire proposes first and foremost that only an act of love can bring solidarity amongst the oppressed and the oppressor: when the oppressor moves into position alongside the oppressed, an act of love takes place that creates a "praxis" wherein the oppressed and oppressor can take action and reflection to change their world (58). "Sharing" is a key word, and it becomes even more important for a tenet of the entire transformative model: dialogue. Freire describes dialogue, which can act as a "permanent relationship" between the oppressed and the leadership, as a leveling factor to counter false generosity's divisions; dialogue provides a freedom that false generosity cannot. He quotes Erich Fromm to explain this freedom towards which both groups must strive: "freedom to create and to construct, to wonder and to venture. Such freedom requires that the individual be active and responsible, not a slave or a well-fed cog in the

machine" (qtd. in 55). This freedom removes the divide between oppressed and oppressor, student and teacher, offering solidarity through shared, active creation and curiosity.

Fromm's words speak strongly to the necessity of imaginative acts when broken down: his words reaffirm the central importance of the freedom to create. Fromm's instinct that places creation at the center of one's educational freedom helps make the link between the pedagogy of the oppressed and pedagogy that instills a love of reading. Looking at a pedagogy of the oppressed applied directly to literacy environments—a pedagogy of a love of reading—illuminates significant reasoning for a love of reading as a foundation of curricula design. A love of reading has the power to show students the effects of imagination and the value of creation because it increases the chances that students will spend more and more time reading, more and more time reflecting on the imaginative acts of the authors they read. Joyful, complex, and personal encounters with reading teach students that creation brings influential and beneficial results to others. When given time to experience reading purely with all its offered imaginative possibilities, they get to encounter those results themselves. If a love of reading has the power to reassure children that creation has value and is possible, then a program that encourages that love is central to pedagogy that wishes to make students into critical thinkers. Freire points out that the banking educational model not only makes students "receiving objects" but also "inhibits their creative power" (64). If educators only expect students to receive knowledge without exploring, questioning, reflecting or changing that knowledge, then those educators strip away students' power to see the world as a place they can transform, or more importantly, as a place in which they can create. Instead of increasing expectations for its students, this banking model of education makes them into further oppressed entities expected to fit into a certain static system. Contrastingly, a pedagogy of a love of reading has the power to emphasize pleasurable, personal reading as a means to seeing one's ability to create in the world, enter the world with a reflective community, and transform the world as a result of one's reflection on it. Indeed, here one finds the educators' opportunity for praxis in the literacy environment: it is an act of love by educators to give their students opportunities to enjoy books simply, to spend time reading independently, to question

all they read, to start conversations about that reading, to make reading meaningful to the student's daily life.

Sudia Paloma McCaleb reports in her book, *Building a Community of Learners*, that this Freirian approach reaffirms children as members of a loving community of learners; it gives them opportunities to question and imagine (11). Freire saw these results through programs that revolved around dialogue that did not "domesticate" the students – or the families – instead bringing them to a point where they love the moments of exploration and flourish in their curiosity. Domestication as used by Freire can be understood as the formation of a hierarchy in which one group is the superior, active knowledge-giver, while the other group is the inferior, passive knowledge-receiver. This idea of "domestication" relates to Kohl's fears about certain works in children's literature, particularly as he examines *Babar* in his essay "Should We Burn Babar? Questioning Power in Children's Literature." Kohl fears the colonialist aspect of the book, and worries about its influence on children who are not engaged in dialogue, a sentiment echoed here in McCaleb's writing about Freire. The dialogue is key to allowing the reading experience to be formative for the child. Studies have shown significant correlations between the number of moments of parent speech during read-alouds with the child's reading and understanding of reading language (Makin 168). Furthermore, a study by Catherine Snow on conversation between mothers and babies suggests that question-and-answer dialogues while reading aloud "pass the conversation over to the child, thus affirming the child and also increasing the interaction between the two" (Makin 168). Suddenly, the dialogue becomes not just a way for the child to improve basic comprehension of a text, but an equalizing moment when that learning is shared with the parent.

Indeed, a main tenet of critical education, dialogue makes it possible for children to learn to express their reality and their relationship to it through language. This idea shows the great power of language made possible through the simple practice of dialogic reading. The power of learning again relates to Kohl as he explores power dynamics in *Babar*: who has the power and why? This kind of question may seem different from what my thesis is exploring in literacy, but in actuality, the roots are the same. Each is concerned with who is in power in the learning space, the student or the authority figure. Is

the teacher the authority, only pouring information into the child, expecting no return or feedback on the teaching than what might be asked on a test? Or might the state be the authority figure demanding that all students look a certain way, or be molded in certain ways to graduate for certain purposes deemed "successful" by those higher figures? Lastly, is the student the authority figure of her own learning? Is she the one who feels in charge of her learning? Freire and Kohl align: the student must be the authority and subject of her own learning, taking what is offered her and examining it first with the help of others, and then on her own.

Furthermore, Kohl relates the dialogic reading to allowing students to see the possible faults of stories such as *Babar*, or recognize the ways in which that story does or does not align with their lived experience. If children are treated in a domesticating way—or as Freire might say, as the objects of the learning—through the dialogue surrounding their literacy experiences, then they might start thinking of themselves in that way. Similarly, Kohl suggests that if children read books that imply domestication and colonialization as normal without having any discussion of those implications, then children might start to internalize those modes and believe that those are ways in which they should be treated. Kohl strongly believes that literature has a great power to shape thought in this way. Arguably, then, literacy programs also have a role to play in helping children think about the structures that imply domestication, colonization, or subjugation; programs must offer reading experiences that support children, encourage them, and offer them alternative ways to consider themselves as learners, allowing them to grow into critical and engaged adults. A critical approach to literacy suddenly illuminates the importance of the early literacy program. A literacy program would most likely be one of a child's first experiences at school or in a school-like setting. Whatever setting in which most students will first experience reading takes on this new significance; these settings could be libraries, homes, classrooms, community programs. These various literacy settings make possible the first reading experiences that will undeniably change the way children look at their world. Therefore, it could play a very great role in influencing children's burgeoning conceptions of themselves as learners. Students begin positioning themselves as learners within a world of which they only know pieces. Critical literacy demands that students recognize their

power to question that world to learn more about it, eventually questioning how they might add to or change it. This critical literacy teaches children to read the world around them in order to assert their power in the world to transform and create it. First, however, these children must understand the power structures of the world; Kohl's thinking becomes clearer at this moment. Early literacy settings that go wrong would very acutely harm young students, because those programs are the very root of all that enables students to find success: being able to recognize language, to use language, to understand language. Taking away a foundational understanding of language results in students less able to understand language as used in stories. If the ability to understand stories becomes compromised, students' might develop only a weak ability to make meaning of the world around them and their lives. If one takes this position, then literacy programs and educators have a lot at stake. A literacy program that makes students the subjects of their own learning, includes reflective or critical dialogue, offers students ways to create and invent, and engages students actively in continual discovery ultimately will grow students who take more seriously their roles in the world.

5. Encounters with Reading

"The mysterious tangle of letters started him dreaming."

-- Daniel Pennac, *Better than Life*

"Maybe they stole the *Mona Lisa* because they just thought she was beautiful—they just wanted to look at her every day. They might not even be bad guys."

-- student, after reading a book about the history of the *Mona Lisa*

The reference from a student with whom I worked allowed me really to grasp the effect that one single question can have when paired with a reading encounter. My conversation with this student during his one-on-one reading work time covered a range of his imagined responses to the history story we had read together about the *Mona Lisa*: we talked about the definition of "bad guys," the way certain art pieces can make us want just to stare at them all day, the reasons someone might have for stealing something, the meaning that a piece of art can have to a country. I was astounded by this student's depth

and focus on this subject; as a young fifth-grade boy, he really embraced both the reading encounter we had and the discussion I started afterwards. I could not help but wonder if this kind of reading encounter depicted the norm, the exception, or merely the idealist's dream for the average elementary classroom. This reading encounter prompted everything that I would most want my students to learn: how to empathize, how to reflect on our own emotions, how to use reason in a difficult situation, and how to make meaning from one's lived experience.

In encounters with reading, the transformative education model has significant implications for literacy programs, since it is a model that ultimately can help shape educators' approaches to teaching reading to their young students. Perhaps first and foremost, the transformative model puts dialogue first in all interactions. Dialogue is key to not only forming relationships between students and educators that are trusting and consistent while literacy skills are developing, but also to ascertaining that all students' voices are heard during reading and writing experiences. Kohl, Freire, and McCaleb all speak to the utter necessity of critical dialogue, and the transformative theory as applied to literacy work cannot leave out dialogue as a central tenet. Kohl makes this case with the example of Babar: "part of the experience of reading *Babar* for a child is raising questions" (Kohl 22). These questions become dialogue, "reading becomes dialogue" (23). Kohl finds that the opportunity for dialogue must follow any reading encounter. In my experience with the Mona Lisa story, the dialogue we had following our reading session not only gave me the chance to build my relationship with my student, but also helped the student share his interpretation of the story. I understand from this conversation, and from others like it, what Kohl means when he writes that dialogue allows texts to be "reimagined and invested with multiple meanings" (23). For my student, the Mona Lisa story took on different meanings than it did for me, but through our open conversation, he could share his ideas, I could respond, we could mutually shape our conversation to fit the flow of our thoughts as they expanded, changed, took new directions. To my student, the story revealed that sometimes questioning seemingly authoritative definitions—like he did when he questioned why we called the "bad guys" bad—is the only way to understand what we believe in a difficult situation. The student trusted me enough in later dialogues to keep sharing his opinions and thoughts; our

relationship through open conversation allowed us to approach each other to learn from each other, to explore together, and to share our reading experiences.

Beyond dialogue, the transformative model implies that both curricular and instructional design relate students' reading back to their lives and experiences. A transformative literacy program starts curricular design with students' experiences: both Freire and McCaleb stress that, in a transformative classroom, "the creation of new knowledge will become a give-and-take process" amongst students, teachers, and community members (McCaleb 43). When students see their experiences taken seriously and used as the basis of instruction, educators open the door for those students to become even more deeply engaged in their learning. Weaving in these experiences also allows students to more meaningfully relate their lessons and studies back to their lives. Carol Lee describes one concept for creating curricula built in relation to students' experiences; called cultural modeling, this concept emphasizes that educators within a transformative classroom support the sets of skills that learners may carry from cultural experiences. Lee points out a need for pedagogy that draws especially on "cultural displays of knowledge," the knowledge that students experience in their everyday lives and cultures outside of an instructional space (25). This kind of pedagogy would "organize face-to-face interactions in ways that position students as sources of authority and make the structure of complex problem solving explicit" (26). Lee's cultural modeling offers a valuable way for literacy curricula to start with students' experiences and relate explicitly to those experiences; she examines the possibilities of cultural modeling in a literacy framework. Using Luis Moll and his colleagues' research on connections between homes and classrooms, Lee cites students' "cultural funds of knowledge" as the foundation for a pedagogy that allows students to take full ownership of their learning (Moll 133, Lee 46). Moll and his colleagues assert in their definition of funds of knowledge that students bring with them to any learning space an entire range of knowledge they have learned to function in a home and as an individual (Moll 133). In planning literacy environments, educators could validate these funds of knowledge by drawing upon a student's range of existing knowledge in literacy lessons and activities. Lee notes: "Literature is essentially narratives of personal experience" (47). For Lee, linking students' experiences with the personal

narratives found in literature gives students a greater capacity to find patterns, solve interpretive problems, understand meanings of events in stories more deeply, and finally, to see searching for meaning as an enjoyable "game" (Lee 49-50). Lee concludes: "Loving to play this game links readers to rich books across a lifetime" (50). In Lee's thinking, literacy programs can build lovers of reading by ensuring that students feel connected enough to books to want to explore them, validated in relating their lived experiences to their reading, and assured that the knowledge they possess "counts" even in a classroom setting. Teacher and writer Daniel Pennac describes the experience of the learning reader: "He is the hero of his reading, the reader whom the author has mandated for all eternity to appear and rescue the characters caught in the weave of the page—so that they in turn can deliver him from the uproar of his day" (Pennac 69). For Pennac, reading encounters must always be about the reader because reading can offer him whatever he might need from a particular story—escape, questions, information, dreams. In a way, Pennac and Lee support the same point that the transformative model necessitates for reading environments: a reader begins to enjoy reading when they find that it can offer them a chance to ask questions, a place to escape, an imagined world of different meanings, or an open space for sharing feelings. No matter the student's stage of literacy development, her knowledge, capabilities, and experiences can allow her the opportunity to connect more meaningfully to the books she reads and studies. Lee asks: "What in the nature of supports in a learning environment increase the likelihood that children . . . will persist in efforts to learn and engage in what for them is a new practice?" (26). This question becomes especially important to literacy learning: knowing how to read well sets up students for all other academic work in which they will engage through their years of schooling. Lee supports cultural modeling as pedagogy that can validate and use the child's cultural background and experiences in encounters with reading. Through pedagogies such as cultural modeling, a transformative literacy environment can allow reading experiences to become intermingled and strengthened by the students' realities and the skills they have adapted from daily life.

As the students' experiences from their homes and communities become a valuable part of transformative literacy classrooms, the transformative model also emphasizes that everyone involved is

seen as a learner. Students, educators, and families all join together as learners in a community. Literacy work especially can involve families as learners; students sharing school experiences for the first time allows families to approach their role as learners, but this idea can go beyond just this literal sense of being a learner. There is less chance of a division between "superior" and "inferior" if educators and families acknowledge themselves as learners and foster an inclusive environment for everyone. A division that creates two separate groups in an educational space hurts the teacher's capability to learn in solidarity with a student or to engage meaningfully with families. For a literacy environment specifically, educators can build community in the classroom by posing themselves as students during reading sessions alongside the children. If the whole classroom feels like a community where learning is embraced by all through open conversation and questioning, then the students become the masters of their own learning experience. Freire aptly moves from suggesting the necessity of going beyond a teacher-student divide to asserting the cooperation that enables freedom in learning. He posits a definition of knowledge that speaks to the idea of involvement by educators, students, and families alike in the educational process as learners: "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (57). The transformative model speaks to the necessity of cooperation in the community as it seeks knowledge together, but Freire's definition here also delineates the necessity of curiosity.

Freire's transformative framework implies that literacy environments and reading encounters will foster and validate intellectual curiosity. Reading encounters taking place in environments "full of complexity, novelty, and challenge" prompt inquiry, giving students many paths for exploring their world and experiences (Barell 13). Freire and John Barell are adamant that educational environments must be filled with chances for students to explore, be curious, and ask questions of the world around them. Curiosity is key, and Barell goes further in saying that curiosity ultimately incites the student to become a more involved, successful, and intellectual individual. Early in his book, *Developing More Curious Minds*, Barell cites brain research by Marion Diamond, who notes that "brain growth is the result of interacting with enriched environments," formed by aspects of "novel challenges" and "opportunities for

free choice and self-direction" among others (Barell 12). However, his support for inquiry and curiosity in instructional models spans beyond even this brain research as Barell identifies these practices as ultimately strengthening society. Barell aligns practices that encourage inquiry with success in the 21st century. Barell points out the capacities of humans as thinkers: "we need to foster and develop what makes us unique—that is, our ability to imagine, to think, to ask demanding questions of people and of nature" (viii). Transformative or critical literacy programs offer students exactly these opportunities to imagine and question their world; Freire and Barell both propose problem or inquiry based education to allow students the freedom to be curious. They approach the issue of banking education, which takes away students' chances to be "co-investigators" or teaches them to "shy away from" asking "rude questions" (Freire 58, Barell 18, 131). Instead of this type of education, Barell proposes instruction that completely relies on inquiry happening on multiple levels: by administration, instructors, and students. He suggests instructional models that encourage "good questions" representing "a genuine desire to find out" (59,61). "Good questions" signal an environment that challenges the students and, as Freire might add, the instructors, too. Barell further argues that "engagement with such high levels of challenge is what fosters intellectual development and, hence, our ability to think productively" (Barell 134). For Barrell, modern society presents challenges that cannot be solved by "easy, one-word, Scantron-like answers" (134). This reality prompts him to assert that education, then, must focus on "thinking through complex, multifaceted situations" (134). Freire also links the concept of problem-posing education to a student's place in the real world: "The more active an attitude men take in regard to the exploration of their thematics, the more they deepen their critical awareness of reality and, in spelling out those thematics, take possession of that reality" (Freire 97). Again, the necessity of exploration to the transformative education model is clear: curious learners who are allowed to explore a challenging environment, asking questions and imagining outcomes, become better equipped to positively transform the world around them. Transformative literacy environments can strive to challenge students with reading encounters that allow such personal and imaginative exploration.

6. Family Ties

For one summer, I worked as the assistant to a reading specialist of a non-profit program working with urban youth to combat summer learning loss. As a part of our program, we hosted a family night. Families would join their students to see the students' classrooms and meet all our staff. For the reading specialist and me, this evening presented the perfect chance to open up all of our reading activities to our families: we immediately started imagining the atmosphere we wanted for the evening. The more we imagined and planned, the more excited I got. We agreed that it had to feel very open, comfortable, and welcoming. We wanted lots of books scattered on our tables, but also spaces for families, students, and staff to gather together for activities. We designed every activity intentionally for any kind of family, with any kind of child: the activities could easily be scaled for all ages and abilities, with no special equipment or tools required. We wanted to welcome all of our families into a very open, lively, and shared space full of books, showing them how excited we were to be working with their children and them as these students learned to read. When our families started arriving, the flow through our activities was perfect: families and teachers gathered around our book area, talking about public library book lists positioned on the tables. The students guided their siblings in games that lined tables arranged by reading level, while parents perused sight word lists. Families wandered from one table to another together, talking amongst themselves and with teachers. We joined in conversations with students as they talked about the books we had been reading, but my favorite table housed our book making activity. As students taught their families how to make books like we had been doing during our reading groups, the adults smiled at the children's enthusiasm, teachers chatted casually while folding pages alongside parents, and younger siblings squealed when the final product was revealed. Families mingled together at the table, some speaking English, others not. Teachers laughed as the students showed them new ways to make the folded books. I hovered for only a moment before one kindergartener called me over to introduce me to her aunt as her the one who had been reading with her every day; the little girl continued scribbling words furiously into the brand-new folded book in front of her, only pausing to ask her aunt if she would make a book too. That table showed me everything that we had hoped the evening would bring: energy, learning,

enthusiasm, and sharing all focused on reading and books. The students, families, and teachers shared in meaningful activities that had intentional links to certain aspects of reading and encouraged playfulness as a part of learning to read. The atmosphere felt so open and vibrant, both of which were encouraged as much by our families and students as by any effort we made. This kind of evening of reading merriment made it clear to me that something was at work here that could be embraced by any literacy program: the simple act of opening the doors to families to share in our joy at reading with their students, to learn with their students and us, to feel their value as members of our organization's community. Everything we did that evening was characterized by our desire to express both a love of reading and a love for these students. As families sensed our openness to and validation of the vital role they were playing in the child's life, the sense of community we all felt that evening grew to take on more significance than perhaps anything else we did that night.

Indeed, that evening made it clear to me that including and valuing families in every aspect of students' reading experiences can only strengthen our capacity to ensure that those students become passionate, joyful, and successful readers. Families present just one outside influence who can encourage reading practices before a child even learns to read; other influences can also be key for developing an early love of reading before a child enters school. Every early literacy atmosphere can work to grow children who love reading, a goal that such educators as Atwell suggest should be the most important anyway. However, as I learned from my work that summer, families' views of their child as a reader matter a great deal. In one study from the Association for Library Service to Children and Public Library Association, a family's approach to reading to a child has "both short-term and long-term effects on language and literacy development" ("Every Child" 5). Taking more general evidence first, the Center on the Developing Child conducted brain research on children from birth to 14 years of age to show that in about the first six years of life, hundreds of new brain synapses are formed every second. However, these connections are reduced after that age based on experiences that can either reinforce those circuits or leave them unused ("Core Concepts in the Science of Early Childhood Development" 2). Thus, early reading environments take on even greater significance for their role in affecting the "nature and quality

of the brain's developing architecture" ("Every Child"). In many cases, the home becomes this central early reading environment; more detailed research on the home supports its valuable role in a child's reading process. Research from studies done in the UK indicates that the second strongest predictor of academic achievement by age seven is the home learning environment (Cullen 5). In an even more direct connection to reading, a study done by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child examined parental reading habits in the first three years; the study found that the greater the frequency of reading sessions between parent and child, the greater the gains for the child in vocabulary and cognitive ability ("The Effects" 1). The study looked specifically at mothers and children in an Early Head Start program that encouraged more frequent reading at home, revealing that by age 3, children had "significantly elevated language and cognitive scores" when their mothers had read to them daily during the preceding two years ("The Effects" 1). This finding is of course important, but does this parent reading time have any effect on fostering the child's love of reading as well? Simply, yes. The researchers concluded that perhaps the most important effect of this increased reading time with a parent was the "mutual 'snowball' effect:" as the child was exposed to more reading time, she began not only to grow in her reading ability but also to express more interest in reading, which led to more reading time with a parent ("The Effects" 1). This cycle includes the effect of the family's reading time on the child's love of reading: the child becomes more interested and invested in the reading time as the parent makes it a part of the daily routine, as evidenced through more talk and increased interest in books. ("The Effects" 2). The authors of the study aptly use the word "momentum" to describe this effect; through more frequent reading family reading sessions, momentum builds that encourages the child's reading growth; accordingly, entry into a preschool or kindergarten class might also be strengthened by this early start ("The Effects" 2). Family involvement in early literacy can help to create this momentum: a tangible process by which families constantly encourage children in their reading efforts and engage them in reading sessions.

Furthermore, families can build up their students as they are brought alongside educators; partnership and equality establish a consistent atmosphere for the student as she moves between home and school. Families and teachers thinking on the same level about the student's ultimate goals contributes to

a more stable, coherent atmosphere for a young reader. With each group providing input valued by the other, the transformative literacy environment implies that families and educators become partners in sharing the task of encouraging young readers. As in my experience during the family event, families responded very encouragingly to conversations where each group was given the chance to ask questions and share their thoughts: we asked them to tell us about how they share books with their child, while they asked us about the activities we did in our reading groups. We kept our event as an open, uncritical space for all of us to talk about books together—and perhaps more importantly, to talk about the students whose learning we all had as our primary concern. Lee's ideas of cultural modeling apply to building partnerships with families as well: cultural modeling identifies the "resources or repertoires" that every home atmosphere possesses, that every adult who closely and regularly interacts with a young student builds in the student (Lee xxiii). Educators who acknowledge families' cultural capital at the start of any literacy program make a space for partnership, for collaboration. Both educators and families become empowered to make their students' educations more cohesive and effective since both groups find that they can reflect, share and make change together. Considering families' "funds of knowledge" also supports the idea that families and educators together form a stronger educational unit than one group alone. Moll and his colleagues believe that "funds of knowledge represent a positive (and, we argue, realistic) view of households as containing ample cultural and cognitive resources with great, *potential* utility for classroom instruction" (Moll 134). They describe in a study on these funds of knowledge that "teachers" in a child's home atmosphere have the advantage of seeing the "whole" child: whether a mother, grandparent, family friend, or sibling, that teacher knows about the "multiple spheres of activity within which the child is enmeshed" (Moll 133-4). Contrastingly, a teacher at school only "knows" his student in that "limited classroom context" (134). Going beyond simply making acquaintances with those in the child's home or community who might know that child in a varied range of experiences offers teachers the opportunity to make a child's learning experience more unified. Similarly, for families, making intentional relationships with those teaching children in contexts other than the home offers the opportunity to build a consistent educational foundation for the child. As Moll and his colleagues suggest,

putting together these two factions that know the child holds definite benefits: in a literacy context, the child can learn to read across environments that acknowledge and value each other. Activities surrounding reading need not be identical in home and in school; indeed, Moll's, his colleagues', and Lee's all support the idea that home reading experiences will almost certainly take on their own tone and pace. Instead of devaluing either the home or the classroom form of reading encounters, the transformative model suggests that the two can work in partnership to create a more cohesive reading atmosphere for the young reader.

Chapter II: Practicing Collaboration and Reflection in the Community of Learners

1. A Community of Learners

The idea of a community of learners appears in McCaleb's work but is again inspired by her study of Friere's work. Examining McCaleb's use of the term might allow it to be most clearly and simply understood at first: the community of learners is created by practices that "transmit a faith in the human capacity for learning, critical reflection, and action to bring about change" (McCaleb 11). It is a community that joins in learning, that together encourages a mindset of openness, that respects the ideas of each member, and that acknowledges its own ability to transform its world for the better. Freire understood that creating communities open to learning together would enable democratic processes to happen more effectively. Barell picks up on this idea by linking it to community inquiry: "The nature of our lives in a democracy is predicated, at least in the abstract and the ideal, on a questioning citizenry" (Barell 131). When communities are learners, they are open to reflection and questioning. They can handle essay questions, not just multiple choice. Communities that are learners are ready to debate, to be questioned, to reflect. Freire's ideas emphasize that practices that involve all community members as learners open up communities to greater freedoms. Ultimately, a community of learners builds communities that are more democratic and more liberating for their citizens.

At the center of these practices, of course, is dialogue. Lee's work on cultural modeling presents evidence for the reasoning behind this community mindset. Her ideas on cultural modeling can be interwoven here quite smoothly to explain some of the reasoning behind the community of learners; Lee describes a curriculum design that focuses on drawing from the knowledges that students already possess in order to strengthen the impact of classroom instruction. Cultural modeling is her way to describe a set of pedagogies that use students' cultural knowledge. How does this thinking fit with the idea of a community of learners? First of all, cultural modeling focuses on validating the students' histories and realities. It seeks to form pedagogy that "draws explicitly on cultural displays of knowledge in everyday practice" (Lee 25). As with the idea of the community of learners, there is a "faith" in the capacity for learning and acquisition of knowledge; there is a simple belief that every member of a community has

some history to share. The community of learners validates its members. Furthermore, Lee's ideas of cultural modeling shape participation in educational settings so it will "enhance identity development and therefore engagement and persistence" (Lee 27). This focus on engagement and identity development are the crux of the ways in which the community of learners should also be structured. The community of learners is at its core deeply engaged in reflecting at every moment on its actions, purposes, and outcomes. It focuses on practices—like dialogue—that encourage and maintain an active involvement from every member. It demands this kind of involvement, since all members are equally interested in the group's goals and work.

Moreover, a community invested in education admits that it too is constantly learning—that it too is composed of learners. Just imagine a student meeting a community member who is open and willing to tell them that she is a learner, and is still learning. The student will not only feel a part of a larger intellectual community composed of diverse members, but also gain encouragement in pursuing learning throughout her life. As the community grows stronger, the advantages keep increasing for everyone involved: student engagement can grow, but so can the community's sense that it has a vital part in the education of all its young students. Research has just begun to show the effects of programs working towards a community that can collectively acknowledge co-participation in the learning process. Working with young urban children in Washington, D.C., and Chicago, William H. Teale et al. began a program to "motivate children to engage in authentic literacy activities across the curriculum while also teaching them higher-level thinking, composing, and comprehension skills" (Teale 499). Using community members who act as pen pals, the program engages students through allowing them to choose books to read and then write about in letters to their adult partner. Classroom instruction then supports the critical reading, writing, and questioning that happen throughout the process of the exchange. Their preliminary research examined a total of 2,000 students in the program and a total of 8,500 students not in the program in grades two through fourth. For students of veteran In2Books teachers, SAT-9 reading test scores were "statistically significantly higher in reading" than control students; first-year In2Books students also "scored significantly higher in grades 3 and 4 than students in non-In2Books classrooms"

(500). Interestingly, Teale and his colleagues emphasize that this program used "a curriculum that deliberately avoided didactic test-preparation exercises in favor of authentic, challenging literacy instruction" focused on dialogue with adult community pen pals, exposure to many genres of literature through book choice, read-alouds with teachers, and independent questioning of texts to compose a reply to the community pen pal (500). Teale and his colleagues also emphasize that the program's advantages are seen through not only higher standardized test scores, but also the provision of "many more opportunities to read and write for authentic purposes across content areas" (501). Here Teale and his colleagues point to the crux of this study's implications for the community of learners: these advantages as noted by Teale and his colleagues become possible through the "notion of the classroom and the pen pals as a learning community" (501). These researchers explain their aim "to establish a community of children, teachers, and other adults who read, talk, and write together in ways that enhance their understanding of the world they share. Such a focus helped all participants feel that were contributing and valuable members of the overall community" (501). As the program "emphasized learning from one another and the benefits of a cooperative approach," students' experiences not only resulted in more engaging and joyful encounters with reading and writing, but also in higher standardized test scores (501). The pen pals "demonstrated that the learning community did not stop at the walls of the classroom or the school" (501). McCaleb's and Lee's work speaks to this idea: learning, when most effective, includes everyone. In this research project, students were given the opportunity to see learning taking place within and across a community. The project revealed to these students that their community values learning, responds to its members' curiosities, and engages everyone in caring relationships that make it possible to reflect upon their world.

Integration as a model to build stronger community literacy work comes from the ideas of emergent literacy, a term that speaks to children's knowledge of reading and writing before they enter school. Emergent literacy focuses on children's abilities as they move from home to school; Makin uses the word "transition" to speak to the changes the children face as they begin to work on reading skills in a school atmosphere (Makin 73). Almost inherent in the definition of emergent literacy is the belief that

children have a sum of knowledge that they bring to the learning that will begin in their school classroom (Strickland 19). Emergent literacy also acknowledges the influence of a child's learning space—whatever it might look like—before the classroom; homes, daycares, libraries, and preschools all form part of the community that children experience in their early years as exposure to language, reading, and writing moves in their awareness (Strickland 19). As students grow as learners, they enter school with the abilities that this early childhood community has given them. Makin acknowledges the greater debate within emergent literacy about the relationship between home and educational settings (73). She emphasizes that children's transition from the community within which they began to learn to read or write to a school atmosphere cannot put pressure on homes or community settings to change to fit a "skills and drills" approach (Makin 74). She writes in detail about this transition phase: "Shared understandings about children's literacy experiences, both at home and in the early childhood setting, can inform transition programs so that children's current experiences become the starting point for the next stage of the literacy journey" (74). The idea of transition programs fits with my thinking about collaboration for community programs in general: early literacy development revolves around not only the capabilities of a kindergarten classroom, but also the strength of the programs that help develop those children's literacy skills before they even get to the classroom. Those programs are all, in a way, transition programs; they all help move a student from home to classroom. Some of the programs, such as the library's Imagination Library or community tutoring programs, continue developing students even after they enter school and move from level to level. Looking at local literacy programs as influences on the child's transition to reading work in a school atmosphere enhances the idea that those programs can share understandings of the work they do to encourage a love of reading.

These communities of learners can also spearhead collaborative efforts amongst all of the entities involved in helping grow strong readers. Collaboration and the community of learners enliven each other: a community of learners pushes itself to take on a more collaborative mindset towards the educational work happening in the community, since all views and experiences represent a valuable aspect of learning and growing. Furthermore, collaboration reinforces and re-energizes the community of learners, ensuring

their focus on moving forward together to best prepare their children to love reading and succeed in reading.

2. Learning Through Dialogue: Case Studies and Conversations on Local Literacy Programs

In the spirit of collaboration, and with a strong sense of hope about the accomplishments possible from moving forward together, I approached local literacy programs to hear about their methods, aims, experiences, challenges, strengths, and concerns. I talked with a range of those whom I classify as educators: in this name, I include librarians, teachers, parents, involved community members, and coordinators of community organizations. I think of all of these people as educators: they all actively contribute to the education of this community's young students. They all have valuable perspectives to offer, and thus the case studies I composed needed to begin with their words on doing literacy work in this community. As part of a community of educators, they gave me time to ask questions, explore their views, and observe their work with kids. These case studies represent my conversations and experiences as I engaged with these educators about instilling a love of reading, teaching reading, involving families, and working collaboratively with other educators. The reflection following the case studies pulls out patterns I found across conversations, while also bringing attention to my moments of surprise or novelty. I like to think of these educators as already forming a base for a community of learners. These case studies represent my belief that I only learn through listening and that, as a community, we learn only through listening. These educators teach me, but they also have the power to teach many others—including one another.

Local Public Library

I met with an early literacy librarian at the Putnam County Public Library, with the special role of working with early childhood literacy. We met to talk about the library's involvement in literacy in the community, and she shared her work to encourage a love of reading through the library's programming for early readers. She described current library programming for children ages birth to five, noting that the American Library Association (ALA), specifically the Public Library Association (PLA) and Association

for Library Service to Children (ALSC), emphasizes reading activities in this age range to increase later literacy success. She believes in the necessity of reading to children as soon as they are born: she cites research on a principle called "use it or lose it" in which "early experiences affect the nature and quality of the brain's developing architecture by determining which circuits are reinforced and which are pruned through lack of use" (qtd. in Every Child Ready to Read @ your Library Training Binder). This early literacy librarian stressed the importance of "circle times" that use dialogic reading, as well as parent-child read-aloud time. The library has on-going age-specific story times for ages two to three and three to five. She hopes to implement programming for children from birth to twelve months in order to reach the whole spectrum of ages. She stressed the importance of getting children into reading right from birth; library programs emphasize literacy from birth with the PLA and ALSC model "Every Child Ready to Read."

Every Child Ready to Read revolves around five practices for families that PLA and ALSC have simplified from earlier models: talk, sing, read, write, and play. By breaking up the kinds of activities to which children need to be exposed in early childhood, PLA and ALSC hoped to make it less daunting for parents to find ways to incorporate these elements into their daily interactions with their children. This early literacy librarian stressed that these five simple practices encourage families to think about literacy from birth to school. Her storytimes model these five practices for parents while engaging children in pleasurable reading experiences.

This early literacy librarian also described the program "Countdown to Kindergarten" undertaken at a previous library. This program, set up as a kind of activity fair, incorporated the five elements for families of strong early literacy development into five different tables or activity centers. It was a sort of open house for school readiness, but was not limited to families only with children entering kindergarten. It worked as a way to share skills, give away books, have conversations, and welcome families with food. It was community-wide, and this librarian thought that it would work best if held in a community center separate from the library. Because story times at the library reach only a certain demographic that might not represent the whole community or convey the whole community's needs, she felt that a very open

atmosphere would make this kind of program successful in Putnam County. Such a program might feel more open and welcoming if held outside of the library. The program would focus again on encouraging reading and literacy activities from birth to age five, engaging families with staff trained in these aspects of early childhood education.

The Imagination Library also holds an important place as a community program that recently changed the local library's outreach to families to provide books for early readers. An interview with an intern, whose work focused on collecting data on Imagination Library and administering the program for the summer of its second year, provided the context for studying this program. In Putnam County, the program has reached nearly one thousand children since 2011, and the intern described its success in reaching a wide demographic of participants ("Imagination Library").

Founded by Dolly Parton in her hometown in Tennessee in 1996, Imagination Library became a national organization in 2000. It focuses on getting books into homes to encourage families' daily reading to their children. By working with local partners such as libraries, community foundations and United Ways, the program delivers a book a month to children in the community from birth to age 5. Using the words "inspiration and imagination" to sum up main themes, the website for the organization also recognizes as key concepts "love of reading and learning; regard for diversity of people, their roles, culture, and environment; promotion of self-esteem and confidence, appreciation of art and aesthetics" (*Dolly Parton's Imagination Library*). Through encouraging parents to read to their children frequently by providing monthly gifts of books, Imagination Library sees itself as strengthening the impact of the classroom when children reach school age and ultimately allowing the child to dream bigger because of that exposure to books.

The intern described the goals of the Putnam County program idealistically: Imagination Library works to increase children's opportunities, and more broadly, to improve their quality of life. Parton's own experiences shaped her work to connect reading to the freedom to dream about the larger possibilities of one's life. The Imagination Library was Parton's idea to encourage that dreaming and

seeking of goals. The intern described Parton as choosing to engage in programming that focused on literacy, parent involvement, and the home environment to help encourage children in that dreaming.

The Dollywood Foundation is the overarching organization that controls all local programs. The intern admired the program's structure because it requires the entire community's involvement. Since the local community must first want to bring the program to its area as well as take responsibility for advertising, registering children, paying for the books, and fundraising, it really takes a "constant effort," she said. She noted the relatively low threshold that the community must reach to have the program: it must find a community partner that is a 501(c)3 and be able to pay the $25/child/year. Nevertheless, once established, the program requires a good amount of community support. PCPL has supported its program through a Putnam County Community Foundation grant, and has also received a significant commitment from the Friends of the Library. Donations and fundraisers from other groups such as DePauw University and local churches support another part of the program's costs, as do grants such as the Operation Round-Up grant from Hendricks County. The intern notes that the broad donor list from Putnam County signals a great deal of local support for this sort of program.

Local Elementary Educators

One literacy coordinator and coach for a local school system allowed me to explore the work that she is doing to meet all students' needs throughout their literacy development. As literacy coach and coordinator, she trains teachers in the Literacy Collaborative model, working with them to teach them the model's strategies. After receiving a need-based grant to rework the school system's literacy programming, the school system adopted the Literacy Collaborative model. The grant provided for teacher training and support. The Literacy Collaborative model is based on the work of Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, giving a three-block framework to organize instruction: Language and Word Study, Reading Workshop, and Writing Workshop; these three blocks adjust to fit primary (k-2), intermediate (3-5), and middle (6-8) levels (Fountas). She cited Literacy Collaborative as shaping the schools' literacy programs. As described on its website, Literacy Collaborative provides "development of a school leadership team, training for a school-based literacy coach, a comprehensive instructional literacy

framework, and tiered instruction to meet the needs of all students" ("Literacy Collaborative Standards"). Two schools in the system are in the implementation phase for the three-block model. The literacy coordinator also acknowledges the influence of educators Lucy Calkins, Linda Hoyt, Debbie Miller, and Debbie Diller in building programming for her classrooms. One programming model the system uses allows managed independent learning, where students are taught skills and then expected to apply them. The system also uses a "running records" form of assessment that takes place in all classrooms with every teacher. Classroom instruction also includes whole group instruction, which allows teachers to instruct, turn and talk, then guide students in practice. The literacy coordinator also pointed to the Storytown textbook that teachers use, supplemented by other books, to meet the students' needs and state standards. This coordinator emphasized that the 90-minute state-mandated literacy block allows the uninterrupted minutes during the day for reading work, but that the strategies in use during this time must be "gradual release" and strongly research-based for the minutes to matter.

Outside of this literacy block, intervention for the students most in need also forms a large part of the work that this coordinator handles. Those most in need receive additional time with literacy work in small groups according to resources that the coordinator uses, such as *Fountas & Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention System*. Schools connect with Title I students and their families as federal law requires. To encourage home reading strategies, the Response to Intervention team reaches out to families of students who may not be responding well to intervention. This literacy coordinator sees ongoing challenges in reaching intervention students; meeting their needs specifically in oral language development and phonemic awareness proves difficult. She described three tiers of intervention methods that the system continues to adapt according to ongoing needs instruction, small groups of intervention students, and individual or partner-based instruction. She found that the need for readdressing intervention strategies appeared across classroom observations, running records on language structure difficulties, and small group and individual intervention observations showing lack of response to intervention on phonemic awareness. This literacy coordinator has implemented new instruction programs, while she continues to address more intensive intervention with small groups and individual/partner work.

The literacy coordinator continued to describe her perspective on family involvement, which she views as a successful bridge between school programming/classrooms and families. She strives to make communication two-way in order to make families feel comfortable as part of a team working to move the child forward in learning to read. Family involvement in this school system includes Title I contact, monthly Title I newsletters, weekly teacher newsletters, student take-home folders, and such PTO events as a family dinner and literacy event. Other system-wide initiatives such as School Improvement Team meetings, District Leadership Team meetings, and monthly activities encourage family participation in the schools. Teacher conferences with all parents happen across the schools in the fall. In the spring, teachers can schedule conferences as needed. Certain literacy initiatives also seek families' involvement: one such program encourages reading at home using calendars for families to track the nights they read with their students. The PTO manages this initiative. Families also receive reading level sheets from teachers; these sheets show a numbered and lettered spectrum marked by instructors for a student's reading level. This sheet requires a signature from families and also includes a place for teachers' comments. Another informational sheet for families outlines a process of reading that encourages questioning for comprehension; it also gives non-fiction and fiction comprehension rubrics, detailing the elements and levels of reading comprehension.

Other collaborative efforts in the school system include several programs that the coordinator mentioned. She feels that the system is progressive for a primary school in the ways it works to find best practices, carry out professional development, and implement programs to meet students' needs. One current effort she sees as collaboration studies the Lindamood Bell LiPS program with the speech and language teacher, special education teachers, Title I interventionists, and the literacy coordinator. Collaboration with the library has also proven successful with a visiting author program and book design workshop with students. The coordinator also noted that the school has always supported and encouraged the library's summer reading program.

My conversations in this same school system continued with a second-grade teacher, whose ideas of holistic teaching aligned with her focus on making reading encounters meaningful to her students. This

teacher described her preferred teaching methods as fitting in well right now with the school corporation's expectations for its teachers, using the uninterrupted 90-minute literacy block mandated by the state to incorporate both whole group lessons and independent reading group work. Within this required reading time, the school corporation also expects teachers to use leveled reading groups. She felt that her teaching methods mesh well with these expectations, and the reading groups allow students to work at their own level. By the end of second grade, the students build up to working independently for 45-50 minutes. How quickly the students build their reading stamina depends upon both social maturity and reading development. She described that process as having many little pieces that in the end determine how long the students will be able to read independently. The leveled reading groups are measured and re-measured, allowing teachers to push students forward while also giving struggling students the space to keep improving. She likes this system because it is how she would choose to teach anyway; she liked aspects of the current system because they allow more individualization. She fits her views about the use of reading groups into a larger context, explaining that kids cannot blossom and grow into a lover of reading if they feel often discouraged or disheartened during the school day. She noted that the school continues to seek better strategies for working with readers needing extra literacy guidance: these readers currently have an extra 40 minutes per day of literacy work, but she finds that this method might add to the frustration of struggling readers or burn them out. At the other end of the spectrum, she pointed out that it is not healthy for strong readers to be bored during a reading time either. With a combination of a skill-specific, whole group lesson taught to the class according to grade standards and the leveled reading groups shaped according to students' abilities, this teacher feels that she has flexibility to teach students what they need to know. During reading groups, she can work with high-ability readers on figurative language or assist struggling readers with decoding words. She spoke to the delicate balancing act of getting both proficient and struggling readers to love reading. Both sets of readers pose certain challenges to instilling that love: skilled readers become frustrated with reading when they cannot comprehend more complex language uses. Frustrating high ability readers can make them lose their love of reading, which right now she feels they all possess. Similarly, struggling readers who cannot easily handle 90 minutes of

sustained reading work become frustrated and can lose the love of reading through a lack of relief of that frustration. This teacher sees the ability of leveled groups to meet all of her students' needs, while also let her focus on maintaining her students' love of reading.

The teacher described several kinds of reading encounters that happen in her classroom. The teacher argues that in order to develop a love of either reading or learning, students need to feel a sense of ownership over that reading and learning. Especially with students uninterested in reading, ownership becomes especially important. Although she also has to teach her students stamina to read books they do not get to pick, even giving students a choice among a few selected books makes a difference. Her students have chances to make careful books choices because she wants them all to have motivation to work to read it. She feels that the mere agency of choosing a book can really motivate many children who see their life as something ordered for them. She noted that motivation for reading can become a barrier to a productive reading time; she again finds that emphasizing her students' interests in her own classroom library collection allows students to find a topic that can motivate them. The PTO buys books for the classrooms, and she chooses books about which her students tell her. A major challenge remains motivating both less interested and less confident students to read. For both advanced and struggling readers, this teacher noted that sometimes a door has been closed: school has been either too easy or too hard. She believes that students really own all of their learning, and by letting her students feel this ownership, that door can be opened again. Explaining that teachers and parents can let kids grow through having ownership over their learning, she finds that second grade shows students more of the power they have over their own life.

This teacher also stressed another aspect of the reading encounters in her classroom: the reading time that happens outside of the 90-minute block. She spoke to her students' passion for science activities, activities that motivate her students to keep pushing themselves. She pointed out importantly that her students take risks, try new things, when they feel that those activities are outside "reading" or "math" or "writing." She notes that when she is ready to take breaks from the regular 90-minute reading block activities, she combines reading with science. She might focus on a study that allows her students a

choice: one such study included a biography project on a person of the student's choosing. Even though the 90-minute block is mandated by the state as designated "reading" time, this teacher also admits that her students do not realize that reading really happens all day in every other context. Writing work is putting sentences together to be read, math work includes story problems, and science work also involves reading texts to get information. From her students' perspectives, when "reading" time ends, reading is over. She manages her students' feelings by creating other projects in science or social studies that involve reading: students become more motivated and willing to take risks for projects that feel outside of the set "reading" time.

During this conversation of her classroom's reading encounters, the teacher also shared with me her experience in involving families in her classroom work. She stressed building a bridge between homes and classroom that allows open communication. Parents should feel like school is a positive place; especially when students face more challenges in school, maintaining that positivity with families can take more effort. She emphasized that keeping a very open, positive relationship with parents becomes vital to helping struggling readers especially move forward. She finds it challenging that family dynamics seem to have shifted in the last 15 years of her teaching: the value of reading as a family seems to have decreased. She noted that some parents are readers, and some are not; regardless, she sends home activities for families with specific instructions but never with anything that might insult someone's abilities. She explained that activities sent home without any specific aim only prompt families to shut down if they do not understand the purpose of the activity; if the child notices that reaction, then the child might shut down as well. She stressed addressing families always with dignity and respect, a mode of communication she notes must first come through having a positive relationship with her students' families. Another difficulty she finds herself facing comes with the changes in families' schedules. She finds that there are often so many distractions for families now, and schedules are very different now for families who work all kinds of jobs and shifts. For this area specifically, this teacher commented on the extremity of the socio-economic spectrum; she feels that few families fall in the middle, which might result in altered classroom environments. She noted that the general changes to family dynamics in recent

years seem to have created some of the challenges that she faces in involving families. She strives to provide positive reasons for families to visit the school and have experiences with their children at school that can help break down unwanted barriers.

I also had the chance to talk with a teacher who also coordinates a local non-profit for an elementary school. In her work with gifted students at the elementary level, this teacher emphasizes her role in making sure they feel supported and motivated, especially in reading. This teacher contextualized our conversation by sharing her view of reading: reading is thinking. We should see reading as a way of thinking rather than as a skill. This educator believes that the public education system redefines reading, turning it into a subject composed of worksheets, multiple-choice tests, and strictly skills-based activities. High-ability students often enter school either knowing how to read already or pick up reading very quickly. Encountering a version of reading in the public education system that might not challenge or engage them, these students are at risk of becoming disenchanted and bored. The teacher feels the urgency of conveying that reading is more than skills to high-ability students especially, since for them, reading can be everything: it allows them an escape, a way to solve problems, a way to be understood. Reading is often their solution to not always feeling understood. However, this teacher often encounters proficient readers who claim that they do not like reading; she senses their frustration with the reading that is done in their classrooms. To these students, "reading" acquires a negative status. Hearing this disavowal of the subject by gifted readers, the teacher believes that classroom "reading" work might actually hurt students' drive to read. In the current public school system, reading time too often focuses on work that shapes students to perform well on basic skill or simple comprehension tests. Teachers then feel that giving students time to read becomes a luxury they cannot afford. Many of this teacher's methods put time for reading and access to a variety of books at the focal point; with her high-ability students especially, she believes in a more hands-off approach that gives them the luxury of reading for pure pleasure. If harnessed effectively by educators, that pleasure encourages students to think more frequently and deeply about reading. This approach supports her underlying belief that reading is

thinking. While she uses this belief to prioritize a love of reading, she admits that community literacy programs and curricula often do not do the same.

As an educator who also takes a role in a non-profit collaboration, this teacher expressed her concerns that collaboration remains challenging. Communication with teachers about their classroom curricula proves difficult, as does matching curricula most effectively to arts programming. She imagines collaborative projects that could approach topics more globally across subjects and grades. Collaborative projects have the potential to align and reinforce the messages that teachers want to send their students. By offering a project that integrates curricular themes, schools could give students unity instead of the disjointedness they often face. This educator envisions a collaborative program that lessens teachers' sense that by taking time away from material needed for tests it poses a risk; a viable program would also cost nothing to schools and have data to ensure its support from administration. Finally, she finds the need for collaboration that allows articulation among teachers; instead of posing one person as the "specialist" simply directing teachers' actions, collaboration could let teachers' share and understand each other's curricula.

Community Members

I had one of my earliest conversations for my project with a community member who has worked for years in early childhood development. Her experiences range from working with children with severe developmental needs to beginning a literacy tutoring program. She began our conversation by detailing for me her view of the kind of instruction that will successfully teach students to read. She described a pendulum of instructional approaches: one side represents whole language and the other phonics. Instruction most effectively emphasizes both explicit phonics instruction and quality literature experiences when the pendulum rests in the middle. That teaching would include good instruction using good literature, a consistent, one-on-one relationship with the student that encourages a love of literature, and explicit instruction in alphabetic phonics. However, she believes that the current public school system offers no way for all three conditions to co-exist; the design of the current system prevents it from

meeting all three conditions. She explained her view that these three pieces are often the least available to the students who most need them. This educator sees aspects of offering good literature, consistent individual relationships, and explicit phonics instruction missing from local schools not because of a deficit or problem at that level, but because of a larger, systemic problem affecting all public school systems. She noticed that alphabetic phonics are not taught explicitly, and the relational aspect is also missing. She stressed consistency as a major factor in forming relationships that lead to a love of reading, but finds consistency lacking in many public schools. She also emphasized the importance of students' reading with the same person regularly on a one-on-one basis in order for trust to be built between the student and adult. If working with the same child regularly, the adult can begin to know the student's strengths, weaknesses, needs, and challenges. In designing her tutoring program, she explicitly built in one-on-one instruction, asserting its importance to both learning to read and loving to read. She also spoke to some of one major need she has seen in her work with local schools: many children are not used to having books in the home. She thinks that obstetricians could play an important role by encouraging expectant mothers to form the habit of reading to their child even while the child is in utero. Once the habit is formed, then it would not be a difficult jump to continue that reading to the baby once she is born.

This educator also described models for involving families that respect, acknowledge, and validate them. With certain populations whose children might be the most in need, time and money are critical, she said. Above all, a literacy program, in reaching out to families, must first stress the relationship it has with the child. She believes that programs should clearly tell families: We love your children, and we care about how they grow as learners. Part of reaching families, this educator pointed out, is providing emotional support to them. Just as children need emotional sustenance, so do the families. Programs can support families by acknowledging the valuable role they play in their children's education. She imagined programs that might provide dinner, offer a movie for children, and give families home literacy materials while still affirming for families' the value of their involvement. She does not feel that schools now are in a position to create programs that can really involve families as effectively as possible; she pointed out the increasing needs and decreasing resources that hinder schools' abilities to

provide these kinds of programs. She feels that PTAs could step in, and they often do. She noted that having staff present at such events creates greater opportunities to bring staff and families together non-confrontationally. Schools and PTAs might worry about not reaching those who could really benefit from such a night, but she pointed out that a program will inevitably fail to reach all families. In that case, someone, whether a staff member or PTA member, could reach out to visit families who were unable to attend the event. She feels that such events could strive to remove pressure from families and lessen the amount of energy they might put into worrying about dinner or their children, instead creating a supportive and compassionate atmosphere.

Sharing these ideas for how programs might engage families, this educator referred to many other possibilities to involve both families and their home reading practices in literacy instruction. She mentioned the possibility that a simple questionnaire could let families share knowledge about their children. Questions might include:

- What is their child's favorite book?
- When are they most frequently able to read to their child?
- What is their child's favorite TV show?
- When they read, is there one book that the child wants read repeatedly?
- In what ways does the child remember a repeated story or join in?
- Why is a certain book special to your child?

Covering topics in a simple note would allow teachers able to form even better relationships with their students—they simply have more from which to build. From that point, teachers could group students by similar favorite books or tv shows; they could have students make books telling their favorite stories and then have children "read" aloud to each other the stories they invent. A second step involves sending home others notes with suggestions to parents based on the children's preferences.

When asked to envision spaces that build the love of reading, this educator responded with various ideas for fostering one-on-one relationships, including alphabetic phonics, and exposing children to quality literature. She imagined this possible space for a class or three year olds: a classroom filled with

accessible books. This ideal classroom promotes, values, and respects children's work by letting them also create their own books. Instruction starts with predict-and-remember reading, and frequent read-alouds prompt students to ask and answer questions. With care and instruction from the teacher, one-on-one read-alouds build consistent relationships between the children and the teacher. Anyone assisting a child in learning to read maintains a consistent role in that child's reading journey. Promoting trust between the adult reading figure and the child results in the child using less energy acting defensively during reading sessions, instead letting the child enjoy the experience more. From predict-and-remember reading, instruction would progress to sound matching and awareness activities, rhyming, breaking apart words that they hear and repeating them, tracing letters, and moving tiles around. Engaging all different senses as children learn to read, this ideal classroom structure allows students to develop many possible neural paths: auditory, speech, movement, memory. This educator shared her definition of literacy with me as we finished our conversation. When children become literate, they acquire an understanding and love of language as used in its written form to communicate one's ideas, thoughts, and creativity.

Working in cooperation with local elementaries while also involving a range of community members, one local Parent Teacher Organization also invests heavily in literacy work. This group welcomes teachers and families, in the hope of supporting teachers in any way possible. The PTO co-president and literacy night chairperson described the relationship as one of love and care: she explained that the PTO aims to provide whatever kind of support teachers need. The PTO coordinates several of the literacy initiatives at the school, handling also family events such as back to school dinners and holiday events. Perhaps the one event most related to literacy is the family literacy night, which happens in the spring. The PTO also sponsors a calendar-based reading program, which encourages families to read together at least 20 minutes a night, marking those nights on a calendar that is returned to the teacher. Students get prizes for completing all of the nights in a month, and these incentives aim to encourage increased family reading.

She spoke with me about the family literacy night after I attended it, allowing me to see her perspective on the work she does to make that night possible, the main goals of that event, and the

challenges of bringing families together. As she planned this year's event, she imagined activities that both promote reading and offer enjoyable ways for families to work through literacy skills. Through a series of classrooms set up with game and activity stations, the co-president, who is also an involved parent, sees the evening as a chance for families to easily spend time thinking about literacy in a way that includes the whole family. Events at this year's evening included a free dinner with book-themed foods, a session on writing with a local author, and a bingo game with books for prizes. Three classrooms were designated with leveled activities to target a range of readers from beginning to advanced, with DePauw students running the games and activities; some of these activities involved composing mini-books, matching rhyming words, tracing letters in rice, using pictures to make a story, and putting letters together to make words. Giveaways and food always help draw in families, the chairperson added. The event was communicated through posters and flyers, but she described the challenges of getting families in for events since many families have very tight and busy evening schedules. Busyness and scheduling are the two main challenges she sees for engaging families.

Explaining the realities of the PTO's work, the co-president shared several challenges with me that she feels make both literacy work and engaging families more difficult. First, success with the Super Readers initiative has not been as rapid as its coordinator thought it would be because families are often so overbooked and busy. She also felt concern about the diminishing time families have to spend reading or speaking with their children. The co-president also noted that families have no designated way to offer feedback on either the Family Literacy Night or the Super Readers program, except through the PTO Facebook page. Finally, she also raised another point: PTOs do not communicate or collaborate between the schools. She commented that the relationship between PTO and teachers at the school is easy to maintain; however, making a PTO-to-PTO relationship between schools in the system is hard. No explicit system-wide structure exists for communication between PTOs at different schools, even though she senses that there would definitely be an interest in such collaboration. Each PTO is its own entity, she remarked, and it would probably take one leader to make the effort to create that kind of collaboration and pathway for dialogue. However, she connected the need for one person to step forward to lead such

collaboration with the challenge she has faced in getting families to step forward to lead other events: she sees the difficulty in both of these situations as rooted in the increased demands placed on families' schedules—whether those demands relate to the students' extracurricular activities or the adults' work obligations.

3. Reflections

I heard echoes in these conversations of particular concerns, hopes, needs, and ideas. The significance of my role as a listener now becomes clear: the patterns I saw, my own moments of surprise, can begin to construct a meaningful framework for thinking through the kinds of reading encounters offered by these programs. I point out a few key ideas that emerged: two categories of reading, concerns with intervention, the necessity of consistent, loving relationships, and missing collaboration among programs and with families.

One pattern across these conversations involves two definitions of "reading": one category speaks to state curricular standards; another to pleasurable, imaginative, challenging, and personal experiences with books. One educator explicitly acknowledged her feeling that a link between classroom "reading" experiences and personal reading experiences is missing; she senses that the current educational system creates reading experiences that push students away from loving reading. Another conversation with a teacher from a different school also brought up the fact that students will act differently with actual reading activities when those activities are not classified as "reading" time. One teacher noted that tests cannot measure a student's love of reading, and the push towards tests has resulted in classrooms that often fill reading time with worksheets, drills, and basic comprehension. Yet as Murnane, Sawhill and Snow attest, basic comprehension—what they call "the simple view" of comprehension—does not appropriately prepare students for "reading to learn, to synthesize, to analyze, and to critique" (7). The second kind of reading takes a critical mode; it allows a deeper personal connection to books and encourages a personal love of reading. One educator identified this kind of reading as a privilege that teachers can give students, but this reading is not shallow or unrooted. This second category of reading

fits into one educator's comments about reading as a way of thinking. Enjoying a reading experience lets students "read to think." From both my conversations and classroom observations, classrooms might be experiencing an over-emphasis on basic comprehension or similar methods that create this split definition of reading. Computerized reading quiz programs appear at several different elementaries I have visited. One morning as I helped a kindergarten student with one of these quizzes, she asked, "Why do I have to take these?" This student, already a proficient reader when she entered kindergarten, was being asked by the quiz something similar to "what color scarf did the boy wear on Tuesday?" In light of this and other "basic comprehension" questions on the quiz, I had a hard time answering her question, because I felt that perhaps taking those quizzes was not the best way to keep encouraging this student to read. If those quiz programs take up class time, are they effectively instilling the deeper skills needed for a more complex, "more authentic and more challenging" comprehension (Murnane 7)? Barell stresses asking questions of the patterns and status quo; questioning even the most well-intentioned efforts to get children reading might prove extremely beneficial to developing programs that actually do motivate children to love reading. (Barell 123-24). I started questioning the two categories of reading emerging from my conversations, and I sensed the friction a teacher might feel who wants to both instill a love of reading and follow overarching curricular standards.

Another pattern showed that many of these educators share concerns about students who require intervention. One teacher noted that some students may perhaps need more concentrated attention or a longer time period to learn to read successfully; these students require support not only in basic reading skills, but also in building their a personal love of reading. A love of reading motivates students to struggle with a challenging text patiently, to grapple with both difficult technical skills and unfamiliar subject matter. The love of reading builds the foundation for students' willingness to be patient with their own developing reading skills; by understanding reading as an activity that they love, they will be primed to understand the importance of working diligently to learn to read. Students who perhaps are experiencing more struggles than the average student, and certainly more difficulties than a high-ability student, would undoubtedly need a great deal of encouragement in loving reading. Simply because

learning to read will be a harder process for those students, they need the extra concentration of encouragement that consistently says, loving reading is our goal, loving reading is valuable and necessary. Educators with whom I talked seemed to acknowledge that strategies for intervention with struggling readers are undergoing and still requiring revision.

Many educators also mentioned the relational aspect of learning to read and learning to love reading. One educator emphasized that students need one consistent person with whom they can form a trusting relationship and who encourages their love of reading in every interaction they have. Several of the early elementary teachers mentioned that laptime or one-on-one time is unparalleled in growing a passionate reader, whether the adult reader be a parent or a volunteer, teacher, or other community member. One educator specifically classified this reading relationship as loving: The value of relationship in reading resonates with my experiences of working in a classroom: the students are so eager for any relationship with DePauw students. However, since consistency seemed to be a significant part of effective reading relationships in the thoughts of these educators, are DePauw students effectively set up to take on this kind of role? Could there be ways to continue increasing the strength of volunteer reading relationships? One educator explicitly noted that consistent relationships with adult volunteers in classrooms are not always possible. Literacy programs' relational patterns and structures deserve further thought.

A conversation with one educator surprised me with her honest admittance of the utter lack of collaboration in the literacy landscape in Putnam County. She sees a lot of literacy work happening, but not as effectively as possible because of missing collaborations. This educator commented on literacy's position as a key educational issue, but stressed the singular message groups send out: "Here is what WE do to promote literacy." She mentioned many groups' wonderful work, nonetheless admitting that they often focus on their individual goals instead of on opportunities for integration or collaboration. Multiple educators admitted that programs may be aware of each other's missions but hardly center their work on a single literacy vision. Although each program contributes its own model and definition of literacy, the programs do not effectively recognize each other's work from a standpoint of integrated literacy

development. Each one has something valuable to add to the literacy landscape, yet may not fully understand other programs' contributions. Does each program validate other programs' work? How do programs understand each other's ultimate vision for the community's young readers, and is this vision shared? Many educators with whom I talked took comprehensive approaches to their teaching; they strove to develop the student a whole, taking into account all of the influences that shaped that student and using those influences to develop a deep, critical thinker. How much more effective might all literacy programs be if they approached building lovers of reading as a way to develop the whole student? By validating the many different influences on students' learning to read and to love it, programs can strengthen the literacy community's capacity to use resources more effectively and, importantly, nurture more critical readers.

It seems challenging for educators to incorporate all of the elements of the transformative framework into their literacy work. However, this transformative model implies fundamentally that learning is a community process, that raising strong young students requires more than just strong schools. McCaleb focuses this idea: "Education takes place within the community context" (42). Therefore, community programs and schools can share the management of education in a way that supports community members, teachers, and students alike as learners. In a community of learners, education allows examining, questioning, strengthening, and sharing the community space. If seen as part of a community of learners, various literacy programs and schools no longer have to stand individually, becoming instead collaborative co-participants working towards a shared literacy goal. They strengthen all young students by forming an integrated front to meet educational needs, use the community as a context for learning, and partner with all members in the learning process. From my conversations, I began to understand why integration or a shared literacy vision might be missing in this community; decreased financial resources, pressure from testing requirements, poverty in the area, and changed family dynamics all emerged as challenges for many literacy programs. Even existing collaborative efforts seem to struggle to stay consistent or focused on a shared literacy vision.

McCaleb's concept of the community of learners offers hope for strengthening all literacy work in the community. Since many programs already do valuable work, what might open up the space for

educators to find a shared literacy vision? If programs clearly understand each others' hopes for young readers, would they be more encouraged to build more consistent collaboration? The community of learners acknowledges the value of each member's background; in what space could this recognition take place in this community? A community of learners also includes families, and though McCaleb sees much of the burden resting on teachers to pull families into this community, I feel that community programs outside of the schools offer great hope for drawing families into literacy work. Perhaps one of the greatest questions we can ask as a community invested in creating strong readers involves questioning Freire's simple word "of": are literacy initiatives in this community "of" the students, families, teachers, librarians, non-profit leaders, and interested community members? Questioning both the ownership and shared vision of our literacy initiatives offers a way for us to unite and strengthen our work.

Chapter III: Working Towards A Shared Literacy Vision

1. Grassroots

The term "grassroots" has gradually taken on new meaning for me in the course of this project as I realized its relevance to my thesis: grassroots efforts acknowledge the value of the voices on the ground and the need for collective responsibility. My thesis draws on this understanding of grassroots by fundamentally including many educators' voices and creating a collaborative space for validating these voices. Real transformation can come from simply hearing these voices. These educators have valuable insight from their daily work; the more that we as a community share and think about that insight, the better. Teachers, families, students, community members—all have experiences to share, recognize, and validate. I hope to keep collaboration, family involvement, and a love of reading in discussion. Shared voices not only create new collaborations, but also strengthen existing efforts. This section explores the ways in which my work used both the foundations of transformative education and conversations with educators to create a space for sharing the challenges and hopes of literacy work.

2. Collaboration: Sharing Our Voices

An unexpected turn in my thesis came when one educator proposed the idea of a meeting that could foster sharing about literacy work in the community. McCaleb's community of learners was similar to a collaborative literacy community that this educator and I envisioned together. A communal and collaborative literacy approach strengthens programs' capacities to build young readers. Moreover, this approach creates a stronger and more reflective community focused on producing open and inclusive communication. Collaboration among literacy programs, families, and other community members deserved thoughtful attention as a way in which this literacy community could begin strengthening its work.

From my conversations I saw another meaning of collaboration: re-calibration of every group's goals to fit into an integrated literacy vision. The Center for Collaborative Planning

defines collaboration as "more than communication or coordination or cooperation" ("Collaboration"). This definition embraces the idea that collaboration goes beyond outward actions: it is actually a mindset for working towards a common mission. Rob Lehman sums up a way to consider collaboration:

> Collaboration, on the surface, is about bringing together resources, both financial and intellectual, to work toward a common purpose. But true collaboration has an 'inside,' a deeper, more radical meaning. The inner life of collaboration is about states of mind and spirit that are open–open to self-examination, open to growth, open to trust, and open to mutual action. ("Collaboration")

This openness aligns perfectly with the community of learners and Freire's ideas. Collaboration may look just like sharing events, distributing responsibilities, or upholding communication about one's own goals, but Lehman continues that collaborative relationships are "vehicles of co-creation" ("Collaboration"). Co-creation stresses both the leadership of multiple entities and the hope of creation from collaboration. Collaboration does not solely result in communities that work together towards common goals; perhaps even more excitingly, collaboration fosters creation, turning a community's hopes into actual projects, programs, and events that can meet its needs.

I began reaching out to educators to whom I had talked already, asking about collaborative projects with which they had experience. Teachers shared that library story times take advantage of the local children's librarians; the schools and library interacted most regularly in this way. Another teacher encourages parents to participate in the summer reading program at the local library. What kind of relationships are these interactions building between the schools and the library? Are they long-term, meaningful, sustainable, and equitable? Are they oriented around a shared literacy vision? One preschool teacher welcomed the idea of more collaboration between the library and the school. One librarian hoped for collaborative projects involving local doctors and health clinics. The head of a tutoring program also described her unsuccessful

attempts to reach the schools for collaboration. Had collaboration become a word used only on the surface, a concept hardly touched by actual working and sustainable programs or projects? As a community hoping for collaboration, how could we know? Were there feedback structures in place to question the effectiveness of our collaboration with families and among other programs? Educator and writer Ken Robinson spoke about creativity as an "operational idea" during a talk on collaboration in the twenty-first century, implying the interconnectedness of collaboration and creative action (Robinson). This operational mindset both fosters dialogue and allows understanding of collaboration (Robinson). It is not an easy concept to suddenly embrace, nor is it easy to put into action even if different groups agree to think from this perspective. Having heard about the various challenges facing different literacy educators in this community, I imagine that it might at first be very difficult to draw both time and resources from current projects to harness them to collaborative efforts. Though dialogue demands time and energy from educators already pushed by many other requirements, collaboration actually offers ways to relieve shared pressures. Through reflecting on the use of time, money, services, or staff, programs that openly create and share a vision for their community might find more valuable ways to invest those resources in the work required to see that vision become reality. This situation shows collaboration at its best: it becomes creative action. The vision becomes shared, but so does the work. The resources can be shared, and so can the time. How is this all achieved? I returned to Freire and McCaleb's model for dialogue. In light of making the connection between collaboration and dialogue, I used the word "forum" to describe the space where collaborative discussion could begin. A forum could address Freire's concern that educators often feel incapable of taking risks: a forum could strive to erode any feelings of incapability on the part of those gathered, to remove any fears of taking risks. This forum could instill the desire to take risks and build a sense of hope around these educators' missions. A literacy forum could create an open sharing space for simply gathering and listening. I have had unmediated conversations and I focused on listening to all the ideas, hopes, concerns, and challenges of many literacy educators

in the community; however, these conversations at first did not happen among or with multiple groups. It made sense for the next part of my project to move to a more active form of letting these educators share their thoughts collaboratively. Thus, with encouragement from several educators, I arranged a gathering for a conversation about literacy work and collaboration in the community.

3. The Forum

For the forum planned for late January, I made a loose agenda to allow our discussion to be guided by the issues that the educators themselves wanted to address. I invited nine educators or community members, including a range of child development specialists, elementary educators, librarians, and community program coordinators, ending up with four people present. This gathering included preschool and kindergarten teachers, as well as a literacy coordinator.

In following Freire's and McCaleb's models for engaging communities in dialogue, I focused on creating transparency during both my planning and hosting of the forum. The Center for Collaborative Planning on-line provided concept lists for collaborative work from which my forum planning drew some of its main principles. My project's theoretical foundations and my conversations with educators produced a list of guiding ideas. First, the forum would provide a space for fluid and organic discussion. Most importantly for me, I communicated the idea that neither the forum nor my project seeks a "right" answer or "solution" to all of the "problems" of literacy work in this community. This forum presented an opportunity to articulate that I wanted to validate and nurture the partnerships that already exist among literacy efforts. I also hoped to encourage the feeling of a community of learners by allowing these individuals to share their initiatives, aims, and processes behind their work. As members of a local literacy landscape, we could work towards acknowledging a shared vision that encourages curious, creative and joyful learning experiences for all students. The forum also offered a space to discuss practices that encourage reading as an impassioned, personal, and imaginative practice. Furthermore, because

families influence a child's early atmosphere so deeply, the forum could provide various perspectives on any ongoing collaboration with families. Since contextualization of literacy activities often affects families' feelings about the role they have in their child's education, the forum could also address our communication with families about literacy initiatives.

We began by briefly introducing our roles. The teachers spend the most time in direct skills instruction with students. From classroom observations of two teachers present, I also know that their daily approaches to reading include story sharing and book time. The preschool teacher uses stations to foster letter skills alongside work that engages students in listening to stories and reading independently. The kindergarten teacher uses small group work with assistants to strengthen her literacy time. Both teachers use motion-oriented songs in their classrooms, with the preschool teacher emphasizing movement with music as a break from circle time, and the kindergarten teacher using songs to teach specific skills such as letter sounds, words, or spelling. The teachers have the day-to-day role of instructing, encouraging, and influencing their young students as they engage in reading experiences.

The literacy coordinator has a somewhat different role in the system, working individually and in small groups with students who need extra help. She also ensures that instruction and intervention meets Title I students' needs; much of her work revolves around seeking best practices for intervention strategies. She helps coordinate and develop school-wide literacy programs, and works between the elementary schools to provide literacy support. She also manages data about students changing needs, assists families having issues with a child learning to read, and arranges for system-wide literacy training. She coaches teachers on literacy instruction, keeping the faculty up to date and coordinated on literacy best practices. Her work also includes involvement with a system-wide professional learning community.

The forum discussion soon moved to the topic of challenges facing these educators as they work to teach their students to read and to love reading. Almost immediately, educators expressed concern about students moving from preschool to kindergarten with little tracking of

their progressing needs. The literacy coordinator acknowledged the issue as a major priority, noting that the transition between the two grades leaves some students without the extra attention they might need. Preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers have no effective space for cooperative reflection on a student's needs as she moves from the preschool level to kindergarten; they felt the need for a system to track students better who perhaps had some reading difficulties in preschool but did not qualify for intervention in kindergarten. The literacy coordinator described the end-of-preschool reading assessment that sometimes does not catch students who might need intervention in kindergarten. Students' scores suggest that they know enough to disqualify them for intervention, but once the students enter kindergarten, they reach a point where their reading difficulties really prevent them from reading successfully. These instances have proven a challenge for the schools to handle, but the literacy coordinator acknowledged the need for more reflection beyond the data.

The preschool teachers shared another obstacle: families seem disengaged with their school's literacy initiatives. Families receive newsletters, reading calendars for PTO literacy initiatives, and direct communication from the teachers. However, the teachers directly emphasized that they struggle to involve families in the reading calendar initiative. The PTO gives teachers instructions to administer the initiative and manages the data from the calendars, asking the teachers to collect the calendars once a month. The teacher described the small percentage of calendars that she receives, even though she reaches out to parents often through a newsletter to encourage the importance of reading for at least 20 minutes every night. She emphasized her focus on encouraging families to work towards building their children's love of reading; her communications with families stress the value of "laptimes" to share pleasurable reading moments. One preschool teacher spoke to families' concerns: families want the best for their children and want to know how they can encourage their child as a student. However, she also shared her feelings that some families do not recognize the importance of preschool, and she believes in families' needing to see the value of preschool activities to make this kind of initiative

work well. The other teachers stepped in to ask if the families were readers. The literacy coordinator asked if the teacher had tried proposing the calendar to families as something more like homework, but with a fun aspect like a poem that the families would sign and return. The preschool teacher mentioned that it is hard for her to get feedback from many of her families, and teachers did not know if families get feedback about the literacy initiative. The literacy coordinator shared that it is hard to get families involved in community decision-making. Orientation at the beginning of the year tries to involve families, and other meetings throughout the year with teachers and administrators are open to families as well. However, those meetings are frequently only attended by teachers and the administration, not by families or community members. Finally, one of the preschool teachers summed up many of the challenges shared at the forum: it is hard for a public school to be a public school. Public schools must meet certain standards or function in certain ways because of expectations placed on them by higher authority structures. Moreover, public schools often struggle to get the resources they need, forcing them into balancing the resources they do have to meet the needs of their students.

The educators shared their concerns candidly, but were equally open to sharing ideas for strengthening their own work. The literacy coordinator shared the ongoing professional learning community model now in place in their school system; formatted into team meetings combining the schools, these communities were described as a place where ideas or concerns can be discussed. Called PLC's, these gatherings happen afterschool, which the preschool teachers noted makes it harder for them to attend because of their schedule. The literacy coordinated offered this practice as one way in which the schools pursue collaborative thinking and models. The literacy coordinator also noted that PTO initiatives like the pancake supper and family literacy night, provide food and activities. The literacy coordinator also expressed her desire for many diverse professionals to be active in the schools with the teachers and the kids. An early childhood center at Ridpath also remains a distant possibility for greater collaboration. The preschool teachers

proposed another early childhood concept to consider: a redesigned preschool orientation for families that joins families with community members.

This concept for drawing in families sprang from the preschool teachers' concerns that their families do not understand the significance of preschool. Though still unsure about the kind of event they want to create, the teachers clearly wish to ensure better family connections to their preschool classrooms. The teachers want to create an event where families could make beneficial contacts with each other, teachers, and community members. The teachers had discussed using orientation or parent-teacher nights to host a series of small discussion groups for families to talk about various topics with businesses and community organizations. The teachers proposed a rotation through a series of ten-minute talks while families could also participate in other activities or meet with the teachers. The educators welcomed the potential of a gathering that could connect families both to schools and community organizations, and the preschool teachers noted that they will continue working through the idea of a redesigned event for involving families.

Several ideas, such as parent gatherings for the preschool, were left open to further discussion. Ongoing questions from the educators included:

- What is literacy? How do we best consider changing needs in literacy instruction?
- What are ways in which reflection beyond data can be pursued?
- Are families getting feedback from the literacy initiatives?
- How can the value of preschool be expressed to families?
- What kind of program could get families more involved in their child's preschool activities?

The forum ended on the note that more time for this kind of discussion would be useful and constructive.

4. Reflections

The forum prompted several questions of my own, and I reflected on the discussion that had happened with the idea of finding ways in which the ideas could be gathered and shared constructively. My hope for an open flow of dialogue amongst these educators was fulfilled, even though I admittedly did not raise some of the issues that I had intended to share. We did not cover anyone's basic philosophies or approaches to collaboration, encouraging a love of reading, and involving families as partners. We also did not cover the idea of the community of learners, and I was disappointed not to have had the opportunity to share this concept. I was sensitive to being seen as imposing ideas or bringing in foreign concepts that might harm the organic flow of discussion and sharing that it was my primary concern to uphold during the forum. Instead, I let the educators themselves direct the conversation, and in this way, we actually covered a great deal of material and addressed several concerns.

First, the concern of transitioning between the preschool and kindergarten showed a need for teachers to have adequate time to communicate and reflect on their students' progressing needs. Outside of a school structure implemented to provide more discussion between teachers from different elementaries and grades, the transition between the two beginning levels could be impacted through collaboration with a community organization. A community program could step in to strengthen the transition; thinking of a local librarian's hopes for a program targeting families with children entering preschool, I hope that a connection between the early literacy librarian and the schools could provide support for preschool students that it might be hard for the schools alone to offer. The preschool teachers also brought up an idea that certainly applies to the challenge of the transition for the schools' youngest students: intentionally building connections with various community businesses and non-profits to strengthen areas in which the schools' might struggle. Addressing the needs of these youngest students might imply reaching out innovatively to create a more communal space for families, schools and community members to share responsibility of ensuring these students get a strong start in school.

I also found myself wondering about the capacity of further connections to strengthen family collaboration in the preschool classrooms. The approach of the calendar reading initiative does not seem to reach the families; I wonder if the PTO hears the concerns of teachers about this initiative. Is there a mechanism in place for feedback from the teachers to the PTO, or from the PTO to the families? What missing piece or structural problem might make it hard for families to see the value of the calendar initiative in a larger context? What is the larger context of the initiative, and how is that context communicated to families? Are these literacy initiatives expressed to families as a part of a larger context of developing students who love to read? I am uncertain of the methods that the PTO uses to determine these initiatives and coordinate them separate of the literacy coordinator or the teachers. The failure of such initiatives to reach families as effectively as hoped could suggest that teachers, families, students, and perhaps even the literacy coordinators do not own these initiatives. Although ultimately responsible for handling the initiatives in the classroom and presenting them to families, these educators lack ownership of these programs; moreover, the current structure of the literacy initiatives seems to place many families in a position that offers them no ownership of the initiatives. Furthermore, does the context of the initiatives frame them as collaboration with families or as expectations from the teachers of the families? Here, the language matters, because it can signal either ownership or unequal power dynamics. A leveling relationship between the teachers and families offers the opportunity for any hierarchical power structures to fall away; this new balanced relationship does not maintain expectations issued "for" one group by the other, but rather supports expectations mutually upheld within the bounds of a collaborative partnership. By recognizing families as a valuable piece of preschool literacy initiatives and school activities generally, this relationship equalizes participation in literacy programs.

The preschool teachers seemed to be reaching for ideas that could support the kind of partnership that would benefit their students who might currently be struggling to return their reading calendars. One of the teachers expressed the struggle to engage families in a way that

would help them to understand the value of preschool. The teachers feel the need, they see the need, to reach out to families differently, and they are willing to work to effect change—even if they are not quite sure about the reasons behind their difficulties in the first place. They want to strive to reach families immediately as their students enter preschool, whether through parenting groups or orientation night discussions. The library could assist in bringing in community groups to work with families to make community connections as well as classroom connections. What supports and encourages the value of preschool, of laptime, of reading to children most effectively and consistently as they enter school? To reach families most effectively, communication must become transparent, leveling, and intentional. In the context of McCaleb's ideas, dialogue with families should establish the importance of the families' voices in the conversation of how best they can support their young reader. This dialogue must embrace everyone's value to the discussion. If families do not feel valued, then it makes sense that they might disengage. This key idea could provide the answer: if families do not attend to the initiatives set out by either teachers or PTOs, then perhaps they do not feel comfortable or genuinely engaged. Of course, other variables come into play here: the obvious one, poverty, could be contributing in multiple ways. The larger power structures that force families to feel overburdened by challenging home, work, or personal circumstances could certainly prevent active involvement. Families could have a history that sets them already in a place in which school does not have positive connotations for them. However, it is then all the more significant that the teacher intentionally and organically engage families as valuable influences both in school and their child's education no matter the situation. A lack of parent support or involvement suggests that parents may not feel like they really have a place in the school world of their children. How can teachers and schools show families their significant position in the school and the world of their child's education? How can a school year begin by acknowledging this leveling stance? Would it take a larger system-wide, whole-district, administerial stance to send out the strong signal to families that all relationships are collaborative? I believe that teachers can engage

families collaboratively; however; I also feel that an administration that understands, and acts by, this principle would make collaborative connections with families even stronger.

Engaging families also must take into account the population and its unique challenges and needs. Schools then find themselves handling a delicate balance: they must at once take into consideration those needs while also providing a space that acts as an equalizer. Schools become one very effective voice to tell families, "All that matters is working together to make sure your child learns in the best way possible and gets the most possible from this school." The school can first tap into the care for the child that it shares with the family – because as the teachers mentioned, all parents or guardians care for their child and for their child's education. These families hope for the best for their children, even as they also must handle the complexities of life that realistically arise to some degree for any family. As McCaleb points out, "The closest and most collaborative relationships that I have seen between teachers and families are those in which the coming together is on a human level of mutual respect and a sharing of knowledge and vulnerability" (McCaleb 39). The mutual care for the students should level the relationship and take away any power structure that might divide the home from the school. Freire's thinking about education also seeks to eliminate this divisive structure, instead allowing everyone involved to acknowledge their vulnerability. I draw on Freire's idea that power structures that create an "other" must be dismantled and transformed into a space of "solidarity" (34). Families must be met as equals, a "give and take" that results in an atmosphere that can positively reconcile differences between the families and school (McCaleb 39). This kind of relationship also acknowledges families as valuable assets—resources without which the classrooms could not function positively. Indeed, it is hard to imagine such an admission from a public school system. I was reminded again of Freire's thinking on the "radical posture" of solidarity; he does not deny the risks involved in taking the steps necessary to be in solidarity with another group (Freire 34). The first step towards solidarity is to "enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary" (Freire 34). The current educational atmosphere has not helped in making space for any

constructive acknowledgment of vulnerability or neediness on the part of the school systems themselves; therefore, how much harder must it be for schools to seek solidarity with families when the expectations demanded of them by a larger system do not allow making any gestures that might reveal forms of weakness or dependency. A sort of paralysis takes hold of educators: instead of reaching families on terms of both strengths and weaknesses, educators might feel paralyzed by the pressure from structures outside their immediate control. Robinson's TED talk "How Schools are Killing Creativity" also illuminates the approach that current education systems take: he describes that "education goes deeply with people" because it "takes us to a future we can't grasp." Because of its reaching towards an unpredictable end, education becomes high stakes. It makes sense, then, that education is valued and regarded in a very different perspective from practically anything else in our society. Is educational paralysis caused by the valuable yet risky nature of education? Do other structures make education high stakes? Critical reflection and discussion might offer the first chance to reach a consensus with school administration on the systemic or societal structures the most paralyze their schools. One key could be the simple admission of the school's need for families and the community—their care, concern, and whatever time they can give to young, growing learners. The context of the communication between the families and the schools matters, since one type of communication could result in a negative power structure that devalues the families while the opposite form would empower the families as contributing members of the educational community. This context is a collaborative one. The word collaboration must be used in all places, in every way. It must embody all forms of action taken by the teachers, the administration, the community members, and the families who together make up the educational world of the young student.

After this forum, I came to a better understanding of the difficulties of collaborative work. Collaboration takes energy to get to a productive point where the meeting is actually valuable for those involved. It was hard to organize even a small gathering of educators, and the conversation itself requires high levels of emotional energy. I was struck by the teachers'

optimism as they discussed both the positive aspects of their work and struggles they have to meet their students' needs. I was quite simply encouraged: I believe that if structures were in place to allow teachers more time for collaborative discussion and action, these teachers would be able to effect real change. Collaboration would only make them a stronger, more united team; admittedly, some existing efforts encourage collaboration, but these educators expressed the difficulty in taking collaboration beyond a single school again and again. I have seen the complications of trying to manage collaborative relationships. Nonetheless, the complexity of collaboration should not deter schools, families, or community groups from embracing it. As complex as this single forum was to organize, I believe that it did represent a start to embracing collaboration. I feel that the time spent even in this first collaborative discussion has value for simply being the first time to form those connections. This first literacy forum proved a meaningful beginning by signaling to me the needed further time and energy to continue growing a critical mass of collaborators that could make a difference. Perhaps this first forum most significantly allowed these educators to see that a critical mass of collaborators exists in this community—even if it is not obviously evident or identical to other communities. I believe in the power of the critical mass of collaborators in this community, and I believe that the energy invested in further collaborative efforts can only keep strengthening that mass, making their power more visible and spreading that power as their influence grows. In the end, if all groups are united around the idea of producing joyful, challenging, and complex encounters with reading, collaboration becomes not only the operational mindset for family, school, and community relationships, but also the way that those groups can most successfully build stronger readers.

My own thoughts about collaboration have shifted significantly since I first talked with educators about a space that could allow a sharing of goals and challenges. Collaboration must be a mindset we hold together as those desirous of building readers, and more importantly, the love of reading. Again, Robinson's concept of creativity as an "operational idea" fits with collaboration: it must be the sole "operational idea" of the education system. It cannot be a word

used solely in meetings, or in chains of emails that cross from group to group. We have to see it as the root of our thinking as educators who claim to desire the same thing: young students who see reading as a personal art that brings pleasure and whose love of reading is tied up in a love of learning as well. Collaboration cannot just apply to schools and libraries. Other organizations in this community are committing time and resources to building strong readers, and their work is valuable even as it takes a different form. Furthermore, collaboration must be the word used to describe interaction with families. Beyond the word "partnership," or even "involvement," collaboration implies that there is a "co" force at work. Families may not feel a spirit of shared responsibility and equality if approached as merely some other entity to "involve" in activities. The shift begins by acknowledging a change from "my work" to "our community's work," from "my group's goal" to "our goal." The dividing line between the other and oneself should start to fade as collaborative efforts begin to happen. In schools, instead of seeing family as separate and having their part of the "work" to do at home, educators might approach this paradigm with a collaborative mindset: families approached as members of a collaborative effort become a vital part of the formation of goals for the community's students. Using the word "collaboration" in all forms of communication with families—especially in the very first interaction between families and schools—can make a difference if everyone understands the implications of collaboration. As I reflected on my notion of collaboration following the forum, I realized the necessity of recognizing all interactions between schools, families, and communities as collaborative.

This forum experience suggested many new questions, while also reaffirming the need for questions I formed ahead of time. After reading both McCaleb and Barell, I want to keep reflection and inquiry as the foundations for any progression. Therefore, my ongoing questions concern not only the ways in which collaboration can be strengthened in the literacy work of this community, but also the philosophies that can make successful collaboration possible. Some of these core questions include:

- What motivates our groups to encourage a pure love of reading?

- What are our groups' basic philosophies for building young students who love to read?
- What common vision might our group create to encourage a love of reading?
- What are our groups' basic philosophies for involving families?
- What would be a common vision for collaborating with families?
- Is reading being privileged in the current educational atmosphere?
- What context are literacy initiatives given when they are shared with families?

Continued questions about each educator's individual experiences are also valuable because of the nature of collaboration and the transformative education model on which my work focuses. These questions would all serve to prompt self-reflection that, as Freire asserts, can lead to action. These questions revolve around the experience and the ways it can enlighten future work:

- What does it feel like right now in the current literacy or reading atmosphere in which you are working?
- In your experience, what kinds of reading encounters do you see happening?
- How would you describe the reading culture of your school or program as you have experienced it?
- How do you feel you have structured your reading time both to meet your students' needs and to encourage joyful reading encounters?
- What are challenges you have faced to encouraging a love of reading?

Finally, perhaps the most important pair of questions to keep asking is: What collaboration happens already among those in this community doing early literacy work? How do we see collaboration making our work more effective? These questions concentrate on both recognizing and validating current efforts, while also asserting that collaboration will strengthen ongoing work.

My final personal question that arose from this forum concerns the nature of my project: How is my writing and recording, all of the conversations and reflections, constructive for these educators? I ask this question keeping those who attended the forum in mind, but I also see this

idea expanding to include those to whom I have talked about literacy and the nature of literacy work. For me, the next stage after this forum demands that I begin considering the ways in which both the forum and its documentation can be most useful to these literacy educators. My writing on the literacy landscape also could act as a practical document if shared with those educators and community members involved in literacy work. I constructed this view of the literacy landscape in order to make it as organic and unmediated as possible; from the beginning, it was meant to have an applicable, constructive, practical component. The forum was the first part of the practical nature of my work, but I feel that a second stage begins now with the conclusion of the first forum. This second stage requires me to seek out feedback from the educators with whom I met, shaping my project to provide a framework that will be most effective for continued collaboration on issues of partnering with families and encouraging a love of reading.

Finally, along with the educators present at the first forum, I saw a need for a second forum and planned it. This second forum sought to gather more community members, teachers, and perhaps even other DePauw students involved in educational work. With this broader reach, a second forum provided the opportunity to discuss the questions about basic philosophies that were not covered in the first forum, as well as expand conversation to include the community perspective. For the second forum, I more intentionally used McCaleb's model for building a community of learners. Since I believe that in this community especially there are many organizations and groups that could effectively initiate collaborative projects, I slightly adapted her principles to fit a broader context in which teachers or schools may not be the sole collaborators.

The first of these principles involves the nature of relationships during learning. McCaleb writes, "teachers and their students together are co-participants in the learning process" (25). For my purpose, I shift this idea to emphasize that learning relationships between any groups working with families and with each other must hold to the notion of learning as "an interchange of ideas and experiences that are to be shared and to be the source of some reflection" (McCaleb 25). Co-

participation in learning demands that all members work to break down a hierarchical power structure of participation, replacing it with continual and mutual exchange. What are the implications of this principle for Putnam County and the Greencastle area specifically? The strength of Putnam County programs such as the public library system, community tutoring centers, and DePauw community service should encourage even greater partnership among these programs, schools and families. By recognizing the strengths of each group, we can encourage co-participation instead of hierarchical power relations. McCaleb suggests, along with Freire, that only dialogue and awareness can start to change existing power structures. This first forum pointed out the difficulty of getting these groups together, but perhaps a different kind of sharing space is needed in the community to make that exchange possible, hence the need for a second forum—or a structure for continued forums—becomes more pressing.

A second forum could also work through McCaleb's next principle that involves knowledge and the process of building knowledge. This principle asserts, "new knowledge is built on old knowledge" (McCaleb 26). A second forum can be a place where current knowledge is both expressed and revised, where new knowledge is both created and questioned. As Barell points out, the question, "How did you arrive at that conclusion?" "may be one of the most important questions for us as citizens of our democracy" (128). Taken with McCaleb's thinking, Barell's ideas clearly define a way of learning that includes both making meaning of knowledge already held by participants and recognizing that knowledge is "continually undergoing evolution" (McCaleb 26). Barell encourages the rooting out of "certain patterns and ways of thinking . . . so ingrained in our daily lives that we forget why we engage in them" (Barell 128). Although schools and other programs might regularly have to meet standards or undergo assessment, how does that assessment realistically affect collaborative relationships with the community or families? Is that assessment broken down and brought before those involved, in this case families and other groups working in literacy? Again, sometimes asking why we take action or make decisions in a certain way feels too risky; I hoped that the second forum picked up

where the first one left off to keep strengthening connections that help create a space where everyone feels comfortable asking those risky questions or taking risky stances. Knowledge could be exchanged and nurtured through an expanded second forum that lays out current programs, projects, initiatives, and activities then encourages ongoing questioning of the reasons and methods behind all of those pieces of literacy work. I planned the second forum even knowing that it would not be enough to complete this task, but making the necessary realization that it could nonetheless have benefits for all of us. A second forum perhaps was not even enough to create a completely comfortable space for sharing the risks of doing collaborative literacy work and building lovers of reading. Perhaps most excitingly, these collaborative processes brought to the forefront the necessity of finding other ways to create spaces for collaborative sharing.

Inherent in this collaborative process is the recognition that every member offers valuable experiences and knowledge. McCaleb uses the phrase "equal contributors," and I think that multiple literacy forums would validate this ideal. A framework that provides these kinds of literacy forums or gatherings would both speed such equalizing relationships and encourage the trust that makes such relationships possible. As members committed to gathering, the energy of every group could be recognized; as forums continued and grew, the understandings among groups would also grow. Understanding each other as valuable pieces of the "educative process" would contribute to an "opening up" of the literacy landscape, welcoming in families, community groups, and schools (McCaleb 26). Alma Flor Ada and Constance M. Beutel add to the definition of this "opening up" as a "moment in dialogue or reflection when an individual discovers she is not alone" (Ada and Beutel 17). This "opening up" happens as forum members recognize other members' dedication to collaboration and then feel more at ease acknowledging both the unique capacities of others' work and a shared vision behind everyone's basic goals.

McCaleb's final foundational belief seems perhaps the most important to a community endeavoring to engage in collaborative work. She states it most clearly: "Through analysis and critique, all people are capable of engaging in actions that may transform their present realities"

(McCaleb 26). I believe that this idea underlies the concept of collaboration; it is a transformative education concept that makes collaboration ideologically possible. If there is no belief in this principle, then collaboration of the kind that I propose becomes meaningless. I propose a collaboration that would bring in educators, community members, civic leaders, and even families. Validating and recognizing that every parent, every businessman, every librarian, every teacher has the capability to take transformative action on the reality around them is essential. This principle makes it possible to believe that forums can be effective: it emphasizes that change in communities and schools can come from those who make an effort to take action for the change they want to see. Sustained collaboration during forums continues sharing and reflection; it supports and directs actions that collaborators feel will change their own reality. McCaleb importantly references the work in participatory research by Alma Flor Ada and Constance M. Beutel that affirms her approach to building a community of learners; the latter part of her book covers a project in this participatory research style that aligns with all of Freire's concepts for dissembling power structures when working in education. I refer to this kind of research because McCaleb's use of Ada and Beutel parallels the effect that I feel continued forums could have on families, schools, community members, and local non-profit organizations. Ada and Beutel speak to the principle that I wish will become the foundation for further forums: "Participatory research is a philosophical and ideological commitment which holds that every human being has the capacity of knowing, of analyzing and reflecting about reality so that she becomes a true agent of action in her own life" (Ada and Beutel 8). For Ada and Beutel, this kind of research is a commitment that makes possible the removal of hierarchical power structures. I see this kind of commitment as providing a way forward to becoming a stronger community: making a commitment to validate each person's ability and to make change through reflection will nurture more effective collaboration. Furthermore, reality becomes something that can be questioned, evaluated and changed if needed. This commitment is neither quick nor simple to embrace. However, if accepted by a diverse group that meets for collaborative discussion, this kind of

commitment encourages a wider perspective on possible change, a greater scope for dreaming about the possibilities for their neighborhood, community, and city. If members of a collaborative gathering or forum believe that all other members have the ability to effect real change, and crucially feel the same belief reflected toward themselves, then any resulting discussion or action will only be more valuable because all members start with the same positive foundation and become united forces encouraging each other to sustain discussion for change. They open a space for freeing, equalizing, continual conversation, and future goals for change are regarded as more than simple wishes. Further forums could provide a place to begin discussing and embracing this kind of commitment to validate the roles of every literacy group in this community, recognize the ability to affect meaningful change endowed in every group, and build the space for stronger collaboration.

5. What Comes Next

Our second forum gathered a smaller group, but brought together two new perspectives. This second forum included a senior student at DePauw also working in the community with creative arts programming in schools and the local librarian with whom I had worked all along. We met and agreed to begin the discussion with a brief statement of our work. The student reported that the program she began almost a year ago works in a local elementary school to provide an afterschool creative writing club. She described her mission: to supplement English classes with games, activities, and opportunities that focus on English. She acknowledges storytelling as one of her core philosophies, and explains that all language acts as code that children must gradually master. Her belief in art and story as code informs her practices; the creative writing club gives local elementary students opportunities to enjoy creating writing and art while engaging with volunteers who lead discussions and games. This student has begun to consider options for sustaining her program, but has yet to reach a final sustainability model. She feels anxious about handing the program over to someone, yet hopes that the program could

expand to include volunteers from the local high school. She feels that these local students have many talents and time into which community programs could tap. She remains hopeful that programs working with local schools and students both as participants and volunteers offer a way to counter educational systems that seem to take away the pleasure of reading.

Similarly, the local librarian focuses her work on storytimes that engage young children in enjoyable imaginative and creative moments. This librarian shared her recent work to begin a baby story time for birth to six months. She has had success with beginning this program, which was a core goal when she first started her job. She has also begun discussions with state librarians to discuss the creation of a Countdown to Kindergarten program at the state level. By making Countdown to Kindergarten a larger state and local partnership, this librarian hopes that it could spread across the state. She hopes to work closely with state librarian liaisons to organize the program, address training matters, and then begin to identify community contributors to the program. She emphasized that a large mass of people are needed; however, because it would draw on training that children's librarians already possess, the program could draw on a group of area librarians for support. This librarian recognized the need for strong community support in both this initiative and another initiative called Reach Out and Read. This second program uses volunteers to visit local businesses, doctor's offices, or public agencies and read a book. She mentioned that a local sorority whose philanthropy is literacy might be pulled as a volunteer base. Her efforts for both of these programs right now focus on garnering community support while also assessing the structures she might need to put in place for these initiatives to encourage strong reading habits across all ages.

These two educators also shared the challenges and concerns they currently face with their respective programs. The senior running the school program continues to consider options for handing it off, along with the manual that she wants to produce from the program's first year. She seeks effective ways to maintain and expand the program while also keeping its strength and mission intact after she graduates. The librarian has similar worries about structures of programs,

especially as she seeks to create new programming for a summertime Farmer's Market storytime partnership and to assist the library with brainstorming for programming that connects to older students or young adults. Both educators shared the exhaustion that their work brings; continually adjusting programming to meet student or community needs necessitates a lot of time and energy. Each educator spoke about the vast amounts of time they have spent revising their strategies, their tools, and their methods.

I closed the discussion by asking what each person would find most helpful in moving forward. The student's needs moving forward include sample lesson plans that could be shared by other educators. She also feels the need for a shared Google document or other online forum to serve anyone doing similar literacy or arts work in the community; this online space could connect the members of this educators' community. Making such connections proved a concern of both the student and librarian, who each spoke to their hope for continued opportunities to meet other educators. They both hope to connect more with high school students, using these students' abilities to strengthen their work with elementary students. The senior shared her thoughts with the librarian for tapping into local high school groups like the drama club who might make a strong partner for library volunteer needs. The senior also expressed her desire for some kind of overarching meeting similar to this forum that could focus on targeting older students and teens who currently do not have as many opportunities to take part in impactful programs. The senior and the librarian agreed that students reach a level around high school where learning or reading can stop being enjoyable; the senior expressed the potential of programs that could allow these high school students to see that they have the capacity to change their community positively. She stressed the idea of allowing these students ownership of the change they can effect; she wants to include these students in programs where they can both influence other younger students and feel a part of a meaningful group in their community. The forum ended with our hopes that another gathering could take place with more teachers to keep sharing the conversation about this community's reading and creative arts programming.

6. Reasons to Hope

These two forums left me not with a sense of despair or negativity, but with a sense of the hope that many community educators have about their work. I also found that this community has several strong collaborative or transformative efforts that continue to place creativity, joyfulness, curiosity, and imagination at their center. These programs are my "reasons to hope." Whether a school program or a structure for a meeting, these few examples are the efforts I see right now that present very hopeful views of the possibilities for this community as collaboration grows. These programs work to provide loving and wonder-filled reading or arts encounters. Furthermore, these programs demonstrate the community of learners in action: they bring younger students, older students, community members, community leaders, and teachers together. This section provides brief portraits of three programs: two groups that work in schools to provide arts encounters, and one initiative by community members to gather for a community arts and education think tank. Each group presents one way to address challenges of ensuring that all students love to read and love to learn. While these groups may not have the same operating model, each does share a vision: that their students will gain a sense of hope about their lives and their world from their encounters with reading, arts, and learning.

"Look! Look!": An Afternoon at Preschool

Lunch was ending, and the preschool teacher had just announced that book time was beginning. Several students approached me with books, and it was not long before I had a handful of students gathered around my book as I read aloud. The little sets of eyes were bright and focused – I asked questions and they responded, I pointed to pictures and they helped me tell the story. It was clear that this established independent "book time" routine meant a great deal to the students; they knew what to do after lunch, and not one student tried to skirt choosing a book. It was a quiet, relaxed, liberating classroom time—and the students seemed to sense that calm. When I talked with this local preschool teacher about instilling a love of reading in her students,

she said that she emphasizes an enjoyable reading time. She makes sure they know that their book time after they eat is theirs – it is independent and for their own enjoyment. I noticed her students' urgency to look at a book after they finish lunch, but she was the first one to point this sign out during our interview, as she shared her students' enthusiasm for the reading time she gives them. However, she stressed that it is important to keep pushing that urgency to read and keep urging students to read at home. She works to make connections to books at home, and to have her students begin making those connections. The one-on-one time, or "snuggle-time," is extremely important. This preschool teacher said that everything surrounding reading must be made into a big deal; it not just reading that matters at this beginning stage, but making sure that students feel proud to recognize a letter. Conversations around books and modeling a love of reading bring an excitement to reading experiences, encouraging the same in children. As I watched her class, the design of each stage of the afternoon session conveyed each activity's importance. Her use of stations for one portion of her classroom time not only get students ready to be in a structured kindergarten room, but also lets students get time in a small group with an adult more readily focused on their work. Since this teacher has two classroom assistants, her groups are able to benefit from that extra attention. The beginning of the class session involved talking amongst the teachers and students, singing a weather song, questioning their day, and reading aloud. The students got to move around during a song, but were willing to settle back down as soon as the teacher picked up the book for that day. As she read, she asked more questions, let the students share their thoughts, and helped the students to make predictions about the book. She mentioned, "This book has rhyming words," and especially emphasized letter sounds. Dialogue took place before, during, and after the read-aloud; there was room for the students to talk, fill in words, examine the illustrations, and imagine the events on the next page. The cozy, intimate space of the circle time expanded during the story in a way: students obviously felt comfortable and free to share since almost every single child spoke at some point during the reading. After lunch, reading time, and more songs, the students were split into three

groups, one for each station. The stations each had a focus on letters, words, or sounds, and the almost constant repetition of letter work in the classroom really demonstrated the strong literacy focus that this teacher takes in structuring her preschool program. At one station of word picture cards, children found plastic letters hidden in a tub of rice; at another, students played a matching game with pictures and words. A third station gave students explicit work on letters and sounds using books the students had made with guidance from the teacher. With their "pointers," also known as index fingers, the students said each letter with its sound and matching word; this station really involved talking through and repeating the alphabet, while also bringing in the idea of learning to read. The teacher at one point called these simple letter books the "first books you learned to read," encouraging the students, "Pretty soon you'll be reading real books! We're so close!" As the students did their letter work, she continually reminded them that they were starting to read. Ideally, every activity and mode of learning would be geared to reading preparation at this point, as the students are encouraged to keep looking forward to reading on their own. This teacher's gentle, repeated affirmations to her students about their reading exactly aligned with this ideal. Her classroom also focused on phonemic awareness and experiences with letters, words, and books—all lessons that she rooted in the excitement about reading that she modeled for her students. Her classroom includes a "What We Can Read" board, with environmental print—clippings from the students' homes—that the students have worked through reading. Encouraging awareness in preschool students that they will soon be reading on their own is certainly influential and perhaps one of the most important goals for an early childhood educator or parent as they prepare children for school.

All of the students were engaged in their work, and the teachers were not afraid to giving careful attention to talk or assist any student. The students were genuinely engaged in the classroom, pointing out letters and pictures as they talked to teachers and each other. Every student was put on the same level, and given the same expectations; the teachers conveyed high expectations for their students as they encouraged the students to be patient, work both

independently and in small groups, participate in every activity, and be responsible for their work. Students worked well with each other, and equally well when asked to sit quietly with a book. There seemed to be no doubt that every student would be included in every part of the class work, and be expected to participate in every activity. The idea of inclusion that permeated this classroom was perhaps what made it most welcoming and open; the teachers did not have to urge any student to participate. There were several calls throughout the afternoon of "Look! Look!" – the moment a child sensed that she had in some way fulfilled her teacher's expectations and wanted nothing more than to show off that achievement.

The relationships between the teachers and the students were clearly very open and loving. As I noted how much the students seemed to trust the teachers, it was also clear that these teachers had been consistently supportive as these young students grew. The laughter and smiles shared among the teachers and students attested to the openness of these relationships; the teachers were extremely responsive to the needs of each individual in the room. With one student who required constant attention, the teachers responded with special visual and verbal cues. They never turned any response into a negative interaction or situation that would embarrass the student. Even with responses that reminded a student of a task or asked a student to stop a certain behavior, the teachers never lowered any student below the rest of the class. To use a Freirian idea, I believe the classroom represented a liberated space: the students and teachers created the learning space together.

This preschool teacher says that she strives to bring families into literacy development by establishing print awareness activities with families. Students can bring in clippings from home that they know how to read, which are then matched to a letter on the board. This kind of engagement is certainly one effort to bring a student's home life into the classroom, giving it value by connecting it with the vital literacy skill of learning the alphabet. The teacher reaches out to family volunteers for her classroom, and also supports daily family reading times. She stressed the importance of making family participation manageable; her hope to make

involvement practical and easy for working adults matches with concerns I have heard from other educators that the home life of the modern family has changed because many adults are trying to manage work overloads with child-rearing. Without criticizing this difficulty, the teacher simply said that she tries to engage families because she knows they all want to push their students further. As she reaches out to families, she focuses on open communication, since she connects those free-flowing interactions with families being better able to support and reinforce their student. Despite all her efforts to make involvement manageable for families, she admits that it is hard to engage families constantly. At school, she has control over the amount of time students spend reading, the amount of practice they have with letters and sounds. She can push reading in class, but she said that reading must also be a priority at home. I think of the carefully structured routines and daily tasks in which her students work enthusiastically, and the obvious attraction to her colorful bookshelf that she has nurtured in her students. That same attraction to learning – and almost the responsibility to read – present in her classroom can be carried over into the home, just as home activities can be carried over into the classroom. It is just the transfer that causes difficulties at some moments. Makin and Diaz point out in their book on early childhood literacy that teachers and parents must be equal partners, collaborators really, in building a student's reading ability. The partnership results in the mutual scaffolding, in the exchange of information and in the flow of conversation between teacher and family. In many ways, not only activities count, but also the atmosphere created through the way in which families discuss learning and reading. This teacher's classroom seemed so freeing for the students because of her and the other teachers' constantly supportive attitudes. As she kept talking about reading—choosing books, predicting stories, learning new words, reading independently—she was always enthusiastic, supporting each child's response while building up the reading experience.

This preschool program fits into the literacy landscape of the county because it offers those valuable first steps: it seeks to engage young students in learning their letters and sounds towards the goal of becoming independent readers. The students are getting a strong foundation

in basic reading skills like recognizing letters as parts of words, becoming aware of print in the world around them, and knowing the different sounds that letters can make. As the program adds a vital element to the early childhood education work in the community, it also works to meet the needs of many different students with varying developmental delays who join the preschool alongside students without such delays. This preschool program is truly inclusive, working to build the classroom as a place of unique opportunities and ways for its diverse student body to learn. This program provides these young students with an environment where their curiosity can grow as they also build skills to strengthen their first years of school; its work could be strengthened by collaboration, and the teacher agreed that cooperative efforts would build the connections she desires among educators, other literacy programs, and families.

Making a Beautiful Mess: The Putnam County Coalition for Education and the Creative Arts

It was a typical day in a Castle classroom: local second-grade students were talking animatedly, DePauw students wandered the room looking slightly alarmed at the noise but also a bit wonderstruck, and arts supplies dotted the floor and tables. These students—all of them—were simply making what Beth Benedix might call a "beautiful mess." This arts workshop in particular focused on writing a fairy tale and drawing its characters, all focused on the idea of telling a story that had really interesting characters to carry it. The DePauw students, just one representation of the many types of volunteers drawn in by this program, had realized shortly after beginning their carefully-planned arts workshop that children often take unexpected pathways to unearth the ideas that interest them. When those ideas emerge, however, the beautiful mess made by the path becomes completely worth it: the children have not only felt a connection to an idea they helped create, but also become enchanted by the creative power they discover within themselves. It is a typical day with not-so-typical discoveries being made every moment.

Called The Castle by all who know it, the Putnam County Coalition for Education and the Creative Arts has infused local schools with creative arts workshops since 2012, now reaching 800 students in a local elementary, middle, and high school. Community artists, community

members, local students and professors alike all step in to develop arts workshops to invigorate the curriculum that students experience in these local public school systems. I have experienced designing, leading, and watching these workshops over the past two years; witnessing these students as they encountered such genuine adults willing to bring creation, play, spontaneity, love, attention, thought, and craft to their classroom truly moved me. Largely formed as a response to decreasing arts funding and increasing testing in public schools, this organization emphasizes that learning is "an organic, messy, and fundamentally collaborative process" ("The Castle"). The organization works from the core beliefs that all students intuitively find joy in learning, that learning is about exploration, and that an integrated arts approach strengthens skills that all students will need in the twenty-first century. Also fundamental to The Castle are its affirmations of the importance of public schools and the involvement of a community to strengthen both itself and those schools. By incorporating local artists and community members, as well as drawing on the talents of local students, The Castle creates a community of learners: it builds the sense that this community will be stronger because it comes together around the education of its students. Even in its structure, The Castle communicates the value of every community voice. Students are valued through the ways in which they take a role in workshops: students create, question, and explore freely with the guidance of volunteers who constantly encourage and celebrate these acts. Joy is at the center of everything done during a Castle workshop, and the learning becomes a process in which every person in the room engages. A sense of hope braces all that these volunteers and students do, because The Castle truly revolves around the hope of learning together and learning with love.

Tell Us a Story: Letters to Make Believe

Jessica Maginity, a DePauw senior who chose to engage with a local elementary school for her senior Honor Scholar thesis, created the afterschool program Letters to Make Believe for Central Elementary School. The program essentially asserts many of the same things as The Castle, but instead of working during the school day with students, it focuses on using afterschool

time to involve students in creative writing and reading activities. Students in grades 3-5 meet once a week with volunteers from DePauw, and while a leader does share some form of group lesson each week, Jessica uses most of her time to engage her students in the joy, creation, and experiment so vital to the learning process. Jessica approached the program through the mode of inquiry: she wanted to instill the joy of learning by directly giving students opportunities to be curious, explore, and create. She herself also strove to lead the program through inquiry, constantly asking herself how the program could be made more meaningful or powerful to its students. In my conversation with Jessica, she emphasized that she created the program to value creativity and to acknowledge students' creative acts. The structure of the program allows students to write in a variety of ways for each nine-week period of their school year; each period has its own theme, with games, story times, and a range of creative activities that match. This period focuses on spies and code writing, a theme Jessica crafted from the students' input. She uses their written feedback to both choose themes and shape lesson plans for each week. This aspect of Letters to Make Believe proves its significance as a hopeful project for this community: Jessica directly gives her students' ownership and agency as she seeks to encourage their love of learning. This program really gives encounters with literature in an organic way—aligning with The Castle's mission to foster organic learning. Students in Letters to Make Believe have agency, and they take roles in directing the conversations they have and the topics they will learn. The program emphasizes imagination and curiosity as vital to any learning experience. Students are given free space to let their imaginations roam, and vitally, to tell stories. She engages them in dialogue, listening to their thoughts and adjusting her goals weekly. Her conversations with her students drive her constant reflection and reassessment, showing where her ultimate goals lie: she wants her students to learn in their own way and see the learning as their own. This program represents another view of the community of learners: Jessica builds this community through her willingness to learn alongside her students and her openness to remaining in a process of inquiry alongside them. The students and volunteers become a part of one community of learners

searching and exploring together. Jessica is not afraid to change, to ask her own questions to make the program better. This process of reflection and renewal makes Letters to Make Believe unique, and even more powerful, since Jessica allows it to change to become more meaningful. As the children take ownership, and see their ideas reflected in Jessica's moderations to her activities, the material with which they engage during the program can only become more meaningful. As this program puts curiosity, imagination, creativity, and inquiry at the center of all that it does, it essentially creates a system in which children clearly understand the value of their curiosity and creation.

A Time to Share: Community Arts, Education, and Outreach Think Tank

This recent think tank again reaffirmed my sense of hope that this community has so many of the pieces it needs to make collaboration a solid mindset with those doing community outreach, creative arts, or education work. Brought together by Beth Benedix and Jessica Maginity, a group of professors, community members, students, librarians, non-profit leaders, teachers, artists, and DePauw community outreach staff gathered for a think tank to share in a discussion about community programs involving the arts. This think tank captured the essence of the community of learners: it brought together many different voices, giving each one an essential, equally valuable status in the conversation. It gave a space for a discussion about a shared vision for this kind of community work. It allowed for openness about ideas, concerns, needs, questions, and dreams. Framed by Benedix as a way to ask questions about building sustainability, bridging programs to classrooms, and the missions of programs in relation to the community's needs, this think tank also brought up the question of the community's shared vision for integrated arts work. As a part of this group, I experienced the open flow of conversation that encouraged every person present to speak; ideas gradually turned into a discussion on the kind of community that this group would like to see grow in this area. As members of this group kept sharing, I watched the effect of the connections they made. The greatest asset of this think tank model is the energy that inevitably will capture the attention of everyone present: this think tank

brought back energy to a discussion on arts, education, and this community that had all too often turned negative. Gathering as a group of individuals representing a myriad of experiences allowed everyone to refocus on the central vision for arts and education in this community. This think tank model certainly offered a productive conversation, allowing participants to acknowledge the value of everyone's ideas while also building upon those ideas in sometimes unexpected ways. The think tank concluded, but Benedix made sure that the conversation would continue: in a follow-up email to participants, she outlined the central ideas and posed further questions, closing with an invitation to continue sharing. The sense of hopefulness endowed by this think tank showed me the importance of continued dialogue, listening, sharing, reflection, and inquiry to the process of becoming a more collaborative community.

Conclusion: The Joy of Reading

From the beginning of my thinking about local literacy programs, I have believed in "literacy" programs as "love-of-reading" programs. My own experiences with books and reading showed this principle at work; I knew that both my family and teachers had encouraged me to see books as vast imaginary worlds for me to explore, question, and recreate. As I spent more time working with reading in local schools, my assumption that literacy programs should be love-of-reading programs registered as somehow going against the grain of current systematic structures. I may not have understood exactly how to articulate it then, but I sensed that ownership, imagination, challenge, and pleasure were missing from reading encounters.

My starting assumption caused small misunderstandings and miscommunications along the way. I could not explain to people why I was exploring literacy programs because I did not yet understand the reasons for the disparity between my ideal literacy program and the programs I saw in action. The question I got asked more than once—"How are you defining literacy?"—helped explain the differences I saw between the reality of literacy programs and the programs that would promote a love of reading. Although I feel that most definitions of literacy imply understanding beyond the ability to read, my own working definition of literacy includes a love of reading. Did my upbringing, which emphasized this love, allow me to pass tests? Yes, but in addition, it opened up an entire imaginative world. I believe that children will learn how to be skillful readers who can pass tests if they must first learn to love reading. I have found that children become critical, imaginative, and joyful readers when adults applaud their efforts as they learn to delight in reading on their own terms.

Understanding my own assumptions in this case allows me to see the assumptions of others more clearly. One group of thinkers approaches literacy programs as skills, data, and testing programs that focus on meeting standards and levels. My own thinking—reaffirmed by the thinking of a few others I have encountered in the community—approaches literacy programs as "love-of-reading" programs that focus on engagement, joyfulness, and curiosity. Seeing the

breakdown or complete neglect of reading encounters that encourage creativity, curiosity, and critical inquiry has driven me to explore the reasons why those experiences are not the reality of literacy work. The divide might even be taken further: one kind of program emphasizes the quantitative whereas the other emphasizes reading as measurable only through qualitative data—the perceptions, reflections, and dialogues of students. Are these two forms ever reconcilable? Maybe this question is yet another one that this project can answer; in one sense, my project really has investigated the best ways to do literacy work in this current educational atmosphere. My project does not exist in a vacuum, but works to instill a love of reading even with the state of public schools and local communities as they are now. Thus, the unexpected path that my thesis took allowed me to recognize collaboration as a way to seek this reconciliation.

Collaboration, or the act of building towards a community of learners, creates the kind of hope that Genevieve Negrón Gonzalez argues "pushes us outward in community with one another to fight for change." Collaboration offers hope that becomes a "tool for creation, not complacency" (Gonzalez). It values every voice, allows reflection, and brings together a community around shared goals. Collaboration finally produces a community ready to take ownership of its wishes for change and to create around it the world it wants to see. The collaborative efforts of my project focused specifically on encouraging literacy programs as love-of-reading programs. All children deserve love-of-reading programs that go beyond skills: children need the imaginative fodder provided by critical, challenging, and engaging reading encounters. They need to learn to read, but more importantly, they need to learn to love it. My collaborative discussions led me ultimately to articulate why many literacy programs are not love-of-reading programs and to understand more than ever the value of transformative, joyful, and imaginative reading encounters. For me, literacy programs seemed as if they must necessarily be love-of-reading programs, but for others, literacy programs mattered because they offered the means to gather data and ensure test readiness. In the current state of education, having these goals is not only accepted, but also expected. My process of understanding the difference in

assumptions, of empathizing with the educators and administrators in the current system, was possible because of my own status as a reader. Reading has made me more capable of empathizing, letting me explore my own assumptions even as I explored others.' For Freire, becoming more fully human means having the freedom to take creative action that can change and transform one's world. I would add to this definition the particular skill that reading endows all who love it: to be more fully human is to act, understand, and reason with empathy. Joyful, engaging, and challenging experiences with reading grow compassion, love, and solidarity. These three strengths engender collaboration that creates the community of learners, which further fosters its members' compassionate and nurturing spirit. The cycle begins again, and the community becomes more adept at creating the programs that offer those first joyful encounters with reading. By passing on to children the love of reading and the joy of books, an entire community can emerge with a shared literacy vision that will, through its own momentum, create empathetic children who learn to read and learn to love it.

Appendix: Agenda for First Literacy Forum

January 23, 2014

I. Intro:
   a. Thank you for coming today! I am so grateful to be having this discussion with you all, and I want to express once again that I have already learned a great deal from talking or working with each one of you.
   b. I thought I would open with just a quick review of my thesis and the stage I'm at right now. As you all might remember, I have been exploring the various literacy programs in our community, and learning how they encourage a love of reading and involve families as their children learn to read. One area I am studying focuses on building communities of learners, and from this idea comes my hope that my project will in some way help nurture partnerships among the groups already working with early literacy in this community.
   c. There are really no "have-tos" or answers that I am trying to get out of this conversation. I first and foremost want this to be a space to just share thoughts on both the challenges of and hopes for our early literacy work, and most of all a time that can be useful to all of us. I see my role simply as someone interested in nurturing partnerships and being a connecting link however I can, and I'll be taking notes, that I'm willing to share, on whatever topics this conversation might cover.
   d. So, now, to begin, I thought it might work well to go around, introduce yourself and start by just sharing the work you do, the concerns you have, and the hopes you have for building partnerships.

II. Ideas to share:
   a. Community of learners – everyone in the community is involved as a learner encouraging young learners to become passionate and engaged about their reading. Fosters a community that is self-reflective, shares tasks, and has open discussion about aspects of young students' education
   b. We want to reach a better understanding of each group's initiatives, the what, how, and why
   c. Countdown to Kindergarten
   d. Reach Out and Read
   e. From collaboration can come a better understanding of why we as a community of educators feel it is important to have young students who love to read and families who are involved in encouraging children in reading.

III. Questions:
   a. Collaboration
      i. What is your sense of collaboration already happening among those in our area doing early literacy work?
      ii. Does anyone have any initiatives ongoing or underway that could benefit from any collaboration or partnership amongst our groups?
      iii. How do we see collaboration making our work more effective through sharing it?
   b. Love of Reading
      i. What are our groups' basic philosophies about how to build young students who love to read, and why that love is important?
      ii. What does it feel like right now in the current literacy or education atmosphere for each of your groups as you are working to develop a love of reading in your students?

iii. What would make up our common vision for the ways in which our groups can build a love of reading in our students as well as communicate intentionally and transparently with families about the way they can be partners in our work?

c. Family Involvement
   i. What are our groups' basic philosophies for involving families?
   ii. How are our groups' initiatives being communicated to parents in a larger context of how to foster literacy and instill a love of reading?
   iii. What are challenges you've seen in your work to partnering with families?
   iv. What would be our groups' common vision for partnering with families?

IV. Closing:

a. I have one question that I thought would be good to finish up with. After this conversation, are there any ideas for how collaboration can be kept strong in the community?
b. Does anyone have any further thoughts for what might come next to better help your groups in your collaboration and work?
c. Before we leave, I thought it might be if you each wanted to exchange contact information, and I have these cards if you wish to do that before you head out.
d. I also want to stress that my project is still ongoing, and I would love to talk more with any of you should you have further thoughts or comments to share, or questions or concerns. Please don't hesitate to reach out to me by email or phone!
e. Thank you again for being a part of this conversation – I'm so grateful you were all here!

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