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Third graders speak: Experiences and perspectives of reading and writing in urban public schools

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THIRD GRADERS SPEAK: EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES OF READING

AND WRITING IN URBAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

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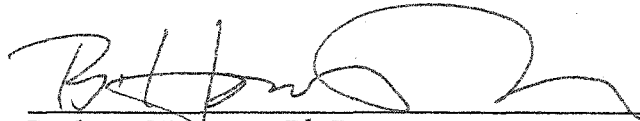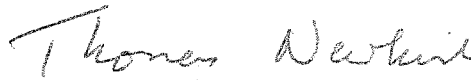
This dissertation has been examined and approved.

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April 21, 2005
Date

DEDICATION

To George – of course.

Your love has made me believe that dreams really do come true.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

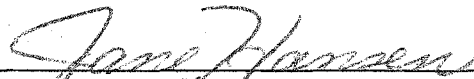This dissertation grew out of my interest in students. I have always been drawn to the ways in which students think about themselves as readers and writers, to what works for them in learning to read and write, and to what turns them off. I am particularly curious about students who attend urban public schools. I was privileged to be able to learn from the twenty-four third graders in this study and then all they taught me about their perceptions and experiences in school. I can only hope that I accurately represented their voices and that those voices will make a difference in literate lives of students in schools.

I could not have done this work without the support of the four teachers who invited me into their classrooms and into the lives of their students. Their classrooms were joyful, learning communities where children read and wrote and teachers taught. I thank Jeanne, Kathy, Kelly and Laura for their time and wisdom.

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I have had the honor to be the company of keen, adept and lively doctoral students in the department of education at UNH, whose kindness and support was unlimited. I thank Michelle Grenier, who housed and fed me and generously shared her love of learning with me. I will always be thankful for the intellectual and loving support of Dan Rothermel, Terry Moher, Charlene Kohn, Barb Tindall, Dale Wright and Elizabeth Lane. I am especially grateful for Jennie Marshall and her family. Jennie's intellect, friendship and honesty continue to bring great joy to my work and life.

Last but not least I want to acknowledge my family. First to my new family: George, Ali and Lily. I thank them for making more than enough room for me in their lives. I am grateful for their willingness to tolerate my absurd need to organize in times of stress (and not so much stress). My love and joy for the three of them is of more than I thought possible. Secondly, to my large and extended family: my parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins and wonderful friends - you have always known what I could do, long before I did. Your love and support made all things possible come true. Finally, to Mark and Jake, whose love, laughter and good cooking formed the foundation of my years as a doctoral student. Thank-you all!

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ABSTRACT

THIRD GRADERS SPEAK: EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES OF READING

AND WRITING IN URBAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by

Kim Boothroyd

University of New Hampshire, May 2005

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and perspectives of

reading and writing among third grade students attending urban public schools. The

study took place in a large urban district in the Northeastern United States and included

two elementary schools, four classrooms, and 24 students. The study was designed and

conducted as qualitative research. 24 students were interviewed at two different times in

the school year using (1) a picture protocol for the first interview and (2) a semi-

structured interview protocol for the second interview. Analysis of the 48 interviews

yielded findings in three areas: (1) The role of choice in motivating and engaging readers

and writers; (2) The importance of a working relationship between a teacher and student

in the classroom; and (3) The distribution of reading levels in urban classrooms compared

to those in middle-to-upper class public classrooms. The results confirmed the centrality

of the student-teacher relationship. These findings have implications for effective

teaching practices that include the ways in which the teacher organizes and arranges for

instruction to meet the broad needs of students.

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INTRODUCTION

I never intended to go to college. By the end of my senior year of high school, I had not taken the SATs nor had anyone really inquired into why I had not. That fall, my father drove me to the nearby community college, pronouncing to the director of admissions, "Take her!" After a rocky start in community college, I found myself in 99 level courses—courses for students "not quite prepared" for freshman level courses. Were it not for the skills instructor, Dr. Marlene Blumin, I would have bolted. She had high expectations, integrated multiple goals into her teaching and monitored learning carefully; she took into account students' understandings and perceptions rather than merely transmitting knowledge to students. Now, as I research urban students' perceptions of themselves as readers and writers, the connection between my past and present experiences comes to light.

Five and a half years after community college I graduated from SUNY Cortland in upstate New York with a B.S. in Elementary Education. I moved to Seattle, Washington, and began teaching first graders who were primarily poor and from a variety of minority groups, deep in the heart of the central district. Later, I moved to central New York where I taught second and fourth grades. In 1990, I entered a M.Ed. program in Reading at the University of New Hampshire. Shortly after completing my Master's, I relocated again to New York City to work as the Reading Coordinator at the Little Red School House. It was at Little Red that I felt I had "come home," as the philosophy of the school is to fit the school to the child rather than fitting the child to the school.

Students' perceptions of themselves as learners were as important as the curriculum. Yet I was continually asking why this kind of education could not or did not seem to exist in public schools. I was invited to teach at New York University, and there I saw in teacher education the opportunity to integrate students' perspectives as part of effective teaching practices.

In my first years of doctoral study, I was involved in a national study researching effective teachers. One of the most compelling findings was that fourth grade students' perceptions of themselves as readers and writers were strongly influenced by the teacher's approach to instruction, reaffirming what I had believed for years. It is not necessarily the reading program that shapes readers; rather the teacher is the critical factor in a child's education. In this dissertation I continue to explore the perceptions and experiences that students bring into the classroom, the teacher's use of what the students bring, and the ways the teachers influence the students' perceptions. Specifically, I studied these factors in the context of a large urban school district.

The purpose of my dissertation is to research what urban third graders report about reading and writing and about themselves as readers and writers. I sought a deeper understanding of how to create schooling for urban students that is truly educative (Dewey, 1902). My goal in this endeavor is to provide educators with insights that will inform future teaching practices. It has long been thought that students' understanding of what it means to be literate and the interactions that take place within classrooms shape and influence learning and motivation (Dewey, 1900, 1902). When educators pay attention to what students' value as learners and consider children's perceptions, they are genuinely able to support children's learning.

Teachers working in urban areas frequently teach children who come from very different backgrounds from their own; this requires instruction that is sensitive to the children's knowledge and backgrounds and consistent in supporting children as individual learners, each with his or her own set of strengths and needs (International Reading Association, 2000). Underlying the International Reading Association's notion of sensitivity in teaching children is a sensitivity and willingness to incorporate what students' value and know into classroom practice. In order to develop the capacity to be more attuned and sensitive to children's perceptions, educators must understand the perceptions that students bring to the classroom.

Given the ever-increasing focus on urban education as a social issue, urban students have been described recently from the perspective of politicians, researchers and educators. Only rarely have their own voices been heard. Urban students are frequently portrayed as 'at-risk' for academic failure based on one or more factors such as poverty, limited parent education, or ethnic and language minority status (Bempechat, 1998). In this study, I document and describe urban students' perceptions of themselves as readers and writers. My goal in this investigation is to reconceptualize the ways in which urban students' perspectives are integrated into literacy education.

CHAPTER I

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: MY THEORETICAL GROUNDING

The conceptual framework upon which my research is founded draws on theories that address ways in which children come to know themselves as readers and writers. I acknowledge more traditional theories that supported my thinking in past years, while moving towards theories that speak to my current research and beliefs. I have drawn from the understandings of key researchers in conjunction with my own teaching experiences to develop a multi-faceted focus for my study.

Since I began this research, my own view of how children come to be literate has shifted. In retrospect, my earlier thinking was framed by the belief that all children should be taught to read and write as all middle-upper class children are taught. Naively or not, I was negating the lives of many children in that thinking. As a classroom teacher, I had not moved beyond thinking that if I provided instruction and an environment that supported the sub-skills of reading as well as providing them with reading and writing experiences that were missing from their own lives, then I would have a classroom filled with readers and writers. I was not paying full attention to what these children do bring to the classroom. While I do not believe that I harmed children educationally, I was not beyond thinking that if only I could *fix* their lives, they would become fully literate. I have since moved away from that stance to a framework that is inclusive of all children. The theoretical perspectives upon which my research is based are made explicit in the following claims:

- Children come to know and understand themselves as readers and writers through an integration of life experience, development, family and education.

- Reading and writing development occur on a "Landscape of interrelated voices" (Dyson, 2003).

- Literacy practices are shaped by socially, situated experiences.

- Urban schools, as they are defined within society, are a socially constructed reality.

In this chapter I will discuss these claims and the ways in which they form the framework of my research.

Children Come to Know and Understand Themselves as Readers and Writers through an Integration of Life Experience, Development, Family and Education

Each of us perceives our work, friends and lives based on a variety of factors that have to do with who we are, where we have come from and how we have learned to position ourselves in the world. Children also come to know and understand their world based on social, emotional and cognitive factors. Historic, cultural, economic, and social factors deeply shape their identities. Much of children's grappling with issues of intelligence, social identity and cultural possibilities happens in the social and cultural worlds of childhood, particularly within the institution of school. Vygotsky conceptualized schools as "cultural settings," with special routines and forms of discourse, where adults help children acquire important mediational means (e.g., literacy and mathematics) of a culture, systems for communication and representing knowledge, and extending and restructuring the children's communicative and cognitive abilities (Moll, 2001). Their development as readers and writers is mediated both inside and outside the school walls. The ways in which students construct their identities within

school provides them with varied opportunities to move through their lives outside of school and visa versa. Vygotsky argued that schools (ideally) serve not only retrospective functions, facilitating the acquisitions of already existing technologies for a new generation, but prospective functions, facilitating students' potential for learning and creating a basis for future development (Kozulin, 1998).

<u>Vygotsky</u>

A major trend in education in the last twenty years has been toward teaching from a Vygotskian perspective. While I will consider implications for classroom practice in my discussion, I draw on Vygotsky's (1978a/b) theories as a scaffold to comprehend the influences of children's understanding of themselves as readers and writers. Vygotsky points to the importance of language as a critical tool in a social-construction of knowledge. It is through spoken and unspoken language that children's awareness of their perceptions is mediated. Vygotsky wrote that the most important sign-using behavior in children's development is human speech.

> Through speech children free themselves of many of the immediate constraints of their environment…they prepare themselves for future activity: they plan, order and control their own behavior as well as that of others (p. 126).

In addition to the role of language, Vygotsky viewed "technical tools" (e.g., pencils, computers, calculators) and "psychological tools" (e.g., language, counting systems, mnemonic techniques, writing, diagrams) as mediating higher mental functions. However, these mediational tools do not merely facilitate prior processes; instead, technical and psychological tools transform the processes and structure of action being performed (Vygotsky, 1981). Wertsch (Wertsch & Sohmer, 1995) has argued that such mediational means "reflect specific cultural, institutional and historical settings, and that

their mastery therefore inherently locates individuals in sociocultural history (p. 334).

This orientation, therefore, is very much in line with considering diversity not as an

impediment but as a valuable cultural resource that provides important and varied

experiences for the development of children and their futures (Moll, 2001).

Vygotsky's theories direct our attention to the fact that at the level of the

immediate personal environment, society influences psychological development through

face-to-face interactions. Children will be more likely to grow as readers and writers

when they are provided with varied levels of interaction. Rather than just having children

work in pairs, students will benefit from interactions in different sized groups as well as

groups differentiated by interest or across-abilities. They will have a broader perception

of themselves as readers and writers when interactions are consciously arranged by the

teacher and peers. Louise Rosenblatt (1989) writes that interactions in the classroom

should be viewed as transactions between the child and the teacher. She argues that

reading and writing do not occur as a transmission of knowledge from teacher to student;

rather, she views reading and writing as a transactional means between teacher and the

student. Rosenblatt would include the ways each learner's oral and written language,

background and experiences influence the actions and interactions of the learner in the

classroom. She raises the importance of interactions in and out of classrooms that need to

occur for students to actively co-construct knowledge with peers as well as with adults.

These interactions will shift and move forward cognitive and social emotional growth for

students.

Language

Language plays a crucial role in the construction of oneself as a reader and writer. It is the social interaction and language between the "other" and the child that bridges what the child already knows with what she will learn and understand. Barbara Rogoff (1991) argues that it is through the process of communication, the use of verbal and nonverbal language, that the teacher makes the connection from new situations to more familiar ones for the child, drawing connections, awakening processes, and creating shared meanings that lead to new perceptions and growth in the child. When individuals participate in shared endeavors, not only does individual development occur, but the process transforms the practices of the community (Rogoff, Baker-Sennet, Lacasa & Goldsmith, 1995). The child relies on others for her language learning, and this is what prompts the child to construct increasingly sophisticated rules of language within her community. In essence, language is the primary tool students use to develop and foster understandings and perceptions that broaden students' lives.

James Gee (1990) explains that language is more than a set of rules for communication; it is an identity kit that signals membership in particular groups. He suggests that primary discourses include "ways of being in the world, of forms of life which integrate words, acts, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body position and clothes" (p. 142). Primary discourses are learned initially within the home and with family, secondary discourses are learned from being apprenticed to many groups and institutions.

Gee (1999) claims that a primary function of human language is to scaffold the performance of social activities (whether play or work or both) and human affiliation

within cultures, social groups and institutions (p.1). In many of the classrooms in which I work, children sit, and teachers talk to them. Children's talking to each other is often not permitted. If literacy practices are one means through which identities are constructed, then multiple opportunities for language should be fore fronted in classroom interactions so that children have time and opportunities to understand yet challenge themselves and their peers in their thinking as they construct their identities.

Classroom Interactions

Oldfather and Dahl (1994) support my strong belief that literacy is accomplished through the interactions that take place through classroom discourse, as well as in family and the larger society, in which students and teachers construct understandings of what constitutes literacy, what it means to be literate. Participation in such interactions contributes to the individual's sense of self as a literate person—as a reader, writer, thinker and knower. Not only does participation contribute to one's sense of self, individuals transform their understanding of and responsibility for activities through their own participation. By participating in an activity or interaction, people necessarily make ongoing contributions, whether in concrete actions or in stretching to understand the action and ideas of others (Rogoff, Baker-Sennet, Lacasa & Goldsmith, 1995). Such stretching to accomplish something together during participation in activities is where the child transforms her understanding. Eleanor Duckworth (1996) writes that the development of intelligence is a matter of having wonderful ideas and feeling confident to try them out, and that schools can have an effect on the continuing development of wonderful ideas (p. 10). She goes on to write that the having of wonderful ideas depends to an overwhelming extent on the occasions for having them. Children are more likely to

understand their wonderful ideas in classrooms where interactions and actions are fore fronted in classroom practices.

Theories of Learning

Theories that shape literacy learning for children also include theories about the ways in which children understand their own intelligence. Educational researchers have learned that children have different ways of interpreting their successes and failures in the classroom, and that these interpretations have a profound influence on how children come to view their intellectual abilities (Bempechat, 1998). Precisely how children come to see themselves as "smart" or "average" or "dumb" and the way these beliefs influence their willingness to take on challenging assignments or persist in the face of difficulty have been the focus of much of the research in children's motivation. Nicholls (1978) has demonstrated that at four to five years of age, most children view intellectual ability as being related to effort and essentially malleable. As they get older, however, children begin to perceive ability as a fixed trait that by its very nature limits what they can accomplish. Nichols refers to this change over time as progression from the belief in ability as "mastery through effort" to the belief in ability "as capacity," that is, limited by what children perceive as an upper limit on their intelligence. (p.25)

In a study of children's perceptions and abilities, Dweck and Bempechat (1983) found that children's choice between challenging and non-challenging assignments and the persistence they will demonstrate on a new assignment differs, depending on whether they believe intelligence to be fixed or malleable. Some students tend to agree with statements like, "As long as you learn new things, you can always get smarter and smarter." In contrast, other children tend more to the view that intelligence is a trait that

is fixed from birth and that "you can learn new things, but how smart you are stays pretty much the same." Students who believe that intelligence is a fluid and changeable ability even when their confidence is low, and they risk mistakes and failure, are more willing to undertake a challenging task. That is, these children tend to see learning as a process, one that allows them to increase both their skills and their knowledge. For children so oriented, worries about how "smart" they are relative to others do not figure prominently in their concerns about their schoolwork. In contrast, children who believe in a fixed view of intelligence tend to choose easy over challenging assignments, preferring a successful performance over new learning. Easy tasks allow them to show off their abilities with little or no fear of making mistakes.

Reading and Writing Development Occurs on a Landscape of Interrelated Voices

The development of oneself as a reader or writer begins long before children are first exposed to instruction in school. There is much attention in the media paid to early reading, where reading is defined narrowly as the ability to decode print. Literacy is viewed almost exclusively in terms of mental processes and individual skills. The learner's experience, culture and education are left out of this perspective, save for the facile and empirically false assumption that children who learn to decode early and well will necessarily be successful later in school and society (Gee, 2001). There are theorists who believe that the development of reading proceeds through stages (Cochrane, Cochrane, Scalena, & Buchanan, 1984). While there is substantial evidence that there are recurring patterns in reading development, much of this research has focused on middle-class children from mainstream cultures (Weaver, 1994). Don Holdaway (1986) and Brian Cambourne (1988) suggest that literacy can proceed in much the same fashion as

the acquisition of language in settings where children receive similar kinds of encouragement, support and response. While I do not think that a whole language approach is *the way* to facilitate reading and writing development, I strongly believe that oral language is a critical factor in literacy learning whether one is white, Latino or Asian. (For a more complete discussion of whole language perspective on early literacy development, see Weaver, 1994; Pressley, 1998) It is not just the language of the dominant culture that accounts for development; it is language as it is constructed by cultural, social, and economic influences of all people that support the development of reading and writing.

Anne Haas Dyson

Anne Haas Dyson (2003) frames my concept of development. Dyson discusses what she calls the "landscape of interrelated voices" that enacts the varied communicative practices that constitute children's worlds (p. 12). The tools and actions of a child in the classroom move beyond a linear set of processes or a stage of development to the ways in which a child interprets, participates, accesses and constructs her knowledge, her voice as a reader and writer. Dyson writes,

> Development is not a process that is a series of stages or a set of sequentially learned skills. Rather it is enacted as children participate in, and thereby enact interpretations of, the recurrent social activities of their lives. These activities are mediated by, revealed and accomplished through—socially organized and symbolically mediated actions, especially ways of talking (p. 11).

When the development of reading and writing is placed on a landscape of interrelated voices rather than viewed as a continuum, a theory of development must include cultural and social factors as well as experiences and practices that shape the development of the

learner. This landscape of development is then a process of participation in sociocultural activities.

That said, Miller and Goodnow (1995) raise the point that it is clearly not sufficient to say that "participation influences development"; we need to ask, "What specific aspects of practice have particular consequences?" Through interviewing students, I hope to better understand the ways in which participation or non-participation in various literacy practices in school shapes students' perceptions of themselves as readers and writers.

Literacy Practices are Influenced by Experiences and are Socially Situated

John Dewey's (1938) writing supports one of the fundamental beliefs that shape my work with children and teachers: that "there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education." (p.20). Dewey believed that experiences are something that we live through. He argued that learning occurs when we (educators) make it possible for students to have educative experiences, though he cautioned that not all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experiences that are mis-educative have the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience (p. 25). When children report that they no longer want to read in school because they have no choice in what they read, I would argue that the experience of reading in that context has become mis-educative. Dewey's work tells us that everything depends on the quality of the *experience had* (p 27). He proposed his ideas over 70 years ago, yet children today often continue to experience school as disconnected and restrictive: as mis-educative.

Dewey believed, as I do, that to optimize literacy learning, children need not only be immersed in experiences that build on their lives, but that every experience both takes up something from those experiences which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after (p 35). For children to grow as literate beings, it becomes the larger responsibility of the teacher and administration to be able to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building experiences that are worthwhile for students (p. 40). Many school-based, literacy related practices, early and late, claim to be worthwhile learning that lead to futures in a changing world. However, at a deeper level, these practices are perceived by students of all cultural backgrounds as simply forms of "doing school," connected more to getting through a gate in the present than to learning for the future (Gee, 2001). Without worthwhile experiences, we not only run the risk of alienating children from schools, we deny children access to an educational process that will give them full access to literate life.

Cultural Practices

Peggy Miller and Jacqueline Goodnow (1995) describe cultural practices as actions that are repeated, shared with others in a social group, and invested with normative expectations and with meanings or significances that go beyond the immediate goals of the action (p. 7). They frame for me a broader understanding of the literacy practices of children in the classroom. Miller and Goodnow propose that the concept of "practices" recognizes that the acquisition of knowledge or skill is part of the construction of an identity or a person (p. 9). Although I am describing individual children in this study, I am also reporting students' understandings of what they do in the

larger context of their classroom, that is, what actions they repeat, such as book choice or daily writings.

Literacy Practices

While Miller and Goodnow's view of cultural practices addresses the practices of the individuals in this study, David Barton and Mary Hamilton (2001) afford my research a definition of literacy practices. While there are multiple aspects of literacy practices, in the simplest sense, literacy practices are what people do with literacy - observable and non-observable - which involves values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships (p. 7). The concept of literacy practices offers a powerful way of conceptualizing the link between the activities of reading and writing and the social structures in which they are embedded and which they help shape (Barton & Hamilton, 2001, p 7). While examining what students report about their practices, I am better able to consider the ways in which the students understand how their literacy practices affects their perceptions of themselves as literacy learners.

Urban Schools, as They Are Defined within Society, are a

Socially Constructed Reality

Given the ever increasing focus on urban education as a social issue, urban students have been described recently from the perspective of politicians, researchers and educators. "Urban" as a concept has been defined traditionally by positivist, Anthony Gidden (1984, 1987), who lays out three assumptions of positivism: a) that the procedures of natural science can be imported by social scientists to the study of social action; b) that the outcome of social science research, like that of the natural sciences, takes on the properties of natural law; and c) that social science research can be applied in

a value neutral manner. Under these assumptions, *urban* takes on properties of the natural sciences therefore making it something that can be quantified and positioned by others, particularly by those who hold elite positions in society and believe they can fix the "ills" of urban education. In this tradition, urban is code for "inner-city," and inner-city connotes a wealth of social ills such as poverty, drugs, unemployment, under-education, gangs, single mothers and crime. The laws of social science and their attendant policy recommendations are ill suited to the seemingly intractable social problems of inner city poverty. It is a positivist discourse of failure that has defined urban education going back to the Johnson Administration, extending into the Reagan administration, and into the current administration (Miron, 1998).

Miron (1998) addresses my belief that there can be no single definition for the term urban, because urban education, as it is conceived is a social construction. Miron writes,

> The concept of urban, like the term reform, has no inherent definition or meaning. Its meaning is derived from social context and is inextricably bound to dominant social and power relations, especially to the political uses of knowledge (Popkewitz, 1991) and official knowledge (Apple, 1993) (p. 3).

That is, who you are, the background from which you come will shape your definition of urban. The epistemological understanding of the term urban depends on the social context in wider society. Urban education, therefore, is a socially constructed reality.

The Lives of the Urban Student

Children who attend inner-city schools are more likely to be children of poverty from marginalized or low-status groups. Nearly one out of two African American children is poor (Ladson-Billings, 1994). These are many of the students of this study whose education is controlled by presumably well-intentioned, but often misguided

politicians, administrators, educators and researchers. Researchers have concluded that in developed countries and in third world countries, learners from impoverished and low-status groups fail to develop as fully and productively literate as compared to learners from sociocultural groups that hold sociopolitical favor (Purcell-Gates, 2002). Urban students are frequently portrayed as 'at-risk' for academic failure based on one or more factors such as poverty, low parent education, or ethnic and language minority status (Bempechat, 1998). Further, as white and middle-income people of color (including African American, Latinos and Asian Americans) leave the cites, they not only abandon the schools to the poor children of color but also take with them the resources, by way of a diminishing tax base (Ladson-Billings, 1994). While there is diversity in public city schools, it tends to be along cultural lines rather than socio-economic lines.

Students, who attend urban schools, be they African-American, Hispanic, Latino, or Caucasian, are no less capable of realizing their literate selves than students in mainstream culture. The institution we call *school* continues to educate based on a system designed for children of the mainstream culture. It becomes imperative that we be knowledgeable of the perspectives of urban, elementary students so that their voices are not omitted from conversations and practices that bring educational equity to their lives.

Subtractive Schooling

Moll (2001) describes the common response to diversity in schools within the United States, specifically among Latinos, as one of eradication, erasure, as a practice of what educational historian Joel Spring (1997) terms "deculturalization." This practice, which forms part of a broader pedagogy of control," is prevalent today, especially in

locations faced with rapid demographic changes such as large cities. The state in which my research was conducted recently passed a state bill that eliminated bilingual education from the public schools. Given the role of language in sustaining culture, this move is clearly a move toward "deculturalization." Moll and Ruiz (2002) argue that the dual strategy of exclusion and condemnation, divesting Latino students of their primary resources—their language and their culture—is what Valenzuela (1999) has called "subtractive schooling." This form of schooling has become a major feature of the education of poor and working class Latino students all over the country p. 365. The reality is that subtractive schooling exists for African-American, Asian, Arab, and other students from non-mainstream cultures as well. Subtractive schooling creates a social distance between the students and the world of school knowledge. It creates the impression that *someone else* possesses great knowledge and expertise, in contrast to the student him or herself who is perceived as unskilled and incompetent – that one's language and knowledge are inadequate because they are not privileged (formalized and accorded special status) at the school. (Moll & Ruiz, 2002). Subtractive schooling continues the discourse of failure prevalent in large urban schools.

This is precisely why we need to better understand the perspectives of students who attend urban schools, students whose lives are marginalized by a system that wants to fix the ills of "urban schools." Nicholson (1989) writes, "We must listen to those who are telling stories about what it means to be excluded from a conversation or community because their 'heroes' or 'heroines' are different from those of the dominant group." Urban schools are filled with Hispanic, Asian, African-American, Vietnamese, Chinese and Anglo children. Urban schools do not need to be "fixed" as it has been defined

historically; a reconceputalization of the concept of urban schools would take into account the voices of all those who live, work and to go to school in urban centers. It is only then that we can begin to improve the academic lives for these students. Perhaps what needs "fixing" is not the school itself, but the match or mismatch between the students and school contexts we provide for them.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE: WHAT CAME BEFORE

The Weary Blues

Oh, I have the
Weary Blues
When I go to school
School isn't really cool
Oh, I have the
Weary blues.

School is like a prison
Where the teachers put you
In a bad position
Oh, I have the weary blues.

I hate math, English, and writing
I'd rather go sleeping in bed
And hiding
Oh, blues

School is like a mosquito
School is your greatest foe
Oh, I got the
Weary Blues
Big Time!
                            Dammond Leonard, Sixth Grader

Dammond Leonard's poem represents a growing number of students who

perceive school as something they have to do, a place where they would prefer not to be,

a place where they often feel their voices are unheard. Research confirms that by middle

school students are less motivated to read or write, where curriculum is driven primarily

by the demands of the state and district (Ivey & Broaddus, 2000). Responses to

documented declines in student engagement have resulted in curriculum and school

reforms aimed at increasing achievement. Voices of teachers and parents, even politicians have shaped these reforms. Interestingly, the voices of the students themselves have been absent from conversations.

There has been a great deal of attention devoted to reading development and processes in the last thirty-five years (Bond & Dystra, 1967; Chall, 1976; Gough, 1972; and LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Just & Carpenter, 1980; Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984; Ehri, 1991; Routman, 1991; Pearson & Fielding, 1991). The majority of this research has focused on what students can do as readers and writers from the perspective of "other." In order to educate all children well, we need to ascertain students' understandings of themselves as readers and writers so that teachers are better able to motivate and engage students to read and write no matter their age or grade level. Only recently has research that included the perspective of the student begun to gain attention in the research community.

Children Reading and Writing

In the last several decades, a small number of researchers in the field of reading and writing have expressed interest in the things children do as they read or wrote. In his study of young children, Frank Smith (1971) asked children as they were reading to stop and reflect upon what they had just done. Smith wanted to understand the nature of reading itself so teachers could decide how to teach children in ways that made sense of what they read. Donald Graves (1983, 1984) was seminal in opening the eyes of researchers and educators to the fact that children are able to provide insight to their writing processes, insight that supports writing instruction. According to Lucy Calkins (1983), "Graves showed us how to listen, how to see the significance in what others

might think was ordinary" (p. xii). However, Smith and Graves were more interested in improving the quality of reading and writing and less in the ways in which understanding students' perspectives motivated children to read and write in the first place.

I wanted to document what motivates students to read and write from the perspectives of students themselves. John Guthrie and Allen Wigfield (2000) call for richer characterizations of engaged and motivated readers, particularly with young readers from age three to eight years (p. 417). Throughout the 480 page report of the National Reading Panel [Reports of the Subgroups] (2000), there are calls for more research on what motivates students to read. For example, "Few if any studies have investigated the contributions of motivation to the effectiveness of phonics programs, not only the learner's motivation to learn but also the teacher's motivation to teach (p. 113)." In regard to teacher preparation, the authors suggest that

> Proficient reading involves much more than utilizing individual strategies; it involves constant on-going adaptation to many cognitive processes. To help develop these processes in their students, teachers must be skillful in their instruction. Indeed, successful teachers of reading comprehension must respond flexibly and opportunistically to students' needs for instructive feedback as they read" (p. 337).

The skillfulness required of educators to teach reading and writing demands an underlying understanding of what motivates and engages students to read and write from the perspective of the learner.

Importance of the Student Perspective

While there has been intense interest in the processes students use as they read and write, research has largely neglected the role of students' perspectives of themselves as readers and writers and why that understanding is important to effectively teach children in all educational settings. Lincoln (1995) suggests that since schooling is one of the

most powerful shapers of both learning and acquiring a world view, it makes sense to attend to ways in which children actively shape their contexts and begin to model their worlds and the way in which we, in turn, shape the possibilities available to learners. It is critical that educators understand students' perspectives so that teaching will fit the needs of the learners, rather than the learners having to fit the teaching.

It could be argued that there has been a fundamental misunderstanding in literacy research about students' abilities to be introspective as well as retrospective about themselves as readers and writers. *The Handbook of Reading Research, Volume III* (2000) is considered to be representative of a decade of important research across the field of reading. The editors explain that in comparison with the previous volume (Barr, Kamil, Mosenthal & Pearson, 1996), the current volume includes perspectives from multiple social-science disciplines and from neurology and critical literacy theory (p. xi). However, in looking closely at the 47 chapters, there is not one chapter that focuses on reading development and processes from students' perspectives. One could assume that if students' perspectives were an important factor in understanding why children engage in reading and writing then the voices of the students would be represented more in the research.

Bringing in Students' Perspective

Importantly, a limited number of research studies continue to make strides in inviting the perspective of the learner to the field of education (Erlbaum, Schumm & Vaughn, 1997; Mueller, 2001; McCarthey, 2001; Newkirk, 2002). Karen Moller (1999) interviewed five first graders over a two month period to better understand their views of themselves in the context of reading. She concludes,

By talking with children we are alerted to areas of high motivation and to areas of need, we are better able to build on their knowledge and to help them broaden their interests (p.254).

Overall, Moller reports that the children's purposes and perceptions are intertwined. The children's views of reading and of their reading identity develop together alongside their growing awareness of print (p. 281). According to the first graders she studied, the main purpose of reading is to practice. The children report that they practice mainly to read longer words and books, to learn more words, and to develop decoding skills. All the children reported this, either when learning to read or as readers who liked to share texts in a variety of ways. In this way, a reading event is always social for these first graders (p. 266). Moller finds that children display knowledge and skills that might have gone otherwise unexplored (p. 289). She reports that examining the child's perspective provides a great deal of information that supports literacy instruction.

Listening to students' understandings of themselves as learners brings greater credibility to research that informs classroom instruction. Tom Newkirk (2002) puts forth critical claims in his book *Misreading masculinity: Boys, literacy, and popular culture*. Newkirk interviewed over 100 third, fourth and fifth graders in five elementary schools in a small state in New England. Newkirk's central claim is that too many schools are failing too many boys. Boys do not under perform girls on school literacy tasks because they are less verbal than girls. Rather, boys are drawn to the popular narratives of television, movies, comics, humor, sports pages and plot driven fiction, narratives which are typically negated in the classroom (p. 170). What is typically taught is "school sanctioned narratives," a genre which girls may be more drawn to but one that boys are less likely to find something about which to write. Newkirk urges educators to

resist the narrow range of reading and writing that is encouraged in schools. "Children combine the cultural resources at their disposal to create 'youth genres,' which may differ in significant ways from literature that appeal to adults." (p. 178). Newkirk's claims are not only based on his review of the research, but more importantly on listening to the students he interviewed. His claims are brought to life and solidified by the voices of the children in his study.

Newkirk concludes that we must resist narrowness in education. "We must resist those forces that would narrow the range of writing (and reading) allowable in schools. Such restriction will invariably most hurt students outside the mainstream, those who draw their inspiration from low-status cultural sources" (p. 186). If we continue to minimize students' perspectives of themselves as learners, many students will never participate in their learning. Many will continue just to "do" school in a system that disregards student voice and interests when making curricular and pedagogical decisions about their literacy futures.

<u>Influences on Students' Perspectives of Themselves as Learners</u>

Students' perspectives of themselves as learners do not develop in a vacuum. The task of understanding the influential factors that contribute to these perspectives is both challenging and worthwhile. Students' theories of their successes and failures contribute to their perspectives as learners. It is central to consider how a student attributes successes and failures in school, what their purposes might be for engaging in learning in school and their perceived self-efficacy.

Beliefs about Ability

Nichols (1990) and his associates have addressed the question of what children believe about abilities and the ways in which those beliefs affect their perceptions of themselves as learners and thus their efforts and subsequent success or failure. Nichols and his colleagues studied children between the ages of 6 and 14 focusing on three sets of relationships: luck and skill; difficulty and ability; and ability and effort. Significant to my research are their findings related to students' ability and beliefs about their effort. Using interview protocols, Nichols found four developmental levels of differentiation of ability and effort among the children in his study (p. 23).

- Effort or outcome is ability. At the age of six, children's beliefs center on effort (people who try harder than others are seen as smarter even if they get a lower score) or on outcome (people who get a higher score are said to work harder -- even if they do not, and are seen as smarter). At this age, children primarily believe that effort equals ability, and ability determines outcomes.

- Children between the ages of 7-9 primarily perceive effort to be the determinant of outcomes rather than ability. In effect, they are beginning to differentiate effort and ability, but value effort as central.

- Effort and ability are partially differentiated. Between the ages of 8-10 children begin to understand that effort is not the only cause of outcomes. Explanations of equal outcomes following different effort suggest the concept of ability as capacity, e.g. the person trying less is faster or brighter. These implications, however, are inconsistent across this age group; some children may still assert that individuals would achieve equally if they applied equal effort.

- Ability as capacity. Ability and effort are clearly differentiated between the ages of 10-13. Ability is conceived as capacity which, if low, may limit or, if high, may increase performance. Conversely, the effect of effort is constrained by ability. Ability is primarily seen as something one has or does not have.

Nichols concludes that across the grade levels, if children feel they lack *ability* even though they might be able to learn, they will see their best as *not good enough*. Their perceptions of themselves deeply affect their willingness to engage in tasks they perceive to be too difficult. When they expect to fail or to take longer on tasks at which others succeed, hard work will be a less attractive option as children get older. Nichols found that six year olds will persevere for the most part in these situations, whereas as children get older they are less likely to engage when they believe that their efforts are likely to establish that they lack an ability that is important to them. Eight and Nine year olds, according to Nichols, are just beginning to differentiate between ability and effort. Their perceptions of themselves and what they report may be influenced by how they view effort and ability. Factors that impact perceptions of one's ability to read and write change across the primary grades, but are particularly in-flux in third grade.

Incremental and Entity Theories

It is clear that children's theories about learning affect how they learn and how they think about learning. Children have their own theories about "smarts." John Bransford, Ann Brown and Rodney Cocking (2000) suggest that children, like their elders, have their own conceptions about their minds and those of others and how humans are "intelligent" Children have been shown to hold one of two primary types of beliefs about intelligence: Entity theories or incremental theories (Dweck, 1989; Dweck &

Elliot, 1983; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Children with entity theories believe that intelligence is a fixed property of individuals; the person is or is not intelligent from this perspective. Children with incremental theories, in contrast, believe that intelligence is malleable; they believe that intelligence is something that can change with effort and perseverance.

Entity theorists tend to hold performance goals in learning situations; since intelligence is viewed as a static entity it is important for children to maintain the appearance of being "smart." They strive to perform well or appear to perform well, attain positive judgments of their performance, and avoid assessments which might reveal them to be "less intelligent." They avoid challenges that will reflect them in a poor light. They show little persistence in the face of failure. In contrast, children who are incremental theorists believe that intelligence can be improved through effort and will; they are therefore more likely to adopt learning goals. Incremental theorists regard their own increasing competence as their goal. They seek challenges and show high persistence. Although most children probably fall on the continuum between the two theories and may simultaneously be incremental theorists in mathematics and entity theorists in writing, the motivational factors affect their persistence, learning goals, sense of failure, and striving for success (Bansford, Brown & Cocking, 2003, p. 102). Teachers can guide children to healthier conceptualizations of their learning potential if teachers understand the beliefs that children bring to school.

In another study of children's beliefs about their ability, Carol Freedman-Doan and her colleagues wanted to better understand the extent to which children think their abilities are modifiable (Freedman-Doan Wigfield, Eccles, Blumenfeld, Arberton and

Harold, 2000). They assessed age and gender variations in children's beliefs regarding the kinds of activities, academics, sports, music and arts at which they thought they were best and worst. They interviewed over 800 first-, second-, and fourth -grade children individually. Children were shown four pictures depicting a same-sex child doing math, reading, spelling, and science and asked to choose the activities at which she was best and not so good. They were also asked if they thought they could become better at an activity they were not so good at. Results showed that most children across the age range remained surprisingly optimistic about how much their ability could change in different areas and that many children believed they could become the best at activities at which they currently think they perform poorly. This appears to be true even for fourth graders who are beginning to understand the notions of ability as capacity. The research of Nichols and his colleagues, as well as Freedman-Doan and her colleagues, provide important insight into students' understandings of their abilities as readers and writers. According to these studies, children in third grade are beginning to solidify their theories of ability and effort. This body of research on children's beliefs provides teachers another lens with which to better understand their students' efforts and motivations to read and write. Teachers are in a fortuitous position in elementary school in being able to potentially intervene to shift students' misbeliefs about their abilities as learners.

Perceived Self-Efficacy

As we consider the theories children hold about their abilities, it is also important to consider children's perceptions of their efficaciousness as learners. Researchers have established that self-efficacy beliefs are correlated with other self beliefs such as attributions of successes and failures and academic changes and outcomes. The construct

of self-efficacy is related to theories of ability as being either incremental or fixed. Self-efficacy is defined as an individual's personal judgment of her capability to accomplish specific tasks and deal with different realities (Pajares, 1995). Self-efficacy is a strong predictor of related academic outcomes (Schunk, 1981; Schunk & Gunn; 1986, Bandura, 1993, Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). Perceptions of efficacy influence human behavior in three ways. First, they influence choice of behavior. People engage in tasks in which they feel competent and confident and avoid those in which they do not. Second, they help influence the amount of effort people will expend on an activity and how long they well persevere. The higher the sense of efficacy, the greater the effort. Finally, self-efficacy beliefs influence individuals' thought and emotional reactions. As Pajares (1995) aptly put it,

> People with low self-efficacy may believe things are tougher than they really are - a belief that fosters stress and a narrow vision of how to best solve a problem. High self-efficacy, on the other hand, creates feelings of serenity in approaching difficult tasks (p. 4).

The process by which children develop interest in activities in which they initially lack skill, interest and self-efficacy is an issue of importance to literacy growth. Bandura (1993) states that students who have a high self-efficacy attribute their failures to inefficient effort and will most likely try harder next time. Students with low-self-efficacy tend to attribute their failures to insufficient ability and feel they have no control in changing the situation. Efficacious students approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered. Inefficacious students see difficult tasks as challenges that may not be overcome.

Teachers need to be aware of students' perceptions and be prepared to deal with them in the daily life of the classroom so that students see their attempts and efforts to

learn as worthwhile and something worthy of future endeavors. Self-efficacy is highly domain specific; thus there are students who have high self-efficacy with respect to math and low self-efficacy with respect to reading (Pressley & McCormick, 1995). It is important to remember that even a knowledgeable student may perform poorly because of visions of failure and a feeling of having no control. Self-efficacy is determined in part by present attempts at learning and performance; it then affects future attempts at learning and performance. When a student believes she can control success in school, performance is improved. Then, when success is achieved, self-efficacy is enhanced, and the student is empowered. This causes motivation to increase and the student can begin the cycle again, this time feeling even more in control of their learning situation (Scott, 1996).

Understanding of Selves as Readers and Writers

In the previous section I discussed the ways in which students attribute success and failure, their beliefs about their abilities as learners, and their perceptions of their self-efficacy. In this section, I specifically discuss the impact of students' understandings of themselves as readers and writers. Researchers continue to find evidence that attitudes and perceptions about reading and writing, success or lack of success with reading and writing, and the nature of literacy instruction affect students' motivation and achievement (e.g., Guthrie & Alverman, 1999). Pamela Michel (1994) argues that by carefully listening to what children say about reading, adults can understand things about literacy that we can learn in no other way.

When children are listened to they are more likely to engage in reading and writing. Batya Elbaum, Jeanne Schuum and Sharon Vaughn (1997) investigated the

effects of different grouping formats for reading instruction on student perceptions. They examined third, fourth & fifth grade students' views of the advantages and disadvantages of same and mixed-ability groups, pairs and students working alone. Using a questionnaire with a Likert Scale, they collected data from 549 students. Questions included, "Mrs. C. keeps the whole class together during reading class. How much would you like to have Mrs. C as a teacher?" During reading class, Mrs. E. puts students into groups so that every reading group has some students who read really well, some students who read okay, and some students who don't read very well. How much would you like to have Mrs. E. as a teacher?" They found that students have distinct opinions about how they learn and what instructional practices benefit them as well as others in the class. While the authors caution against a "students know best" attitude, they argue that students' views are likely to influence their motivation and engagement (p. 490).

The inclusion of students' voices gives greater credibility to research that informs classroom instruction. Morrow (1999) investigated the impact of a literature-based program on literacy achievement, teachers' use of literature in reading instruction, and children's attitudes toward reading. Pertinent to my research, Morrow interviewed teachers and children to determine attitudes toward the reading program. One hundred and two students who were in the experimental groups were interviewed once during the study. Students in the experimental groups read literature every day and were being instructed using a basal reading program. What follows are some sample questions and student responses:

What did you learn in the literature program? *You learn to read better because you read a lot. You learn to understand what you are reading. You learn a lot of new words.*

What do you learn in your regular reading groups? *You learn to read stories in a book the teacher gives you. You learn how to spell and sound out hard words. You learn to answer questions and memorize.*

What do you do and like to do in the literature program? *I get to read a lot. I can write stories. You can choose what you want to read.*

What do you do and like in regular reading? *You get only one fat long book to read that's boring. You take tests, answer questions, and be quiet. You must sit in your seat when you work. You can't choose what you read, the teacher tells you what to read and it is the same for everyone.*

Morrow reported that most of the children identified reading and writing in the literature program as fun. Morrow described "fun" as when you could choose what you wanted to read and write, whether to work alone or with others, and whether to use literature manipulatives such as puppets or felt boards. Children's attitudes about reading were clearly impacted by the approach to reading instruction.

McCarthey (2001) examines the perspective of fifth grade students to explore the role of literacy and curriculum in identity construction. She believes that students' accomplishment or lack of accomplishment and their relative interest in reading and writing impact the ways in which they and others see them as readers. McCarthey found that for strong readers, literacy seemed to play a major role in how they viewed themselves. In contrast, for struggling readers, interests outside of school tend to dominate their views of themselves as readers (p. 143). Their understanding of their abilities as readers and writers influenced perception and motivation to engage in literacy related tasks.

In looking closely at the numerous studies of children's reading and writing processes and development, there are a number of studies that involve K-2 students or fourth and fifth graders, but notably few which address students in grade three who are presumably making the transition from a focus on learning to read to one which emphasizes the content. Moreover, often these studies were done with a large number of students across many schools and/or school districts. Not surprisingly, these studies were conducted in suburban or middle-upper class communities; fewer were conducted in urban schools.

<u>The Urban Elementary Student and Literacy Research</u>

Given the increasing focus on urban education as a social issue, urban students have been described from the perspective of politicians, researchers and educators. Only rarely, however, have the understandings and experiences of the students themselves been described. Heath (1991) writes that thousands of studies of classrooms have described language and learning – especially conditions surrounding the teaching of reading and writing. Very few studies have described in detail the language and learning of low-income, minority children (p. 21).

<u>Reading and Writing Instruction: The Impact on Children who Attend Urban Schools</u>

A limited number of long-term studies have been conducted to examine the impact of reading and writing instruction on urban students' achievement as well as on the students' perceptions of themselves as readers and writers. Victoria Purcell-Gates and Karen Dahl (1991) carried out one of the first large, non-case study documentations of the process of learning to read and write from the perspective of children in an urban, low socio-economic setting. Their goal was to explore both success and failure among

children in low income communities who were learning to read and write in traditional skills-based classrooms. Their primary analyses were focused on students' interpretations of instruction. Data were collected over a two-year period on 35 kindergarten students from three elementary schools in the same urban district. Twelve focus students were randomly selected from the sample for close observation. At the beginning of the study, the researchers administered a task to measure knowledge of written print (Clay, 1979). Home visits were also conducted with most of the focus students.

Urban Students Reading and Writing

Purcell-Gates & Dahl found that the kindergarteners who were most successful at reading and writing had by the end of first grade more highly and broadly developed schemata about written language than the kindergarteners who were least successful. These researchers argue that the operative factor contributing to the differences was not social-economic class, but rather experience with written language. Interestingly, all of the children in this study came from economically distressed homes and neighborhoods, yet many began school with more experience with written language than others.

In another study, Dahl and Freppon (1995) conducted a comparison of inner city children to shed light on how the children make sense of and interpret their beginning reading and writing instruction in the early grades of school. They also compared the perceptions of children in skills-based classrooms and those in whole language classrooms. Data were collected for two years examining closely twelve principal children from the time they began kindergarten. The children's talk and actions revealed an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses as readers and writers. The study

found that students in the whole language classrooms indicated a "disposition for learning," provided evidence of learner ownership, and had a positive attitude toward literacy. In the skills-based group, these factors were evident only among the most proficient readers and writers. Dahl and Freppon considered these learning factors important in light of the vexing problem of patterns of failure that often characterize inner-city learners in public schooling (p. 70). Child-centered interpretations of learning to read and write are particularly important now given the current federal mandates which are based on scientific approaches to reading instruction. Interestingly, Dahl and Freppon found that learners in the whole-language classrooms expressed extensive interest in themselves as literacy learners. If what we want for our students is to have efficacy as readers and writers then 'having a disposition' for learning is critical.

Dahl & Freppon (1995) argue that we must consider the learner's perspective and individual differences in reading and writing development in order to understand children's reading and writing behaviors. Beyond documenting classroom curricula and their consequences, we need to know what children believe, what events and contexts shape their thinking, and how instruction can better fit children's evolving knowledge and skills (p. 72). At the same time educators need a clear understanding of what motivates and engages students to read and write both in and out of school. With this understanding teachers will be better able to support students in making sense of themselves as readers and writers.

Giving Students Every Advantage

There continues to be an achievement gap between students educated in urban/rural public schools and students educated in suburban schools. According to the

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 1998) the percentage of urban fourth grade students in public schools nationwide who achieve a basic level of proficiency is significantly lower (51%) than for students who reside outside of urban centers or live in large towns (65%). In the same NAEP report, four times as many poor students fail to achieve the NAEP basic proficiency as non-poor students.

One of the strongest voices in urban education research is that of Shirley Brice Heath (1983, 1985, 1986). She examined the characteristics of language and language socialization of mainstream and non-mainstream groups to better understand what it means to be literate. In this important research, she focuses on the ways in which low-income children are "disadvantaged" when they open the school door. She found that though African American and Mexican-origin working class communities differ widely on many features (such as gender expectations related to talk and the valued characteristics of talk), both groups share three features of language use (Heath, 1983, 1985, 1986):

(1)   Children learn the names and features of objects, events, or situations in the day-to-day process of interactions and not in "Lessoned" contexts or through specific queries from adults.

(2)   Questions adults ask of children are more frequently yes-no questions or playful and teasing queries rather than requests for recounts of information already known to adults.

(3)   Narratives or stories emphasize persons as actors and the quality of events. Most narratives are jointly created by several speakers with frequent interruptions, overlap of turns at talk, and embellishment of details. In addition, both groups

place primary reliance on teaching by demonstration and apprenticeship in both
home and community learning, with oral language support for evaluation of
performers rather than the performance.

Heath suggests that all children generally learn by watching and participating in
appropriately assigned sociocultural roles. More importantly, African-American and
Latino cultures place higher value on group reliance than do other groups. They thus cut
themselves off from intense involvement in institutions such as school or in other
mainstream occupational groups that often repeat and reinforce, as well as rely on, many
school taught practices. Heath makes it clear that students from many minority
communities will be at a disadvantage in classrooms and with regard to certain types of
tasks that expect their thinking, as demonstrated through oral and written language, to
bear certain characteristics of the mainstream.

Through the Eyes of the Student

In a two-year case study of an urban family, Victoria Purcell-Gates (1995) posed
the question, "What does the world look like through the eyes of a non-literate, gendered,
urban Appalachian?"(p. 8). She worked with a mother and her second-grade son for two
years, spending time with them in their home as well as at the University Literacy Center.
Purcell-Gates uses a sociocultural, theoretical lens to guide her research. She believes
that it offers educators the best chance to understand low literacy attainment by poor and
minority peoples.

> How can we understand why so many children do not learn what the mainstream
> schools think they are teaching unless we get "inside" the learners and see the
> world through their eyes? If we do not try to do this, if we continue to use the
> mainstream experience of reality as the perspective, we fool ourselves into
> believing that we are looking through a window when instead we are looking into

a mirror. Our explanations threaten to reflect only ourselves and our world, serving no real explanatory purpose (p. 6).

Like many before her, Purcell-Gates found a relationship between social class and literacy levels. Children from poor, minority homes have, overall, lower levels of literacy skills and different ways of incorporating literacy into their lives as compared with middle class peers. Lower-class, minority homes are thus, overall, differently literate as communities from middle class ones. Children and adults in these low-income, minority communities experience greater difficulty learning to read and write in schools designed for children from middle-class, literate homes (p. 184). Even though Purcell-Gates examined the urban Appalachian, her conclusions have wide implications for children in other urban communities. Her call for seeing the world through the eyes of the students, in fact, requires that literacy research include talking with children to better understand how they see themselves and the world.

<u>The Divide</u>

The truth is that while American elementary students' reading achievement has been improving, there remain large numbers of children who still fail to acquire real reading proficiency. These children are most often poor, and because children from ethnic minority groups are more often poor, minority children are overrepresented in the pool of lower achieving students (Allington, 2000). Purcell-Gates (2000) writes that researchers around the world have recently focused on this problem: the cavernous and uncrossable ravine that seems to lie between children of poverty from marginalized, or low-status groups, and their full potential as literate beings.

> Overall the best we have been able to do is to describe the situation over and over again, using different measures, different definitions of literacy, different developed countries and in third-world countries, learners from impoverished and low-status groups fail to develop as sociopolitical power and favor (p. 124).

Purcell-Gates (2003) strongly suggests that whether we interpret differences among children or adults, as deficit or difference, depends primarily on the preconceptions, attitudes, and stereotypes we hold toward the individual children's communities and cultures. One's interpretation is also dependent on one's idea of a literate person. If the child's family is poor, his parents undereducated, his dialect nonstandard, then we are much more likely to interpret experiential difference as a deficit in the child, in the parents, in the home, in the sociocultural community within which this child has grown up. Dyson (2003) states that, in general, there is a contrast between the literacy development of "ideal" or mainstream children and that of racialized and classed other children lacking resources that has assumed new prominence as the government attempts to make teaching a matter of equity. The call for a change in research that focuses on detailing the language and learning of low-income minority children is urgent and necessary. Research of this type will provide invaluable information into the ways instruction can be shifted so that life in the classroom is equal for children whether they are attending an urban or suburban school.

Testing and Retention: Advantages for Some

In 2001, George W. Bush signed into legislation the No Child Left Behind Act. While the federal government cannot force No Child Left Behind regulations on every state, any state that wants the federal money must agree to test all children in grade three through eight. No Child Left Behind requires that all students be tested yearly in reading and math. Schools must make adequate yearly progress (AYP) or they are subject to severe punishment. Because of these regulations, a great deal of time is spent preparing

for the tests, and then a great deal of attention is focused on the results. Preparation for testing has taken over many of today's classrooms (Ball, 2000). Under the current testing requirements, teachers may be forced to stifle thought, discussion, and questions in the name and hope of raising test scores (Bracey, 2003). In his book *On the Death of Childhood and the Destruction of Public Schools*, Gerald Bracey writes passionately about the short and long terms effects of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), calling the government's NCLB act "educational terrorism" (p. 26). Educational improvement is not accomplished through administrative or legislative mandate. It is accomplished through attention to the complicated, idiosyncratic, often paradoxical, and difficult to measure nature of learning (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). And, I would argue, a better understanding of the effects of this testing climate on children's perceptions of themselves as readers and writers, as learners.

Comprehensive State Exam

Equally troubling is the fact that current local policies and national policies hinder teachers' ability to forefront children's understandings of themselves as readers and writers in the classroom. Test scores and adequate yearly progress now determine the extent of federal and state involvement in schools (Allington, 2000). Across the state in which my research was conducted, students in grade three are given the comprehensive state exam each spring. It is a high stakes exam that is administered over a two week period. In the parent handbook, the district writes that the state comprehensive exam is administered to help determine if the child is ready to go on to the next grade. All tenth grade students across the district must pass in order to graduate from high school.

In order for students to be promoted to the fourth grade, they must meet district benchmarks. Those who do not make the benchmarks during the school year are required to attend summer school. For many students, academic performance in summer school determines if the student goes on to the next grade. Unlike most aspects of education, which have contending forces pulling in opposite directions, the body of research on retention speaks with a single voice. One 1992 study reviewed the literature on forty-nine educational innovations, calculated their impact on achievement, and then ranked them in order of power. Retention ranked 49th. It was among the few innovations that actually produced negative results (Bracey, 2000). Despite this body of research that shows retention does not benefit the student, the district in which this study was conducted maintains its retention policies. Twenty-five percent of the students in this study were retained in the third grade.

The effects of retention as well as state testing can have a lasting impact on students, not only on their perceptions of themselves as readers and writers, but on their promotion to the next grade. I can not imagine that children do not feel the pressure of the tests in their daily lives. I would argue that the current climate only causes injury to students who are already marginalized. We need to better understand what urban students' live daily in a high-stakes assessment environment. With this knowledge, change in instruction may help students move toward a realization of their literate selves. A realization that includes a better understanding of oneself as a reader and writer, and the ways in which those understandings broaden or limit their lives in and out of school. A literate self that Jackson (1968) puts it in the bluntest of terms: If an interpretation of what goes on in classrooms does not in some way point to how teaching and learning

might improve for diverse student populations or how teachers can be better prepared and highly motivated to teach diverse students more effectively, why bother? (cited in Ball, 2002, p. 72)

Life in the Classroom

Experiences in the classroom will affect students' understanding of themselves as readers and writers and what readers and writers do, whether the curriculum is student-centered or test-driven or somewhere on the continuum between the two. The ways in which students need to be taught, the varied levels of interactions in the classroom that need to occur, and the critical need for students to experience multiple levels of participation places a great deal of emphasis on the effectiveness of the classroom teacher. It is essential that the classroom teacher has a wide range of teaching tools to meet the broad learning needs of students.

The Nature of Classroom Experiences

John Dewey (1938) refers to as "the intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education." For many students in public schools there is a disconnect between the actual experience of their lives and the reality of their education. Students' personal lives are often left outside of the school walls when a child walks through the proverbial school doors. In particular, students in urban public schools are often educated by white middle-class teachers whose experiences in public schools by no means mirror the lives of the children whom they teach. Well-intentioned teachers continue to impose a perspective on teaching that by its very nature diminishes the perspectives of the urban student. Experiences in the classroom should continually provide students with a balance between the necessary standards and expectations to

which students are accountable and teaching practices that include and use the perspectives of the students in the daily life of the classroom.

Luis Moll's (1988) research on teaching Latino students addressed ways in which teachers organized instruction for students and the reasons for their instructional decisions. The study was part of a larger project on "effective" schooling conducted in a large metropolitan area in the Southwest in a district working towards higher student achievement. He found that in contrast to the assumption that working-class children could not handle an academically rigorous curriculum—or in the case of students with limited English proficiency, that their lack of English justifies an emphasis on low-level skills - the guiding assumption in the classrooms he observed seemed to be the opposite: that the students were as smart as allowed by the curriculum (p. 467). The idea of "watering down" the curriculum was flatly rejected by the teachers in the study as unacceptable and was considered "degrading and disrespectful" to students. Moll also found that there was a diversity of instruction in these classrooms as well as a constant emphasis on creating meaning. The teachers set up their lessons to encourage students to use their personal experiences to make sense of the classroom content. Moll argues that these teachers are important because their orientation, teaching methods, and outcomes go against the status quo. These teachers do not necessarily strictly adhere to district or state mandates, but they achieved academic results.

The Disconnect

Researchers continue to bring to the forefront the disconnect between what children perceive as literacy practices of school and the literacy practices in their home and communities. Monzo and Rueda (2000) examined the contexts that produce literacy

engagement in low-income Latino children. Over a two-year period, 21 Spanish dominant Latino children were observed within classroom, home, and community contexts. The students attended school in one of the most impoverished, inner city communities in Southern California. All of the parents in the study were immigrants to this country. Monzo and Rueda found that, despite the popular notion that children in bilingual education programs do not develop the motivation to learn English; the children expressed a strong belief in the need for literacy. In fact, English was sometimes so valued that the value of maintaining Spanish was often secondary to the children. Parents also understood the need for English literacy and expressed to the researchers repeated desire for their children to learn to speak, read and write in English. They also found the functional nature of literacy in the home context to be distinct from the decontextualized literacy of the classroom. Some children may not recognize what the book-reading and writing activities of the classroom have to do with the daily literacy tasks they encounter outside of school.

Moll (1988), Moll and Gonzalez (1994) and Monzo and Rueda (2000) support my on-going belief that teachers must access the resources of home and community, thus building on the intellectual and practical skills children develop as they participate in daily household and community activities. As educators we must find out what children's understandings of reading and writing are. With knowledge of their students' home and community contexts for learning, teachers can provide instruction that is contextualized to children's lived experiences, making reading and writing relevant (Monzo & Rueda, 2000).

Effective Teachers: Why It Matters

Not only does the nature of experiences students have in school matter, the effectiveness of instruction is crucial to positively affecting perceptions. This 'effectiveness' has to do not only with instruction, but also with the ways in which the teacher organizes and plans for instruction, as well as how she listens to and talks with students. Guice (1992) found that sixth grade children's perceptions of themselves were influenced by their interactions with books and peers in both home and school contexts. The way teachers structured classroom interactions such as allocating time to discuss books, choice, and the availability of time for extended time for reading shaped their perceptions. These interactions, in turn, also influenced the children's level of engagement with reading.

Classroom-based research on effective teaching finds that the teacher is critical in ensuring students' engagement and learning (Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block & Mandell, 2001; Allington & Johnston, 2002). In a year-long study, Wharton-McDonald, Boothroyd, Johnston and Cronin (1999) found that fourth-grade students' perceptions of themselves as readers and writers were influenced, in part, by the teacher's approach to instruction. The ways in which students described themselves as good or not-so-good readers was also influenced by their perceptions of the strategies and literacy practices good and not-so-good readers employ. This research, as part of a larger national study, shed light on children's understandings of themselves as readers and writers based on the ways in which reading and writing were taught.

Effective Instruction for Students in Urban Public Schools

Luis Moll (1998) and Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) stress the importance of effective teaching for urban students, teaching that takes into account students' understanding of themselves as readers and writers. If we are to meet the literacy needs of students attending urban public schools then it is incumbent upon educators and researchers to better understand the teaching practices that support learning for students in these schools.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) contends that in order for teachers to effectively teach African-American students in urban settings they must have an in-depth understanding of their students. Ladson-Billings conducted a two-year study across ninety schools. Her work looked at teaching ideology and common behaviors, rather than individual teaching styles. As part of this study, she closely examined eight teachers known for effective teaching of African American students and how their teaching helped students achieve academic success, while maintaining the students' positive identity as African Americans. Ladson-Billings uses the term "culturally relevant teaching." She argues that culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These cultural referents are not merely vehicles for bridging or explaining dominant culture; they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right (p. 117). The cultural referents that Ladson-Billings refers to are accessed when we observe and talk with students and bring that knowledge of the students into everyday, classroom practice. The perceptions, attitudes, viewpoints, concepts and general stances

of these learners affect what learners believe will broaden or limit what they can or cannot do in the classroom (Dahl & Freppon, 1995).

Tatum (2000) conducted an eight-month teacher-as-researcher inquiry in a class of twenty-nine eighth-grade students who attended one of the largest urban schools in the country. These students were on a low-level track. They were reluctant to read orally, seldom completed assigned readings, and refused to answer questions when called upon. Students in the class rarely ventured into independent reading. Tatum was concerned with the emphasis on standardized scores. He argued that the gap between a comprehensive approach to literacy teaching and the widespread practice of teachers of African American adolescent students with poor reading skills is widening because of the emphasis on standards (p. 52). He interviewed students at the beginning of the study to determine what prevented their participation in reading. Fear of embarrassment, deficient-word-attack strategies, and limited vocabulary were identified as major barriers to students' success in reading. He found that the students had become accustomed to worksheets and assessment questions from their basal readers as their primary mode of instruction.

Based on Tatum's findings the classroom was reorganized and instruction was restructured. For example, goals were set, instructional focus shifted to explicit word study, fluency, writing and comprehension instruction, and culturally relevant literature (Ladson-Billings, 1995) was incorporated into the instructional framework. At the beginning of the year, all of the students in the class had reading stanines of four or below on the previous year's Iowa Test of Basic skills. By the end of the school year 25 of the 29 students were promoted to high school meeting the minimum standard of 7.0 on the

Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Several students scored well beyond the minimum standard. Tatum's work not only speaks to the importance of the structure, organization and approach to reading instruction, but also to the shift from a more traditional stance of teacher-centered curriculum to curriculum generated in part by interviewed students. As Dahl and Freppon argue (1995), it may not be as much about what is being taught, but what students were learning about themselves, about reading and writing, about school.

Denny Taylor (1993) writes that our task as teachers is to insure that the voices of children become embedded in the ways we teach. While we know that there are many teaching strategies that support fluent reading and reading for meaning, it is important to recognize the effective teaching strategies and practices that bring to life the voices of our students, teaching practices that engage and motivate students to read and write. Readers and writers can come to understand themselves in particular ways as a result of literate engagement in school (McCarthey & Moje, 2002).

CHAPTER III

ONE TRAVELER'S JOURNEY

In Chapter II, I reported that researchers, educational policy makers and scholars have attempted to capture students' understanding of reading and writing from a wide range of perspectives. While this has happened in small ways, the reality is that we know little about students' understanding of reading and writing from their own perspectives. Part of the reason for the lack of student presence in educational research may be that few researchers and policy makers have placed students' perceptions and experiences at the center of attention. We know even less about urban students' understanding of literacy (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Bempechat, 1998). Most of what we know about urban students' understanding of themselves as readers and writers comes from second-hand sources and from a small number of research studies involving teacher interviews and test scores rather than on interviews with the students themselves.

My purposes in conducting this study were to describe what urban third graders report about themselves as readers and writers as well as to understand their perceptions of what "counts" as reading and writing in school and out of school in classrooms where the teacher was considered effective at reading and writing instruction. This study was designed and conducted as qualitative research. Morse (1994) writes,

> Conducting qualitative research is like walking into the wilderness: some trails are well trodden, whereas others not visible at first sight. The map, which helps a person decide which forks to take, becomes clearer as each person is interviewed and observed along the path (p. 50).

I interviewed students in this study at two different times in the school year using two different interview protocols. This methodology provided me with a wealth of "paths" and "forks" to consider along the journey. Using grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), categories and themes emerged and were mapped out based on what the third graders reported. In order to better explore students' understandings, I observed students in their classrooms, conducted semi-structured interviews, interviewed their teachers, and continually analyzed data categories, patterns and confirmations of developing theories.

First, however, I needed to find research sites—a journey in itself. Hence, I set out initially to find principals who would allow me to conduct research in their urban schools, teachers who were known to be effective at reading and writing and who would provide me access to their students, and students who were willing to be interviewed.

The Beginning

The interviewer is a traveler on a journey that leads to a tale to be told upon returning home. The interviewer wanders along with the local inhabitants, asks questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world... (Kvale, 1996).

The journey to find students in classrooms where the teacher was known to be effective at reading and writing instruction was not an easy one. Initially, I asked principals, "Who are your effective third grade teachers?" One after another would reply that all their teachers were effective. ("How could I possibly single out a few?") The alternative response was to politely tell me that their school was not at a point in the year to have a researcher in the building.

The district in which I wished to conduct my research is a large urban school district that has been studied in depth, and the results have not always been portrayed positively (e.g., Kozol, 1967). At the time of my investigation, there were over 62,000 students in this

district attending 131 schools. I learned quickly that to get an appointment with a principal I had to begin by sharing that I was a teacher first and then weave in my role as a researcher. I soon learned that my validity as a researcher had to be predicated on the validity of my work in schools and on my status as a former teacher. It was not until I started consulting in the district that doors to schools in which I wanted to conduct research began to creak open.

As a consultant in the district, I learned to ask people with whom I worked (consultants, administrators, and supervisors) which schools were known for their literacy programs? And where were there third grade teachers who were considered to be particularly effective at reading and writing instruction? After several months of such questioning in the district, I was finally getting a road map of schools to visit. I started knocking on doors again. When I rephrased the question with administrators some months later, I asked, "Who are your third grade teachers who are especially good at reading and writing instruction?" Slowly, principals would tell me about one or two teachers. Often they would tell me long tales of the teachers' accomplishments. Only after I had listened would I ask, "Do you think she would be willing to let me spend some time with her students?" Five months after beginning the search for classrooms, doors opened and two principals invited me into their schools.

I traveled many hallways poking my head in classrooms, politely introducing myself, smiling, hoping—hoping that the principal had shared with them that I would be stopping by and hoping that two teachers in the same building would be willing, that the teacher would make time in her busy schedule, and that she was amenable to letting a perfect stranger into her classroom. After touching base, I called teachers at home. If they were inclined, I would meet with them in their classrooms, in an office not in use, or in a coffee shop after school.

Two teachers readily welcomed me into their classrooms in January; three months later two more teachers agreed. The sites and students were secured.

School Sites

Research sites were set up in two schools. In each school, as part of their agreement to partake in the investigation, I offered to do a workshop for the staff at the completion of the study. Both principals had started out in the school district as teachers, only later entering administration. Each had been principal of her/his school for fewer than five years. At the time of the study, the school district had recently elected to implement Reading and Writing Workshop (Allen, 2000; Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Graves, 1983) district wide. Reading and writing workshop were defined as a whole school change methodology focused on implementing a balanced and comprehensive approach to literacy. Components included explicit teaching and demonstration of reading and writing strategies during daily mini-lessons, independent reading, conferring, shared reading, flexible groupings of students for instruction, word study, interactive read aloud and whole class share. The workshop classrooms were discernible by the repeated rhythm of whole-class explicit instruction and modeling, followed by individual and small group instruction based on students' level or readiness, interests, and learning styles, and concluding with a whole class wrap-up or sharing of achievements. (For more details on Reading and Writing Workshop, see Tomlinson, 1999; Allen, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Hansen, 2001.) For the principals in the study this was a new approach to instruction that had wide implications for each of their schools. While they accepted the districts directed shift to the Workshop approach, each school had a distinct character that shaped the work of the teachers and students.

The student demographics in the school district at the time of the study included African American (47%), Hispanic (30%), White (14%), Asian (9%) and Native American (1%). Students in the schools where this study took place were primarily African American (30%) and Vietnamese (20%) although the students whom I interviewed represented a broad range of ethnic groups including Hispanic, Kurdish, Polish, Somali and Irish students. Of the 24 students interviewed, 16% were Caucasian.

Downey Elementary School. Downey Elementary School (all names used are pseudonyms) is a large school housing 529 students in grades K-5. Sixty-one percent were in regular education classrooms, 17% were in bilingual classrooms and 21% were in self-contained special education classrooms. Included in the group of students in the regular education classrooms were many who were bilingual. Downey was surrounded by parking lots, a housing project and empty fields. It is not a quaint neighborhood school, but rather a large, sterile, imposing building. As is the case with all of the schools in the district, the doors of the school are locked at all times. Access is allowed only after identification which is followed by a grating buzzing noise, a click and you're in. The student population is 36% African American, 42% Hispanic, 13% White, and 8 % Asian with 90% of Downey's students qualifying for free or reduced lunches. The school day is divided into 45-minute blocks so that teachers can accommodate the longer blocks of instruction necessary for literacy and math instruction.

Table 1

Students in the Study

Student	Demographics	Retained	Bilingual	Reading Level	School
Akilah	African American	Yes		Struggling Reader	Downey
Alex	Latino	Yes		Struggling Reader	Downey
Anna	Vietnamese		Yes	Strong Reader	Collier
Bryanna	Caucasiann			Average Reader	Collier
Carlos	Latino	Yes		Strong Reader	Collier
Chau	Vietnamese		Yes	Strong Reader	Collier
Christina	Latina		Yes	Strong Reader	Downey
Hassan	Kurd		Yes	Struggling Reader	Downey
James	Hispanic/Irish	Yes		Struggling Reader	Collier
Jason	Caucasian			Average Reader	Collier
Kaleb	African American			Strong Reader	Downey
Lan	Vietnamese		Yes	Struggling Reader	Downey
Lee	Chinese		Yes	Strong Reader	Collier
Linh	Vietnamese			Average Reader	Downey
Maggie	Caucasian	Yes		Struggling Reader	Collier
Mahmouod	Somali		Yes	Struggling Reader	Collier
Mariama	African American			Strong Reader	Downey
Marianne	African American/French			Average Reader	Collier
Max	Caucasian			Average Reader	Collier
Rachela	Polish		Yes	Struggling Reader	Downey
Rafiki	African American			Average Reader	Downey
Rhamed	African American			Average Reader	Downey
Than	Vietnamese	Grade 1		Struggling Reader	Downey
Tisa	African American	Yes		Struggling Reader	Collier

*All names are pseudonyms.
Collier – Collier Elementary
Downey - Downey Elementary

Collier Elementary. Collier Elementary sits in the middle of a large urban

neighborhood just south of the downtown. It is a neighborhood filled with Irish

immigrants although most of the students who attend Collier Elementary are

bused in from the two areas in the city with the largest minority populations. On

one side of the Collier Elementary School is a large housing project and on the

other side, vacant lots. Collier is also a Community School that functions as a space for neighborhood classes, workshops and events. There is a Senior Citizen Center off to the right of the main lobby where people gather daily for coffee and a bite to eat. Collier is one of the largest elementary schools in the city with 738 students crammed into 34 K-5 classrooms. Sixty-five percent of the students at Collier are in regular education classes, 11% in bilingual classes and 24% are educated in special education classes. As with Downey elementary, my data collection focused on students in regular education classrooms. At the time of the study, the student population at Collier Elementary was 47% African American, 28% White, 14% Asian and 12% Hispanic. Over 90% of Collier students qualified for free or reduced lunch.

<center>Students, Teachers, and Classrooms</center>

Selecting Students

Two classrooms at each elementary school were included as research sites. The classrooms were selected based on recommendations from administrators within each school that teachers were especially effective at reading and writing instruction. Initially, I met with each teacher, and asked her to share her insights and understandings of her students' literacy achievement as well as their social and emotional growth. I asked questions like, "Tell me about the ways in which your students have learned to read and write this year." "Who are your stronger readers and writers?" "What makes you say that?" "Who struggles with reading?" "Why do you think that is?" "If I were to walk in here during the middle of reading workshop, what would I see?" Following the initial interviews, we met a second time to select six students from a range of reading and writing abilities. Teachers identified two students (one female, one male) in each of these areas: "high ability," "average ability,"

or "low ability" using the reading levels students attained on the Developmental Reading Assessment (Beaver, 1997) as a measure of ability. The DRA was designed to be a classroom-based reading assessment to monitor student growth on a variety of skills and strategies. As part of the DRA, students independently read a short, teacher-selected text and then write responses to questions about the text. Students are also expected to write a summary. Students' performance on the DRA is analyzed so that their independent and instructional reading levels can be determined. Based on DRA data and validated by teacher observation and professional knowledge, the following criteria were used to choose students for this study: two students of "low" reading and writing ability who had scored below a level 28 (approximate grade level 2), two students of "average" reading and writing ability who had scored at a level 38 (approximate grade level 3), and two students of "high" reading and writing ability who had scored at a Level 44 or higher (approximate grade level 4).

Selecting students was not an easy process for teachers. The teachers were concerned these students would be reluctant to talk with me as many of these students had weak oral and written language skills. Another consideration in choosing students was the issue of retention. In this district, all third graders must meet benchmarks set by the district and the state in order to be promoted to the next grade. Those who do not meet the requirements must go to summer school. In summer school, it is determined whether the child will be promoted to the fourth grade. The year that this study took place there were approximately 21% of third graders were not promoted to the fourth grade. The state provided additional funding for each school to add an additional third grade teacher or a "transitional teacher" as the school district labeled these teachers. In selecting students for the study I tried to achieve a balance of students who had been retained and those who were completing third grade for

the first time. Of the 24 focus students in the study, six were repeating the third grade. Interestingly, these were not necessarily the struggling readers; more often they were of average ability in relation to their classmates; they simply had not met the third grade benchmarks for some other reason

Classroom Sites

The classrooms in this study had many similarities in terms of the structure and organization. All four classrooms were organized to include areas for whole group, small group, and individual instruction. Desks were arranged in small clusters of three-to-five students. There was a meeting area in three of the classrooms that consisted of a rug area with either cushions or mats for students. One classroom was very small so the teacher had the students turn their desks into a circle or pull their chairs together in order to meet as a whole group. There were also smaller areas in each classroom for the teacher to meet with small groups of students for instructional purposes. Each classroom had a classroom library with many trade books. There were well over 300 books and magazines in each classroom that could accommodate the range of students' reading abilities and interests. All classrooms had listening centers. There were also bulletin boards that often displayed student work and units of study. In the section below, I provide individual profiles of each of the teachers and their classrooms.

Mrs. Wylie. Jane Wylie (all names used pseudonyms) spent her first eleven years teaching students receiving special education services. She described her training in teacher education, completed in 1978, as quite traditional. However, in recent years she had changed her classroom practice. Not only did she believe strongly in reading and writing workshop, but she deftly integrated systematic phonics instruction into her everyday instruction, creating a balance of required skills instruction and authentic purposes for reading and

writing. The classroom library was set up in the middle of her classroom with clusters of desks around the edges of the room. The placement of the library as the centerpiece of the classroom sent a clear message of the priority of literacy instruction in this classroom. Mrs. Wylie had a straightforward approach to classroom management. After years of working with a variety of students, she had clear expectations of students tempered with humor and joy in the daily life of her teaching. She greeted each student personally every morning, often asking about a sibling or family member. Each day began with students gathered on the rug while Mrs. Wylie sat in a rocking chair that had been in her family for years. She began the day reading aloud to her students

Mrs. Santos. Katie Santos had been a classroom teacher for nine years. When I met her, she was expecting her first child and would be leaving school at the end of May. Mrs. Santos' classroom was filled with noise in the morning as students came in, put homework in various bins, took out reading and writing folders and began to answer the problem of the day. Mrs. Santos met with students individually every morning to check their homework folders as well as for personal check-ins. Students would then head to the rug with their question journals in their hands. On the white board each day was a question related to a topic they were studying in science, social studies or math. There were baskets filled with books, articles, texts, and newspaper clippings that offered support for finding the answers. Students were expected to work together in pairs and small groups to formulate answers and then write them in their journals. This was Mrs. Santos' springboard each day into read aloud and then Reading Workshop. Katie Santos probably laughed as much as she talked and learned with her students as they worked together each day.

Ms. Gibbons. Linda Gibbons had only been teaching for a year, but one might think she had been teaching for ten years. Although she had a tiny classroom, she made tremendous use of the space for her sixteen students and herself. Desks were grouped in threes and fours with a corner completely filled with books of all genres. Window counters doubled as tables, and students were deft at quickly pushing desks out of the way to make a circle with their chairs for daily classroom meeting. Ms. Gibbons implemented Reading Workshop to support her students' literacy growth although her formal training through her teacher education program did not include the workshop approach, but rather focused on how to implement a literature series. She had primarily learned about the workshop approach through district courses and workshops and reading she had done on her own. She taught writing, but did not call herself a writing workshop teacher, as she felt she had no training in writing workshop. Linda reported that she spent a great deal of time at home coming to better understand her teaching. She explained to me that her drive to teach her students from where they were compelled her to learn more so that she could understand them better.

Ms. Stahl. Kristen Stahl had a no-nonsense demeanor, which she attributed to her three years teaching third graders. Her classroom was huge with windows running down the length of the room and bookshelves covering one entire sidewall. The desks were arranged in a giant horseshoe on one half of the room with a rug area taking up another fourth of the room. There were small tables and areas in various corners. Kristen had been immersed in Reading and Writing workshop as a student in her elementary school years and was then trained in the workshop approach in college. As a teacher, she continued to use the workshop approach with her students. She would gather her students each morning on large rug to discuss the schedule for the day, and then move into a short, focused lesson based on

the reading skills and strategies her students needed to be independent readers. Her love of literature was apparent as she conferred with her students during Independent Reading. Kristen engaged her students in lively conversation about their books. During these discussions, she also shared her own reading processes and strategies with them. She often wrote alongside her students prodding them along as they struggled through writing.

<div align="center">Data Collection</div>

Observation

Prior to interviewing the students, I functioned as a "bystander" or "spectator" in the classrooms rather than as a participant observer (Spradley, 1980). I was what Spradley would label a passive participant. That is, I was present at the scene of action, but did not participate to any great extent in the classroom (p. 59). It was important for me to observe in the classrooms so that when I was interpreting student talk later I would be in a better position to combine my observations with the insights and observations students provided me about themselves as readers and writers. In a sense, the students were participant observers without knowing it. When I interviewed them, I made use of their informal skills as participant observers; I tapped into their knowledge of reading and writing in their classrooms (p 124). My role as a passive participant in their classrooms provided me with insight into students' observations of their lives as readers and writers in school. I followed the suggestion of Eder and Fingerson (2002) to observe for a brief period preceding the interviewing process so that I could identify some of the reading and writing contexts students bring into the interviews. I spent a minimum of two days in each classroom prior to beginning interviews with the students.

Student Interviews

A semi-structured interview is an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the lived world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena (Kvale, 1996, p. 6).

Consistent with Kvale's definition, the purpose of the interviews I conducted was to understand students' lived world of reading and writing. Interviewing children requires respect for them and for their knowledge about themselves as well as a willingness to suspend judgment and perspective (Tammivaara & Enright, 1986). This is especially true when the interviewer and the student represent different social and cultural backgrounds. Tammivaara and Enright (1986) caution that the researcher must avoid "adult-centrism" and "ethnocentrism" and must be able to suspend culturally related assumptions (p. 235). In this study, in order to avoid bias, I continually reflected upon assumptions I may have held in regard to urban children. One was that urban students might not be able to respond to my interview questions as fully as a student living in the suburbs. I assumed that their lives in the classroom may have been more traditionally structured than in suburban schools in which I had worked. I naively thought they would be puzzled or confused by what I was asking. I also assumed that the struggling readers may not necessarily have the insight into their reading and writing processes as the more proficient readers. At the least, I did not know if they would be able to describe what they do as they read and write.

It is also important when interviewing children to create a natural context for the interview. Eder and Fingerson (2002) believe it is imperative for the researcher to examine the power dynamic between adults and children. They argue that the adult researcher's power can be reduced by making the interview context more natural. While they suggest that the critical path to accomplish this is through group interviews, this was not practical for the

purposes of this study. Moreover, group interviews with young children are subject to their own types of distortion, since they can be dominated by one or two very active participants. However, Eder and Fingerson also suggest that children be interviewed in their classrooms, "a natural context," rather than being isolated for the interview. I conducted interviews in the classrooms when possible, although because of instruction or noise levels, the majority of the interviews were done outside of the classroom in hallways and small rooms not in use. In an effort to avoid looking like the 'teacher' or 'adult educator', I dressed casually for the interviews (Eder & Fingerson, 2002).

There have been a few published studies that used interviews with young children in the context of academic subjects. Tammivaara and Enright (1986) describe the "union" of the investigator, the child and the materials. That is, children generally find that having something to do and talk about to be easier, more comfortable, and more interesting than only talking about something that isn't physically present (p. 232). In a study of elementary-aged children, Carol Freedman-Doan and her colleagues (2000) interviewed students to better understand what they believed they were best at, both academically and socially. The researchers developed a picture protocol that engaged students in reflective responses to questions posed by the interviewer. The interviewer placed four cards depicting a same-sex child doing math, reading, spelling and science in front the student and asked the student to indicate at which activity he/she was best and, conversely, not so good. In the current study, the use of picture protocol to support interview questions allowed the creation of a triangular relationship between myself, the student, and the picture (Hawkins, 1973). During the first set of interviews, described below, the pictures provided students with a concrete referent to

talk about rather than having a vacuum-like space between the student, the interviewer, and the question.

Interview # 1. The picture protocol was used for the first round of interviews, conducted in April and early May of the school year. Pictures were chosen from a variety of sources including magazines and textbooks for elementary aged students. I chose pictures that showed students reading in and out of school. I wanted pictures that depicted students of different ethnicities. Pictures chosen also depicted readers with a range of emotions. All pictures are included in Appendix A. The questions developed for the pictures were primarily open-ended. (What do you think is happening in this picture? How might you describe what she/he is doing? What do you think she had to do to learn to read a book like this?). This provided the student with opportunities to bring in topics and modes of discourse that were familiar to them (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). Questions that were presented to all students are listed in Table 2. I avoided questions based on a "known-answer" in which the purpose of the question is to get a correct response. I began each interview by sharing with the student how I appreciated her helping to understand how 3rd graders think about reading and writing. I explained a little bit more about the interview process proceeding to ask if she had any questions for me. I then showed the student a picture. I showed males pictures that depicted males reading and writing, and I showed females pictures that depicted females reading and writing. Questions were asked based on responses so that in any given interview the sequence of questions might vary, but all students were asked all of the questions listed in Appendix B. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. I also kept notes as I conducted interviews; these were instrumental in supporting my recall of the interview context as I later transcribed and analyzed interviews.

Interview #2. The purpose of the second interview was twofold. First, I wanted to build on the first interview and to ask similar questions to see if any of the information from the first interview had changed. Second, with the end of the year approaching, I asked students to reflect on their growth as readers and writers. The second set of interviews was conducted between two and four weeks after the first set of interviews depending on classroom schedules and student absenteeism. These interviews consisted of open-ended questions, but were conducted without the support of pictures. In addition, students were asked to reflect on the entire school year. ("In what ways do you read differently now than at the beginning of the school year?" "What can you do now that you couldn't do in second grade?") Students had their writing folders and/or reading logs in front of them to support their answers. Again, I tried to create productive "union' between the child, interviewer and materials. Appendix C includes the questions students were asked in their second interviews.

Teacher Interviews

Each of the four teachers was interviewed once at the end the study. Interviews took place after school for approximately 90 minutes. The purpose of the teacher interview was to paint a broad picture of the classrooms in which the students were developing as readers and writers. Teachers were asked questions that focused on how they came to know, understand, take into account, and assess students' perceptions and achievement as readers and writers (Tell me about [student] as a reader and a writer. What are the student's strengths? Weaknesses? How did you come to understand this student?) In addition, teachers were asked to describe their approaches to reading and writing instruction, as well as their biggest obstacles to their literacy instruction. Lastly, because state testing was so central to the teachers' experiences that year, they were asked to consider how the state test affected their

literacy instruction. Importantly, each teacher provided me with an extensive picture of the students in the study and the literacy instruction in which they were immersed. All questions are included in Appendix D. Teacher interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

For my analysis, I implemented a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) guided by my primary research question, "What do urban third graders report about themselves as readers and writers?" I personally transcribed 12 of the 48 interviews as well as one of the teacher interviews; a transcriptionist transcribed the remaining interviews. I then listened to all of the tapes while reading the transcripts in order to include any auditory context (e.g. tone and voice emphasis) in my analysis. While I closely listened to tapes, I began a microanalysis on the data. I used line-by-line analysis of the data to generate initial categories. Doing a microanalysis at that point compelled me to listen closely to what the students were saying and how they were saying it. Specifically, I attempted to understand how students interpreted certain questions. This helped prevent me from jumping to premature theoretical conclusions that might lose sight of the students' interpretations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As I listened I also kept anecdotal notes on each child including information about the student's attitude on the day of the interview, academic information, as well as my reactions to students. I generously used post-its and my journal to record my insights, questions and possible directions. These notes allowed me to add categories, subtract irrelevant groupings and diagram the data (Strauss, 1987; Morse, 1994).

Once I had read through every transcript at least once, I began to make sense of my heap of data. I started with open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of interview transcripts, rereading the data, and again using line-by-line analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Initial

codes that arose included: what students were reading; the actions of good readers and not-so-good readers; and the effects of choice in determining student engagement. Next, I reviewed my initial results using cooperative axial coding (the process of relating the categories to their subcategories). There were over twenty categories at this point in the analysis. These categories covered a range of student responses to the interview questions from feelings about reading and writing to reading outside of school to understandings about readers and writers. I then collapsed categories in order to develop categories that reflected my understanding of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Once I had determined that there were authentic, broad, recurrent themes, I made the decision to stop the analysis using the four criteria put forth by Egon Guba (1978):

(1)   There was an exhaustion of sources as there were no new situations to observe, subjects to interview, or documents to analyze (p. 60).

(2)   Saturation had occurred within the data. That is, no new information had emerged from the data.

(3)   There was an emergence of regularities across the categories. When the area "feels" integrated, as best attested by a sense of regularity in the available information, it is probably best to stop (Guba, 1978, p. 60).

(4)   I wanted to avoid overextending the analysis.

The themes that emerged at the time that I stopped the analysis included the students' descriptions of what motivates and engages them to read and write, the effects of choice, high stakes assessment and the literacy practices of readers and writers.

Validity

In qualitative research, the term "credible" is used to describe the concept of validity (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). In this research, careful steps were taken to ensure credibility. Rubin and Rubin (1995) write that validity is supported by consistency across cases. I had to be aware of the potential to form conclusions prematurely. After repeated analysis, I often abandoned previous impressions and eliminated categories. In order to accomplish consistency across cases I carefully explored all patterns, and if a pattern failed to hold, I continued the analysis either by going back into the data or figuring out under what conditions the pattern held and under what conditions it did not (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Data triangulation and methodological triangulation were used in this study to ensure the credibility of the findings (Denzin, 1989). The aim in triangulation was to choose triangulation sources with different biases, different strengths, so they would complement each other (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data triangulation was accomplished by collecting data in four different classrooms with 24 students on different occasions by means of two different interview protocols. I also interviewed teachers as a compliment to the student interviews. I was better able to understand what students had reported about reading and writing in their classrooms after talking with their teachers. The teacher interviews provided me with a context for understanding the spaces in which the students were learning to read and write. These interviews also confirmed the reliability of what students had shared with regard to their classrooms. Methodological triangulation ensured that I did not solely rely on student interviews, but also analyzed teacher interviews, classroom observations and theoretical constructs.

In addition to triangulation, I used negative case analysis to scrutinize the data in order to substantiate the emergent patterns and to help me explain variations (Morse, 1994). For example, two students reported that the type of clothing one wears lets one know if that student is a good reader or not. After rereading transcripts, I found no other students reporting this phenomenon. Miles and Huberman write (1994) that a good look at the exceptions to the developing category can test and strengthen the basic findings. It not only tests the generality of the findings, but also protects against self-selecting biases (p. 269). I did as Miles and Huberman suggested by continually asking myself, "Do any data oppose this conclusion, or is there an inconsistency with this conclusion?" (p. 271). Therefore, when a category arose that could not be coded as consistent with other data, I would go back to the transcripts to determine if a new category was emerging or if this category was an exception.

Wolcott (2001) suggests that one not try to convince an audience of the validity of one's observations based on the power of the fieldwork approach, but rather with sufficient detail about how one obtained the data actually used. Therefore, as I collected data and analyzed the data, I kept careful notes on my analytical processes so as to be able to describe in detail not only how I obtained the data, but also how I analyzed them. I had to keep pushing myself to stay tuned to each student's words as I read and listened to the transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Reliability

Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that issues of reliability ride largely on the skills of the researcher. The markers of a good qualitative "researcher-instrument" are familiarity with the phenomenon and the setting under study, strong conceptual interests, a multidisciplinary approach, and good "investigative" skills, including doggedness, the ability

to draw people out, and the ability to ward off premature closure (p. 38). In some research settings, lack of familiarity with the phenomenon and setting and single-disciplinary grounding are considered assets. However, Miles and Huberman argue that unfamiliarity with the phenomenon or setting allows for a fertile "decentering," leading to relatively naïve, easily misled fieldwork, along with the collection of far too much data (p. 38).

My experiences as a former classroom teacher and classroom researcher kept me centered and provided me with a great deal of familiarity with the setting I was studying providing more reliability to this study. Taking a cue from Dyson (1993), I did not attempt to guide or help the students as a teacher or aide might; instead I kept busy with my own work. I continually stepped back from my roots as a classroom teacher to focus on the students in the study and their understandings of themselves as readers and writers. That is, I kept letting the students speak to me.

Kvale (1996) suggests that reliability depends on the consistency of research findings and the rigor of methodology. As I have reported, I was systematic and as honest as I could be about methodology, analysis, biases, checking interpretations with others, verifying multiple sources, and being reflective and thorough. Again, data triangulation was used to make use of the different sources to provide reliability for corroborating data in this study (Creswell, 1998).

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS: URBAN THIRD GRADERS SPEAK

I have a lot of stories that I choose, and they come from my heart.
(Christina, #2, p. 4)

Earlier this school year I was working in a third grade classroom where the students were busy writing. What struck me most was the amount of time students spent getting in and out of their seats and talking with each other. Students seemed to speak more about what had happened with friends at morning recess than about their writing. "See?" the teacher exclaimed to me, "These kids just don't want to write." The writing the students were expected to complete was assigned by the teacher. "It is like pulling their teeth to get them to complete assignments," she shared with me. I asked what happened when she let students choose their own topics. "Are you kidding? They would do nothing" she replied as she walked away. As I sat working with a young boy, I was reminded of a girl whom I had interviewed for this research. When asked about her writing, Christina explained,

> I like it when I choose what I write [sic] [rather than when the teacher chooses]. Because I have a lot of stories that I choose and they come from my heart. They just don't come from what she wants. It comes from my heart and what I like to write about.

I learned a great deal from the students in my study about the reasons they engaged in writing and reading when they felt they had a choice. However, choice was not the only theme students discussed. As I reread and coded student interviews a third or fourth time, I heard the students talk beyond choice.

*All names used are pseudonyms. The # referenced refers to the 1st or 2nd interview. The

p. refers to the page number where the quote appears in the transcripts.

Analysis of the 48 interviews yielded a number of commonalities among the third grade

students, as well as some findings that identified sub-groups of students.

In this chapter, I discuss the key findings that helped me answer the question, "What do

urban third graders report about themselves as readers and writers?"

<u>Common Themes</u>

Commonalities across the data became evident as student interviews were coded.

The terms described below were consistently represented across the majority of the 24

students in the study.

<u>Choice</u>

A powerful and consistent theme in students' voices was the role of choice in

motivating and engaging students in literacy experiences. Seventy-eight percent of

students reported that when they were able to choose books and topics, they were more

likely to read or write for longer periods of time and were willing to respond in greater

depth when questioned about their reading. All students reported that they had some

opportunities to choose to read from a wide range of genres and were clear about their

preference for such choice. Students readily shared the way they selected books. Akila

said, *I look at the title and see if it is easy or good for me to learn* (#1, p. 7). Mahmoud

was clear about 'easy books,' *I don't like books that are too easy; they helped me when I*

didn't know how to read... (#2, p. 2)

Students articulated the difference between situations in which they choose to

read or write and those in which the teacher or parent chooses. In describing the books

she enjoyed most, Christina explained that they were, *the ones that I choose, I like the ones that I choose better because it's part of what I like, not what she chooses.* (#1, p. 5) Bryana noted that, *Sometimes I like the book the teacher chooses and sometimes I don't.* (#1, p. 3) When Max was asked, "If you were the reading principal what would kids do?" He responded that he would let students, *Read any book they want, [there would be] books that kids want to read and the teacher would let them.* (#1, p. 6)

Although students reported that their teachers and parents provided guidance for their reading and writing, students suggested that they were the primary decision makers in choosing what they read or wrote. When Carlos was asked about the boy in the picture (See Appendix A), he explained, *"He [the boy in the picture] gets to choose because his teacher isn't always telling him what to write cuz he need to come up with his own ideas too"* (#1, p 18). Alongside their preference for autonomy, however, students understood the importance of teachers and parents in providing guidance in their book choices and writing topics. Tisa animatedly shared that, *Sometimes she [the teacher] says, "Oh, Tisa, maybe you might want to try this book cuz it is right for you and might have somebody who is doing the same things as you do in it [sic].* (#2, p. 3)

Students were more likely to be motivated to read and write when teachers offered them opportunities to do so. As Max explained, *I am interested in the writing when I want to write it because I write scary stuff, funny stuff.* (#2, p. 2) Mariane was clear, *I would keep on writing if I chose.* (#1, p. 23). The third graders were provided contexts in which they had control over the choice of writing topics. Choice is clearly an important teaching strategy. When students are given choice in what they read they are

more likely to develop ownership of and engagement in the work that moves them forward in their reading and writing.

Teaching Strategies

The third graders in this study were consistently able (and willing) to describe the activities, tasks, and structures their teachers used to support their reading and writing, and they seemed to have a firm understanding of what helped them as learners. Moreover, 100% of the students said they were more likely to engage in reading and writing when they believed their experiences in the classroom would help them improve as readers or writers. If they felt that what the teacher was asking them to do was really going to help them with reading or writing, they were more likely to "have-a-go."

Reading. Students were asked in the second interview, "How did your teacher help you in reading this year?" followed by, "How did your teacher help you in writing this year?" Specific strategies described by students fell into five categories. These teaching strategies provided many opportunities for students to employ the literacy practices they required to build reading skills and strategies. Students reported that *direct instruction* helped them build their word knowledge, learn decoding strategies and understand new ways to think about their reading. Every day Reading Workshop began with a 10-15 minute focus lesson that directly taught a reading strategy, skill or management tool students needed in their reading development. Students talked about the ways in which their teacher *guided* their reading whether during a reading conference or during small group instruction. Importantly, the students in the study were clear that having *extended time to read* was an important component of their reading instruction. By May, students were given up to 45 minutes a day for independent reading. Teachers

in the study also *conferred* regularly with students to discuss and teach the skill and strategies needed for reading growth. Students talked in detail the importance of having reading conferences with their teachers. This individualized teaching practice was important to students as each student reported how much they liked it when their teacher talked to and worked with "just me."

Lastly, students conveyed how their teacher *expected* them to get stronger as a reader. The combination of these teaching strategies provided constructive and varied levels of support for students throughout the school year.

Writing. Students articulated five general ways in which their teachers helped them in writing during the school year. Of these five tools the teacher used to support writing, students most often cited the first three: *time for writing, high expectations and conferring during writing.* Students reported that having *long periods of time to write* was helpful as it gave them more time to develop their writing. Time for writing varied from 25 minutes to 40 minutes a day. Students knew that their teacher had *clear expectations* about their writing and their ability to write. As with reading, they also described the importance of the teacher sitting down and *conferring* with them as they worked on a piece of writing. Again, as with reading, students stated that the teacher often *guided* their writing through small group instruction or during a writing conference. Students reported that soften their teacher met with them to work on a piece of writing that was confusing or hard. Interestingly, students found *direct instruction* to be an important teaching strategy but not as important as *providing time for writing.*

Table 2

Teaching Strategies that Support Reading

STRATEGY	EXAMPLE: The teacher...
Provided Direct Instruction	• Explicitly the skills and strategies students needed to read. *She taught me how to say difficult words...like if the work is complicated then take it one at a time then you break it up and then you read each piece.* (Christina, #1, P. 11)
Offered Guided Practice	• Listened to students as they read. • Showed them how to use a reading skill or strategy as they read individually or in small groups. • *She gives us books to read in reading group.* (James, #2, p.12)
Provide Time	• Offered time to practice reading during Reading Workshop • Scheduled more time for Independent Reading. *She helps us by giving us 30 minutes [to read].* (Rahmed, #2, p.2)
Conferred	• Met with students individually during independent reading to discuss & teach to the needs of the students • Advised students in small groups. *She talks to me at her desk and she says to tell me about my book, I read this book...If I don't know anything, I just highlight for her and then I come back to it and then she works with me.* (Anna, #2, p. 13).
Expectations	• Expected students to read and read a lot. *She told me to just keep on reading.* (Rafiki, #2, p.1)

Table 3

Teaching Strategies that Support Writing

STRATEGY	STUDENT VOICES
Provided Time	*We write for a long time.* (46% of students reported this strategy as helpful
Expectations	*She tells us to write a lot.* *I was going to write like two paragraphs and she asked me to write more.* (30% of students reported this strategy as helpful.)
Conferred	*She sits down and conferences with me, she asks me if I am having trouble with this writing.* (30% of students reported this strategy as helpful.)
Offered Guided Practice with composing and conventions of print	*She helps me with ideas.* *She helped me with my cursive.* (30% of students reported this strategy as helpful.)
Provided Direct Instruction	*She taught us how to write paragraphs and she taught us how to write story, a title, author and characters.* *She told us how to write in the middle of the story and at the end* (21% of students reported this strategy as helpful.)

Teacher's Perceptions

Seventy-one percent of students believed that their teacher thought they were good readers. When students were asked, "What would your teacher tell me about you as reader? Their first response was often, "I don't know." But when they were further questioned, "What do you wish she would say?" Students' responses were varied. Mahmoud hoped she would say, *"That I'm good"* (#2, p. 5). Akila believed she would say *"I read all the time"* (#2, p. 5). Finally, Racela thought her teacher would say, *"I know how to read very good"* (#2, p. 2).

Students also reported what their teacher might say about their challenges in writing. Alex said, *"That sometimes I pay attention [when I am writing] and sometimes I don't"* (#2, p. 13). Mariane told me that, *"She might say that I write good because sometimes I write good and sometimes I don't"* (#2, p. 3). Jason talked about how his writing looked. *"I am average because sometimes I write sloppy"* (#2, p. 6). While the students' perceptions of what they their teacher thought of them seemed somewhat ambiguous, the third graders were honest. Their understandings suggest that their teachers spend enough time with the students reading and writing to know what students are not always "good" at and to know when students are trying hard to be a "good enough" reader or writer.

Good and Not-So-Good Readers

One way of accessing student understanding of the reading process is to ask them to describe what good and not-so-good readers do. In interviews with students in previous studies (Wharton-McDonald, Boothroyd, Johnston, & Cronin, 1999; Allington & Johnston, 2002). It was clear that fourth grade students understood the active nature of good readers. This was particularly evident for strong readers. Students in my study reported that good readers do many things: predict, use pictures, keep on trying, take their time, read, read with feelings, read harder books, read chapter books, check work, concentrate, get the story in their mind, reread, focus, read directions, ask questions and like to read. Chau thought that, *Sometimes they come to a sad part, they get real sad and when they get to a good part, they turn happy* (#1 p. 7). Rafiki, a strong reader, said, *They always go back and check to see if they messed up and correct mistakes* (#1 p. 7). Racela explained, *They think, when they read they think about the story that's going to*

happen (# 1 p. 6). Lee was clear that, *They concentrate and picture things in their heads* (#1 p. 12).

Students also described the actions of the not-so-good readers as just mostly reading pictures, reading too slowly or too quickly, sounding out words, giving up, just going over words, and playing around. According to a number of students, not-so-good readers, "Just don't like to read." Tisa, who had been retained in third grade said, *They just read and want to get it done* (#1, p. 412). Lan suggested that, *Their eyes are looking at the book but... they are not really reading* (#1, p. 8). In other words, struggling readers are not engaged readers.

While all of the third graders studied described strategies of good and struggling readers, those who were good readers themselves provided much more specific explanations and detailed descriptions than did the poor readers. When the data were analyzed by students' ability levels, it was the average to above average reader that described the practices of the good reader as one who uses specific strategies and skills. Rafiki acknowledges that, *In a chapter book, I get confused on each word. I just stopped and I just walked away and then I came back in a little while and read. I read it again* (#2, p. 2). In contrast, James and Tisa—both struggling readers—were less specific: *They focus; they work hard* (James, #1, p. 4). *They read the book over until they understand* (Tisa, #1, p. 412). The struggling readers had a more limited repertoire of strategies to draw upon as they read.

Why Read or Write?

Students' perceptions of the purposes of reading were linked to their own skills and success. Good readers were more likely to respond to the question, "What do good

readers do as they read?" in terms of what reading offered them as learners. They also understood the larger purpose of reading for enjoyment and future successes. Kaleb explained, *Because if you get a job [and], you are not going to know how to read, they're not going to hire you* (#1, p. 21). Average and struggling readers, in contrast, tended to focus on the immediate purposes of reading (e.g., to complete assignments or locate particular information). They tended to view the purpose for reading as one of obligation: Their teacher made them do it; it was a required assignment. Not-so-good readers were not always able to discuss the more global reasons for reading. Their reasons were more immediate. James (Interview #1, p. 13), a struggling reader, responded, *Because I like to read chapter books.*

The urban third grade students in this study had many things to say about the strategies good and not-so-good readers use or don't use. All of the students provided some insight into what they perceive to be the actions of readers and writers. Many could talk about reading and writing with clarity and intelligence. While the stronger readers used more "reading-like language" to respond to questions, the average to struggling readers were also tuned into what good and not-so-good readers do. Perhaps it was my greatest hope that third graders would not think there was a difference in ability amongst themselves. However, their responses suggest that they are aware of the differences that exist.

<div align="center">Reading and Writing with Friends and Family</div>

Friends

Students reported that they choose to read and write with their friends both in school and out of school. The contexts in which that happened varied. Racela shared,

Sometimes I read at my friend's house, if I'm stuck on a word they help me (#1, p. 7).

Overall, students were more inclined to read with a friend than to write with a friend.

Fifty-eight percent of the boys reported that they read with their friends in school. This

happened primarily because the teacher arranged for buddy reading or small group

reading instruction. As James said, *Sometimes we go to the computer and we go to the*

listening center and sometimes we go to book choice, and umm, in the reading center [to

read with friends] (#1, p. 8).

Girls also reported reading with friends at the direction of their teachers.

However, beyond teacher-created contexts girls were also more likely to create

collaborative contexts for reading on their own as well. Whereas 58% of the boys

reported reading with friends in school, 92% of the girls reported that they read with

friends in school.

Eight-three percent of the boys reported that they did not write with their friends

unless they were in school and the teacher required it of them. Kaleb reported that he

writes with his friends, *If we are in groups, yeah, sometimes* (#1, p. 16) Jason was clear,

No, only in school (#1, p. 23). In contrast, 75% of the girls reported that they wrote with

their friends. Christina said that, *Yeah, we write sometimes. We write stories because it*

is fun; you can make up your own stories (#1, p. 17). The 25% of the girls who reported

that they did not write with their friends qualified their "No's" by saying if they wrote

with friends it was for specific reasons; Anna said she would write with a friend, *If she*

has a project (#2, p. 7) or as Linh said, *There was some stuff the teacher tell us to write*

together (#1, p. 14). What is important is that students in the study were provided

opportunities for collaborative writing.

<u>Family</u>

In contrast to some of the stereotypes of low-income, urban students, all students described somebody who read at home. In fact, many students reported that *everybody* in their home read. Bryana remarked, *My whole family reads usually* (#1, p. 10). Alex happily announced, *Almost everybody in my house [reads]* (#1, p. 10). Two students reported that their mothers did not read at home because they did not speak English. Mom, Dad, sisters, brother, uncles, cousins and grandparents were all reported to read at home. According to the third graders, family members read a variety of materials, including:

- newspapers
- chapter books
- grown-up/adult books
- TV guide
- magazines
- books from the library
- business books
- magazines, newspapers & books about sports
- books on science & social studies

Students also reported that they received various types of support at home from parents and family members. Mariama explained, *"They helped me by telling me I am a good reader."* No student reported that she or he did not get help at home. These types of familial routines and structures provided students with positive images of readers and writers that they carried into school.

<div align="center">

<u>The Strategies and Stances of Urban Third Graders</u>

</div>

Students across the study reported using a wide range of reading strategies at different times as part of their literacy practices. Good readers reported using a wider range of strategies while not-so-good readers drew from a smaller repertoire of strategies

from thinking as a strategy to decoding, visualizing and questioning. Not surprisingly, students' overall stance toward reading and writing affected the practices and strategies they used. Students also described why and when they sought teacher support, and why they read and wrote with friends. The combination of strategies, stance and support come together to develop the literacy practices students bring into play both in school and out of school. In this section, I discuss the reading strategies, stances and help-seeking behaviors of the urban third graders represented in Table 4.

Table 4

Stances, Strategies and Skills of Urban Third Graders

WHAT THIRD GRADERS "DO"	Example
Help Seeking Behavior	Seeks Help from: ▪ Teacher ▪ Peers ▪ Friends ▪ Self
Stance	• Try • Practice • Fake Read • Concentrate • Avoid • Choose
Strategies & Skills	▪ Think ▪ Question while reading ▪ Reread ▪ Visualize ▪ Skip ▪ Decode ▪ Answer Questions ▪ Make Connections ▪ Predict ▪ Abandon Books ▪ Use Pictures

Help-Seeking Behavior

Asking for Teacher Support

The teachers in this study were dedicated to promoting student learning and consistently made themselves available to students who needed support during reading and writing. According to students however, there were significant differences in the ways students made use of that support. Students who average to above readers were reported that they asked the teacher for help when they were unsuccessful at using strategies on their own. In contrast, the not-so-good readers were much less likely to ask the teacher for support. Rather, struggling readers described a limited number of strategies they could use. While they acknowledged that they often needed help, they seldom sought it out. Struggling readers were more likely to continue to use strategies and skills that had limited use for successful reading over time. One might say these students were spinning their wheels rather than calling AAA to get out of the mud.

Support from Peers

Teachers were not the only source of support available to these third graders. Peers supported each other in school in many ways. Students reported knowing who in their classrooms they could turn to for help in figuring out a word, recommending a good book, helping with writing topics and/or spelling issues, and suggesting powerful words to add to a story. Students also discussed whom they knew they could work with productively and who would get in their way of finishing work.

When reading, students described the ways their peers helped them out. Chau described what he and his friend did as they read: *Well, they read one page and each of us take turns reading one page so, like if there are some hard words that they might know*

and I don't then they said it (#2, p. 4.) Christina asks her friends to figure out words with

her: *They help me reading difficult words and help me break it up into something* (#2, p.

8). Tisa told me that her friends give her space to read, *They give me room too, if I am*

really into a book and I don't want to talk they won't tap me or nothing, not to be

disturbing (#2, p. 9).

Conversely, 25% students reported that their friends often did not help them in

reading and writing. Rather, these students reported helping their friends and helping

themselves. The students with this approach ranged from struggling to advanced readers.

Anna felt that, *My friends don't really help me, I help them* (#2, p. 15). Alex was clear

that friends were not always helpful, *They don't, I help myself* (#2, p. 11). Carlos

retorted, *They don't help me at all, only when we have to pair up and do work with*

another person (#2, p. 18). This preference seems to be related to individual learning

styles, rather than any systematic difference in instruction or reading success.

<div align="center">Stance</div>

Stance toward Reading

A third grader's stance toward reading had the power to sustain or delay forward

movement in literacy. A reader's stance is his or her mental attitude toward reading or

writing (Rosenblatt, 1989). Readers who did not take a positive stance toward what they

were doing were less willing to engage in certain literacy practices. Students revealed

this when they were asked two questions in particular: "Do you like to read?" and "What

is it about reading that you like or dislike?" The majority of the students responded that

they liked to read. Mahmoud said, *It's fun and it's like when you're reading it's like it's*

really happening (#1, p. 2). Rafiki explained why he likes to read: *I like exciting words,*

it brings you to different places (#2, p. 2). The students who reported that reading was bad or boring were primarily the four, struggling female readers. *Horrible...because I don't read right. I don't know most of the words. Some words I don't hardly ever remember.* Akila did go on to qualify the context in which she feels badly, *I have fun when I'm reading* [in a group] *but when I'm reading by myself, it's not fun* (#1, p. 14). In other words, reading may require too much effort without the support of peers and teacher. If the student perceives reading as requiring too much effort the likelihood that they will have a positive stance toward reading is diminished. And readers with negative stances toward reading tended to exert less effort, thereby sustaining the negative cycle: negative stance – diminished motivation – less effort – less success and progress – negative stance.

The most frequently cited reasons for not wanting to read included the difficulty of the book. As Lee said, *If I read a chapter book sometimes I get a headache if there are too much pages and I want to look for another book* (#1, p. 5). Linh talked about not wanting to read a book where there is no action, *They have no exciting stuff* (#2, p. 11). Students also resisted having to write written responses to a book. Racela explained, *It doesn't help* (#1. p. 5). How they felt about reading and writing inevitably affected the degree to which they engaged in the literacy practices that were expected of them. When they liked the book and could read it, they were more likely to have a positive stance toward reading and put more effort into the process.

Boys, especially, were more likely to read if there were reading materials that were interesting and engaging in the classroom library. Sadly, though, 55% of the boys in the study reported that there was nothing for them to read in school. As Carlos said

sarcastically as I interviewed him in the school library, *"We like to read cars, books of cars. Like there is a book of cars that is around here somewhere"* (#2, p. 9). Girls were more likely to report being able to find interesting books in the classroom library than boys did.

Stance toward Writing

Seventy-one percent of the third graders reported a positive stance toward writing. In particular they felt good about writing stories. Kaleb told me, *I like to write stories mostly, I just use my imagination and feelings* (#1, p. 16). Students also enjoyed writing poetry: *Like when I write poetry; mostly I get stuff in my mind by looking at stuff. Like I have a pumpkin patch in my backyard. It has been there for a year now, I look at it. I look and I write about all different types of things. They give me ideas and I make it a poem* (#2, p. 5). A few of the third graders also liked to write about books they had read; *I like to write about the stories I read* (Mariama, #1, P. 18). Overall, 67% of the females reported having positive feelings towards writing than males. Forty-two percent of the males reported that they liked to write while 33% clearly did not have positive feelings about writing. Twenty-five percent of the males gave mixed or ambiguous answers about writing. Chau was typical of this group when asked whether he liked to write, Chau replied, *Yeah but not all the time* (#2, p. 8).

Students had less positive (and more negative) responses to writing exercises or topics that were required and offered limited opportunities for choice. When students had to write within a prescribed structure or topic, they were more likely to be turned off by writing. Christina explained, *I wish I didn't have to write about something* [the teacher] *says because sometimes I really don't like it, not interesting that much. It's taking all the*

fun away from me (#2 p. 4). The nature of the assignment affects students' stance which in turn affects their efforts as writers.

<div align="center">Reading Strategies in the Classroom</div>

Reading strategies are those repeated strategies described by students in the context of the classroom that they use as they read and write. Questions such as, "How did you learn to read?" "What do you do when you read? Give me a picture of that." "What do you do now that you didn't do in second grade?" made visible the strategies third graders used to support reading. Students across reading abilities reported a wide range of strategies they used in school. (See Table 3, p. 77.) It is these strategies, whether they were utilized one at a time or in concert with others, that provided the scaffolding or tools to develop reading and writing across students' developmental landscape (Dyson, 2003).

<div align="center">Fake Reading</div>

While there were many factors that supported literacy growth for the students in the study, there were also some factors that interfered with their literacy development. By third grade many students were adept at a set of literacy practices that hindered, if not dramatically slowed their reading and writing progress: primary among these was the process of *fake reading*. Students who engaged in fake reading were not really reading or writing in any engaged sense of the processes; rather they spent an enormous amount of time and energy pretending to be reading (Gee, 2003). By the third grade, some students have become adept at imitating reading behaviors such as looking at the text, turning pages even answering comprehension question without actually reading for meaning at all. They are only going through the motions of reading in order to finish the task at

hand. *Like, if you're looking at the book, their eyes are looking at the book but...they're*

playing (Lan, #1, p 8). Students in all four classrooms knew who *fake read* at one time or

another. Some students were able to articulate why third graders used this passive

"action" as illustrated in the interview exchange below:

> KAB: Are there kids in your class who look like they are reading but they really
> aren't?
> Christina Nods
> KAB: Tell me more about that. How does it happen?
> Christina Because *there's a lot of kids in my class that do that. They don't like
> DEAR TIME that much...it's really long, like two hours or something and they
> just flip through the pages and pictures.*
> KAB: How about your teacher, does she think they're reading?
> Christina MMhhmmm *[yes]. They're just pretending that they're reading by just
> skipping through paragraphs.*
> KAB: I'm wondering if all good readers do that or just not so good readers, or all
> kids or doesn't it matter?
> Christina All *kids, it doesn't really matter. Troy does that and he's a really
> excellent reader.* *[Christina, #1, p 12]*

Fake reading was reported by students of all reading abilities. What wasn't clear

was how often fake reading occurred and in what contexts. Fake reading represents the

opposite of engagement. The student's cognitive energy is devoted to faking out the

teacher—rather than the genuine reading process. This seems to be directly related to

choice and interest. Contrary to expectations, students' actual abilities were not the

determining factor in fake reading. Instead it was related as much to their interest and

engagement in reading as to their ability.

Fake reading is attractive to some students because it is easier than doing what is

expected. *Lots of people[do it]...Because sometimes they want to do something really*

quickly like when it is time to go home, and write a book report but my friend just turned

the pages and just looked at the pictures (Kaleb, #1, p. 12). Jason reported, *Yeah, the*

teacher tells them that they have to read and then he doesn't...he pretends he is reading

the book (#1, p. 8). Fake reading also enables the reader to look like a reader, like a person who knows what they are doing. When asked, "Why would someone do that?" Carlos told me, *To look educational* (#1, p. 12). While Carlos told me this he demonstrated with a book how he looked when he was fake reading: *Sometimes I sit here not reading the book but talking with one of the persons sitting right there* (#1, p. 7). His eyes tracked the words and his face looked serious and engaged. Yet his mouth barely moved, he whispered to me as if I were a friend sitting next to him talking about the local baseball team. If I were his teacher, I would have been faked out.

<div align="center">High Stakes Assessment</div>

During the spring that this study was conducted the state exam was administered to third graders for the first time across the entire state. The test placed a great deal of pressure on both the students and the teachers. Teachers were reminded by their administrators monthly (if not more often) of the need for students to reach a certain level on the state exam. Students were reminded weekly about the importance of the exam, the relationship between classroom work and the exam, and the consequences of the exam. Specifically, if a student did not meet the proficiency level, summer school would be waiting. Students in the study were asked why they thought they had recently had to complete the state's standardized test.

Stronger readers believed that they took the test to see if they had learned anything. As Anna said, *"Because to see if we learn or not"* (#2, p. 8). Rafiki reported, *To see how good you're reading and writing is* (#2, p. 7). However, students of average or below average competencies felt they took the state exam, as James explained, *"To see if I can go to fourth grade* (#2 p. 5). All students saw the test as a gate they had to pass

through to get to the next grade; they knew that if they did not meet a certain benchmark there would be dire consequences. Chau acknowledged taking the state exam, *To test to see if we improve and if we do we can go into the next grade and if we don't we have to be kept back and we can learn again (#2, p. 5).*

Conclusion

The urban third graders involved in this study revealed a large capacity to understand the multitude of literacy practices that underlie and support their reading and writing. They also recognized a number of those practices that knowingly or unknowingly derail literacy development. Students in the study came from a variety of backgrounds; some spoke English as well as a different language, some of the students had been retained prior to third grade. A few students in the study had recently transferred into their schools. Given all of these factors and others, what was remarkable were the commonalities among what the third graders know about reading and writing and about themselves as readers and writers.

I am struck by the insight the urban third graders in the study offer teacher education. Some of the findings confirm what we know about the role of choice in the classroom and about teaching strategies that support reading and writing development. As a former classroom teacher I am drawn to the students' perceptions of reading and writing and their understanding of themselves as readers and writers. Their knowledge provides me with potential to maximize motivation and engagement in reading and writing. It is apparent that the strategies and tools the teacher uses are critical to students

being efficacious as readers and writers—to having agency as literate beings. The findings point to significant implications for classroom practice which I address in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

LEARNING FROM THEIR VOICES

The focus of this research on urban third graders allowed me to give voice to their perspectives of reading and writing. As a former teacher, I feel as if I have gained insights from these 24 students that build on what I have learned in twenty years in education about the ways in which students' understandings of themselves as readers and writers are shaped by their experiences and understandings in school. Never have I been clearer about the role of choice in engaging and motivating students to read and write. Moreover, I have a deeper understanding about the critical nature of the relationship between a teacher and her students. Without a working relationship in the classroom, students are less likely to be active participants in their own education.

The risk that learners become inactive is especially great in urban public schools which are more likely to have large populations of students who read below grade level than are schools situated in middle to upper class communities (NAEP, 2003). Moreover, not only are urban students more likely to be at risk, their teachers are also more likely to be inexperienced and inadequately prepared to teach (Allington, 2002).

Teachers are in a unique position to affect young readers' experiences and perceptions of reading and writing and of themselves as readers and writers. Sonia Nieto (2000) argues,

> Learning is a complicated matter…understanding how learning can be influenced by the myriad of forces of society can help teachers and schools affect the learning of their students in a more positive direction" (p. 18).

In order for teachers to know their students and to make pedagogical decisions based on that knowledge, teachers need to believe in their own agency as educators. Being a good-enough teacher is not adequate in any school; the teacher must have a strategic teaching toolbox to meet the broad array of students' needs and experiences so that students move through school in the most positive direction possible. In this chapter I discuss the three critical findings from this study of urban third graders: the role of choice in engaging and motivating readers and writers; the importance of a working relationship between the teacher and her students; and the features that differentiate a classroom of urban third graders from a classroom of middle class suburban kids.

The Role of Choice in Motivating and Engaging Readers and Writers

There is a common perception among educators that motivation is something we "do to" children rather than something that comes out of their natural inclination as curious, exploring, social, and self-determining human beings. Many educators have separated issues of motivation for literacy learning from the very processes and experiences of learning itself (Oldfather & Dahl, 1994). Teachers may use extrinsic rewards to motivate students in the belief that if students receive a tangible reward they will be more likely to continue to engage in the task as desired. As a young classroom teacher, I often used stickers, video passes and pizza parties to motivate students only to wonder why students did not remain engaged in reading for longer periods of time. While my students were motivated for short intervals, the treats did little to develop their intrinsic motivation for reading. It is students' intrinsic motivation for literacy learning that will sustain and engage them as readers and writers beyond the requirements of the classroom.

Penny Oldfather (1992) posits that students must have "epistemological empowerment," a concept akin to metacognitive ability. She defines "epistemological empowerment" as a sense of intellectual agency and the ability to know that emerges from a strong sense of integrity of one's own processes of constructing meaning (p. 5). We know that metacognition—the awareness of one's own cognitive processes— increases the likelihood of long-term appropriate use of strategies and skills (Pressley, 1998). Oldfather (1992) argues that it is possible for a student to have strong metacognitive ability, believe that she can make choices, set goals, and make things happen in her life and yet not believe she can construct knowledge and be her own agent of change. In other words, she lacks the self-efficacy to sustain reading engagement over time. Epistemological empowerment expands the notion of metacognitive ability to include the empowerment of the learner. I include Oldfather's concept of epistemological empowerment as one tenet of developing the sustainability and self-efficacy of readers and writers. While a third grader is developing an understanding of her processes as a reader and writer, her empowerment as a reader and writer is primarily supported through the pedagogical practices of the school and classroom teacher; choice is a critical component in this pedagogy.

Choice and Empowerment

The role of choice has received a lot of attention in education (e.g. Graves, 1983; Hindley, 1996; Cunningham & Allington, 1999; Hansen, 2001). Given the data described here, in which choice played a critical role in learning, it seems there is a need for a more developed understanding of what "choice" means in the classroom. I am always surprised when a teacher explains, "I do let them choose, but it doesn't seem to

matter." This despite the fact that 78% of the students in this study reported that they would read for longer periods of time when they had a choice in what they were reading.

The concept of choice is at its foundation connected to students' lives in school and out of school. The majority of the third grade boys in the study reported that there were not very many books that interested them in their classroom libraries. Yet they reported regularly enjoying reading wrestling magazine and comics books outside of school. When I asked Max if he read wrestling magazines, he nodded his head. "Do you read that at home?" He nodded faster! When I asked him if his teacher had magazines with wrestling in school, he responded *She doesn't like that* (#1, p. 6). It is clear from the interviews that when students are given the opportunity to choose texts that connect to their life experiences and histories they are more likely to engage in reading and writing for longer periods of time and find more pleasure in the experiences. Guthrie and his colleagues (1999) argue that when students are motivated to read books, they make and value connections between the text and their lives; this motivation positively influences learning with the text. Bottom line: Interest and motivation increase the amount of reading students do, which then leads to improvement in their reading skills and text comprehension in particular. Students who understand what they read are more likely to want to keep reading. Conversely, when there are minimal choices, and interest is diminished, this can lead to less time and attention devoted to reading and limited understanding, resulting in less interest and motivation to read or write. Analysis of fourth grade NAEP scores, which indicate that successful readers read more outside of school (2003), support this cycle.

<u>Beyond Choice</u>

It is very important to be clear about what one means by choice. Tom Newkirk (1989) warns that the instant a child walks into a classroom, he/she meets up with ideologies of literacy that limit choice (p. 184). While students may not make curricular decisions (even less so in the current political climate), it is important for teachers to understand the importance of the theoretical and pedagogical reasons for providing students with guided choices in the classroom. The hierarchy of school automatically places the student on the bottom rung of the ladder, yet it is important for students to believe that they have a choice in what they read or write. When children are not only given choices in their daily lives in school, but also provided with books, texts, hypertexts, etc. that interest them, they are more motivated to read and write. Oldfather (1994) suggests that, "deep and personal engagement is exactly what motivation for literacy learning should be about" (p. 4). In fact, motivation might be a more powerful predictor of student learning than are the more traditional indicators of grades or achievement (Miller & Meece, 1999). But motivating students to read or write is not an easy task, nor can it be simplified to the suggestion that if students have choice, they will automatically be motivated to read and write. Teachers and students need to have working relationships in which students trust the choices teachers make and teachers know their students in ways that allow them to make pedagogical decisions that match the students' interests and needs

<u>The Complexities of Keeping Third Graders Engaged in Reading and Writing</u>

Ultimately, the goal of providing choice and of motivating students in the classroom is to support their growth as independent learners in the broadest sense.

Learners who believe in the value of learning and in their own competence can imagine a wide range of possible selves. The question for me continues to be, "In what ways can teachers consistently encourage students to believe they can do well in school and hence affect the possible selves the children imagine and their engagement in learning experiences?" This happens when there is a working relationship between the teacher and the student in which the teacher is able to provide options specific to the life, interests and needs of that student. I define a working relationship between a teacher and a student, as one of mutual respect—a relationship that supports learning goals rather than performance goals and is built on a foundation of the teacher's current knowledge of both students and curriculum. In the current context of intense focus on academic achievement, there continues to be a void in providing teachers with the time and teaching practices to motivate students in school. This limits the teachers' ability to nurture a working relationship with their students. Turner and Paris (1995) found that the most reliable indicator of motivation was not the type of reading program that the districts followed, but the actual daily tasks that teachers provided students in their classrooms. When the teacher provided opportunities for students to use reading and writing for authentic purposes—opportunities that allowed students to be actively involved in constructing individual meanings about literacy—they were most successful in motivating students. The teachers and students had a working relationship in the classroom, a relationship that existed at both the individual and the collective level. The ways in which the teacher structured and organized the working relationship with her students was grounded in her knowledge of her students' interests and experiences and the experiences students valued in school and out of school.

Teacher as Sociocultural Mediator

For students to internalize the purpose and value of reading and writing, the teacher needs to be a sociocultural mediator (Diaz & Flores, 2001) in the classroom. The ways in which the teacher arranges for learning, the things she says and does, shape cognition. The teacher mediates between what the student needs to know and what is already known. As Tisa revealed when her teacher mediates her book choices, "*Sometimes she [the teacher] say, 'Oh Tisa maybe you might want to try this book cuz it is just right for you and might have somebody who is doing the same things as you in it'* [sic]" (#2, p. 3). Diaz and Flores (2001) suggest that the teacher structure and organize the classroom to offer students opportunities for varied interactions with peers; in some situations, for example, students work in pairs or small groups; in other situations, they may work independently. An effective teacher arranges the learning contexts thoughtfully and deliberately, based on a secure knowledge of students, curriculum and materials. The students that I interviewed were aware of how and why the teacher structured learning for them. For example, in his second interview Hassan reported, "*Ah, like she started me reading, like easy words. She said to start with easy words and then like get to harder words. Then she tells us to go read somewhere, and come back, I talk then we read like two pages to her.*" I asked him if that was helpful. He replied, "*Yeah...so she can know how to help me read*" (p. 15). Diaz and Flores posit that in order to promote positive development of an individual, the teacher must mediate teaching and learning so that students achieve their fullest potential (p. 33). When teachers do this – when they know their students and know how to match students with materials, strategies, even learning partners – students are more engaged and learn more.

The zone of proximal development as described by Vygotsky (1978b) is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. Mahmoud illustrated the zone of proximal development when he explained to me, "I take a like hard book and then a harder one, and harder" (#2, p. 4). He is repeating actions he has experienced in his working relationship with his teacher. Diaz and Flores (2001) extend the concept to include their conceptions of "positive zone of proximal development" rather than "negative zones of proximal development" (p. 34). The teacher must create interactions, experiences, and work for her students in their positive zones of proximal development based a deep awareness of the student's cultural experiences, an appreciation of their differences, an acceptance of their development and capacity to learn and the teacher's knowledge of curriculum and state standards. This provides students with a variety of literacy tools they need eventually to scaffold their reading and writing in and out of school. It is important for teachers to understand that learning is influenced by a teacher's actions; as such, schools must provide conditions that allow teachers to teach well so that working relationships can be optimized.

In a study of effective literacy instruction, it was shown that the scaffolding provided by outstanding teachers was critical in helping students learn (Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998). The first grade teachers observed in that study were able to monitor student thought processes and intercede with just enough help to facilitate learning. Interestingly, the researchers found that the more typical teachers in the study, who were less skilled at scaffolding, were more likely to stick closely to

intended lessons and appeared to be less aware of student thinking. By contrast, the outstanding teachers in the study continually provided guided practice and individual scaffolding so that students who were passive in their help-seeking received support nonetheless. It seems that one characteristic of highly effective teachers is the flexibility to deviate from planned curriculum and instruction when the needs of the students call for it. Unfortunately, this is hardly the approach to teaching being advocated by those in power today.

Self-efficacy in Readers and Writers

Self-efficacy is the reader's sense that he or she has the capability to read effectively (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). It seems probable that a student who lacks self-efficacy as a reader is less likely to seek help from the teacher when needed. In order to change academic failure to success, teachers must be able to identify students who are not seeking the help they need and provide appropriate instructional interventions in the learning context. Individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to take risks and seek help when they need it. Students with low self-efficacy in reading are more likely to be passive help seekers.

The students in this study who believed they had more control over their learning were the good readers. The not-so-good readers often perceived their reading ability to be under the control of teachers or others. They were not often convinced that by using specific reading strategies in class they could contribute to their own reading and writing abilities. On a daily basis, good readers described seeking help when they recognized they needed it. Mariama, a strong reader, told me that she goes up to the teacher and, *"She helped me read words when I needed to put them in chunks"* (#2, p. 12). The not-

so-good readers acknowledged that while they needed help at times, they were passive in seeking it. Maggie quietly told me, *"I read silently...sound them out, spell the whole word out and then go back. [I] keep on practicing and practicing"* (#2, p. 4). Their efficaciousness as readers was diminished. Other studies (Wharton-McDonald, Pressley & Hampstead, 1998; Allington & Johnston, 2002) in which students are found to believe that the teacher can and will help and feel comfortable (safe) asking for help demonstrate that a working relationship between teachers and students can interrupt this process of the less efficacious students not seeking help and the teacher knowing when to go to a student who needs support.

Students' Perspectives on Working Relationships in the Classroom

The students interviewed in this study spoke clearly about aspects of their working relationships with their teachers that helped them become better readers and writers. They knew what they were being taught, and they also knew how those skills or strategies could be used to support them as readers or writers. Rafiki reported, *"She told me to just keep on reading and when we'd make a mistake we'd go back and check it all the time. She said that is what good readers do, always do, go back and check. It helped me learn a lot of words"* (#2, p. 1). Penny Oldfather (1992) argues that we want to nurture in our students the continuous impulse to learn. "The continuous impulse to learn is characterized by intense involvement, curiosity and a search to experience learning as a deeply personal and continuing agenda" (p. 142). I have argued that a key factor in students having intense involvement with reading and writing is an effective working relationship with their teachers and a relationship with the ways they are taught. Critical to the working relationship is the teacher's explicit—or implied—expectation that each student *is* a reader

and a writer. Max knew that his teacher gave him time to think (#2, p. 8). Rahmed needed the time his teacher gave the class for independent reading: *"It helps by giving us thirty minutes"* (#2, p. 2). Tisa knew from her working relationship with her teacher that her teacher understood her need to read lots of books to support her reading. *"Cuz it is like she was always giving me books and she would stop by [my desk] and the books were getting bigger and bigger"* (#2, pp. 1-2). From providing students with time, to conferring with them, to supporting students when they need it, the teacher tacitly conveys her expectations that students can read and write—and that they will. Teachers' high expectations are one factor in shaping intense involvement in reading and writing. The perspectives of the urban third graders provide insight into the need for a wide range of working relationships that move students toward the goal of a continuous impulse to learn.

Gender Differences

The girls in the study reported overall that they felt there was a lot for them to read and access in the classroom library and much to write about. The boys felt differently. Jason reported with a frown, *"I like to read comics with my friends at home, but that doesn't happen in school"* (#2, p. 9). This is consistent with work by Jeffrey Wilhelm and Michael Smith (2002). Many of the adolescent boys they studied viewed their home and school literacies as entirely unconnected. Often what they read outside of school was nothing like what they were expected to read in school. Similar perspectives have been described by Brozo (2002) and Newkirk (2002). In an effective working relationship, the teacher considers what boys like to read and matches those interests with what needs to be taught.

The boys I interviewed had a range of positions on reading and writing, but a significant proportion of those positions were negative. Carlos, a strong reader, was succinct, *"No, I don't like reading, it's boring"* (#1, p. 2). Then he shrugged as he added, *"It's okay"* (#1, p. 4). Jason reflected, *"When I was little I used to read stories but now I'm older and I can't really get into the stories"* (#2, p. 10). Wilhelm and Smith (2002) suggest that boys need to have a sense of control over literate activities and to appear and be competent in them. They describe activities that increase boys' feelings of competence. For example, they found that the boys in their study sought some kind of relationship as a precondition for their learning; they also identified other features of learning activities that would help teachers build upon these relationships. The most enjoyable and powerful form of support for reading identified by the boys in their study were activities that involved active, participatory, hands-on responses. It was through the hands-on activities such as a dramatic activity that the boys felt they were competent and in control. All learners strive for competency and control in the classroom. Wilhelm and Smith conclude that educators, who are most often women, must create working relationships with boys in particular that engage them in reading and writing and build their sense of competence and control in the classroom.

Making the Connections between Students' Lives In and Out of School

Relationships are foundational in the classroom. Jane Hansen (2001) suggests that reading and writing cannot thrive unless we honor a diversity of voices in the classroom. "It is the responsibility of finding value in others that can turn a classroom into a setting in which readers and writers create work they value" (p. 18). This form of value comes from teachers having working relationships with their students. Feeling valued in the

relationship with the teacher is essential for the student to extend reading and writing outside of school.

Dewey (1902) wrote,

> From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in school comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while, on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning in school. That is the isolation of school—it's isolation from life (p. 75).

Critical to engaging students in this relationship is the challenge of convincing them that what they do in school connects with their lives outside of school. While the focus of the interview questions was primarily on students reading and writing in the context of school, their responses made it clear that what happens in regard to reading and writing outside of school held importance in their lives.

The third graders talked openly about the ways in which their families supported them in reading and writing. Their relationships with family members were critical to these students' understandings of reading and writing and to making the connections between school and home. Maria shared, *"My dad helps me a lot. He has these big books, like this (her hands show a big pile of books) He helps me to read like the chapter of that book and sometimes on another"* (#2, p. 11). The relationship these students have at home provided each with a foundation for success in school.

When students are provided with opportunities to choose books that represent their experiences outside of school or to write about a topic that they know about from a previous experience, school has the possibility of being not an isolating place but a place where school connects with students' lives.

> School may be connected with life so that the experience gained by the child in a familiar commonplace way is carried over and made use of there, and what the

child learns in the school is carried back and applied to everyday life, making the school an organic whole, instead of a composite of isolated parts (Dewey, (1902, 1915, 1956), p. 91).

The third graders I describe echoed this message. While many teachers pay lip service to the connections between home and school learning a great deal more can be done to develop those connections and make them evident to students on a daily basis.

Urban Third Graders: What Distinguishes Them

While the voices in this study belong to urban third grade students, it is not clear that the perspectives described in the findings are unique to urban students. I am not so sure that I would have received substantively different responses to the interview questions with students attending suburban public schools. However, the students' perceptions of themselves as readers and writers provided me with a way to think about what possibly differentiates the voices of these urban third graders from other third graders in wealthier, suburban schools.

Rather than the content of their responses being the distinguishing feature among urban students, the salient difference may the distribution of students within the classroom. That is, in middle-class suburban classrooms there are some strong readers, a lot of good readers and few struggling readers. In contrast, urban classrooms are more likely to have fewer strong readers, some average readers, and many students who struggle. What struck me most when the teachers were trying to select students for the study was the difficulty in identifying strong readers. In a small way, their struggle is representative of the larger issue of the disproportionate number of students who struggle with reading in urban public schools. In 2003, nine urban districts participated in the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) in reading and writing at grades four and eight.

The TUDA was part of the NAEP assessment for that year. (The school district is which this study was conducted participated in the trial assessment.) At grade four, the average score for each participating district in the TUDA was significantly lower than the national score for students in suburban schools. (NAEP, TUDA, 2003). Based on these data, urban schools have a statistically higher proportion of students who struggle with reading and writing than do schools in suburban, middle class districts. Moreover, a high proportion of students in these schools are learning English as a second language—a factor with clearly impacts their literacy development in English.

Children who attend urban public schools frequently come from poor families and minority backgrounds; often they have not had the same exposure to school-valued language literacy skills that children from higher socio-economic backgrounds have had (IRA, 2003). Often the teachers in urban schools are unfamiliar with children's home cultures, background experiences, and/or languages, and thus they may make inappropriate judgments about children's competence using misguided criteria. It continues to be critical that instruction proceed from the recognition and appreciation of what the student knows and does not know about reading and writing so that it makes sense to the learner. Anything else is nonsense, both to the learner and to the system it perpetuates (Purcell-Gates, 1995).

It is widely acknowledged that being facile with both oral and written Standard English is an important predictor of academic success for children (Delpit, 1995; Nieto, 1999). Whereas students from middle and upper class, suburban classrooms are more likely to come to school with standard spoken English comfortably in place, many students in poorer, urban classrooms must learn it as a second language. Fluency with

Standard English is one concrete marker of cultural differences affecting students learning in urban classrooms. The congruency between the skills English-speaking, middle class students bring to school and the skills required for academic success is much greater than it is for urban kids from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Thus, it is imperative to both recognize the context from which the student comes and build a working relationship so that the student can learn what she needs to know to succeed beyond the classroom.

Understanding the Larger Purpose of Reading

Often students who attend urban schools have not been raised within "the culture of power" or who have not explicitly learned the rules of the game for academic success (Delpit, 1986). Such would be the case for the majority of third grade students in this study. The students whom I interviewed primarily lived in high poverty areas of the city. Seventy-five percent of the students in the study were from non-majority cultural groups. These students did not necessarily enter school with reading capital compared to third graders at middle/upper-class public school. Sonia Nieto (1999) puts it succinctly,

> Students from socially and culturally dominant groups generally begin school with the kind of knowledge that will place them at an advantage to learn in that setting; they have more of the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991) that it will take to succeed in school (p. 54).

The students in this study are more dependent on school to help them develop the cultural capital or reading capital they will need to succeed (Mehigan, 2005). Showing the students a picture of a boy or girl reading, I asked them, "In what ways can reading help this girl/guy?" I assumed that students' experiences and education had provided them with the knowledge to respond to such a question. Their responses revealed only a general understanding about the importance reading and writing. Students were able to

tell me, "She's trying to get a good education and learn…because she …she wants to get a good job." I strongly believe urban students need to understand the relationship between the purpose of reading and writing and how that understanding provides them with the capital they need beyond the school walls.

The larger issue is for students to know the ways in which reading and writing will give them access to the cultural capital to survive and succeed in life. Delpit (1995) argues that,

> Students must be taught the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life, not by being forced to attend to hollow, inane, decontextualized sub-skills, but rather within the context of meaningful communicative endeavors; they must be allowed the resources of the teacher's expert knowledge, while being helped to acknowledge their expertness as well (p. 45).

The purpose of reading and writing beyond skills and strategies needs to be made clear to students, especially to students who enter school from lower socioeconomic groups.

The Need for Strong Working Relationships

The findings of this study highlight the need for strong working relationships in urban public schools. According to Richard Long, the International Reading Association's Director of Government Relations, "Children in urban areas need teachers with different skills related to language, the impact of poverty, and a wide array of social issues." (http://www.reading.org/resources/issues/focus_urban.html). While teachers in any context need to understand their students' strengths and weaknesses and the cultural context in which they learn, what distinguishes the urban classroom is the degree of socio-cultural disconnect that often exists between the teacher and her students. It may be harder to establish a working relationship with students whose backgrounds are different from that of the teacher. In a working relationship, the teacher not only is

teaching children particular content and strategies, she is also laying the foundation for a relationship where teacher and students listen to each other, learn from one another and thus build a community of learners in the classroom.

A working relationship is built upon mutual respect between the teacher and her student. Mutual respect comes out of a caring for students. Caring involves stepping out of one's own personal frame of reference into that of others (Noddings, 1984). When a teacher cares, she considers the student's point of view, her needs and what the student expects of her. The teacher's attention is on the student, not on herself. Caring teachers listen and respond differently to their students. Teachers are more able to care for students when they better understand their students' interests and needs, cultures, families and friends. In a working relationship where caring is central, the socio-cultural distance between a teacher and her student can be greatly diminished.

<u>High Stakes Assessment and No Child Left Behind</u>

Logic and learning research dictate that instruction must proceed from what the student knows to what he or she does not know. In reality, however, instruction is increasingly driven by high stakes assessment regardless of the students' starting point. The third grade students in this study took the state exam in the spring the study was conducted. All of the students understood that the exam was a necessary gate through which they had to pass to go onto fourth grade. The pressure, the fear of failure, and in some cases actual failure over time may have the opposite of the intended effect of raising performance: It may cause students to react to avoid the source of discomfort or pain – in this case, school and academics (Garran, 2004). Christina said wearily, *"I*

thought it was way hard. And then I thought if it is hard in 3rd grade it be even harder in

fourth grade" (#2, p.9).

Urban public schools are failing state exams in larger numbers than middle-upper class schools (NAEP, 2003). The result of this failure is more time spent on teaching to the test and less time spent on actual reading and writing. More importantly, schools that do not meet state and government standards are designated "failing" or "low performing" schools. Incredibly, the instructional methods and materials imposed on low-performing or failing schools are not the same methods that are used by high-performing (usually more affluent) schools. Thus, children in low-performing schools receive a more "back-to-basics," dumbed-down curriculum as mandated and approved by NCLB instead of methods that are used in high-performing schools (Garran, 2003). The NCLB mandates severely restrict teachers' ability to provide individualized, flexible instruction. The curriculum they receive is less likely to meet them where they are and less likely to connect to their lives outside of school. Thus, the sociocultural gap widens and the achievement gap between urban and more affluent public schools can only grow larger in the future.

Implications for Classroom Teachers

The findings in this study provide a range of implications for pre-service and in-service teachers. The results confirm the centrality of the student-teacher relationship. It is important that teachers know themselves, know their students and know what needs to be taught in order to be adept at working with a broad range of students. This is especially true when the teacher and student come from backgrounds that are culturally and socio-economically different from each other.

A working relationship requires teachers to know themselves so that they can support students in knowing themselves well. In order to teach well, one must examine one's assumptions about families, children and learning. A continual questioning of what one believes children can or can not do in the classroom is essential to teaching children in their zones of proximal development and moving them forward. One can not teach a student well if she does not believe the student is capable of learning. Understanding one's own assumptions about children from diverse backgrounds is even more imperative so that knowingly or unknowingly, a teacher does not limit a student's potential.

All teachers need to know their students regardless of the context in which one teaches. However, with students attending urban public schools, knowing students' interests, dislikes, life outside of school is even more critical to being able to successfully meet the needs of students. Teachers need to understand their students as readers and writers, but in a deeper and broader way as well. Teachers come to know their students in a variety of ways: morning meetings, conferring, checking in with students about home while collecting homework, listening to students as they talk with one another, and spending time with students outside of the classroom.

Teachers should arrange for learning so that students can bring their different literacies into the classroom, making visible their lives outside of school. Incumbent on this happening is the ways in which the classroom is organized and structured for various interactions between teacher and student, and student-to-student. The classroom has to be organized to meet the broad range of learning needs. Desks in rows, where students face the backs of other heads, are no longer an option. Room arrangement should be able to accompany the class meeting as a whole group in a community area, as well as quiet

spaces for learners who need calmer places to work, tables for students to work in small groups, pairs or individually. Ideally, there are designated areas in the classroom for an organized classroom library and a writing center that provides writing tools to write in a variety of genres. The classroom atmosphere should place evident value on the students' growing sense of competence and independence so their lives in school are not completely separated from their lives in the community outside.

Teachers have to know what to teach and how to teach it. The students in this study were clearly able to articulate what their teachers were teaching and why. Students were also able to talk about the strategies and skills they had been taught that supported their reading and writing development. Interestingly, what they reported was not that different from what we know about best practices that support reading and writing growth (Pearson & Fielding, 1991; Pressley, 1998; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Mandell, 2001; Allington & Johnston, 2002). Classroom teachers have to balance between what needs to be taught based on state standards, the school curriculum and grade level expectations and what the needs and interests are of the students. This is no easy task. It requires balancing curricular needs with work where children can bring more of themselves into their reading and writing.

The students in this study revealed that working relationships can thrive in classrooms in which the teacher continually works on making reading and writing come alive for students. The teacher is the socio-cultural mediator in the classroom; she is expert at meeting the needs of the students and the demands of what needs to be taught. The balance between curriculum and the needs of the students is not always possible in every teaching moment, but striving to match what the student knows and needs to know

is critical so that students can develop, maintain and expand upon their personal images of themselves as literate learners.

<div align="center">What I Learned...</div>

As I contemplate what I have learned from this study, the students come to mind first. From the twenty-four third graders, I have come to better understand how much third graders have to say about reading and writing, what they understand about themselves as readers and writers and how much they know about school. Their perceptions provide keen insight into what motivates and engages them to read and write.

Students need and want to be listened to in school. While I had the time to talk with students outside of the classroom, I now believe that time must be made in the school day for teachers and children to talk, for students to be heard. It is not that the teacher has to do something concrete or obvious with everything a student shares; rather it is important that the students know they have the opportunity for their voices to be heard – to be part of the conversation of schooling.

I learned that urban classrooms are not places where learning is stagnant and teachers are disconnected from the lives of the students. The classrooms in which I observed were thriving with students engaged in a variety of learning experiences. I saw students reading and writing for long periods of time, teachers modeling their reading and writing processes, and children talking about their reading and writing with each other. Most of the students in the study did not want to be taken out of the classroom for interviews during reading or writing workshop.

I learned that urban students are not very different from students who attend public schools outside of urban centers in the ways they talk about reading and writing

and their understanding of themselves as readers and writers. I thought these students would have different perceptions of reading and writing; they did not. While the life of every student is marked by socio-cultural and socio-economic differences, what students know about reading and writing is similar.

The notion that a one-size reading program does not fit all was confirmed by this study. The teachers in the study used a wide range of effective teaching practices to meet the diverse learning needs of their students. While teaching practices such as guided reading worked for some students, other students needed guided reading combined with word study work to meet their needs. The teachers were facile at arranging for learning. The students let me know how important it was to them that they could work independently, with a peer or in a small group. The students were clear most of the time about what worked best for them. But they also knew that their teacher had greater knowledge about what should be included in their reading and writing lives that support their literacy development.

In listening to the students in the study, I learned the importance of the teacher as a sociocultural mediator. This kind of mediation may not be necessary for the children of middle-class and culturally mainstream families, but very often it is required for students whose families do not have the high-status cultural capital required for academic success (Nieto, 1999). Teachers need to support this kind of learning while at the same time affirming all that the student brings to school as viable and valuable resources for learning. The teacher must be expert in matching what the student brings to school and what needs to be taught with the student's literacy development. I come back to where I started in contemplating what I have learned: that the teacher must know herself, know

her students and know what needs to be taught so that, in the end, students are able to have wonderful ideas (Duckworth, 1996).

> The more we help children to have their wonderful ideas and to feel good about themselves for having them, the more likely it is that they will some day happen upon wonderful ideas that no one else has happened upon before (p. 14).

Limitations and Further Questions

Limitations

The purpose of this study was to begin to describe what urban third graders report about themselves as readers and writers and to use these understandings to inform classroom contexts and teaching practices. The interpretation of these findings is limited, given the small number of participants (24 students) and its single location (a large urban district in the Northeast). Moreover, the research focused on students in regular classrooms, leaving out students in special education and ESL classrooms. Further work would benefit from a larger, more educationally diverse sample.

There were also methodological limitations in describing students as good and not-so-good readers and writers. Newkirk (2002) encourages us to question who defines "good" and "not-so-good" particularly when it comes to students who are not male, white and middle-to upper-class. Daily, I find it challenging to categorize a student in terms of his or her ability; this counters my strong belief that we must talk about children in terms of what they can do rather than what they can't. For the purposes of this study, teacher nominations and test scores were used as measures of "good" and "not-so-good." Obviously, this is not the only measure of success in literacy. Further studies would use multiple measures and definitions to describe readers.

This study was conducted in four classrooms where the teachers were considered to be particularly effective at reading and writing instruction. The four teachers in the study used a Workshop approach to teaching reading and writing. The organization of the four classrooms was similar, and teachers reported similar approaches to teaching reading such as guided reading, independent reading and read aloud. Further research is necessary in more teacher-centered classrooms or in classrooms where a published reading program (such as Open Court) is used to guide instruction in order to better understand the motivations, intentions and understandings of readers and writers in classrooms of this sort.

A picture protocol was developed in order to elicit a broader range of responses from students. The pictures provided a powerful catalyst for many of the students to talk about themselves as readers and writers. The pictures were primarily obtained from magazines. In the future, picture protocols might best be developed using photographs taken of children at the same grade level of the students being investigated. Pictures that provide images of same age children in familiar contexts may provide students in the study with more connections and associations to their reading and writing.

Further Questions

As a long-time teacher, student, and literacy coach, further questions remain for me as a researcher and educator: How can we as teachers and researchers convince students to attribute their successes and failures to factors they can control (effort)? Where in the cycle of success and efficacy can we best intervene? What role does culture play in the development of agency and students' perspectives of themselves? How can we best balance a commitment to increased student choice within the demands of

accountability and testing? What role does teacher agency play in efforts to develop student agency? Finally, if it is true that there is a higher proportion of students from low-income, urban (and perhaps rural) classrooms who have a limited sense of agency, what are the implications for instructional practices and how can these implications be communicated in teacher education? These questions lead to a variety of future research projects.

What continues to compel me most are my everyday interactions with teachers and students in urban schools. The individual life of any child comes with complications that can hinder or foster learning. What sustain me are the voices of the students in this study as well as the young students with whom I work daily. Just as students need to be nourished by their experiences in school, I am motivated by my desire to see that all children have access to an education that leads them to a life of empowerment and agency as readers and writers.

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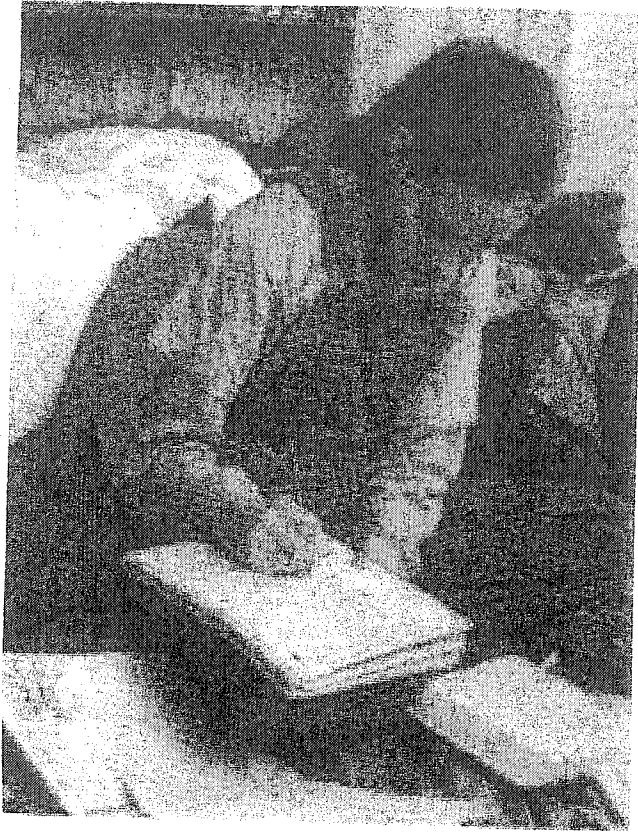
APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

PHOTOGRAPH PROTOCOL FOR INTERVIEW #1

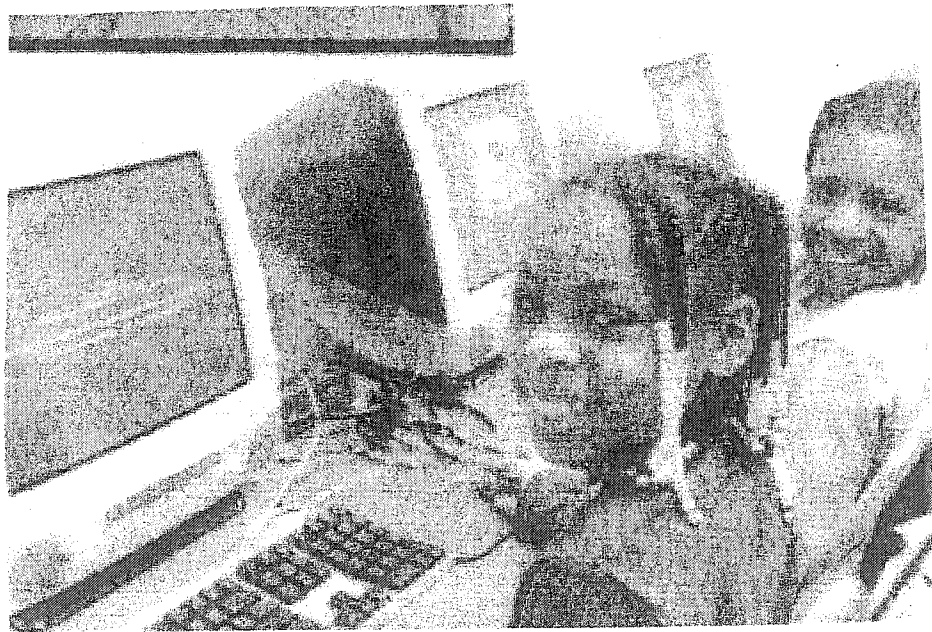Female Students Reading

Female Students Writing

Male Students Reading

Male Students Writing

Students Engaged in Reading and Writing

APPENDIX B

STUDENT INTERVIEW #1 PROTOCOL

I will begin interviews by saying "I really appreciate your helping me to understand how 3rd graders think about reading and writing. It has been such a long time since I was in third grade and things have really changed since then. So I really need experts like you to tell me what you think. Is that OK? The questions I will ask you are about your understandings, you opinions. There are no right or wrong answers. Your ideas might be different from others in your class, and that's fine. I have a tape-recorder here because I want to remember everything you say, is that OK?

I will show the student a picture of a boy or girl reading a book. If the student is a female, she will be shown the picture of a girl reading. Similarly, it if I am interviewing a boy he will be shown a picture of a boy reading. Then I will begin each interview by asking "What do you think is happening in this picture. The sequence in which I ask questions will be determined by the responses of the student. A potential sequence of questions in reading might include:

What do you think is happening in this picture?
Why do you think that? What makes you say that?
What lets you know that the she/he is reading (writing)? Tell me more about that.
Do you think he was always able to read this book? What makes you say that?
Why would (s) he be reading (writing)? Why would (s) he want to do that?
How might you describe what he is doing? What makes you think that? Tell me more.
Who so you think chose the book?
Who chooses the books you read. Tell me more about what you mean by that.
In what ways can reading (writing) help this boy/girl? Say more about that?
What do you think (s) he had to do to learn to read a book like this?
What else might (s) he do in school that has to do with reading (writing)? Why would (s) he do those "things?"
Do you think his/her teacher reads (writes)? Well, I want to hear more about why you think that?

Do you like to read (write)?
I am wondering what it is about reading that you like (or don't like? Why else might you read?
Describe what you do when you read? Why do you say that? Say more about that.
What is it that good/not so bad readers (writers) do when they read (write)? Tell me more.
What type of books do you like to read?
Tell me about what you write?

Do you think this boy reads with his friends? Tell me more?
Do you have any friends who are good readers (writers)? What makes you say that? What is it that they do that makes you say that?

Do you read (write) with your friends? Oh, where do you do that reading (writing)? I want to hear more about that.
[Or you don't? Tell me more about what you do with your friends.}

I wonder if this boy/girl reads (writes) outside of the classroom, what do you think?
Where might (s) he go to read (write) and why would (s) he do that? Tell me more,
Do you ever read outside of the classroom?
Where would you do that? I want to hear more about that…tell me more
Where some places you like to are go and read?

Do you think this boy/girl reads (writes) at home? What makes you say that?
Do you read (write) at home? What do you like to read (write) at home?
Do you read different books at home than in school? Tell me more?
Who else in your family reads (writes) at home? What do they like to read (write)?
Do you get newspapers, magazines, etc. at home? How many?
I wonder if you read (write) with them? Please say more about that?

APPENDIX C

STUDENT INTERVIEW #2 PROTOCOL

I will begin interviews by saying "I really appreciate your talking to me again to help me understand how 3rd graders think about reading and writing. Last time we talked I showed you three pictures and asked you a bunch of questions. This time I am going to ask you some questions but I am not going to show you a picture. The questions I will ask you are about your understandings, you opinions. There is no right or wrong answers. Your ideas might be different from others in your class, and that's fine. I have a tape-recorder here because I want to remember everything you say, is that OK?

Below is a potential sequence of questions:
Tell me how (teacher) helps you with your reading this year? Writing
What makes you think that? Tell me more.

What is the most challenging book you read recently? What made it challenging?
Tell me why you chose that book? How did you choose it?
Have you read it before? Why might someone read a book more than once? Tell me more
What kind of reading is your favorite kind of reading?
I am wondering what you don't like to read. Tell me more about that.
What might be your most favorite book ever?
What do you and friends like to read?
What might your friend(s) tell me about what you do when you read (write)? Say more about that?

In what ways do you read differently now than at the beginning of the school year? Second grade? Writer? In what ways are you the same? Different? Why do you think that?
Actually, what can you do now in reading that you couldn't do at the beginning of third grade? Why do you say that? Tell me more.
What kind of activities did you do that helped you in reading?
In what ways do you write differently now than at the beginning of the year?
What do you do that is the same?
What do you do when you write? Tell me more about that?
Who chooses your topic?

If I asked your teacher to tell me what you do when you read (write) what might she say?
Tell me more about why you think that.
What did you learn most recently about reading? Writing?
What would you like to learn in fourth grade?
What kind of activities
How will you do that?

If I asked your parents (mom/dad) to describe what you do when you read (write), what might she/he tell me? Tell me more about that?

What do you read at home? Say more about that?
Tell me some things your mom/dad might tell me about the kinds of reading (writing) you do?
What does your mom/dad think you read (write)? What makes you say that?

APPENDIX D

TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- Please tell me the story of how you came to be a teacher.

- Tell me how you teach reading? How do you teach writing?

- What are the biggest obstacles in you literacy instruction?

- How do the MCAS and other assessments affect your literacy instruction?

- How do you meet the wide range of student's needs in reading and writing?

- Do you ever think about what kids report about themselves as readers and writers? In what ways do you take into account individual student's understandings of themselves as readers (writers) as you plan? As you are teaching?

- Tell me about (student) as reader and writer? Tell me more about (student) does as (s) he reads? Writes? What are (student) strengths and weaknesses?

- How did you come to this understanding about (student) achievement?

- What goals do you have for (student)?

- How will you meet these goals?

- What questions do you have for me?

APPENDIX E

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

fice of Sponsored Research
Service Building
51 College Road
Durham, New Hampshire 03824-3585
(603) 862-3564 FAX

LAST NAME	Boothroyd	**FIRST NAME**	Kim
DEPT	Education-Morrill Hall	**APP'L DATE**	12/3/99
OFF-CAMPUS ADDRESS (if applicable)		**IRB #**	2238
		REVIEW LEVEL	FULL
PROJECT TITLE	Contrasting Instructional Approach: Achievement and Understanding among Struggling Urban Third Grade Readers and Writers		

The above-referenced protocol has been carried on the IRB agenda for a number of sessions without action. At the time of initial review the Board requested your response to the following:
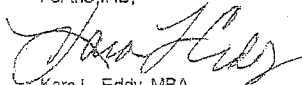
The investigator must provide permission letters from the schools involved in the project.

It appears from the investigator's protocol that videotapes will be used for research and/or teaching. The parent letter says "only I will listen to and view..." -- if this is NOT the case (i.e., others in research and instruction will view the tapes) parents should know this.

If you've chosen not to conduct the study, please inform the IRB. If the IRB does not receive a reply from you by its next regularly scheduled meeting, the pending protocol's status will be changed to "inactive." The IRB does not support the use of human subjects in inactive studies.

If you have questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at 862-2003. Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this project. Thank you.

For the IRB,

Kara L. Eddy, MBA
Regulatory Compliance

cc: Grant Cioffi