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At the heart of it: Middle school writers use talk and multimedia journals to forge a literate classroom community

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AT THE HEART OF IT:
MIDDLE SCHOOL WRITERS USE TALK AND MULTI-MEDIA JOURNALS
TO FORGE A LITERATE CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

BY

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DISSERTATION
Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

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in

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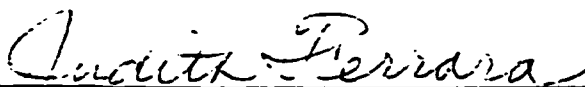
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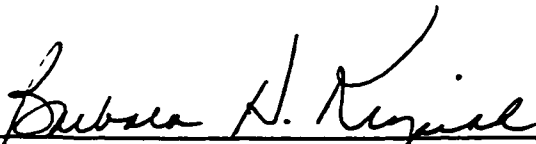
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April 19, 1999

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to:

Judith Ferrara

and

Jane Hansen

You loved and believed in me always. Through you, I found myself.

Through me, your work continues.

iv

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v

Thank you to my former **eighth grade students and their families**. Our six months together at Spring Street Middle School reaffirmed my commitment to public school education.

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vii

FORWARD

About the Title: *At the Heart of It*

My heart is what brought me to the place I am today. Let me explain. I never intended to become a schoolteacher. I imagined myself appearing on television or radio stations, chasing down news stories, my name beneath by-lines. During my junior year in college I transferred to a reputable journalism program at a large, well-known university in the Southeast. That's when everything changed.

Every paper I wrote that semester for my journalism professor received a D or an F. I was astounded because I had never before received low grades on my writing, and I resorted to everything I could think of to improve my paper grades. I talked to my professor on numerous occasions. I sought out the help of my classmates. I even stopped sleeping, staying up for 48 hours straight before every paper was due, scrutinizing paragraphs, sentences, words, and punctuation marks. Nothing seemed to help.

A few days after my horrible semester ended, I was Christmas shopping at a local mall and ran into the professor who had graded me so harshly. After we chatted briefly about our holiday plans, he paused and said, "Well, I hope you have learned your lesson."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You can't write with your heart if you want to be a journalist. There's no such thing as writing with your heart," he said.

viii

Suddenly it dawned on me what the problem was. It was impossible for me to write without my heart. I still don't know if what the professor said was true of journalists or not, but the next day, my heart intact, I started to look for another profession.

I became a writing teacher, which is the beginning of my next story and the continuation of the theme that has shaped my life's work. I write with my heart. I teach my student writers to write with theirs. I have investigated ways to help literate individuals connect their hearts to other literate individuals in community settings. By placing talk and multi-media journals at the center of my eighth grade language arts curriculum, my students were able to forge a literate classroom community. To forge means to gradually give shape and roots to something cherished and important. All this my middle school students and I do in our literate classroom community without forgetting who we are, who we hope to be, and what we love in our hearts.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

xii

xiii

LIST OF FIGURES

Page

xiv

LIST OF FIGURES (CONT'D.)

ABSTRACT

AT THE HEART OF IT:
MIDDLE SCHOOL WRITERS USE TALK AND MULTI-MEDIA JOURNALS
TO FORGE A LITERATE CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

by

Julie A. Pantano
University of New Hampshire, May, 1999

In this research study, I investigated how middle school writers use talk and multi-media journals to forge a literate classroom community. Talk and multi-media journals helped middle school writers to construct and maintain a safe, caring, supportive, and respectful learning environment where transformative literacy and learning experiences could take place.

Classroom talk played a vital role in improving students' relationships in this literate classroom community and engaging them in meaningful ways with their multi-media journals. During the research study, explicit instruction in the social aspects of talk emerged as important as explicit instruction in language arts content.

The multi-media approach to journal writing evolved from my own membership in a Women's Journal Group. The multi-media approach to journal writing involved the use of other mediums, especially the visual arts, while writing. Students reported that the multi-media journals helped them to begin and continue writing as well as increased their enjoyment of writing.

I conducted this teacher research study over a six month period. I employed the tools and procedures of ethnographic and qualitative research in the data collection and analysis.

xvi

INTRODUCTION

Transformation is often a common theme in the research studies of progressive educators today. It seems that transformation is the natural by-product of engaging in important work with our students. Although it was not my original intention when I began this research study, the account reported here is also about transformation. In the following pages, I will describe how I became a teacher-researcher and someone who lived literacy. I will tell how my middle school students and I used talk and multi-media journals to forge a literate classroom community. The literate classroom community that my students and I forged is the most significant portion of this research study. Inside our literate classroom community, my students learned meaningful ways to express and use literacy in their lives. Without our literate classroom community, my students and I could not have transformed from a conglomeration of people into a caring, supportive group.

When I started this research study, my goal was to investigate a tool, "multi-media journals," that I believed would be successful in encouraging writing in language arts. Prior to this research study, I had belonged to a Women's Journal Group that had adopted the multi-media approach to journal writing. The members of the Women's Journal Group had found that multi-media approach to journal writing helped them to "live literacy," and this was what I desired for my middle school students to experience (Brooks, 1997). About three weeks into my teacher research, however, I realized that classroom community would also need to be a focus of this

1

research study. This was due to my observations that my middle school students desperately wanted a safe place to talk, write, and learn, a place where they felt valued for who they are, inside and outside of school. In the beginning of the research study, caring, respect, trust, and acceptance were not characteristic of my students' interactions with each other and me. Additionally, I discovered that the overall middle school environment seemed to contrast, even undermine, what I hoped to achieve in my language arts classroom. The dominant school paradigm did not assist students to become literate individuals who used literacy to help themselves and others. During the six month period that this research study occurred, my eighth grade students and I would face great obstacles in overcoming this "norm" propagated at Spring Street Middle School. I found that challenging the entrenched norm at Spring Street Middle School was "highly political, very emotional, and professionally risky" (Wolk, 1998, x), and yet that is exactly what my students and I needed to do in order to have a classroom community where authentic learning took place.

The central activities of our literate classroom community revolved around talk, visual arts, and writing. I structured the language arts curriculum and classroom set-up in such a manner that my students and I could devote the majority of our time to talk, visual arts, and writing. Sometimes it would become necessary for me to model and give explicit instruction on both content-related learning behavior and social behavior. Even after my students and I built our literate classroom community, we would continue to work hard at sustaining it by resolving and mending conflicts on a regular basis.

Perhaps like me, there are a few literacy instructors reading this right

2

now that are ready to try new methods because of something they learned from a summer writing program, conference, graduate school, or professional literature. Or perhaps like me, a few tried writing workshop or teacher-research, but their efforts were thwarted by unsupportive colleagues and resistant students. Their experience didn't parallel what they experienced in the summer writing program or read about in published accounts. My hope is this work is somewhat different in that some language arts teachers will find that my depiction of the environment at Spring Street Middle School and my difficulties as a language arts teacher will resonate with them. I have tried to construct in this dissertation an honest research account that includes my successes as well as failures. Although the classroom model that I advocate in this research study is not one that could be easily duplicated by other language arts teachers since many factors influenced its form, the conditions for a literate classroom community that are so deeply entrenched in my pedagogy are ones that other teachers can prescribe to. I believe that literacy instructors must "teach community" (Wolk, 1998) with the same patience, time, commitment, and enthusiasm that we give to the other areas of learning in language arts. We must initiate and form support networks to nourish the learning and growth of our students and colleagues. Only then will the small differences we make in our language arts classrooms seem like remarkable ones.

3

CHAPTER I

WHY DO TEACHER RESEARCH?

As a middle school teacher, I spent an inordinate amount of time jumping from 45 minute class period to class period, from meeting to meeting, from curriculum guideline to guideline, trying to accomplish all that I needed to do in one school day, with little time and energy left for reflecting on the joyful processes of learning for myself or my students. More often than not, strong feelings of self-doubt and vulnerability accompanied my movements. Federal, state, district, and administrative demands were piling up, and even though I loved teaching language arts, many days I felt overworked and underappreciated—hardly the picture of the educator who means to make a difference in public schools. Though I believed I was making a difference, at least a small one, occasionally my students' faces and attitudes would mirror frustrations about their learning that seemed to approximate how I sometimes felt about my teaching.

After five years of this grinding work routine, I decided to improve my teaching situation by invigorating my professional knowledge and practice in graduate school at the University of New Hampshire. I did not teach middle school during the four years I was in graduate school. However, when it was time for me to return to public school teaching, I was determined to avoid the frenzied pattern of previous years. I also desired a systematic and intentional way to apply and nourish the new theoretical and pedagogical understandings that had manifested and grown in graduate school. After meeting and spending time with teacher researchers from across the United States, I

4

believed the answer to my own teaching difficulties rested in teacher research. Many of the reading and writing educators I admire are also *teacher researchers*. Not only have I witnessed what I consider to be good teaching in their classrooms, but also, these instructors appear to possess something I lacked: the tools and stamina needed to be inquisitive and reflective about their students' learning.

During my doctoral studies at the University of New Hampshire, I was fortunate to work as an university researcher in another teacher researcher's classroom, and one year ago for my own dissertation research, I conducted research in my own middle school classroom. In attempting to chisel out my own space and identity in the teacher research field, I have since studied the research accounts of many other teacher researchers and noted what features they seem to share in common with each other (and with me). I also have surveyed many of the established research journals that now recognize and publish the research studies of teacher researchers. It appears that more and more public school teachers are feeling empowered to examine their own pedagogy by conducting teacher research studies, and educators, like myself, are selecting and relying on classroom-based qualitative research methods in order to discover ways to improve the overall learning conditions of schools (Goswami and Stillman, 1987; Bissex and Bullock, 1987; Daiker and Morenberg, 1990; Belanger, 1992; Huberman, 1996; Mohr, 1996). I believe the recognition of teacher research as a valid and important contribution to the current body of educational qualitative research is a necessary step toward closing the gap between theory and practice (Lytle and Cochran-Smith, 1990) and erasing the inherent distrust some public school teachers seem to bear toward academia (Santegelo, 1998). "Teacher researchers are uniquely

5

positioned to provide a truly emic perspective that makes visible the ways students and teachers construct knowledge" (Lytle and Cochran-Smith, 1997). Personally, teacher research has opened a world of endless and exciting research possibilities.

In this chapter I will share stories about who I am as a teacher, a learner, a researcher, and a person. I will explain why I became interested in teacher research, and ultimately, chose to pursue a teacher research study on multi-media journals in eighth grade language arts for my doctoral dissertation. I will describe the process involved in the doing of teacher research as well as the crucial lessons I learned as a result of being a teacher researcher. Most importantly, I will address specifically the following seven common features of teacher research:

1. Teacher researchers acknowledge and respect the meaningful personal stories of the self as well as the meaningful personal stories of the students they teach.

2. Teacher researchers nudge their pedagogical, philosophical, and theoretical assumptions.

3. Teacher researchers ask questions about and generate solutions for their own classrooms.

4. Teacher researchers develop systematic, intentional plans and use qualitative and ethnographic research methods and tools to make sense of their students' learning.

5. Teacher researchers seek support for their research from a variety of sources.

6. Teacher researchers collaborate with their students on the research study, inviting them into the research process.

6

7. Teacher researchers reflect and evaluate throughout the research study, adjusting the research course for the necessary, appropriate interventions.

First Feature of Teacher Research: Stories of Self

> When teachers do research, they draw on interpretative frameworks built from their own histories and intellectual interests. (Lytle and Cochran-Smith, 1997, p. 1)

The saying goes, "We all have to start somewhere." So where do teacher researchers start? How do teacher researchers come to know what they know? The place I started is similar to where other teacher researchers have reported starting as well. We start with the stories of self. Stories of self connect us with our students. They are the phyllo dough of our classroom research; the thin, intimate layers, while not the crux of our classroom research, reveal the tiers of our classroom life and the intentions in our hearts. "Our knowledge—our teacher research—must be lavishly illustrated with and habitually embodied in stories. For if our knowledge of teaching. . . is divorced from our own meaningful stories, our knowledge will ultimately make little sense" (Gillespie, 1992, p. 19).

Teacher researcher Jack Wilde (1993) suggested, ". . . theories of teaching can never be disconnected from my own experience. . . we must shape our teaching to conform to what we know to be important in teaching, and to what we know of ourselves (p. 10). Other teacher researchers such as Janet Allen (1995), Nancie Atwell (1987), Linda Rief (1992) and Maureen Barbieri (1995) join Jack Wilde in this belief, each beginning their teacher research accounts by delving into personal and professional narratives. And why not? "Narrative is the natural form we use to make sense of our

7

lives. . . . By structuring the incidents and the complex relationships in our lives, we seek to see patterns and to understand events in a broader context rather than in small fragmented pieces" (Caulfield, 1996, p. 62). "When stories are acknowledged and included within the school culture, a powerful message is sent to the students" (Caulfield, 1996, p.51). The message sent: I acknowledge who you are inside--and outside --of school. I respect who you are inside--and outside--of school. You can trust me. Genuine, real life learning will occur in this classroom.

The use of narrative to understand the self and others in a broader context is what brings this discussion to the first common feature of teacher research: *Teacher researchers acknowledge and respect the meaningful personal stories of the self as well as the meaningful personal stories of the students they teach..* According to Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1990),

> Not only can each separate piece of teacher research inform subsequent activities in the individual teacher's classroom, but each piece potentially informs and is informed by all teacher research past and present. Although teacher research is not always motivated by the need to generalize beyond the immediate case, it may in fact be relevant to a wide variety of contexts. (p. 85)

Therefore, I also offer to the reader the potentiality that when educators study the meaningful personal stories of teacher researchers and the students they teach, they often locate their own students and themselves.

My own story of self recalls my first experiences with classroom journal writing. At one time or another, most English teachers meet up with classroom journal writing. According to Kirby and Liner (1988), "The journal is one of those phenomena of English teaching: an instant hit with teachers everywhere. . . used and abused at one time or another by most English teachers. Some teachers swear at it; some swear by it. Some do both" (p. 57). I

8

initially discovered the value of classroom journal writing in a summer institute of the National Writing Project at Pembroke State University in Pembroke, North Carolina. I include my early experimentation with classroom journal writing here because it is the genesis in the evolution of the multi-media journals as well as an important part of my teacher research narrative. Also, "since teaching and researching are both reflective processes, I couldn't begin without looking back at the path that brought me to this time and place" (Allen, 1995, p. 1).

Something turned inside of me during the time I was part of the summer institute, and fortunately, I would not leave as the same English teacher who arrived four weeks earlier. The instructional focus of my classroom was on the verge of changing, **for good**. After spending twenty day-long sessions reading, writing, and responding to other people's work, I left Pembroke, North Carolina convinced that all students must have opportunities to write often and to write well. I learned that proficiency in writing requires daily practice, practice that is sponsored by the teacher, but also initiated by the students themselves (Atwell, 1987; Graves, 1983, 1994; Hansen, 1987). However, where does a language arts instructor fit writing into a curriculum that already requires the integration of so many learning strands? To this inquiry, one particular implementation seemed to be the answer for my classroom, and that answer was daily journal writing.

After the summer institute, I included journal writing in my middle school curriculum, but unsuccessfully. My students loathed journal writing; usually they wrote little, less than one paragraph, and chose repetitive, mundane, and meaningless topics (Parsons, 1989). But I was determined to make journal writing work by rearranging my priorities. My first priority was

9

my students and I would write everyday without fail for extended periods of time (Atwell, 1987). Second, my students and I would use journals frequently during learning experiences and the drafting process, as a catchnet for musings and reflections, as an evaluative tool which showed experimentation and growth over a length of time, and as the road map to completed written products (Fulwiler, 1987; Calkins, 1994; Fletcher, 1993). Lastly, I would relinquish the teacher-centered role I was accustomed to in my classroom. I would model writing by being a writer myself (Graves, 1983, 1990, 1994; Atwell, 1987; Rief, 1992; Murray, 1985).

The inception of daily journal writing into my middle school language arts curriculum was slow and painful in the initial stages; mostly due to the fact that I directed, orchestrated, and organized it all. My students and I wrote for 5-6 minutes each day; I always supplied the writing prompt which I wrote on board and on dated index cards kept in a file box on top of my desk. However, soon my students were willing to increase their writing time to 10 minutes a day, then 12 minutes. Eventually, I noticed they **didn't want**, let alone, **need**, to rely on me or the file box on top of my desk. Hansen (1987) tells that when students write often and on a predictable schedule, they begin to look at their world as an arena of writing topics and usually come to writing class with a topic in mind. Curious about this, I asked students throughout one school day where they received their writing ideas from. They named a myriad of sources: music, tv, dreams, shopping malls, family members, and friends, but as predicted not one mentioned their writing instructor as their most frequent and/or valuable reference (Ferrara, 1990).

This insight was hard for me to accept since the writing teacher I hoped to become (and my students seemed to desire) was not familiar to me in my

10

own schooling and literacy history. Difficult as it was for me to say goodbye to the teacher-centered classroom, I soon understood that my students should choose what they wanted to write about *all of the time*. Also, my time was better spent modeling my own literacy habits and growth and helping my students investigate theirs, rather than concocting additional writing prompts and assignments. However, their burgeoning enthusiasm for writing was contagious as well, so I was ready and anxious for us to spend whole class periods, even weeks, engaged in our writing, especially our journal writing. Together we refashioned our notions of what a "writer" is, a word we now used to talk about ourselves.

Second Feature of Teacher Research: Nudging

As I mentioned before, despite the eventual success and satisfaction my students and I had attained with daily journal writing, I was not immediately comfortable with my new, unaccustomed role in the middle school language arts classroom. Also, I wasn't always sure why things clicked in my classroom when they did click. My two roles of teacher and writer especially tugged at each other. I even asked my students once, "Am I more of a writer or a teacher?" They answered, "That's a silly question since you're the writing teacher." However, I was not satisfied with that natural, seamless answer. Since I was the writing teacher, I found I could not join my students' writing community in the same way they joined or with the same expectations.

Around the same time that I was rethinking my role in the English classroom, I overheard my language arts colleagues bantering back and forth about "living literacy." These conversations caused me to grapple with additional feelings of guilt, apprehension, and fear. What did it mean to be

11

"living literacy," and even more importantly, where do I carve out the space in my personal and professional life for such a feat? Since I was responsible for teaching 120 language arts students each day, how could I possibly make my own reading and writing progress a priority, and thereby, model "living literacy" for my students? Often I would set lofty goals for myself: "I will read these ten books by Christmas," "I will write in my journal for 30 minutes every day no matter what," only to abandon them shortly after during fits of frustration, exhaustion, and isolation.

Troubling doubts like mine that something in this classroom isn't quite right or could be better usually precedes the teacher research study. Hubbard and Power (1993) reported that "many teachers have to do some wandering to get to their wonderings. Often questions for research start with a feeling of tension" (p.3). Janet Allen (1995) remembered "the muscles in the back of my neck tightening" (p. 22) during the early stages of her interest in and concern about the behaviors of resistant adolescent readers. What does a teacher researcher make of these tense moments? She learns from them. She reflects on them. She decides to inquire further into their meaning by testing the water of possibilities. These notions of wandering, tensing, and testing shift this discussion toward the next common feature of teacher research: *Teacher researchers nudge their pedagogical, philosophical, and theoretical assumptions.*

"Nudge" is a term I borrowed from Donald Graves for the purposes of talking about teacher research. Graves used the term to describe the kind of help literacy instructors should provide to their student writers. Graves (1994) wrote,

> Nudge was just the right word to clarify what bothered me about
> much of my own teaching and what I observed in classrooms.

12

> Sometimes children get stuck in one gear, writing about the same
> topic or the same personal experience five or six times in a row, or
> engaging in endless drawing before writing. When this occurs I
> have the same feeling about my teaching: the children are not
> changing or improving their work. We are all stalled in staleness.
> A nudge suggests a slight push in the right direction. (p. 93)

However, "nudge" is also an appropriate word to describe what the teacher researcher does. The teacher researcher is a learner along with her student learners. She herself is a model of pushes and pulls in the right direction. Neither she nor her students is stalled or stuck in one gear. The teacher researcher teaches her students to challenge and improve themselves beyond staleness because it is the same learning behavior she expects of herself.

Psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) would perceive the act of nudging as a condition for moving students into the *learning zone*, the "zone of proximal development." The zone of proximal development is defined as the "distance between the actual developmental 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" (p. 86). Vygotsky contended that students can work just beyond their actual developmental level in the zone of proximal development if they are supported and assisted by peers or adults. Also, teachers should balance the classroom work so that students receive opportunities to work at their actual developmental level and in the zone of proximal development. I would suggest, however, that the teacher researcher understands that the zone of proximal development is not one reserved for children only, but a place for the instructor to awaken and advance her own literacy growth with the help of her students and colleagues.

I decided that when I enrolled in graduate school I would continue to

13

search for ways to include daily journal writing in a middle school language arts curriculum and for the meaning of "living literacy." I, too, would awaken and advance my own literacy growth with the help of others. While at the University of New Hampshire, I met several educators who said they also had experienced obstacles with "living literacy." Some said they had stories about their personal and professional lives, stories similar to mine that they had wanted to tell for a long time. I then asked if they would commit to journal writing on a regular basis and spend two Saturday mornings a month at my home discussing their journal writing progress. Six agreed to be a part of our small literate community.[1] I volunteered to coordinate the meetings, and I kept field notes during the two year period we met. Eventually, we renamed ourselves the Women's Journal Group and adopted the multi-media approach to journal writing for the purpose of studying and reflecting upon our literate lives (Brooks, 1997).

One group member, Stephanie, who is also an artist, had always included pictures, drawings, and watercolor painting along with the writing in her journals, and she frequently modeled this behavior for group members. However, it was Ann who advocated that all group members use the multi-media approach to journal writing. Ann had employed a similar multi-media approach to journal writing to study her literacy habits for a graduate education course the previous year (Hansen, 1996; Hansen, 1998). In multi-media journals, group members write big and small, up and down,

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[1] Throughout this dissertation, I will speak of *literate communities* and of my students' *literate classroom community*. These terms I have coined for the purposes of this discussion, and I have borrowed my definition and understanding of them from James Gee's work. Gee (1996) suggests that the "traditional view of literacy as the ability to read and write rips literacy out of its sociocultural contexts and treats it as as an asocial cognitive skill with little or nothing to do with human relationships" (p. 46). Furthermore, "literacy practices are almost always fully integrated with, interwoven into, constituted part of, the very texture of wider practices that involve talk, interaction, values, and beliefs" (p. 41). Also, see Chapters Three and Four.

14

crooked and sideways. We cut and paste, color, paint, and draw, as well as, add visual images and physical artifacts to prompt and enhance the writing process. Ann said, "I like collage-like things. I'm not an artist but who can't cut and paste?" She was right, **who can't**, because the multi-media approach to journal writing seemed to give all group members permission to explore their literacy beyond printed text literacy. The multi-media approach to journaling released us from our writing harnesses.

Although I had belonged to other reading and writing communities before the conception of the Women's Journal Group, nothing I had ever experienced in the past had prepared me for the renewed sense of purpose and fresh understandings that would soon evolve concerning my literacy. The Women's Journal Group touched and transformed every part of my literate being, and other members reported feeling the same. Peter Elbow (1973) contended that membership in writing communities like the Women's Journal Group will unearth a writer's thoughts and feelings. He wrote,

> When people not only begin to improve their writing ability but
> also find themselves in a group where their words are heard and
> understood better than they usually are, they discover messages they
> want to send which they forgot were on their minds. They want to
> say things that are complex and difficult to express which they
> previously learned to ignore because it had always been impossible
> to get them heard. (p. 123)

Within a short period of time, the Women Journal Group members were a close-knit and supportive literate community even though like the middle school students I taught in the past, we were virtually strangers when we met for the first time. We had moved into the "working stage" of group process (Corey and Corey, 1992). Characteristics of a group in the "working stage" involve a willingness among group members to demonstrate the following behaviors: a) trust one other enough to disclose threatening

15

material, b) treat one another respectfully, c) consider other group members as important and valuable resources, d) take turns sharing and initiating group leadership functions, and e) develop group norms cooperatively so individual members can attain goals.

Also similar to my middle school students, as much as the Woman's Journal Group Members desired to express ourselves in writing, we resisted it as well. However, we all reported that we were handling writing frustrations on our own better and we felt more inclined to take risks with our literacy. With the backing of the other group members, many of us set and achieved individual goals. For instance, two group members and I wrote enough to fill entire journals over a five month period, something we had always wanted to accomplish in our writing lives. Another group member used her journal to record and reflect on her process of becoming a professional storyteller, and practiced storytelling at our meetings. Two more group members used their journals and our meeting forum to enhance their writing for publication. Women's Journal Members suggested that living literacy is not a burdensome responsibility when shared with others. One group member, Gail, said, "Even though we are apart while writing [in our journals], we are not alone."

Ultimately, the Women's Journal Group impacted not only how I viewed writers and writing, but also, literate communities and meaning-making systems such as orality and art. I had always taught writing in a school environment, to classrooms of children placed there by a scheduling administrator. Therefore, I hadn't fully understood or considered the relevance of group process to educational settings, let alone, how to explicitly form a cohesive literate community with middle school students using journal writing, talk, and the visual arts. Although I believed and advocated

16

strongly that any student in my classroom could learn to write well with regular practice, my view of art was much more narrow. However, my experiences with the Women's Journal Group showed me that just like the tools of professional writers are available to novice writers, so are the tools of the professional artist. I realized that if I was to model living literacy for my middle school students and continue to grow as a literate individual who lived literacy in her everyday life, I could no longer confine myself--and my middle school students--to only one or two forms of meaning-making and expression.

Third Feature of Teacher Research: Questions and Solutions

Wonder is a mark of the third common feature of teacher research in that *Teacher researchers ask questions about and generate solutions for their own classrooms.* According to Kutz (1992),

> Some of the most valuable classroom research begins with . . . the wonderings of individual teachers as they engage in day to day work with their students. This is especially true in language arts, where most of the knowledge that defines the field today has come from work that began with teachers asking questions about their own classrooms. (p. 193)[2]

The progression in my own chronicle matches the chronicles of other teacher researchers because "wonder" about my own classroom drove my teacher research study on multi-media journals (Belanger, 1992).

With the support of the Woman's Journal Group and my colleagues at the University of New Hampshire, I considered further how my own experimentation with multi-media journals could impact my eighth grade language arts students. My plans for my teacher research study began with the question: **Am I living my literacy, and in doing so, how am I helping my**

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[2] Also see Emig (1983), Shaughnessy (1977), Atwell (1987), and Moffett (1968).

17

students to live theirs? Additionally, I looked closely at the instruments of my own literacy, including photography, drawing, genealogy, poetry, journal writing, and mystery novels.

Donald Graves (1990) has reminded literacy instructors that "life presents us with edges, questions, moments, and experiences to listen to and observe" (p. 23). Furthermore, responsible and sensitive literacy instructors preserve, cherish, and celebrate even the most ordinary of "literate occasions." Certainly, my professional and personal life was presenting me with some special challenges for me to listen to and observe carefully. Therefore, I asked myself repeatedly: **What are some things about my literacy that I feel good about? What are some things about my literacy that I feel uncomfortable about? What "literate occasions" in my life deserve special scrutiny?**

Next, I used the answers to my inquiries to brainstorm a list of additional research directions and a research question. A crucial starting point in the design of a teacher research study is the research question. I framed an initial research question (**What do eighth grade English students say and do when using multi-media journals to document literacy learning and growth?**) that was open-ended enough to allow other possibilities to emerge, while keeping in mind that qualitative research studies typically develop a focus gradually (Hubbard and Power, 1993; Eisner, 1991). Lastly, this study would honor not only who I was as an literacy instructor, but also, the uniqueness of my students.

Fourth Feature of Teacher Research: Plans and Tools

The fourth common feature of teacher research involves finding and

18

planning the focus of the teacher research study for *Teacher researchers develop systematic, intentional plans and use qualitative and ethnographic research methods and tools to make sense of their students' learning.* Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1990) have constructed the following definition of teacher research: "systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers about their own school and classroom work" (p. 84). By *systematic*, Lytle and Cochran-Smith mean "ordered ways of gathering and recording information, documenting experiences inside and outside classrooms, and making some kind of written record." Systematic also refers to "ordered ways of recollecting, rethinking, and analyzing classroom events for which there may be only partial or unwritten records." By *intentional*, they mean "an activity that is planned rather than spontaneous."

For the purposes of this discussion, I have added the words *develop* and *plan* in order to emphasize that I set out with a proposed sketch of what I hoped to find out as the result of my deliberate efforts, and I trusted that research is an ongoing process that unfolds over time. According to Belanger (1992), "the major cost of teacher research is time: time to refine questions, time to read about what others have thought and done on the topic, time to discuss ideas with colleagues, time to plan the research, time to collect and analyze the data, time to reflect, and time to publish" (p.17). However, the teacher researcher also understands that unplanned events will occur, changes to the research focus and plan will be necessary, and important, though unexpected, insights about teaching and learning will often be generated (Lytle and Cochran, 1990).

Lastly, the teacher researcher uses qualitative and ethnographic research methods and tools for the collection, analysis, and interpretation of

19

the data because they can be included in and adapted to the regular classroom routines and activities without too much difficulty (Hubbard and Power, 1993; Wolcott, 1994; Eisner, 1991; Allen, 1995). Belanger (1992) posited,

> Good teaching might be characterized as a life-long experiment in which we invent new methods and materials in search of better ways to help students learn. Upgrading this experimentation to research is not so much a matter of solving more complex educational problems as it is of keeping detailed records and sharing findings. . . . Developing a research persona requires both the faith that what we are doing is valuable to others and the use of standard procedures to conduct the research and report the findings. (p. 16)

Like Belanger and others, Eisner (1991) sees teaching as "a form of qualitative inquiry" (p. 6). Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1990) acknowledge a wide range of inquiry as teacher research including journals, essays, oral inquiry processes, and formal classroom studies. My own teacher research study falls under the title of formal classroom studies because I used "the documentation and analysis procedures of university-based classroom research" (Lytle and Cochran-Smith, 1990, p. 86; see Chapter Two).

To prepare for my own teacher research study, I spent about eight months prior to the start of school in September thinking about and planning how I would use multi-media journals with middle school students. First, I needed to locate a school in which to collect data. Certainly, access to schools and classrooms is not something that a researcher can take for granted (Eisner, 1991), and in my case, the search proved to be more difficult than I anticipated and took about six months. I sent letters and vitas to the school principals and district superintendents within a fifty mile radius of my home which I usually tried to follow-up with a phone call or drop-in visit. I also posted messages on the internet and checked Sunday's Boston Globe for possible openings. At last, serendipity favored me, and a school contacted me

20

about assuming a six month maternity leave position.

In preparation to enter my field site, I rewrote and reworked my research question (as well as the subquestions I hoped to pursue) several times. Then, I continued to revise my research question and subquestions as significant data began to emerge during the early stages of the fieldwork. However, the transition from doing research on the Women's Journal Group to doing research in my own classroom wasn't always smooth. I had learned from the Women's Journal Group that at the heart of the multi-media journals was its community of writers. Yet, my initial research question did not include a focus on the school environment and classroom setting of the eighth grade student writers, something that definitely was evolving as crucial (see Chapters Three and Four). Eventually, a more focused, but still open-ended research question (**In what ways do multi-media journals contribute to my students' membership in a literate classroom community?**) took shape. I also pondered: **What adjustments to the curriculum and classroom routines will be necessary? Do I have access to the appropriate materials and supplies like children's literature, paper, scissors, glue, markers, and paint? Will my administrators, parents, and students support this research endeavor? What if the first week (or month or months) of school doesn't go well? What if I am overwhelmed by the dual roles of teacher and researcher?**

Next, I devised a research methodology and selected the appropriate research tools (see Chapter Two). Since I needed to take field notes as I was working with my eighth grade students, I decided to record my field notes in my multi-media journal (see Chapter Two and Appendix A). It seemed like a logical decision since I kept my multi-media journal with me at all times

because I was modeling the importance of writing frequently throughout a day for my students. Eventually, my multi-media journal bulged with everything imaginable: observations about my classroom, students, and school community, fragments of conversations with students, their parents, and colleagues, personal writing including fiction, letters, and poetry, multi-media journal entries, reflections on my research and references to educational theory. For me, the multi-media journal was the most functional, unobtrusive, and safe place to log field notes.

Also, I purchased plastic crates which I filled with ninety manila folders labeled with my students' names. I placed in the folders any artifacts I collected from my students such as classroom work, writing samples, and copies of their multi-media journal entries. Researchers often discover that they do not have a sense of what they should have collected at the start of the project until they are well into their research (Hubbard and Power, 1993). Therefore, I filed most things throughout the research project, and even hired students to stay after school and help me sort through it all.

Fifth Feature of Teacher Research: Seeking Support

I indicated earlier in this chapter that I functioned previously as a public school teacher, university researcher, and graduate student, but never all three roles at the same time. My experiences as a graduate student and university researcher deserve mentioning here for it is from these experiences that I borrow the qualitative and ethnographic research principles that guide my work as a teacher researcher.

In order to expand my personal knowledge of and experience with literate communities (communities other than the Women's Journal Group),

22

I immersed myself in study and research of as many literate communities as possible over a two year period. I joined a poetry seminar, enrolled in a counseling class that dealt with group process and dynamics, practiced gathering field data on a women's wellness group and a Congregational church body, and worked as a university researcher on the Manchester, New Hampshire Students as Evaluators Project. On the Students as Evaluators Project (Hansen, 1998), I collected data twice a week in the classroom of Family and Consumer Science teacher Nancy Kelso. Perhaps, it may seem that a high school home economics teacher and former middle school English teacher were an unlikely research pair, but I learned a great deal in Nancy's classroom and sharpened my research skills there. My intention was to hone my "emic perspective,"(the insider's perspective from which cultural descriptions and interpretations are constructed) by placing myself in settings that were culturally different than my own, and at times, very uncomfortable for me (Fetterman, 1989; Wolcott, 1994).

Thomas Newkirk (1992) recommended that teachers should regularly visit the classrooms of other teachers so that they can share failure stories and create more realistic models of success. One of the most important tenets I took away from the Students as Evaluators Project is that an occasional failure should not be equated with the ultimate success of a teacher research project, rather failure is merely the designated detour arrow on the researcher's road map. I also discerned from this experience that genuine collaboration and support among teachers, students, administrators, and university personnel is necessary for sustaining interest and maintaining progress in the teacher research study (Hubbard and Power, 1993; Donahue, 1996).

Nancy, my research partner on the Students as Evaluators Project,

23

wanted her students to play a larger role in the curriculum planning and the evaluation process, but was afraid of what would happen in her classroom as a result. Also, Nancy's colleagues chastised her for "making more work for herself," and not keeping her family and consumer science curriculum uniform with the other teachers in the district. They pressured her to return to the more "accepted" way of teaching home economics. Nancy and I persisted in our beliefs and maintained an united front throughout the Students as Evaluators Project, and I have contemplated the fact that a singular researcher might not have fared as well as we did. Teacher researchers need supportive individuals who are willing to assist them through the moments of uncertainty and disillusionment that seem to plague most researchers. Hubbard and Power (1993) have concluded that these individuals "may be as local as your own school or as far-flung as a few key teacher-researchers you find in journals and texts. But you do need someone, somewhere. . . . this mutual support among teacher-researchers is what keeps the movement growing" (p. 131).

Therefore, the research support networks that I belonged to during the two years prior to the multi-media research study period were vital to my success as a teacher researcher because they continued to provide reinforcements during the multi-media journal research study. However, I also needed to garner additional support from other sources in order to get the multi-media journal research project off the ground. The necessity of support for the teacher research study introduces the fifth common feature of teacher research: **Teacher researchers seek support for their research from a variety of sources.**

The first person I made genuine efforts to build rapport with and gain

24

support from *inside the school building* was my school principal. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of the school administrator's support. Although my school principal was unfamiliar with the process of teacher research (and me as well since I was a newly hired teacher), she bolstered my efforts after we discussed what I hoped to accomplish during the teacher research study. At our first meeting, I supplied her with a draft of my preliminary work on multi-media journals and a letter explaining the teacher research project that I intended to send home to parents. Also, I invited her to visit my classroom whenever she could and promised that I would provide two to three minute updates on classroom activities whenever I saw her. These efforts resulted in her support and validation of me in my unfamiliar role as a teacher researcher (which encouraged me to be a greater risktaker), but also, headed off what could have been some great misunderstandings between us.

For instance, early in the research study, I observed that the special education students in my inclusion classroom wrote very little in their multi-media journals. As part of their individual educational plans (IEP's), the school district gave them spellcheckers to improve their writing, but the students themselves had become so wary of spelling anything incorrectly that they would spend all of their in-class journal writing time checking words on the spellcheckers and composing virtually nothing. One morning, I placed all the spellcheckers on my desk and told the students they would be returned when they learned to "make meaning" in their multi-media journal entries. "Meaning-making time," I said, "is not a time to be worrying about your spelling." The students and I then talked at length about what should happen early in the drafting process and when spellcheckers would be appropriate to

25

use. However, a classroom aide who misconstrued my purpose reported me for teaching children to spell incorrectly, and later, I would be required to explain my action to the school principal and special education director. By the end of the second month of school, the classroom aide was replaced due to the uncomfortable relationship that erupted between us following this incident and others.

In teacher research studies I commit to in the future, I would make sincere and well-intentioned efforts to acknowledge the influence of individuals like support personnel on the classroom environment and the ensuing research study. Additionally, I would include these individuals in several preliminary and ongoing meetings in which I furnish clear guidelines about my reading and writing methodology, student expectations and interventions, and the teacher research process. Also, I would seek out like-minded colleagues for bouncing ideas off of, and possibly, undertaking joint ventures into teacher research. It was very difficult for me to build supportive networks at my research site because I was unknown to the school body and working in a six month temporary position. However, I hope that in future teacher research studies, I will be well-established in the school community and able to enlist the help of other colleagues interested in teacher research.

Since I didn't have a steady support network inside Spring Street Middle School (I relied mostly on my previous support networks from outside of the school), I returned regularly for quiet reading and reflection to the foundational work in reading and writing methodology that had impacted me greatly as a language arts instructor (Atwell, 1987; Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1986; Hansen, 1987; Murray, 1985). I also attended local and national

26

conferences as much as possible and scanned professional journals and books for other research reports like mine. These activities fueled my motivation for investigating multi-media journals further when I noticed an agreement among educators that writer's journals (also, referred to as notebook, logs, and daybooks) are useful tools for supporting the literacy practices of students (Calkins, 1994; Fulwiler, 1987; Murray, 1985; Fletcher, 1996; Atwell, 1987; Rief, 1992; Johnston, 1992; Barbieri, 1995) as well as a mounting interest in the multiple literacies (Gardner, 1993) such as the visual arts. While many educators have accepted traditional uses of writer's journals, researchers like myself are just beginning to probe into and understand the connections between various meaning making systems and the reading and writing process (Smagorinsky, 1995; Murray, 1997; Ernst, 1994; Hubbard and Ernst, 1996; Rief, 1998; Blecher & Jaffee, 1998).

Sixth Feature of Teacher Research: Students Act as Co-Researchers

Like me, other teacher researchers attempting teacher research for the first time may experience some hardship in locating support for their teacher research. "The isolation of the teacher-researcher arises from the isolation of the classroom teacher within the walls of her classroom" (Kutz, 1992, p.195). However, more and more teacher researchers are recognizing the active, even visionary, roles their students can play in the teacher research process (Hubbard, 1996; Kutz, 1992; Heath, 1983). This was especially true of my eighth grade students who acted not only as my informants, but also, as enthusiastic, supportive, and astute research partners. Inviting students to share in the research process is an aspect of the sixth common feature of teacher research: *Teacher researchers collaborate with their students on the*

27

research study, inviting them to co-research. Kutz (1992) suggested, "It is not enough for us, as teacher researchers, to do research about our students and their learning. We much do research with our students, working together to discover answers to the questions that arise in our classrooms" (p. 196). Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1997) theorized that the teacher researcher must collaborate with her students because "teachers and students, regardless of stance or pedagogy, inevitably negotiate what counts as knowledge in the classroom, who can have knowledge, and how knowledge can be generated, challenged, and evaluated" (p.6).

The classroom learning environment of my eighth grade language arts classroom, in particular, improved dramatically when I invited students to share in uncovering the ways multi-media journal contributed to their membership in our literate classroom community (see Chapters Three and Four). Throughout the school day, I kept my multi-media journal in conspicuous locations so I could refer to it and write in it often. My purpose was two-fold: to model my own literacy behavior and to show students that I valued their words and actions so much that I recorded them in my field notes. After about four weeks of building rapport and getting acquainted, students began to approach me with their multi-media journal entries and other writing before I asked, and they openly questioned or commented on my teaching and/or their learning. This continued throughout the six month research period.

I also encouraged the students to give feedback about the research study by exchanging weekly letters (see Appendix B) with them and providing them with class time to write back to me. (Some students also shared the letters with their parents who occasionally wrote me as well.) The goal of the

28

weekly letters was to offer my students not only a listening ear and a way to connect with their peers, but also, opportunities to support or contradict my research notions. Wolcott (1994) stressed how important it is for the researcher to begin writing while at the field site in order to start making sense of the data. However, stretched thin as I was, I needed to create a manageable system for sorting and analyzing the early data. Therefore, throughout the school week, I would read through the letters my students had written to me on which I had underlined significant passages and coded possible research categories in the margins. I also started to list in my multi-media journal the emerging patterns in the students' inquiries, attitudes, experiences, ideas, questions. On Sunday evenings, I read through the entries in my multi-media journal for the week prior and again reviewed my students' letters. Then I blended my questions, concerns, and insights with theirs and composed a one page letter (I could have written lots more but limited myself to one page so the letter was concise and not so wieldy) which I distributed on Mondays.

Although I focused primarily on three main pieces of data: students' multi-media journal entries, field notes of class discussions and activities, and final drafts of student writing in different genres gathered at regular intervals throughout the school year, the weekly written conversations with my students became another important source of data triangulation (see Chapter Two). Also, certain students, who were shy about approaching me in person, became especially adept at reflection on and observation of themselves and others; these students inadvertently became very reliable informants. With my students' help, I was able to construct from my main research question (In what ways do middle school writers use talk and

29

multi-media journals to forge a literate classroom community?) the following subquestions that would narrow and direct my data collection (see Chapters Five, Six, and Seven).

1. **In what ways does the student talk surrounding the multi-media journals influence their membership in the classroom literate community?**

2. **In what ways do students use visual arts in their multi-media journals to influence membership in the classroom literate community?**

3. **In what ways do the students' multi-media journals influence them as writers?**

Seventh Feature of Teacher Research: Intervention

Above all, I have learned over the past year that doing teacher research is an intensive pursuit that requires much time, commitment, and patience. It is not for the literacy instructor who wishes that she and her students remain static. Rather, it involves a "willingness to change" (Hubbard and Power, 1993, p.5) the teacher researcher's subject matter knowledge, pedagogy, and school relationships, something that can be quite scary, yet exhilarating, for the teacher researcher. Considering that a willingness to change is essential for the teacher researcher, it follows that teacher research is a "particular kind of intervention" in the literacy classroom (Johnston, 1992, p. 32). Based on what the teacher researcher and her students find out, the teacher researcher adjusts her teaching to include the necessary and appropriate interventions for her students' learning. Nancie Atwell (1987) has called this "theory in action," when the teacher researcher and students

30

"forge and inhabit a common ground where the logic of their learning and . . . teaching can finally become one" (p. 22).

Springing from the above suggestions is the last common feature of teacher research: *Teacher researchers reflect on and evaluate throughout the research study, adjusting the research course for the necessary, appropriate interventions.* Throughout the multi-media research study, I found it necessary to reflect on and evaluate my students' learning, and then make the appropriate changes and improvements. Therefore, the bulk of the text that follows in this dissertation is a retelling and recapturing of how my students and I came to understand how multi-media journals contribute to their membership in a literate classroom community and what interventions in our classroom were necessary in order to allow this to happen.

31

CHAPTER II

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Site

My multi-media research study took place at Spring Street Middle School in Jordan,[3] a suburban neighborhood in central New England. Like many of the smaller towns in New England in the late 1990's, the population in Jordan was starting to grow rapidly; young families with children looked to settle in communities that allowed quick access to larger cities and the major industrial and business areas nearby. Real estate in Jordan sold rapidly, and it was considered prime location. Jordan was reached easily by a number of state roads that converged inside the town and two interstate highways that ran along its borders. Except for a main strip of shopping plazas, grocery stores, restaurants, and a few small businesses, the residential part of Jordan had maintained the demeanor of a quaint New England town.

The population in Jordan was estimated at 6,600 residents in 1996. The median family income was around $50,000 and the average single family home cost about $150,000. About 20% of the population was college-educated and one third of the population worked in professional occupations. The median age of Jordan residents was 37 years old, and over 90% of all Jordan residents were of Caucasian race according to 1990 Census Bureau statistics. Very little rental property could be found in Jordan because this was a community that catered to people who could afford to be homeowners.

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[3] The names and places included here have been altered to protect the identity of the school and my eighth grade language arts students.

32

However, the homes in which my students lived varied greatly from small 1950's ranch houses to renovated farm houses to older Victorians to $300,000 colonials in the newer subdivisions.

Most of my eighth grade language arts students had attended the public schools in Jordan for all of their education since their families had moved there when they were small. A total of about 1,100 students were enrolled at the elementary school, middle school, and high school. However, about 10% of the students enrolled in Jordan schools lived in other towns, usually lower income communities, and had state vouchers to attend school in Jordan. In order to distribute resources more evenly across the state, a state voucher program had been in effect for several years, but there were some serious concerns over whether the program worked well. In many cases, students who used their state vouchers did so because they were seeking particular services such as special education. I often overhead the Spring Street Middle School parents, teachers, and administrators comment on "those out of district kids using Jordan's money for the services they need instead of using their own school district's monies." Although this was a relatively affluent school district compared to others nearby, the residents of Jordan were frugal with the town's tax money, especially when it came to "extras." There was no reading and writing specialist in the entire school district and for a short period, no school psychologist. For this reason, I often volunteered my time during and after school to do reading and writing assessments for struggling students and to help parents advocate for the resources they needed for their children.

Gaining Access

Gaining access to a research site proved to be more difficult than I

33

anticipated. I had recently relocated to a different region of New England to be at home with my new husband, and so the research site contacts I had made at the University of New Hampshire were of limited use to me. For six months, I searched the internet and newspapers, sent letters and resumes, and personally visited schools within a forty-five minute drive from my home. Finally, Spring Street Middle School contacted me about assuming a six month maternity leave position in eighth grade language arts. I was thrilled, but my concerns about accepting a new position after a four year break from teaching and becoming a teacher researcher all at the same time became more real. I felt this was not the optimal environment for my teacher research study because I would have liked to teach in a school for a few years and then begin a research study.

After securing permission to research from the Institutional Review Board at the University of New Hampshire [Case# 1885] and my school principal, I sent letters outlining the multi-media research project to all the parents of the students I taught (see Appendix C). I wrote that I would be documenting most events that occurred in the language arts classroom and saving the students' work for my doctoral research. I also discussed the research with my students, who along with their parents were given permission letters to sign, so that I could include their work and statements in this dissertation.

All ninety of my students and their parents agreed and gave permission to be part of this research project. The parents and eighth grade students at Spring Street Middle School were enthusiastic and supportive research partners. They blessed my life in ways that go beyond the reported research study. They opened their homes and hearts to me. They invited me

to participate in family outings and meals. They answered a multiplicity of questions about their experiences, beliefs, school, and community. For this, I am forever grateful.

Selection of Participants

I was the only eighth grade language arts teacher at Spring Street Middle School. Therefore, I taught all ninety eighth grade students spread over four different periods. Students at Spring Street Middle School were not "tracked" for language arts meaning there were no top-middle-bottom classes and learners of all types were mixed together. However, students were tracked for math, and special education students followed the same daily schedule. This in turn caused two of my language arts classes to have a greater number of higher achieving students.

I collected data on all ninety of my language arts students. I developed strong hunches about the direction the teacher research study was taking because I analyzed my data in an on-going manner. However, I made no determination concerning which students I would focus on in the writing of this dissertation until after the six month research period was completed. Then, I noticed two occurrences. One, certain students were adept at articulating in a general sense what was happening for the majority of the students in our language arts classroom (Graves, 1981). Two, individual students offered special looks at learning processes unique to themselves (Bissex, 1987; Graves, 1981). I conducted formal interviews outside of school over an additional six month period with these students. Much of what they said is reported in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven.

35

My Background and Beliefs

Objectivity is a tricky issue in teacher research (Bissex, 1987; Peshkin, 1984, 1988; Hubbard and Power, 1993). Teacher-researchers cannot remain detached observers especially since most teacher-researchers do research in order to enact changes upon their students' learning and the learning environment. Moreover, closeness with research subjects and the acknowledgement of a teacher researcher's own literacy history are usually desired features of a teacher research study (Allen, 1995; see Chapter One). Therefore, it is especially important to recognize and articulate influences on the ensuing research study such as the researcher's background, beliefs, and value judgments (Fetterman, 1989).

One of the greatest sources of influence on the multi-media research study was my previous years of experience as a middle school language arts teacher. During that time, I had adopted a workshop approach to the teaching of reading and writing (Graves 1983, 1995; Calkins, 1986; Atwell, 1987; Hansen, 1987; Rief, 1992; Murray, 1985) that specifically included journal writing. I found that using the workshop approach in my language arts classroom increased my middle school students' enjoyment of reading and writing and facilitated their literacy growth. Although in many ways I was a "teacher of inquiry," (Lytle and Cochran-Smith, 1990), I had not participated in the formalized, organized study of my beliefs and practices that teacher-research requires. The success I felt that my middle school students experienced in my workshop approach classroom caused me to investigate further the current professional literature on reading and writing methodologies. Eventually, my interest would lead me to individuals and graduate study at the University of New Hampshire.

36

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While at the University of New Hampshire, I founded the Women's Journal Group to study journal writing and the concept of "living literacy." The members of the Women's Journal Group discovered that the multi-media approach to journal writing eased their writing apprehensions and transformed them as literate individuals. Also, the Women's Journal Group reaffirmed something I had already suspected in my own middle school classroom, and that was the importance of establishing a classroom environment that was a literate community. I believed the culture and climate of schools could be improved dramatically if teachers were aware of the need to provide specific conditions for literate classroom communities (see Chapter Four). I believed that middle school students, like the members of the Women's Journal Group, needed literate communities to support their literacy growth.

During this time, I also was involved in other qualitative research projects such as the Manchester Students as Evaluators research study. On the Students as Evaluator research study, I learned about the importance of students creating their own goals and plans for learning and using multiple forms of expression to self-evaluate (Hansen, 1998). I also honed my qualitative research skills while working on various research projects connected to my graduate study at the University of New Hampshire. I closely identified and aligned myself with the traditions of the educational ethnographers and teacher-researchers who had come before me. (See Chapter One for a discussion of where my own teacher-research fits in with the current body of published teacher-research.)

In consideration of my own doctoral research, qualitative research seemed like the best method because it would yield the kind of "thick

37

description" (Geertz, 1973) that I desired to know in connection with my middle school students and their multi-media journals. Additionally, I saw and continue to see my professional role in the reading and writing field as a scholar who blurs the distinction between theory and practice for teachers at both the secondary school and university levels.

Research Study Questions

The research questions that directed the multi-media research study were as follows:

In what ways do middle school writers use talk and multi-media journals to forge a literate classroom community?

1. In what ways does the student talk surrounding the multi-media journals influence their membership in the literate classroom community?

2. In what ways do students use visual arts to influence their membership in the literate classroom community?

3. In what ways do the students' multi-media journals influence them as writers?

Chapter One contains additional information about how these questions were developed and how they evolved during the course of the research study.

Data Collection

For the data collection in the multi-media research study, I used qualitative research methods, including notetaking, participant observation, formal and informal interviews, and document collection (Spradley, 1979; Agar, 1980; Wolcott, 1994; Hubbard and Power, 1993, Peshkin, 1984; Fetterman,

38

1989; Eisner, 1991).

My multi-media journal was a primary source of data collection. While acting as a participant observer, I observed my language arts students in our classroom as well as participated in activities with them to varying degrees. In my multi-media journal, I wrote fieldnotes about classroom events, student talk, meetings with teachers, administrators, and parents, community interactions, and personal insights. I chose to record my fieldnotes in my multi-media journal because I needed a research tool that would not be intrusive during the course of the normal school day and one that was handy and nearby at all times. I also wanted my middle school students to see me as someone who was exploring and reflecting regularly on her own literacy learning and growth. Having my fieldnotes as part of my multi-media journal allowed me to model the importance of this premise for my language arts students. (See Chapter One for more information on my multi-media journal.)

In order to secure data triangulation and support the emerging patterns in my fieldnotes (Fetterman, 1989; Eisner, 1991), I collected and copied important and pertinent student documents, such as the pages from my students' multi-media journals entries, portfolios entries, writing samples of final drafts developed from their multi-media journals, and other classroom work. Occasionally, I distributed surveys that asked students to reflect on their literacy histories, their feeling and beliefs, and/or to evaluate their progress. This resulted in a large volume of data for each of my students which I regularly put in files labeled with their names in plastic crates.

On several occasions, I approached students and asked them to explain particular "key events" (Fetterman, 1989) to me. This would be considered an

"informal interview." Such conversations usually happened spontaneously when I needed clarification of particular events or situations. Sometimes I would even ask students to write down what happened in their multi-media journals after we discussed it. For instance, I might have noticed that Beth, Karen, and Susan had talked to each about their multi-media journals during a small group share and that seemed to influence them to act in a particular way. However, since I was not directly involved in their conversation, I could not report it first-hand. I then would enlist those students to aid me in the research process, writing in their own words what had happened among them.

After the six month research period was over, I also conducted prearranged "formal interviews" with key informants which were audiotaped and transcribed for further data analysis. Most formal interviews took about one to two hours and were done in the students' homes. For formal interviews, I used a series of questions that I mailed to students ahead of time (see Appendix D) as well as any other questions that arose from what the students said during the course of the interview.

Another way in which my students acted as my co-researchers was through our weekly letters. A wealth of data came from my students' weekly letters. In the weekly letters, students wrote some of their most private thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about language arts class, school, and their lives. Chapter One and the next section, "Data Analysis," provides additional information about the weekly letters.

Data Analysis

I analyzed my data in an ongoing, cyclical manner. I followed the

40

process that Wolcott (1994) recommends of "description," "analysis," and "interpretation." Every Sunday I would review my multi-media journal entries and my students' weekly letters. As I read through this material, I underlined what seemed to be emerging as important and coded it in the margins of my multi-media journal and my students' weekly letters. I coded with simple words like "community," "talk," "environment," "friends," or "evaluation." Then I would review everything I coded in order to locate the kernel themes and to begin composing a one-page letter to my students that was distributed on Mondays (see Appendix B). Since my students told me that they wanted to know what was happening in the other language arts classes, all classes received the same letter.

The weekly one-page letters summarized the emerging patterns I noticed and asked students to respond to the themes and the questions I had. Many weekly letters were dedicated specifically to what students said and did during the previous week; students said that reading about themselves and their friends in other classes was one of their "favorite language arts routines." The weekly letters dymystified the process of teacher-research for my students and invited them to co-research with me. Students were quite willing to counter my research assumptions and offer honest feedback. Students revealed in the weekly letter their deepest thoughts and feelings concerning all areas of their lives. While I do not focus on this aspect of the weekly letters, it is important to recognize that these letters substantiated students' wish for a supportive learning environment.

Every Monday, students wrote back to me, and then the process of description, analysis, and interpretation began again. The weekly letters drove the data collection and analysis process and kept me focused during the

41

school week. Based on the weekly letters from the previous weeks, I had a better idea of what to look for while I was in the classroom. Sometimes the weekly letters caused me to ask different questions, to collect additional data, or to follow-up with particular students. Through the weekly letters, my students showed me how vital community, talk, and art were to the multi-media journal writing. Based on my students' insights in the weekly letters, I revised my original research question and added the subquestions about talk, art, and writing. I then used these questions to direct me toward my research study findings. The weekly letters also led me to my key informants.

The next stage of data analysis involved the conducting and transcribing of formal interviews and the writing of this dissertation. After the six month research period was over, I again reviewed, organized, and coded my data to find the major themes that had emerged and could be interpreted within the theoretical context of current reading and writing methodology. I tabbed significant places in my multi-media journal and student files related to talk, art, and writing so that I could flip to and locate those places easily. I also created a data base of computer files to compile, sort, and compare the supporting and corroborating research data. According to Eisner (1991), this is an example of "structural corroboration," his term for data triangulation. "In seeking structural corroboration, we look for recurrent behaviors or actions, those theme-like features of a situation that inspire confidence that the events interpreted and appraised are not aberrant or exceptional, but rather characteristic of a situation" (Eisner, 1991, p. 110).

Next I began the initial writing of this dissertation. The initial writing of the dissertation pointed me to where I needed additional information. This is where the formal interviews with my eighth grade language arts

42

students added much to my understandings. I purposely waited until the six month period was over to move into this stage of the dissertation for two reasons; one, because of time constraints when I was a full-time teacher, and two, because I felt my eighth grade language arts students would be in better positions to evaluate their overall literacy experiences once they were no longer my students. As I continued to write and revise my dissertation, my findings became more clear. In my case, it was true that I wrote to discover what I knew (Murray, 1985; Elbow, 1981; Fletcher, 1993).

Findings

Overall Finding: Classroom talk and multi-media journals helped students to forge a literate classroom community where they were involved in purposeful, authentic, and transformative literacy work.

1. Classroom talk was important for engaging students' in a meaningful way with their multi-media journals. For one, classroom talk surrounding the multi-media journals improved students' relationships in the literate classroom community. Classroom talk also readied students for and sustained writing practice in their multi-media journals. Explicit instruction in the social aspects of talk emerged as being as important as explicit instruction in language arts content.

2. Students discovered that the freedom to use the visual arts in their multi-media journals increased their enjoyment of writing. The visual arts also helped students to begin and stay engaged with writing in their multi-media journals. Alternative forms of expression, such as the visual arts, invited more students to participate in the conversations and activities of our literate classroom community and led to greater acceptance, inclusion, and

43

collaboration among students.

3. Some middle school language arts students who wrote in multi-media journals perceived themselves as writers and expanded their perceptions of who they were as literate individuals. This transformation occurred once students understood that their writing can affect others inside and outside our literate classroom community.

I will elaborate on each one of these findings in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven. However, I will first establish the context of the multi-media research study (Fetterman, 1989) by describing the overall school environment at Spring Street Middle School in Chapter Three and the establishment of the environment of my eighth grade language arts classroom in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER III

THE ENVIRONMENT OF SPRING STREET MIDDLE SCHOOL

In Chapter Three, I invite the reader to meet the students, faculty, and parents of Spring Street Middle School as I did during the first two weeks of the research study. This chapter contains descriptions of the Spring Street Middle School environment and an ensuing discussion of "what's going on here" (Wolcott, 1994). It is relevant to provide some discussion of the overall school community to which my students belonged before revealing my research findings. Issues involved with membership and power in the overall school community did cross the threshold of my language arts classroom. Therefore, it was essential for me to acknowledge what already constituted membership and power in the overall school community and relate their influences to my middle school students' behaviors. By doing this, I could begin to understand how I might use talk and multi-media journals to affect changes upon my students' literate classroom community, and put in place the necessary conditions for creating a literate classroom community.

Much of my time in the first few weeks of the multi-media research study was spent acquainting myself with my students, acclimating to the school community, and recording in my multi-media journal what I saw, heard, and felt during my early interactions at Spring Street Middle School (Fetterman, 1989; Wolcott, 1994; Eisner, 1991; Agar, 1980). Although it seemed as if in the beginning, I was being bombarded by the sensory details of the field site, the subjective nature of immersing myself completely in the school

45

community assisted me later in drawing out the meaning of seemingly ordinary school day events (Peshkin, 1984). Additionally, I can trace in my fieldnotes how my feelings and observations (which varied greatly throughout the research study) influenced crucial decisions I made at the beginning and during the course of the research study in relation to the classroom set-up and routines, the structure of the students' learning activities, and choice of curriculum materials (see Chapter Four).

The Day Before

Throughout the day before school started, several teachers walked to the end of the hall where my classroom was and looked in. Some greeted me and introduced themselves; others just peeked in the small rectangular window of the door and said nothing. The bolder ones asked: "What's the rug for? What's the bookcase and wicker basket for? Do you let the students sit in this rocking chair?" "You don't read aloud to middle school students, do you?" "You brought your own books to school for the students to read?" Others commented: "I've never seen a classroom set up like this before." "The principal will like how you put your desks in groups, but I think it encourages too much talking." "I heard that educational theory says that students learn better in rows." I felt like I lived in a fish bowl. My one reprieve was when the English Department chairperson dropped off a copy of the state curriculum frameworks and invited me to the book storage room to take whatever I needed. When I arrived at the book storage room, the other English teachers from my department were arguing over the literature anthologies and grammar books. Some were incensed because they didn't have enough to issue all their students textbooks on the first day of school. I

46

told the other middle school English teachers they could have my allotment because I preferred not to use them, but there still weren't enough. The English department chairperson and another English teacher engaged in a heated debated after she told him that more English department budget money should be allocated to textbooks because the first year English teachers needed them to teach. Meanwhile, no one had touched large cardboard boxes of trade books in the corners of the room. They were dusty, but a gold mine, multiple copies of assorted young adult literature. "May I have these?" I asked. Since no one else wanted the trade books, the English department chairperson delivered them to my classroom later in the day.

The First Day

When my students entered the classroom for the first time, a few looked at the share center, a carpeted area in the classroom where we write in and share our multi-media journals, and said in loud, sarcastic voices, "Oh, story time, she's going to make us have story time like we are in kindergarten." Right from the start, they wanted me to know that they believed they were too old for the writing and sharing of stories. However, their negativity was not only limited to me. As I stood out in the corridor in between the changing of classes, I often observed students pushing each other into lockers and yelling inappropriate comments at each other. Already, I had to intervene in a few of their conflicts. The students seemed to find it difficult to interact and respond to each other in positive, respectful ways. I realized that I must establish the tone of my classroom environment quickly over the next few days of school, otherwise the opportunity to become a cohesive, caring unit would be lost.

47

The students questioned me after they read the copies of my first letter to them. They asked: "Why did you write us a letter? What form should my answer be in? How long does it have to be?" I responded: "It's a letter, write a letter back. We are going to write together for about 15-20 minutes. Write about a page." More students protested: "I can't write a page in 15 minutes. Do I have to do this? Even if I do it, you won't read all these letters." I answered: "You can't write a page about yourself in 15 minutes? Why not? Of course, I'm going to read them. Your letters are important to me." We went back and forth like this, a taffy pull of wills, during all four of the class periods I taught. I even felt a little angered by their lack of initiative and independence, shocked by how little they trusted themselves and their abilities.

In period one, Robert started to copy over what he wrote in his letter, saying it was "messy" when I asked him about it. He had written for about three minutes so I told him I would rather he wrote more about himself than worry about messiness. So then he just put his paper away and said he didn't have much to tell me.

The Second Day

I assigned partners for a class interviewing activity that students were to complete in their multi-media journals. I asked students to interview their partners and write an introduction for the person that could be shared with classmates. I wanted to help students to know each other better. I used the analogy of the dark side of the moon to explain what I hoped for the students to accomplish. I explained, "In the phases of the moon, certain parts of the moon disappear; those parts are dark and hidden from sight. That

48

doesn't mean the moon is no longer whole during its phases—we on earth just can't see the full moon during certain times of the month. I believe people are like the moon. There are important things about every person that are hidden from the surface view. Everyone has a surface side, a side that sunlight shines on, a side that all can see such as age, hair and eye color, gender, and height. But everyone has a dark side as well. Your goal during the interview activity is to ask dark and light side questions, so your classmates learn not just what is on the surface, but what is underneath as well."

Next, we brainstormed lists of interview questions together. Then I asked the students to line up by birthdays. I folded the line and assigned partners. Most students jumped right in and carried on animated conversations with their partner during the class interviewing time. However, I noticed others who barely maintained eye contact with their peer partners and sat passively and silently for the majority of the class interviewing time. Shortly after we started the interviewing activity in fourth period, Leo asked if he could talk to me privately so we went over to a quiet corner of room.

He said, "I know you are new here and everything, so you probably don't know that you assigned us to work with people who aren't our friends."

I responded, "Yes, it's true that I am new here, but that is exactly the purpose of this assignment." His eyes reflected back to me the greatest disbelief. Finally, he shrugged his shoulders and returned to his partner.

During first period, I asked students to give response to Susan after she shared from her multi-media journal. A few volunteered, "It was good." I said, "Tell her specifically what was good about it." It seemed like forever

49

before one student said, "You chose a good form for your words. I liked what you wrote."

My eighth period class was the class period that acted most resistant to talking with each other, listening to stories read aloud, and writing in their multi-media journals; the whole class reeked: "I hate school. I hate being here. I hate EVERYTHING you are going to ask me to do." One angry student shot me daggers with his eyes during the entire class period, and it was very difficult to stay even-tempered in this large class of 27 students.

The Third Day

During the fourth period I asked one student who was sitting on the periphery of the group to join us in the share center where we were writing in our multi-media journals. He said, "Oh, damn it." Then he made an excuse about his doctor not allowing him to sit on the floor of the share center. I said, "Oh, a serious medical condition I need to speak to your mother about?" He said, "Yeah," and smiled defiantly. He joined us, but not before a big huff of sighs and the deliberate dropping of his backpack contents onto the floor near his desk. With all students, I had been tenacious about adhering to our share center routines such as everyone sitting together on the floor, and I had been strict about no talking/socializing during our writing time. I paused in my own journal writing a few times to give teacher looks for talking. I wanted them to see that I believed that writing in my multi-media journal is so important that it shouldn't be disturbed for any reason. One student who caught my teacher look today teased, "It's the share center, we're sharing." Eventually, I would allow quiet talk while they wrote, but at this point, they used talking as a way to avoid writing. Some closed their

50

multi-media journals after they had barely written a sentence, and then distracted others in the share center. James wrote just a few lines. Then he looked at me and asked, "Now what?"

The Fourth Day

I told my second period class that we were going to write in our multi-media journal for a longer period of time today, about 20 - 30 minutes. The room had just quieted when Joan slammed her journal shut and let out a shrill, tearful wail, "I can't do this. I can't write." Her outburst surprised me, and I could see that my students were watching carefully for my reaction. I picked up my multi-media journal and walked over to her. I leaned down next to her and touched her arm. I said in a firm, reassuring tone, "You can do this. Write what is important to you. Write what you are feeling right now. Write whatever you want. For some of us, writing never comes easy. That's why you can use the art kits or try some freewriting or do a little bit of both." During this incident, the classroom was as solemn and subdued as a church confessional box. I think the majority of students felt frustrated like Joan, and everyone, myself included, held his or her breath until Joan opened her journal and tried to write.

The Fifth Day

Why couldn't I remember how much time it used to take me to get things to run smoothly? I knew it would take at least six weeks—in the past, it has taken almost to January with some classes. The students in fourth period told me that they liked the share center but they were worried that they wouldn't be allowed to continue their sharing when I left in February. One

51

student suggested, "Even if we keep the share center, it will be three minutes here and the rest of the time doing grammar exercises." I told them, "No, it won't be the same but I hope by February, the class will run itself." I had to impress upon them the possibility that they could oversee the classroom routines and structures—without me.

The Sixth Day

Eddie wrote this story in his multi-media journal and shared it with his classmates:

One Friday morning all the teachers overslept. They got in about 10:00 but something didn't seem right. They went to their classrooms and taught their classes. It was time for lunch. After a fine meal, they went back and taught the rest of their classes. Today was Friday so there was a teacher's meeting. The teachers went in and talked and talked. All was over so they decided to correct papers. All of them at the same time realized something, and it was that there was no papers to correct and grade. "But that is how it is," they said. But then they realized there was no students the whole day. The teachers were so oblivious and clueless that while they taught they didn't notice the children weren't there. But that wasn't the end of their stupidity. One of the teachers ran in with a newspaper and yelled, "It's Saturday." After about ten minutes of comprehending the events that took place, the teachers went home.

When Eddie finished reading, many of his adolescent peers said his story resonated with them. I wasn't surprised since this wasn't the first time I had encountered "school stories" such as Eddie's in my students' writing. Often these stories described how disconnected and detached these students

52

felt concerning their school learning. Even more frequently, the stories revealed how the students did not view themselves as readers and writers, let alone, growing literate individuals.

The Seventh Day

I had been thinking a lot about Mandy after the meeting with her parents today, especially how resistant and oppositional she was to learning. She and Vanessa became upset when it was their turn to share from their multi-media journals this week. Mandy's father said if she had a choice, she would always choose not to share. He said, "She thinks it's us against her." Well maybe it was—or it seemed to her to be that way a lot of the time. Why didn't Mandy have anything she was proud enough to share, so proud that she wouldn't mind sharing it?

My conversation with Mandy's parents reminded me of the new teacher workshop I attended the day before school started. The veteran teacher who conducted the workshop said that "teachers should not think of their students as equals" and that the "high school teachers are tired of fixing what the middle school teachers broke." Perhaps, an "us versus them" mentality was part of the consciousness of the students and teachers at Spring Street Middle school, and if so, I was growing unsure where my place in this school is. I did not take my standing as teacher for granted, and did not feel that because I had more age, education, experience, or authority in the school community, I was a greater being. I was humbled by the contributions my students make to my life throughout a school year and grateful for the learning challenges we face together.

53

The Eighth Day

I read *Warriors Don't Cry* to my students this morning. Then we created entries for our multi-media journals and shared them. I wanted to illustrate a couple of different things for them. For example, how the events from your life, events that seem ordinary, can result in something monumental. And how history affects the future. They were reading about the Civil War in social studies class right now. The events in Warriors *Don't Cry* happened 100 years after the Civil War, but the decisions we make as a culture—our attitudes, beliefs, values—are passed from generation to generation. My turn for sharing came up today so I read from my multi-media journal a story from my first year of teaching. We talked about how someone doesn't have to be a minority to be treated differently, and also what could make someone a racist. My students had a lot of questions about this book. I wondered how many would ask to read it or buy their own copy.

In order to keep my curriculum aligned with my students' social studies class, I generated (with help from the school librarian and social studies teacher) a list of young adult books, mostly historical fiction, that dealt with the Civil War. I told my students that they were required to choose at least one book off the list to read during the first grading term. However, one of the teachers on my teaching team was upset that I wasn't requiring all the eighth grade students to read the same book about the Civil War (as was the practice of the language arts teacher in the past), and told me so during our team meeting. I told him that my intention was to not only give the students a choice of reading materials so they could bring different perspectives on the Civil War back to language arts and social studies class, but also to provide options for those students of varying reading abilities. I have to say honestly

54

that I acted defensive when he responded that there are certain books students should read because if they don't, they won't become educated. I said, "There's no magic book list out there that makes people into literate, educated individuals. Do you know how many students told me on the first day of school that they hated certain books? And when I asked them why they hated those books, they said, 'Because my teacher made me read it.' Do you want to be the teacher who is remembered for making a child hate a book? I don't."

The Ninth Day

I'm glad we use a rotating class schedule at Spring Street Middle School because my students acted differently at different times of the day. I wished I knew what to do with the "spotlight kids," my nickname for the students who wanted to be singled out for negative attention rather than positive. I've observed in past years that once a teacher allows them to step in the spotlight, they will usually continue the negative attention for the rest of the year. Two of my spotlight kids, Christopher and David, still wouldn't write in their multi-media journals. I saw two others trying to poke each other with their pencils. I had felt upset with Scott and Philip all week because they didn't want to participate in the share center time. Mandy was reading a note from a friend when we started working with our multi-media journals but put it away after a few minutes so I didn't say anything. Then she wanted to go to the bathroom, but I told her no. At times it seemed so much harder to teach this way.

55

The Tenth Day

I think things might turn around soon. Today Nick brought candy to share with everyone while we wrote in our multi-media journals in the share center. The candy thing started yesterday when I had a mint in my mouth after lunch. They noticed and taunted me, "Are you chewing gum, Mrs. Pantano?" (It was a school rule that we are not supposed to chew gum and I was to discipline them for it almost everyday.) "No, I'm not chewing gum," I said, and then I stuck my tongue out at them so they could see that it was a mint candy. Then one of my students said in an exaggerated voice, "Well, you're not supposed to have that unless you share with everyone. When we share, we share with everyone." The whole class burst into laughter because that's something I said all the time: "When we share, we share with everyone."

However, I knew the message was really sinking in when Nick pulled out a bag of candy this morning and said,

"When we share, we share with everyone. So is it okay if I hand this out to everyone before we start writing?"

His generosity surprised everyone, including me, and my students seemed to be nervous about my reaction.

"Sure, Nick," I said, and I started to write in my multi-media journal as if nothing unusual was happening.

Then Carl piped in, "Nick is the only person I know who would clean out his own savings to buy candy for us." Other students agreed and began saying, "Yeah, that's true, thanks Nick, thanks for the candy." So we ate candy at 7:30 in the morning, and I was sure the rest of the team teachers would thank me at our team meeting today for supplying these students with sugar

56

highs. More importantly, they seemed appreciative of being together in the share center this morning and treated each other kindly as we shared our multi-media journals. I wouldn't have believed that after two weeks they could understood the inherent value of sharing with everyone, but I believe they did.

The Eleventh Day

Dear Students,
Thank you for all the contributions you have made so far to our classroom learning environment. What I hope most to impress upon you is the importance of daily reading and writing practice within a caring, supportive community setting. This is, and always will be, the center of our English classroom. I realized that some of you were surprised by my approach to reading and writing. You might have noticed that I always write (or read) with you in the share center. That is because I believe adults should model good literacy practices for kids by DOING, not just by talking and/or believing! One idea from last week that I would like to recall is this: Your literacy is a special gift and privilege that is not available to all people in this world, so it must be used in positive ways, to help yourself and others. . . . Remember, We Read, We Write, We Share, To Know We Are Not ALONE.

The responses I received from my students after this weekly letter pleased me greatly. Vanessa said that even though she found our language arts classroom to be strange in the beginning, she liked how I "taught more like a mom than a teacher." David commented in his letter that my teaching philosophy was "based on not leaving people alone," and he looked forward to language arts because it was unlike the rest of his school day.

What is Happening in This School Environment?

In many ways, the events from my first two weeks at Spring Street Middle School are hardly extraordinary; in fact, they were rather typical of my

57

past experiences as a middle school language arts teacher in the first month of school. What made these experiences distinct for me this time was my willingness to look upon them from a different, new perspective, from the view of the teacher researcher. I had assumed that it would be relatively easy to transform a middle school language arts classroom into the open, sharing literate community that my Women's Journal Group was. I had assumed that the words "school" and "literate community" were practically synonymous. I had assumed that most of my middle school students would be committed to realizing their own literacy growth. However, not only were my assumptions slanted, but there were some serious truths lurking behind my imprecise assumptions that would have implications for the multi-media research study.

The idea of school as a community where people are "working along common lines, in common spirit, and with reference to common aims" (Dewey, 1915, p. 14) can be attributed to early progressive educators such as John Dewey, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, and Sylvia Ashton Warner. John Dewey (1915) believed that everyone should have access to an education "which enables him to see within his daily work all there is in it of large and human significance" (p. 24). Most educators would agree that schools should function as supportive, cohesive, and meaningful units since children spend a large portion of their time in schools and "schools remain one of the few sites in our society where children are able to experience an ongoing social relationship with a group of people that extends beyond their immediate family and friends" (Smith, 1993, p. 7). Yet the norms established in most school communities are the "antithesis of those associated with community membership" (Smith, 1993, p. 8). Raywid (1993) posited,

58

"Words such as ownership. . . commitment, caring, respect, trust, and family have all been linked with the idea of community, as have culture, climate, and ethos. . . . but unlike culture and climate. . . community is not evident in all schools" (p. 24).

Others theorists (Tyack and Cuban, 1995; Shannon, 1990; Freire, 1970; Sizer, 1984; Graff, 1987; Cremin, 1961; Callahan, 1962) have noted how modern day schools have moved toward a conservative policy of scientific management where bureaucracy, standardization, and tight structure leave little room for individual differences. In such schools, children often receive discriminatory treatment when their ways of knowing, learning, and expressing do not align with the mainstream literacy practices taught and valued there (Gardner, 1993; Delpit, 1995; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Their teachers are expected to teach from an established "canon" and compromise their ideals in order to maintain the status quo. The literacy instructors who choose not to conform to the ways of scientific management walk along bumpy roads. Their optimistic concern for their students' well-being is swallowed whole by school systems fearful that there is an educational crisis lurking nearby, and they are in the business of producing a nation of culturally illiterate individuals (Hirsch, 1987; National Council on Excellence in Education, 1994).

This kind of thinking is part of a dangerous and hurtful school paradigm (Wolk, 1998). According to social linguist James Paul Gee (1996), teachers and students should view literacy not as "some decontextualized ability to write and read, but the social practices into which people are apprenticed as part of a social group" (p.57). However, Smith (1993) suggested that the patterns of interactions between children and adults in schools are

59

rarely contextualized and anything but social. He wrote,

> Instead of the diffuse and caring relationships they [students] would
> be expected to encounter. . . . they are drawn into relationships
> characterized by emotional flatness, continuous evaluation, and
> transiency (p. 9). Children are essentially taught that they occupy a
> subservient position to their teachers and that their primary
> responsibility lies in their acquiescence of the school's behavioral
> norms and standards of achievement (p. 10).

With the above theory and the previously described school climate in mind, it is understandable why my initial meetings with my eighth grade language arts students at Spring Street Middle School would be characterized by resistance, distrust, reticence, and apathy. Many students doubted that I would read and give thoughtful reflection to their weekly letters, and even if I did act in a manner consistent with my teaching and learning beliefs, other teachers wouldn't. Students were so used to their academic curriculums being skill-based and teacher-driven that they wouldn't consider any other possibility. After the research period was over, they said, "It will be three minutes here and the rest of the time doing grammar exercises."

A majority of my students seemed content to be "passive receptacles" (Shannon, 1990, p. 9) in "less-than-zero" power positions (Shor, 1992, 1996), and so, they turned to me for all of their motivation and direction. On the other hand, the students who craved activity (and the "spotlight") sometimes acted out in negative rather than positive ways. Students seemed trained not to question cognitively and critically, but to automatically conform to whatever the teacher said or to automatically reject it. A few students like Joan, uncertain of their own innate abilities, seemed to feel frustrated by the unconventional learning environment, the freedom of choice, and the routines of our language arts classroom. Others students like Eddie perceived

60

that teachers were "so oblivious and clueless"—and so busy teaching their curriculums—that they didn't notice when the children weren't there, literally and figuratively. Consequently, what Eddie and his peers learned from these preoccupied teachers seemed foreign, unimportant, and disconnected from their real life experiences. Mandy, her father, and the veteran teacher conducting the new teacher workshop all alluded to the imbalance of power in the school community, or an "us versus them" mentality. Numerous students said they felt alone and neglected throughout a school day, and their relationships with their teachers and peers were distant, rather than close.

For the literacy instructor to achieve in her classroom the right equilibrium among these clashing forces is a delicate challenge to say the very least. Timothy Lensmire (1994) has purported that reading and writing workshop advocates such as Donald Graves, Nancie Atwell, and Lucy Calkins, have told only the positive stories about the student interactions in their workshop settings. Given that the overall atmosphere of schools typically does not support the tenets of reading and writing workshop, Lensmire believed these researchers must have experienced more difficulties and failures than mentioned. This is due to the fact that Lensmire found the peer social interactions in his workshop setting to be quite disturbing. "Children evaluated and excluded each other—by gender, by social class, by personality—in ways that echoed some of the worst sorts of divisions and denigrations in our society" (p.141). However, I would argue based on my understanding of the research base that perhaps the workshop founders conducted their research in healthier school environments than Lensmire and I had worked. It is crucial to approach the teaching of writing with more than one or two classroom models in mind and to "reinvent the workshop as

61

we go" (Calkins, 1994, p. 162). The classroom is merely a microcosm reflecting the larger school environment, and the recreation of a new environment takes time and cannot occur overnight. According to Donald Graves (1991), children will bring negative experiences from their personal literacy histories into the language arts classroom. Another responsibility of the literacy instructor is to welcome and accommodate all experiences, good or bad, and use them as a springboard to move the children forward in their learning.

Therefore, a literacy instructor must remember that the establishment of a literate classroom community in which children feel a sense of security, belonging, worthiness, respect, and empowerment is linked to the overall school culture and climate. But even in the most unfavorable circumstances, **the teacher does make a difference and is the "key to true school reform"** (Wolk, 1998, p. 6). In my case, I was committed to establishing a literate classroom community that was the bedrock of all language and literacy activity in my classroom (see Chapter Four). In order to do this, I first addressed and acknowledged the wider influences of the outside world that were coming inside my classroom. Next, I used my knowledge of the outside influences to help my students improve their social relations within the classroom and to invoke the positive, supportive atmosphere I wanted students to be surrounded with as they worked. My emphasis on a student-centered classroom allowed for the power and responsibilities among the class members and the teacher to be more evenly distributed. Lastly, I was patient as the establishment of our literate classroom community took much time and effort.

However, my goal in this research study was not only to forge a literate classroom community but also **a community of writers**. The inclusion of

other meaning-making systems while writing ("multi-media journals")
provided options for students beyond the mainstream print literacy found in
most middle school language arts classrooms. Consequently, more students
were able to engage with the writing practice in their multi-media journals.
More students became "members" of our literate classroom community
because their learning was "culturally relevant" (Ladson-Billings,1994) to
their lives outside of school. Another key aspect of our literate classroom
community was for the community members to support the literacy
experimentation of the other members. This function of a literate classroom
community was especially pivotal for my middle school students whenever
they felt uneasy and/or struggled with their writing. Furthermore, students
who were members of our literate classroom community were more likely to
endorse the collective notion of becoming literate individuals who by their
own agency assisted others and made real changes in their world. The next
chapter, Chapter Four, will discuss in more detail my middle school
classroom and the necessary conditions for a literate classroom community.

CHAPTER IV

THE ENVIRONMENT OF OUR LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM

In an ideal learning situation, a positive classroom climate would be easy to launch because the classroom climate would reflect the deep commitment of the overall school community to further students' cognitive, affective, and social growth. On the other hand, when a teacher is confronted with opposing forces in the school community that are detrimental to her students' learning, she must work earnestly at building the literate classroom community and dedicate substantial instructional time to the accomplishment of such a feat. I perceived the content area knowledge of my eighth grade language arts classroom spread over a long, heavy oak table supported by many legs. If any of the legs were removed, the table would wobble, perhaps even, collapse. These legs were the pedagogical and community-building principles that guided my teaching of reading and writing in my eighth grade language arts classroom. Most of us are able to recall brilliant instructors whose heads were full of knowledge that could not be shared with their students because they lacked communication and relationship skills. Ultimately, little can be learned in a content area where sound pedagogical and community-building principles are absent.

This chapter discusses the classroom layout, organization, and routines of my eighth grade language arts classroom and the conditions I believed were necessary for a literate classroom community. In order to construct a literate classroom community, I carefully planned the classroom layout, organization, and routines surrounding the multi-media journals so that my

64

eighth grade students would know what was expected of them and would eventually assume responsibility for those expectations (Graves 1991, 1994; Atwell, 1987; Rief, 1992; Kaufman, 1998). I also spoke to my students using a particular language and engaged them in specific behaviors in order to build and maintain our literate classroom community (Kaufman, 1998). By doing so, I hoped to make explicit for my students what in time would become natural and implicit for them. Furthermore, I desired a flexible physical classroom space where adolescents worked comfortably for extended periods practicing and experimenting with their literacy habits and skills (Peterson, 1992). At the same time, I needed to fit my language arts curriculum and pedagogy into the already established and existing Spring Street Middle School organization and design (Wolk, 1998). As a teacher researcher, it was also important to determine "what's going on here" (Wolcott, 1994) in this classroom setting. I believed that by attending to all of these factors, the necessary conditions for a literate classroom community would fall into place and then the multi-media journal would evolve as a tool for strengthening adolescents' enjoyment and understanding of the writing process and secure their membership in a literate classroom community. In this chapter, I will show and discuss the conditions that enabled my language arts classes to become literate classroom communities.

Shared Identity and Purpose

When constructing our literate classroom community, my first concern was to provide my language arts students with a shared identity and purpose that would cause them to feel bonded and attached to me and each other. I described in Chapter Three how alienation, distance, loneliness, and

resistance were part of the school environment and culture of Spring Street Middle School. Students had learned to "be alone in a crowd" and to position themselves against one another and their teachers (Smith, 1993, p. 10). Therefore, in order to construct a literate classroom community in which they used multi-media journals successfully, students needed to learn new patterns of interaction and ways of validating and appreciating their differences. In the initial weeks of school, I did this by suggesting to my students that they were becoming "readers and writers of the world" as they engaged with their multi-media journals (Graves, 1991; Freire, 1987).

What do readers and writers of the world do? A reader and writer of the world notices the big, the small, and especially the seemingly very ordinary events from our community and world. A reader and writer of the world understands that these events hold important feelings and meanings for the self and others, that they are the key to unraveling the universal human experience. A reader and writer of the world reads one's daily life as if she was reading an engrossing book, and stars the day's highlights in her mind for later recording in her multi-media journal. A reader and writer of the world studies and writes about the self and world with the intention of uncovering and revealing personal truths and awarenesses. A reader and writer of the world frequently spends long periods of time engaging with her expressive, literate side. Lastly, a reader and writer of the world is a member of a literate classroom community where individuals talk about and share important stuff from their lives.

Becoming a reader and writer of the world meant that all eighth grade language arts students had an avenue into and a purpose for belonging to our literate classroom community. I encouraged my eighth grade students to be

66

readers and writers of the world because I believed most adolescents experience their secondary education without taking time to deliberately meditate on what they know in their minds and feel in their hearts. My hope was that when eighth graders committed to being readers and writers of the world, to truly knowing and feeling, they would not only be empowered to initiate their own learning growth, but also, to experience the **power** of literacy. Many of the adolescents I taught believed literacy is only the ability to read and write, but literacy is also the "emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 62).

That's why I called my students readers and writers of the world and encouraged them to refer to themselves and each other in this manner. I wanted my students to have something big, something great, something special, something powerful to collectively call themselves, something they all identified with and shared in for the overall common good of our literate classroom community. I reminded them over and over again: "This is what you are, *a reader and writer of the world,* a **literate individual.** You do have a say AND you can impact your literate classroom community, even if it is only for 45 minutes a day." I also wanted them to understand that the success and responsibility for success was shared by all group members in our literate classroom community (Sergiovanni, 1994).

In any democratic community, the degrees and levels of participation will vary from person to person, and the same was true of my language arts classroom. About nine to ten weeks into the school year, I noticed that some students began to internalize my words and to act like readers and writers of the world as they wrote in their multi-media journals and shared their work with each other. Also, the bullying, teasing, and pushing from outside my

67

classroom door no longer came into our literate classroom community once students perceived that although they were different, they also were alike as a result of our shared identity ("readers and writers of the world") and shared purpose (to experiment with writing in our multi-media journals).

Thus, I assumed a significant role in the establishment and cultivation of the shared identity and purpose in our literate classroom community. I modeled regularly for my students the appropriate behaviors and attitudes of respect, caring, inclusiveness, trust, empowerment, and commitment that are associated with the shared identity and purpose of a literate classroom community (Raywid, 1993). In my opinion, adults hold an untapped capacity for rolemodeling to children, but few adolescents encounter adults living their literacy, even at schools where one would presume an infinite number of literacy role models existed. It is a common expectation in some elementary schools that all adults who work there should model their literacy habits and behaviors for the students and participate in their literacy activities. Practices such as "Sustained Silent Reading" require that adults in the elementary school, including the custodians, cafeteria workers, office secretaries, and administrators, devote time every day to reading and writing with the children.

Although I have yet to work in a middle school that adheres to this kind of thinking since it is rare to find a practice such as this in secondary schools, I tried to evoke a similar environment in my middle school language arts classroom by modeling my own literacy habits and behaviors for my students, and explaining to them the importance of my own literacy as often as possible. I also demanded that other adults who were present during our literacy experiences, such as visitors and support personnel, participate as

68

well. I believe that adolescents sense fakes. If I were not openly committed to my own literacy growth and truly concerned about my students' literacy growth, multi-media journals would have no meaningful place in my middle school language arts classroom.

I revealed how I lived my literacy to my students in mostly subtle ways, but the students noticed. I stood outside my classroom doorway during the changing of classes and chatted with my students about their reading and writing progress. I sat crosslegged on the floor of the share center to write in my multi-media journal. I carried my multi-media journal with me at all times so I would be ready to start writing. I encouraged my students to do the same. When I was stuck in my multi-media journal, I pulled out the watercolors and markers from the art kits and created colorful messes. I confessed my bad writing. I announced my good writing. I volunteered to read the rough draft of a poem I was revising or to be the response partner to the student without one. I brought novels to lunch. I drafted my own novel about Army wives. I showed my students an article I published about the Women's Journal Group. I scattered my favorite children's literature around the classroom. I displayed my short writing piece on the share center wall along side theirs.

Ultimately, I divulged much of my true literate self to my eighth grade students. Sometimes, it was a daunting task to live my literacy in this way because it was not the way I learned or the way most of my students learned in the past. However, since my students trusted and honored me by allowing me to share in their giant far flung leaps into literacy, it was only right to reciprocate by allowing them to share in mine. On the other hand, the fact that I lived my literacy openly made it possible to convince my students to

69

abide by and model for each other the key tenet of our literate classroom community: *Literacy is to help yourself and others.*

Agency

Educational buzz words such as "engagement," "empowerment," and "ownership" are often associated with a "child-centered" literacy classroom. While these concepts do have an important place in a literate classroom community, for the purposes of this discussion I have chosen the word "agency" as one of the conditions for a literate classroom community. The reason I prefer the word "agency" is because it denotes "taking more control of your own mental activity" and "the active strategic nature of learning" (Brown, 1997). Agency underscores the kind of leadership roles students must assume in a literate classroom classroom if they are to become "agents" **for their own learning and for the learning of their classmates,** an "agent" being "one that acts or has the power or authority to act" (American Heritage Dictionary, Second College Edition). An important aspect of agency is for the literacy instructor to involve her students in the self-evaluative process in which students create their own goals and plans for learning and document their progress toward their goals (Hansen, 1998; Graves and Sunstein, 1992; Wilcox, 1993). Also, the literacy instructor introduces mini-lessons based on what she determines her students need—and what the students tell her they need (Calkins 1994/1986, Graves 1995; Atwell, 1987). Lastly, she organizes her literate classroom community around rituals that enable the students to run the classroom themselves (Graves 1991, 1995; Peterson, 1992; Atwell, 1987).

In our literate classroom community, I shared leadership roles with my students. I expected them to do more than engage with their learning; they

70

also must reflect back on and act in a forward moving motion, assuming the direction and control of their own learning (Graves, 1995). By following my students' impulses, I was assured that the classroom work remained authentic and connected to the students' lives outside of school (Dewey, 1915). The curriculum focus unfolded as I acquainted myself with my students and learned of their backgrounds, interests, and beliefs (Hansen, 1987, 1998). As I guided and facilitated my students' learning, I also encouraged them to turn their attention and focus away from me and toward themselves and their peers. Students became "agents" of learning for themselves and each other. The significance and meaning of the students' classroom work and learning experiences were then derived from the transactions between the learners and the curriculum (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Due to state mandates on alternative assessment, all middle school students at Spring Street Middle School maintained portfolios for their four academic classes: math, science, social studies, and language arts, though the format was haphazard and varied from instructor to instructor. My language arts students followed the format I learned while acting as a researcher on the Manchester Students as Evaluators project. During the first nine weeks of school (the first grading term), Spring Street Middle School students placed personal artifacts and written reflections in their portfolios after sharing them with classmates. At the end of the first grading term, I asked them to create individual goals and plans for their reading, writing, and language growth, based on their own interests and needs. Students experimented with reading, writing, and language goals in their multi-media journals and documented their progress toward these goals by placing artifacts and written reflections that represented their goal attainment in their portfolios. My mini-lessons

71

centered on what the students said they wanted to learn in their goals and plans, what skills I determined they should practice, and the state curriculum frameworks. Students also adhered to set classroom rituals so they knew what was expected of them each day and could share in the responsibility for those expectations. Since classroom rituals are one of the conditions for a literate classroom community, they will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Rituals

To function properly, my classroom community needed agreed-upon norms that were manifested in its rituals. Although I positioned into place certain "thou shall nots" (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 136), it was the agreed-upon norms that influenced how well our literate classroom community operated. "Norms count more than rules and control is embedded in the community's norm structure. Members of the community are motivated to behave in certain ways because of the obligation they feel to abide by these norms" (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 120). A community in which members abide by the agreed-upon norms can be said to be in the "working stage" of group process (Corey and Corey, 1997, see Chapter One). When particular members do not follow the agreed-upon norms, their behavior is recognized, confronted, discussed, and resolved by all group members. Also, unlike more traditional classroom settings, the members of a literate classroom community are **intrinsically** motivated to comply with the agreed-upon norms. Reaching the working stage of group process is of utmost importance in a literate classroom community; members must move into the working stage if they are to participate in life-transforming work together.

72

<u>Share Center</u>

The physical location that served as the heart of our classroom rituals was the share center. It was the safe learning space in our classroom literate community where students took up "residency" (Peterson, 1992) while practicing their reading and writing. I believe every literate classroom community requires a sanctuary like a share center for students to gather as a whole group everyday. According to Georgia Heard (1989), writers need writing spaces and rituals in order to keep the writing spirit alive. Every class period began with a meeting in the share center. Then students usually moved to their small group desk arrangements for their classroom work (see Appendix E).

To prepare for the arrival of my students in September, I covered one corner of the classroom, about 8' X 10', with a leftover carpet remnant. I purposely chose a carpet piece of relatively good size yet small enough so that students would have to sit in close contact with each other. Next I added a bookshelf of adolescent fiction and nonfiction (from my personal and the English department's library), a basket of magazines, an old upholstered lime green chair from my husband's bachelor days, a rocking chair I bought at a yard sale for $3.00, and bean bags in primary colors. The finishing touch included a bold sign which I designed on my computer proclaiming *"Share Center."* However, I left the share center walls blank. Students filled the two adjoining walls with their own personal touches over the first month of school. (One of their first assignments was to bring in pictures of themselves to hang on the walls.) Students continued to make decisions regarding the appearance of the share center so that they truly felt that it belonged to them.

Since the *multi-media* portion of my students' journals necessitated

73

that they use other mediums as they wrote, they needed the appropriate supplies handy (see Chapter Six). I divided piles of markers, colored pencils, crayons, glue, and scissors (purchased by the school and allocated to me) into six deep 7" X 12" rectangular plastic containers. To these containers, I added glitter, watercolor palettes and brushes, oil pastels, and colored chalk which I purchased at an art supply store. Now the *art kits* were ready and waiting in the share center as well.

Most adolescents, even those who like reading and writing, do not spend significant amounts of time engaged in reading and writing (Bomer, 1995; Krogness, 1995; Allen, 1995). Without significant amounts of time engaged in reading and writing practice, these adolescents are unlikely to realize their potential and cultivate life-long literacy habits (Wells, 1996; Bintz, 1993; Kos, 1991; Muehl and Forell, 1973). Students alternated how they spent their share center time between reading and writing weeks. One of my goals was to engage students in daily reading and writing. My eighth grade students spent approximately 30 minutes a day in the classroom share center and completed at home an additional 40 minutes four nights a week on reading and writing practice. During writing weeks, students worked on their multi-media journals during share center time and read a book of their choice for homework. During reading weeks, students read books of their choice during share center time and for homework, chose one or more multi-media journals entries from the week prior to be developed into finished written drafts. This system worked well for it maintained a consistency that was not confusing to the students, and it fulfilled Spring Street Middle School policy which required teachers to assign homework a minimum of four nights a week.

74

Organizational Rituals

I assembled carefully several organizational routines in order to avoid the typical middle school distractions that might interfere with our share center work time. As I mentioned before, every class period began in the same way. As soon as students entered the room, they left their book bags and personal items at their assigned desks. Then they proceeded to the share center to begin immediately writing in their multi-media journals or reading their books.

Throughout a class period, students moved several times between their small group working areas and the share center, but they always started each class period in the share center. I required them to adhere to this routine because I wanted that the students learn to initiate their own writing practice in their multi-media journals and not to be dependent upon me for directions and/or reminders. By keeping the expectations and routines uniform everyday, students had time to think about and plan what they might create for their multi-media journals. Also, I did not want the loud, rambunctious behavior displayed in the hallways and lunch room to spill out into the soft, tranquil backdrop of the share center.

I often relied on a quiet signal of a raised hand which I taught students to recognize on the first day of school. I would raise my hand and tap on the shoulders of a few students who would in turn raise their hands and politely tap on the shoulders of other students until the entire classroom was quiet. The goal was to silence the room in ten seconds or less, all without talking or shouting. The quiet signal replaced the need to yell or repeat instructions many times over noisy students who are busily working. The quiet signal was the only time I expected students to raise their hands. Another

75

important characteristic of our literate classroom community and share center was students practiced good listening skills and learned to speak when appropriate. To me, hand raising did not encourage students to engage in realistic, mature talk, and so, I abandoned this common classroom practice.

I avoided other interruptions such as late arrivals and bathroom passes by putting a Sign In/Sign Out Book on a table at the classroom entrance. I told students that they were responsible for their own needs, and that it was inconsiderate to interrupt everyone else's learning by making noticeable entrances or exits. Each afternoon I reviewed the Sign In/Sign Out Book and talked privately with (or kept after school) the students who abused their privileges (though this rarely happened). I considered forgetting to bring the multi-media journal to language arts class as the most serious interruption of share center time. I stood in the hallway in between the changing of classes and would insist that a student retrieve the multi-media journal from his locker before coming into the classroom or even call home to have a parent drop it off. I expected the multi-media journals to become an extension of my students' lives, and therefore, I encouraged students to carry their multi-media journals with them always. Students personalized and adapted the look of the multi-media journal to their individual preferences. Most students used a three ring binder to which they added loose leaf paper, plastic pockets, and construction paper with the holes punched out. Others purchased hard covered blank books at local bookstores. Some students and I found an artist's sketch book worked well. A few students liked stenopads and spiral notebooks best.

On the table next to the Sign In/Sign Out Book was the Class Notebook in which students took turns taking attendance and adding the notes from

76

my mini-lessons. If a student was absent, he or she could check the Class Notebook before, during, or after school to catch up on missing school work. These simple organizational routines and devices not only lightened my paper load tremendously but also empowered students to be accountable for their own behavior and learning. Involving students in simple organizational rituals like this moved things along like clockwork and provided us all more time for important things such as writing in our multi-media journals, reading, talking, and becoming close members of our literate classroom community.

Celebration

Theorists who have studied learning communities agree that ritual celebrations contribute to the tight bonds and intrinsic motivation of the group members (Peterson, 1992; Raywid, 1993; Graves, 1991; Wolk, 1998). According to Ralph Peterson (1992),

> The social life of a learning community is incomplete if it doesn't include celebration. . . .When we celebrate in the learning community, we recognize that people have the power to incorporate the joys and achievements of other people into their lives. Celebration not only dignifies the lives of individuals in the group, it contributes to sense of belonging. (p. 39)

In our community, my students and I celebrated the fact that everyone wrote in his or her multi-media journal with the "author's chair" (Graves and Hansen, 1983). Each share center session culminated with three or four students sitting in the author's chair, choosing something to read aloud from their multi-media journals, and receiving response from their classmates. Although I never forced students to share, I did remind students who hadn't shared recently, and the student in charge of the class notebook for that particular day recorded the member shares. We also had "spur of the

77

moment" celebrations (Peterson, 1992, p. 41) such as the time we took our multi-media journals outdoors on a beautiful fall day (see Chapter Five) or when we paused in our lesson to study and write in our multi-media journals about the first snowflakes sliding off the windows of the language arts classroom. My eighth grade students wrote in their weekly letters that their favorite celebration involved the sharing of the multi-media journal entries and portfolio entries that showed their most recent accomplishments in their school learning—and their personal lives.

Expressive Activity

Expressive activity in varying forms (ie. watercolor, photography, sketching, cut and paste, song, drama, sculpture, dance, etc.) enriches the conventional learning of the language arts classroom which tends to focus on and value exclusively the textual print literacies. Expressive activity is the "organic" response to life (Ashton-Warner, 1963). "It is not children but adults who have separated writing from art, song, and play; it is adults who have turned writing into an exercise on lined paper, into a matter of rules, lessons, and cautious behavior" (Calkins, p. 59). Making room for expressive activity in my language arts curriculum and our literate classroom community showed respect for and understanding of the different views on knowing and having "intelligence" (Gardner, 1993). All forms of expressive activity, but especially the visual arts, contributed to the "multi-media" portions of my students' multi-media journals (see Chapter Six). The expressive activity in our literate classroom community is what told my students about and defined for them the "art" in *language arts*.

A flurry of expressive activity was released in our literate classroom

78

community as we worked on our multi-media journals. Expressive activity was the natural outgrowth of busy, happy, and excited learners at work. When students became accustomed to the classroom rituals, began to build significant relationships with their peers and me, undertook a shared purpose and identity, and accepted the role of agents for their learning and the learning of others, they were more likely and willing to engage in expressive activity. They had witnessed relevant, meaningful learning as shown and authenticated by their peers and me; therefore, they were challenged to take chances and go about their learning in different ways. Also, these students were "willing to risk experimental behavior because of the closeness and support for new ways of being" (Corey and Corey, p.231).

The cheerful, stable environment of our classroom which centered on the students' interests, goals, and experiences and invited them to engage with as many expressive forms as possible, helped them to overcome the fears and dislikes they associated with writing. A majority of my eighth grade students were turned off to reading and writing before they ever crossed the threshold of our language arts classroom. Reading and writing had been diminished to a functional use for school only; reading and writing were rarely expressed in meaningful ways in the students' lives inside and outside of school. Expressive activity such as the visual arts, music, and movement increased their enjoyment of writing. For some others, expressive activity was their preferred way of learning, but it had often been denied and withheld from these students in school. When these students were able to demonstrate their learning with alternate forms of expression, they were no longer excluded from the literacy experiences in the language arts classroom. The "successful" students in a traditional sense, the ones who preferred to use

79

and were good at print literacy, had rarely experienced the liberating and enhancing effects that expressive activity can leave on one's reading and writing. Expressive activity freed them to try other modes of thinking and expressing. (Also see Chapter Six.)

Talk

During the pursuit of and engagement in expressive activity, my students depended on talk and collaboration with their peers and me. Throughout a school day, in and out of the language arts classroom, we talked about our struggles, beliefs, and experiences as well as literature, music, television, and hobbies. Students expressed various opinions during their talk, and sometimes changed their opinions and/or influenced the opinions of others as a result of talk. Our talk was relaxed and accepting of each other. Most importantly, students had classroom time devoted to talking with their peers and me every day. All share center times ended with talk. All literacy experiences involved talk and collaboration with peers. Talk was an expected condition of our literate classroom community and the work in our multi-media journals (see Chapter Five).

As a middle school language arts teacher, I had observed how difficult it was for my students to participate in discussions. This was especially true in the first weeks of our literate classroom community (see Chapter Five). It seemed that during elementary and middle school, my students had been trained to adhere to particular discourse patterns, usually the teacher question, student response, teacher evaluation pattern (Wolk, 1998). In the graduate courses I had taught and teacher workshops I had conducted, educators had told me about the many weeks that go by without talking to or

80

hearing the voices of their individual students. These circumstances are quite upsetting to me because "human existence cannot be silent" (Freire, 1970, p. 69). According to Freire (1970), words are the means by which people lift oppression and transform the world. Thus, if talk is how people transform the world, it also follows that talk can transform language arts classrooms into literate learning communities, and this is something students should practice in school as part of their literacy experiences.

Educators need to understand talk. Some teachers discourage classroom talk among students because they believe it is disruptive and counter-productive to learning. Actually, the opposite is true if one believes that learning is a social act (Dyson, 1993; Heath, 1993; Gee, 1996; Freire, 1970). When students are provided so few opportunities in school to talk and interact with each other, they may use talk in subversive and destructive ways. Students must learn how to talk appropriately with each other, especially when a problem-solving discourse is not part of their literacy history (Ferrara, 1996). Also, teachers sometimes misinterpret student talk, which on the surface may appear unrelated to their work. In actuality, there are important intentions and meanings underlying the students' conversations as they work together (Graves, 1983, 1995; Rief, 1993; Atwell, 1987; Newkirk & McClure, 1992; Richardson, 1998; Kaufman, 1998; Hansen, 1987, 1998).

I found that in the beginning of the school year whenever my students spoke, they looked at and talked to me only. Therefore, I had to redirect the attention and talk of my students away from me and toward each other. I reminded them it was necessary to talk with all members of our literate classroom community in order for us to collaborate on our learning. Also,

81

my students had to learn appropriate ways to talk with each other; they had to learn to use words and engage in conversations that revealed their sponsorship of our shared purpose, "Literacy is to help yourself and others." My role involved modeling this kind of talk for them at every available opportunity, especially in how I talked to and with them during class, in the hallways, during lunch and homeroom, and before and after school.

Sometimes, I gave my students specific guidelines for how they were to respond and to talk to each other as they worked in their multi-media journals and small groups in order to keep them on track. Lastly, every student knew that an expectation of our literate classroom community was that each individual received a turn to talk and share on a regular basis (see Chapter Five).

With the necessary conditions for the establishment of our literate classroom community in place, students were able to become members of a solid, cohesive group working toward the same purpose and similar goals: *to explore and use literacy to help themselves and others*. Also, students were better prepared to use multi-media journals to become "readers and writers of the world" and to experience the full transformative power of their literacy and learning. Additionally, the establishment of our literate classroom community provided students a safe, comfortable place to experiment with other forms of literate expression in their multi-media journals and to share their processes with others. My students and I assumed crucial roles in the establishment of our literate classroom community. A non-traditional approach to the teaching of writing such as multi-media journals would not work successfully and would seem out of place in a classroom setting devoid of these "preconditions."

82

The next three chapters give the accounts of eighth grade language arts students inside our literate classroom community and focus on the influences of talk, visual arts, and writing as related to the multi-media journals.

83

CHAPTER V

THE INFLUENCE OF TALK ON STUDENTS
AS MULTI-MEDIA JOURNAL WRITERS

Previously, I revealed how the inclusion of journal writing in my language arts classroom in my early years of teaching was unsuccessful. I attributed this difficulty to the fact that my students and I did not share openly about our literate lives. As a result, we did not reflect seriously upon on our lives in our writing; we chose monotonous, safe topics to write about that were not related to our real worlds and we did not invite other forms of literate expression into the language arts classroom (see Chapter One). After my experiences with the Women's Journal Group, I began the multi-media research study believing that the multi-media journal would be a tool for helping middle school students to become members of a literate classroom community. Yet, my students and I would have to overcome our schooling histories and an educational climate and culture that did not value this kind of learning (see Chapter Three and Chapter Four). For this reason, explicit instruction on talk came to have an important role in my language arts classroom and the multi-media journals. It would be essential for me to give explicit instruction on talk and involve my students in particular behaviors that would lead to appropriate talk. Classroom talk surrounding the multi-media journals also was influential in helping students to feel more comfortable with their multi-media journal writing. I engaged my students in talk about topic choice, the outside world, and literature in order to bolster the writing experimentation and progress in their multi-media journals.

84

The Day of the Rainbow: An Entry From My Multi-Media Journal

a rainbow crept down upon us
out of a gray morning sky
and broke the dawn
across the curl of the freeway
                                        September 30, 1997

I saw the most incredible sight as I drove to work this morning: a full, radiant rainbow stretched across Route 68. I haven't seen a rainbow that large before. After I exited from the freeway, I passed beneath the colorful bands. Lots of kids waiting for the bus saw the rainbow too. They came into school talking about it and asking, "Did you see it?" I told them that I saw the amazing rainbow and that I planned to write about it today. Scott exclaimed, "You must be psychic because that's what I wanted to write about today." As we settled into the share center, Tina told her classmates that she saw the green part of the rainbow touched down on the roof of a friend's house and turn it into a "Care Bear" house. (Several years ago, about the time these students would have been in elementary school, "Care Bears" were popular television cartoon characters who lived in a colorful rainbow world.) "You have to write that down," I said, "before you forget." Silently and quickly, many began to write entries about the rainbows they saw in their multi-media journals (see Figure 1).

85

FIGURE 1

RAINBOW ENTRY

Sept 30, 1:

...Walking in the woods when suddenly I [saw] a rainbow. I remember hearing all the stories about when you find a rainbow you should follow it to the pot of gold. These stories are seldom true, but since it was a nice day and I had nothing better to do, I decided to try.

I walked towards the rainbow for what seemed like hours, but the rainbow didn't seem any closer to me than when I had started. My feet were tired from all of the walking, so I decided to sit down. There was a stream near by, and it seemed to be the perfect place to rest. I found a rock that looked comfortable and sat down. I watched the water flowing down the stream, and it must have tired me out because all of a sudden, I fell asleep.

When I had woken up, or thought that I had woken up, things didn't look the same as they did before. I was sitting in the middle of a circle of wild animals. A chipmunk, a squirrel, many birds, an owl included, a rabbit and many others. There, in front of me where animals from all over the world too! Elephants, kangaroos, monkies and others. When I put my hand down on the rock I realized that it was no longer a rock, but a turtle! I jumped with fright, but didn't run away, because there was no where to run to. It was a strange place to be dreaming about, but it seemed so real to me. Before I thought another minute about the place, the wind did

86

The Influence of Talk about Topic Choice

Figure 1 showed one example of how my eighth grade language arts students practiced being "readers and writers of the world." In this case, Elizabeth was "reading" a surprising, beautiful event from her "world" and then, choosing to write about in her multi-media journal. By the end of September (about four weeks into the research study), most students began to recognize the importance of reading one's world in order to find and choose writing topics. I heard much less fussing about "I don't know what to write."

Choice is a rudimentary part of effective writing instruction (Graves 1983, 1994; Hansen, 1987; Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1994), and for this reason, I was concerned about how to incorporate choice into my writing classroom. My prior teaching experiences confirmed that students needed to choose what they wanted to write about so that they cared about what they were writing. To care means to scratch below the surface of the individual students and to ask them to write about subjects that are introspective, thought-provoking, and revealing. This also means that writing teachers, like myself, occasionally are unprepared for what happens when students' subject matter choices cross into the nonacademic, the too personal, and the realistic.

Certainly, I considered always steering my students toward "safe" topics (like rainbows) that were less private and more comfortable for me. On the other hand, if I always directed my students toward "safe" topics, was I doing an effective job as a writing teacher? Would my students derive satisfaction from their writing practice if their writing choices involved only happy, agreeable, and nice topics? The members of the Women's Journal Group achieved their greatest breakthroughs with their journal writing when they were courageous enough to deal with risky subject matter. One member

87

announced to group members: "My self-sabatagoing voice needs to be killed," before writing the truth about several events that were burdening her.

In my own writing life, I found it helpful to write in my multi-media journal about topics that were intimate, emotional, and daring for me, especially in tandem with my serious academic writing such as the composing of this dissertation. Once I purposely created an ugly, black scribbled mess of words and color in my multi-media journal. Across the top and bottom of my entry I wrote with thick brown and blue markers, "I am ugly, ugly this morning. I like it." The binding on my multi-media journal was such that pages could not be removed without destroying the entire journal. I wrote in a journal like this because in the past I had torn out and thrown away journal entries, only to regret my actions later. An entry like: "I am ugly, ugly this morning. I like it." was very difficult for me to compose and leave permanently in my multi-media journal because it was a honest departure from my neat, controlled, and polite self. My neat, controlled, and polite self would have never allowed such an unsightly truth to remain in plain sight in my multi-media journal.

Even though I felt strongly that my students should have the freedom to choose what they wanted to write and the latitude they needed to write candidly, I was not totally prepared for how I would deal with topic choice in my students' multi-media journals. I was also unprepared for the dominant influence the media exerted over the lives of my eighth grade students. They seemed to be more engrossed by worldly things and more drawn to cultural icons than I ever remembered of my former middle school students. The influence of the media on some students was as powerful as the influences of church, school, government, and family. When I observed how unaware my

88

students seemed of the media's influence on their thinking, I was armed with additional rationale for encouraging them to become "readers and writers of the world." As a result, I dealt with a realm of student writing that challenged me. Some of my students' multi-media journal entries in the early weeks of school caught me entirely off-guard because they contained mentions of homosexuality, violence, and sex. I never anticipated that my students would choose such topics for their multi-media journal entries. These were neither topics that I expected to be discussing with my middle school students, nor were these topics I knew how to talk about or even wanted to talk about with my middle school students.

The stories told here show not only how I handled topic choice in my students' multi-media journals, but also, how my students and I sustained our literate classroom community after it was established. Although it is crucial for the literacy instructor to plan and be well-prepared for her students' learning, sometimes, it was necessary for me to forego what I had planned in order to address issues as they emerged. Furthermore, these instances are good examples of *in the moment teaching*. "In the moment teaching" required willingness and flexibility on my part to redirect my students' learning toward certain areas when unpredictable events occurred in the classroom. Thus, how I handled the surprising, uncomfortable, and challenging moments in our literate classroom community impacted my students' learning, the writing in their multi-media journals, and our future interactions. Additionally, these moments clarified for me what was important to my students and why they chose particular subjects for their multi-media journals.

When my dilemma over topic choice first arose, students had been

89

working on and sharing their multi-media journals for about a month. I felt that things were running smoothly so far. Students seemed enthusiastic, each begging to be the first one to get in the author's chair and read what he or she wrote to their classmates. On this one particular day in late September, Nate was the fourth person to share. He sat proudly in the author's chair and began to read an entry from his multi-media journal.

In Nate's entry, there is a character named Gregory who is a stranger in a restaurant. Gregory decides to approach the narrator. That's when the reader finds out that Gregory is gay. Nate included in his story lingo and body movements stereotypically attributed to the homosexual population. I listened for about 1 and 1/2 pages. My students were laughing hysterically. I decided to interrupt and not allow Nate to finish his story. The story was offensive to me, and I believed it would have been hurtful to any gay person who heard it. However, I had to think quickly about how I wanted to handle this situation, and I was afraid. The wrong approach would blow things apart in our literate classroom community.

I started to explain my point of view to the class after I interrupted Nate. I said, "I'm upset about how the character Gregory is depicted in Nate's story. My expectation is you should be able to write about whatever you want. We also should always talk openly and honestly about what we write. But a story that hurts or makes fun of others has no place in our classroom community."

I looked right into the faces of Nate and the other students. I tried to maintain a calm, tender tone in my voice and not put Nate on the spot. My intention was not to make Nate feel so bad about his writing that he'll never share again. Some students looked at me with bewilderment. Others glared

90

angrily at me as if I were a traitor. Then Nate said, "Just let me finish it. It's not that bad. It's on tv all the time." I repeated, "But literacy is to help yourself and others. When you use your gift of literacy to hurt a segment of our population, you are not using your literacy for helpful, positive means. Can anyone here imagine how a gay person might feel if he read this?" After a long silence, Lea admitted, "My parents have gay friends. . . . "

Even more painful and troubling for me was the fact that this was not the only incident that day and that week, just the most striking. Other students wrote entries in their multi-media journals that contained sexually explicit scenes, violence, and profanity. When I began the multi-media research study, I anticipated that my adolescent students would test the waters, and I knew that as their teacher, I was responsible for establishing the boundaries and guidelines. Sometimes, my eighth grade language arts students took small risks in their writing in order to get a sense of what my reaction was and whether or not I was someone they would trust. Usually these smaller risks preceded larger risks. For instance, students often borrowed my first name for story characters who were usually involved in some sort of terrible adolescent ordeal. Calling a teacher by her first name is something that is traditionally frowned upon in the culture of school; I believed those students were signaling through their writing (without putting too much of themselves on the line) that they desired a more casual and trusting relationship with me. At the same time, I suspected that something deeper than a trust issue was happening inside my students' multi-media journals and our literate classroom community.

Messages from tv, music, advertisements, and movies bombarded the lives of my middle school students. Seldom during the busy, crowded school

91

day are they afforded opportunities to pay attention to their lives, to be pensive about their world, and decide what they wanted (or didn't want) to influence their lives. Yet many experienced adults know that when we are reflective about our lives, not only do we have more options in life, but also, a greater empathy for the struggles of others. I wanted students to do more than practice writing in their multi-media journals; students would use the multi-media journals to pay attention to their own lives and the lives of others. So few had spent extended periods of time with their literacy, let alone other literate individuals. Few of my eighth grade language arts students knew that literacy could reach beyond school; they did not know that they already had at their fingertips the powerful, enlightening force of literacy, something that some people in our communities and world did not have access to.

Next on my agenda was to create a series of mini-lessons that specifically addressed violence, language, stereotypes, and topic choice in writing. I also shared literature that illustrated the importance of using literacy to help yourself and others. During one of our mini-lessons and discussions in the share center, Jim asked, "Is violence bad?" I honestly didn't know how to answer, and I told my students that I didn't know the answer. Until Jim's question, I hadn't realized how much my students were confused (and possibly swayed) by my strong reactions. They needed time to think through violence on their own and write about it in their multi-media journals.

I answered, "I do know that violence is all around us, and if we never talk about it, we can't notice it, stop it, or prevent it. I am uncomfortable when I think we are too used to violence. But sometimes, violence is

92

necessary. Like when the American soldiers stormed into Europe during World War II to liberate the concentration camps. Gandhi believed in nonviolent passive resistance. Many African-Americans showed how effective passive resistance was during the Civil Rights Movement. What do you think? Let's spend some time writing our opinions on violence in our multi-media journals." Jim's question, "Is violence bad?" haunted me so much that I included it in my weekly letter to my students on the next Monday, and continued to discuss the issue of violence with all my language arts classes during the following week.

After another week had passed, Marie asked during our share center time if it was okay if she added a violent description to a story in her multi-media journal. She then explained to me and her peers why the story needed the violent description, and she compared her story to a mystery novel she was currently reading. She asked if she should continue. I told her yes. While the subject matter was a little gory, the fact that Marie paused before she wrote the rest of her story told me that she was consciously thinking about her writing choices and audiences.

Marie's input led to further discussions about audience and public and private writing with my language arts students. We talked about the differences between public and private writing, and why it was pivotal for writers to engage with both kinds of writing. I also told students that they needed to consider that at least part of their multi-media journals would "go public," (everyone had an obligation to share and at least one multi-media journal entry was to become a finished piece of "public" writing every two weeks) even though we in the literate classroom community would respect the writer's desire to keep private certain parts of his or her multi-media

journal private. An outcome of these discussions was that my students and I decided that writers would mark and/or fold down pages in their multi-media journals that were supposed to remain private.

The Influence of Talk about the Outside World

On October 30, 1997, I wrote in my multi-media journal:

Have we spent so little time looking that we no longer see?
When was the last time you unlocked yourself to learning?
Come outside the red school building, I say,
if you want to be a reader and writer of the world.
And look, really look, at what we were too busy yesterday to notice.

As seen in the entry from my multi-media journal, I was concerned about how unaware my students seemed of the world's influence on their lives. I wanted my students to move outside our school building and situate their school learning in relevant contexts. In order for my students to become literate individuals who used their literacy to help themselves and others, they needed to become more aware of the world around them and assume more active roles in our literate classroom community, and eventually, other settings as well. The difficulty in helping students to accomplish such goals was that the structure of the middle school day was not conducive to students spending long periods of time reading, writing, and talking with peers, meditating on their lives and their worlds, and becoming powerful forces in their own lives and the lives of others. That is not to suggest that I could not make time for such premises; the smallest acts in our literate classroom community seemed to leave the longest impressions on my students.

So much of what concerns students and teachers is outside the school walls, but seldom do students and teachers visit the outside world together

94

and relate to each other as human beings. I often joked with my fellow teachers about how our middle school students reacted when they accidentally met us in the grocery store or shopping mall. A Spring Street Middle School student said to me once, "I saw you at the gas station yesterday--and you were pumping gas into your car," as if it was an odd event for a teacher to drive a car and put gas in it. Just as teachers seemed "oblivious and clueless," in the students' estimation, students were also unaware that we were real people with real lives.

The day that I composed the above entry for my multi-media journal was one of the last warm indian summer days. I couldn't stop looking out the long rows of windows in the far side of our classroom. I thought it was a shame that all our learning was happening inside the classroom when the world outside was so glorious. I also considered what a contradiction this situation was; I continually reminded my students the importance of becoming readers and writers of the world, but I never *literally* stepped outside into the world with them. I then decided to put aside what I had planned for the students to do that day. When my students arrived, I told them that we, our multi-media journals, and the art kits were going outside to study our world and locate subjects to write about. "This is an example of what literate individuals do," I said, "they seize important moments before they are lost."

Once outside in the woods behind the school building, my students not only basked in the precious autumn day, but they also approached their "outside" learning with much seriousness as they wrote and drew in their multi-media journals. Furthermore, many students reported to me after the six month research period was over that this day was the turning point for

95

them in their multi-media journals and our literate classroom community.

One such eighth grade language arts student was Doug. Doug was one of the five special education students enrolled in my first period. Out of the five special education students in my first period, he was the most vocal, extroverted, and reflective. He also was the oldest of all my eighth grade language arts students, almost 15, and the biggest, around 180 pounds. Doug was extremely active outside of school. He played on football and ice hockey teams, dirtbiked and snowmobiled on the weekends, and worked a few days a week at the local car wash. For me, however, Doug stood out because of how he viewed himself and how others viewed him. Becoming a literate individual was the furthest thing in Doug's mind.

In the beginning of the school year, Doug wrote and drew as little as possible in his multi-media journal, and usually took advantage of the close quarters of the share center to poke a friend with his pencil or talk in serious whispers with his nearest peer. But Doug loved the outdoors, and something clicked for him on the fall day we went outside to write in our multi-media journals. He discovered things outside that he wanted to write about. He drew graphics in the margins of the journal pages. For the next week or so, he couldn't close his multi-media journal. He scribbled furiously for days and told me, "I don't know what's wrong, but poetry is just flowing out of me." A few days later, he decided to share his writing with his classmates for the first time.

Doug had never written or shared with his peers before eighth grade language arts. For one reason, Doug was rarely presented such opportunities. Another reason was because Doug thought he was "dumb." In case his peers and I forgot, Doug reminded us on numerous occasions, saying, "I'm not very

96

smart, you know, I'm dumb." To complicate things a bit, Doug's cousin was in the eighth grade with him. His cousin, Floyd, was successful in school, a B student who learned quickly. But I hadn't realized how serious Doug's characterization of himself was until I was chatting with his cousin after school one day.

"Did you know Doug, in your first period, is my cousin?" Floyd asked. "Yes," I answered.

"But he's not very smart, is he, he's dumb," Floyd said.

I did not agree. Instead, I told Floyd that Doug was hardworking, intelligent, and capable, even though reading and writing didn't come as easily to Doug as it did to Floyd. However, I found this conversation to be bothersome due to the fact I did not detect malice in Floyd's words. He seemed to be stating things as he heard them. My conversation with Floyd reminded me how difficult it is for individuals to shake misperceptions of themselves, especially when those misperceptions are internalized and repeated by the individual and to the individual over and over again (Brooks, 1991).

The perception of Doug as "dumb" could also be attributed to how the special education students were characterized at Spring Street Middle School. In many ways, the special education students were marked as "different," and to the other middle school students "different" meant "dumb." Doug was "different" because he and the other special education students followed the same class schedule so that an aide could assist them throughout the school day. Also, Doug's school day was split between the regular education classroom and the resource room. During the middle school teachers' meeting and planning periods, special education students spent their elective

97

time in the resource room while the other middle school students attended electives such as art, technology, foreign language, and band. I also determined from school records and informal reading and writing assessments that Doug was reading and writing about four grade levels behind his peers and had made minimal gains during elementary and middle school. I was particularly frustrated when I learned that special education students such as Doug were given separate assignments in their academic classes, and sometimes, pulled out of classes in order to avoid reading and writing tasks. I, however, refused to excuse him from the reading and writing practice that my language arts students were doing. My refusal won Doug's loyalty though it also caused some heated debate between myself and the special education teachers.

Doug's sharing of the first poem he ever wrote initiated him into our literate classroom community (see Figure 2). He was no longer Doug the dumb one, but Doug the poet. Following the sharing of Doug's poetry, I noticed that students began to talk to and about Doug differently. Several weeks later, I heard Tim announce to others in the share center, "Doug is a good writer." Lea told Ana, "Doug writes poetry. Go see Doug if you want help with your poetry." When Marty walked into the classroom, he said to me, "Maybe Doug will read us some of his special poetry today." Doug even left notes on my desk during the day: "Oh ya, Mrs. Pantano, I want to give you an ice hockey poem. Alright. Ok. Don't forget to remind me. Ok. Ok." "Mrs. P., I must know when I can read my really cool poem to the class. I really think the class will like that. Mr. M." Doug continued to write poetry in his multi-media journal during the six month research period, but it was

98

FIGURE 2

DOUG'S FIRST POEM

ONE TIME I SAT DOWN IN THIS
tiny SLIt Beetween two ROCKS AND
you could Not SEE in to that PLACE
Because the willow hung Down over it

And the WILLOWS SWAYED in the
wind LiKE LiKE tow PePole in Love
Dance ing

It WAS very Peace Ful you $ could
hear Leves Rustling in the wind And
under PePoles feet

And it was nice to hear all
these Neat sonds And MRS. n
yelling At Bustin

then I heaRD gese FAR AWAY
nonking And going south FoR the
winter

And then I heard A squirlel
in the Leves gathing nuts for winter

this is what come to mind
when I think of FALL

99

especially obvious in Doug's final revision of his fall poem that he had decided to shed the former trappings of the special education student and embrace new ones. The revised final words in the last line of his poem now read, " And then I weirdly all of a sudden, I wished I was an eagle, so beautiful. . . so. . . so. . .sooo. . . independent." (See Figure 3.)

Like Doug, the more my eighth grade language arts students felt esteemed and validated in our literate classroom community, the more willing they were to bring subjects they cared about and wanted to write about into our literate classroom community. I encouraged my eighth grade language arts students to talk openly and honestly about their lives; one subject we frequently returned to in our multi-media journal entries was our relationships with family members and friends. I also participated in this discourse, writing and sharing about my own family and friends.

In the beginning of the research study, I was newly married, and soon after, pregnant with my daughter. My growing abdomen in the midst of eighth grade language arts students caused a barrage of questions about my husband and our family life. Several students warned me not to divorce like their parents did and then described in their multi-media journals what life was like for a child with a single parent. Some of my female students wrote in their multi-media journals how they wanted to help me pick out names for the baby and detailed what they hoped their lives would be like as grown women. After I shared with my students about how my husband preferred television and athletics to reading, a few of my male students created multi-media journal entries in which they indicated that they identified more with my husband than me. Other students, now curious about their own backgrounds, approached family members to learn more about their own

100

FIGURE 3

DOUG'S FINAL DRAFT OF POEM

FALL ~~POEM~~
POEM

ONE tiME I SAt Down in this tiny
SLit Between tow Rocks AnD you couL
NOt SEE it BecAUE thE WiLLOW hug Down

thE WiLLowS swAYeD in thE wInD
LiKE LiKE two PePoLE In LovE DAnce

it wAS very PeCEFuLL You couLD
heaR LeveS RuSLIng in thE WinD AnD
UNDeR PePoLES Feet

AnD it wAS niCE to heaR thAt
then SuDenLY I heaRD BirDS AnD
MiSS NOnAn YeLLing At ~~BrarY~~ ~~StArt~~

then I heaRD A Long AwAY honK
honK then I SAw A FLOcK oF cAnADiun
geSE FLYing oveRheaD FLYing South FoR
winteR

then I thought to MY SELF winteRS
Very CLoSE You Know wnAt thAt MeanS
Snow PLowing with MY qauD

then I SAw A gRAY SquiREL gAtheRing
NUtS For thE winter thAt wA3 cutE

AnD then I weRDLY ALLof A SuDen
I WiShed I WAS An EgALE So
BotiFuL ....
.... So ..... So ...... Soooo...........
.... inDePenDent

101

family history for their multi-media journals. In one example, Susan decided to interview her grandmother using her multi-media journal, and then wrote an entry about their family history and close relationship in her multi-media journal (see Figure 4).

Besides families and friends, we also talked about the influences of newspapers, magazines, books, music, and television programs on our lives. Many students chose to write in their multi-media journals about emotional, high coverage media events such as the death of Princess Diana as seen in Nick and Susan's writing samples (see Figures 5 and 6). Many female students were enchanted by the love story, actors, and music from the movie, "Titanic." They would often sing the theme song coming into language arts class and would write the song lyrics in their multi-media journal. They would exchange pictures of heartthrob Leonardo DiCaprio ripped from teen magazines and paste them in their multi-media journals and portfolios. One student, Isabel, who planned to see the movie "Titanic" with her friends and was caught up in the movie hype, created a multi-media journal entry based on her understanding of the Titanic's events (see figure 7). She described to me and her peers how her Titanic multi-media journal entry came into being.

"It helped me to spend a little time drawing something in my multi-media journal until a good idea came," Isabel said. "On this day I was using glitter. And then I decided to turn it [the glitter] into water. This was around the time that "Titanic" came out. So then I turned the water into a poem and a story about the Titanic. It's really neat how that happens for writers. I used the art kits frequently while writing. I'm not a good artist at all but I loved fooling around with it." (Chapter Six discusses the visual arts in more depth.)

102

FIGURE 4

SUSAN'S MULTI-MEDIA JOURNAL ENTRY ABOUT HER GRANDMOTHER

Interview   83
                                                       -87
          born   in   '23
          Leo born in '20   in   '17
          Sofie born   in

14   moved   to   Worcester
met   papou   at   16 - didn't go out til 17
got   married at   24 - '47
Sofie   died   in   '83 - 66
Sofie   moved   to   New York   in   25 - marr.
     Chris

Leo   is   3   years   older
Sofie   is   6   years   older
Anastasia   died   in   72
Dad   in   1930
mom   was   worked   in   cotton   mill
Dad - in cotton   mill - stroke
Dad - Peter   Toda
bought   house   in   ASS
had   mom   at   38 - Dira at   40
worked   at   Dodge Park   from   '81 - '96
Papou   owned   Miss Worcester - sold it   in   '61
became   diabetic   in   '65
Papou   worked at   Nick's Grill   and   Arthur
Papou   was   in   service   from Jan '42 - Jan '46
served   in   WWII   4   years - didn't see him fo.
     4 years
learned   Greek   in   that   2   years
before   WWII   worked   At   American Steel
and   Wire   Company
married   Treasa   in   '42

103

FIGURE 4 (CONT'D.)

About My Grandmother

Growing up as a small girl in Connecticut wasn't an easy life for my grandmother. Elizabeth Toda Setropulos lived in Tompson, Connecticut with her sister Sofie, her brother Leo, and her mom. Her father had had a stroke 3 years before and never really recovered. One day, while helping Leo fix a clothesline, he dropped to the ground and never got up. My grandmother was 7.

~~My grandmother~~ ~~had was very short.~~

My great-grandmother, Anastasia Yassu, had a total of 6 children. Her first three children ~~Anastasia Noel~~ died of influenza, yet she had another three. (my grandmother, Leo, and Sofie), to ~~My grandmother never met ~~her~~~~ ~~~~ 2 of her brothers or her sister Anastasia worked many hours in a cotton mill, because Peter (my grandmothers dad) was ~~sick~~ from his stroke. Anastasia moved her in 9 in 1972 of old age. She was 92.

Peter Toda was my great-grandfather. He worked in a cotton mill, alongside h

FIGURE 5

NICK'S MULTI-MEDIA JOURNAL ENTRY ABOUT PRINCESS DIANA

Nick ___   9-17-13

Farewell To A Well Known Stranger

As I gazed across the restaurant, a
stranger caught my eye, she looked so bold
and beautiful huhh! her name was lady Die,
along with her young compuion, Dodi Al Fied, they
looked so cute together. I never would have
guessed that their lives would soon come to an
end, and when I laid down to bed that night,
something triggered my fears and when I
awoke the next morning, my eyes were filled
with tears, as I looked up at the tv, the world
came to a halt, and then I realized that
lady Die was gone, and her tradgic life ending
story was not her fault, the driver of the
car that night comited a serious crime, he
took the life of a princess with a flip of
a dime, the memory of the saviour is now
imbeded in my mind, and now the ledgend
and her spirit is frozen in time.

Princess Diana 1961-1997

105

FIGURE 6

SUSAN'S MULTI-MEDIA JOURNAL ENTRY ABOUT PRINCESS DIANA

PRINCESS DIANA

At the estate where as a child Di played
On a small island she is eternally layed
Her life was cut tragically short
She was known as one of a kind, as one of a sort

Now England's Rose is gone forever
The worldwide grieving seems to end never
When I learned of her death I didn't believe it
Could Diana be gone? She was the world's charm and wit

Lady Di was the Queen of our Hearts
She was a role model above all other parts
Quiet and shy as a child she seemed
At the Fairy tale Wedding she smiled and beamed

Diana's poor boys, deprived of their mom
This news must have hit them as hard as a bomb
During the time they need her most
The Paparazzi had her last living pictures to boast

Since wedding into royalty Di was chased by the press
They hounded her to death, more or less
Lady Di couldn't go into the public without a camera in her face
When the media caught sight of her there was always a chase

After meeting Dodi Di sensed a happy ending
Prince Charles certainly took this news offending
Dodi and Di were killed in a crash
Dodi died instantly; Di not so fast

From the cute little girl to the beautiful teen
Diana Spencer was every guys' dream
Although she will never be England's Queen
She will reign in our hearts forever

106

FIGURE 7

ISABEL'S TITANIC MULTI-MEDIA JOURNAL ENTRY

The Influence of Talk about Literature

The movie, "The Shadowlands," included a wonderful scene in which a young boy visiting the home of C.S. Lewis discovered an old wardrobe in the writer's attic. The boy approached the wardrobe tentatively, wondering if perhaps this is the same wardrobe that Lucy walked through, the one that led into the magical land of Narnia. As I watched "The Shadowlands," I, too, hoped that this was the same magical wardrobe in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, or at the very least, I wanted to believe that a real wooden wardrobe existed in C.S. Lewis' home. Most movie watchers and readers of books want to believe that there is some speck of truth in the stories they love. My middle students and I were no exceptions.

I liked to read aloud from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and describe this movie scene to my eighth grade language arts students. Since most of my students have been familiar with this book since elementary school, I used it to illustrate how a writer like C. S. Lewis might have practiced being a reader and writer of the world. I explained how C. S. Lewis may have borrowed something as everyday and common as an old, wooden wardrobe closet in his attic, and transformed it into something exciting and magical. I encouraged my middle school writers to try to follow Lewis' example in their multi-media journals. This is one example of how my adolescent students and I talked about significant literary text.

During our share center time, I frequently highlighted literary examples as a means for furthering my students' writing in their multi-media journals. At first my middle school students thought it "strange and childish" that I read aloud to them and we talked about what was read aloud since this was practice that my students' teachers had stopped in elementary

108

school. However, my students soon reconciled with the benefits of reading aloud and talking about literature. They even demanded in their weekly letters that I read aloud to them more often and provide them more time to read aloud to each other. Thus, I set aside time for students to read aloud from and talk about their own books during our reading weeks in the share center.

Although I introduced individual students to a wide range of literature (everything from picture books to adult literature), the literature selections that I chose to share in our whole class settings were determined by what mini-lesson concepts I hoped they would grasp (as in the case described above) and what events they were studying in history class at the time (as I planned and tried to keep my curriculum aligned with the social studies teacher). I purposely focused on literature that dealt with relationships among people with the intent of getting my students to think about their relationships with other people (in our literate classroom community and elsewhere) and stories of literate individuals who had transformed important ideas and events into occasions for writing. I found it relatively easy to locate material that situated our discussions about literacy in a historical context since the history teacher, my students, and I were all searching and talking about our reading discoveries from the Civil War to present day. The literary selections that my students said they appreciated the most included: *Having Our Say*; Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" Speech; *Warriors Don't Cry*; *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky*; *Slave Dancer*; and *Killer Angels*.

Undoubtedly, certain historical events, literary selections, and classroom talk would cause more affective, emotional reactions in some students than others; however, in many instances, I was able to distinguish

how the classroom talk about literature impacted my students' multi-media journal entries, especially how the ideas garnered from particular literary selections evolved over time from the earliest multi-media journal entries into polished writing drafts. This was especially true of Isabel's multi-media journal.

During her eighth grade year, Isabel was worried about her peer relationships and the future. She talked in the share center about how some of her childhood friends were going to different high schools next year and her desire to know a larger, more diverse group of individuals. Initially, she wrote in one entry, "It's great to have a close knit group of friends but you really should not exclude everyone else in the world. I find it really hard to become and stay friends with people in other groups of friends." Isabel composed other multi-media journal entries about "choices," "cliques," and "popular people." Isabel revealed to me privately, "There is a variety of people sharing in language arts, and that is good because I don't get a lot of that. . . . All my friends are the same, we all have the same views, we do the same things, we have the same classes. I take part in the status quo. I feel bad. I have an awareness of it. But I don't know how to deal with it. . . ."

Reading and talking about Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream speech" was a pivotal turning point in Isabel's thinking and writing in her multi-media journal. Isabel found that the ideas and themes in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech as well as the classroom talk about them resonated greatly with her. Isabel then went on to write in her multi-media journal two poems and an essay based on the famous speech that showed her new insights. Isabel said she liked to discuss things from literature and write about them in her multi-media journal because "it

110

helped me to know exactly how I felt."

Isabel explained, "Our discussions in the share center pushed my feelings further than what I realized. When I began to write in my multi-media journal, it wasn't like only one person going into my writing. I considered what they [my classmates] thought. Then I could express my opinions even stronger. The share center gave us a forum to talk about things in our world and school, things we wouldn't normally talk about. When we were in the share center, it seemed that if we wrote about it, then it was okay to talk about it."

Many students like Isabel suggested that what they read and talked about with their peers impacted tremendously what they wrote in their multi-media journals. Isabel said she also learned "a lot of different styles to experiment with" in her multi-media journal. Students agreed that the more they read and talked about literature, the more they were able to locate the correct form for their words and write what they wanted to say most in their multi-media journals. Most of my eighth grade language arts students had limited exposure to different genres of writing. In their multi-media journals, they had a place to experiment with different visual representations and genres and to demonstrate connections between forms of expression that they liked and engaged with outside of school and the more traditional forms of print literacy.

For instance in Caleb's multi-media journal, he had written over several weeks about events he observed at Spring Street Middle School that he did not like, and he authored a humorous fictional story entitled "Scary School" based on those events. After the final draft of "Scary School" was finished, Caleb continued to lament the circumstances of his school

111

environment in his multi-media journal entries. As a result of classroom talk about essays and nonfiction writing, Caleb then decided that if his concerns about school were to be taken seriously by a wider audience, he should fold them into something more formal than a humorous fiction story. Thus, Caleb wrote an essay.

During language arts, Caleb shared parts of his essay in whole class and small group settings. Jack, another student in Caleb's language arts class, and Caleb, then spent some time talking about their multi-media journal writing. Through talk, Caleb helped Jack to see the importance and purpose of more formal writing like essay writing. Jack felt strongly that a local water reservoir should be open to swimming in the summer time. Therefore, in order to get his concerns heard in the Jordan community, Jack tackled essay writing and letters to the editor in his multi-media journal.

In another example, Nick uncovered during our classroom talk, much to his surprise and delight, that poetry had similar characteristics to music. Music was a form of expression that Nick loved and devoted most of his free time to outside of school. Many of my students would write and/or paste the words of their favorite songs in their multi-media journals, which they would then talk about during our share center time. I used their favorite songs as a jumping off point into a study of poetry. Influenced by his new discovery, Nick composed "musical poems" in his multi-media journal. He explained to me in one of his weekly letters how his musical poem entitled "Rocky Raccoon"developed. "I made a poem which was influenced by the different parts and words of music I listen to. Music is very important to me and my self expression. That is why I wanted to play the guitar. I could not live without music" (see Figure 8).

112

FIGURE 8

NICK'S SONG

Rocky Raccoon

  C   Am   F
Rocky Raccoon checked into his room,

      G   C
only to find Gideon's Bible.

          Am   F
Rocky had come, equipped with a gun,

      G   C
to shoot off the legs of his rival.

    Am   F
His rival it seems,had broken his Dreams,

       G   C
by stealing the girl of his fancy.

    Am   F
Her name was Jill, she called herself Lill,

       G   C
but everyone knew her as Nancy.

   C   Am   F
She and her man who called himself Dan,

      G   C
were in the next room at the hoe-down.

    Am   F
Rocky burst in and grinning a grin he said,

      G   C
"Danny Boy, this is a showdown."

    Am   F
But Daniel was hot and drew the first shot

      G   C
and Rocky collapsed in the corner.

              Am
Now the Doctor came in,

 F   G   C
stinking of gin and proceeded to lie on the table.

                        Am
He said "Rocky you've met your match."

       F
Rocky said, "it's only a scratch."

113

FIGURE 8 (CONT'D.)

The Positive Influences of Talk Continue as Long as We Remain a Literate Classroom Community

Talk was instrumental in building and sustaining the relationships among members of our literate classroom community. That is not to imply, however, that it was no longer necessary for me to model appropriate talk, and continue to foster it among the members of our literate classroom community. Out of the four language arts classes I taught, two classes found it extremely difficult at times to forego the social dynamic that had been established in the overall school community when they arrived to language arts. Therefore, it would be necessary for me address this problem periodically and reinforce more appropriate behavior. A critical piece of what I do in my language arts classroom as a teacher researcher is that I am explicit with my students about WHY we do what we do.

The most vivid example of this occurred in my first period. I was thrilled one afternoon when Sam finally volunteered to read and sat down in the author's chair. Sam was a leader among the other adolescents males, and at times, a disruptive influence. He was one of those students who sets the tone. He wrote sporadically in his multi-media journal, and each day the other young men watched him carefully to determine how they should act. If he wrote, they wrote. If he fooled around or seemed disinterested, they did the same. But sometime during the third month of school, Sam became enthusiastic about his multi-media journal when he uncovered an interest in mobster stories and decided to try writing one himself.

Sam was about one paragraph into reading aloud his story when Trey, Rob, and Jamie interrupted his reading by shouting out a teasing nickname that they made up in the lunchroom that day. Sam looked at them, closed his multi-media journal, and refused to read another word. I was horrified and

115

outraged that these students dared to bring this kind of behavior into our literate classroom community. I was also worried that Sam's progress so far would be stunted. I barked at Trey, Rob, and Jamie, "This behavior won't be tolerated in here. See me after class." I was very angry. The other students seemed uncomfortable so I struggled to regain control of my anger so the entire class period wasn't lost. It was too late. "It's okay, Sam," I said pleadingly, "The rest of us were enjoying the story. Please finish. I promise rude behavior will not be tolerated under any circumstances" I glared at Trey, Rob, and Jamie. But Sam refused.

During the following week of school, my female students also refused to share because they were afraid that the boys would tease them as well. I didn't force the issue for about three days. On the fourth day, I bought a bag of of Hershey's kisses to school. We sat in a circle, and I gave a handful of chocolate kisses to each student. I told them to give their chocolate kisses away to each other. "When you give a chocolate kiss to someone," I explained, "say what you value most about that person." It seemed to break the ice among my language arts students. They started to talk to each other again and said nice things. Then it was time to get serious.

I said, "I want you to know how I felt as your teacher when Sam was teased and no longer wanted to share. I also want us to talk about some solutions to this problem so it never happens again." Then I reminded them of the reasons why we had a share center. I told them how I noticed that the girls didn't want to share anymore because they were afraid they would be teased like Sam. Lee interrupted me, "That's not true, Mrs. Pantano, the girls don't feel that way." I said, "You're right, Lee, I shouldn't be talking for them. They should talk for themselves." Next I turned to my female students and

116

said, "This is your chance to tell your classmates what you really think and feel." Then I waited, but none of the girls responded at first. Their body language seemed to indicate that they were upset that I put them on the spot. Diane though did speak out. "I do feel some people don't take their writing time as seriously as I do. They ruin it for everyone else." Many students were honestly shocked and remorseful when Diane said these words. Trey apologized to the class, and then other students did as well. Through the talk that followed Diane's statement, we began to repair our literate classroom community.

For all of my language arts classes, the positive influences of talk continued as long as we remained a literate classroom community. Several times I showed my fieldnotes to individual students who had told me they were influenced by what a particular student or students had said in the classroom. I then asked that they point to the exact words that influenced them. Many times students responded that how students spoke to each other was as important as what they said. Kenny, one of my eighth grade language arts students, explained, "When other people listen to your writing, you can get a sense of what they feel from their reactions. But just having their attention, just being there, is even more important than what they say. Every little move they make has to unconsciously communicate: I'm present." From students like Kenny, I learned that I must do more than teach students how to talk with each other about their writing in our literate classroom community. Rather, students must learn to "be present" in every way possible that human beings can be for each other.

117

What My Eighth Grade Students Taught Me About Talk

This chapter demonstrated how talk influenced my eighth grade language arts students as multi-media journal writers. The classroom talk surrounding the multi-media journals expanded my students' thinking, prepared them for choosing topics and writing in their multi-media journals, and promoted camaraderie and collaboration among the members of the literate classroom community. The talk of our literate classroom community was often social; at times it was imperative that I provide explicit instruction on appropriate talk. My intention for including the described classroom events in Chapter Five was to show why my students and I valued a "socially-mediated" approach to writing. Undoubtedly, the writing in my students' multi-media journals thrived because it was situated in a socially-mediated learning environment. According to Englert, Raphael, & Anderson (1992), a "socially-mediated" approach to writing instruction is characterized by the following four features:

1. the development of students' declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge;
2. an emphasis on dialogue related to writing;
3. the provision of scaffolded instruction; and
4. the transformation of writing from a solitary to collaborative activity.

Current research indicates that children engage in rich language experiences in discourse communities outside of school and literacy instructors must not miss opportunities to integrate these experiences into the language arts curriculum (Cazden, 1988; Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1984; Heath, 1993; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Wells, 1986). However, literacy instructors such as myself have an ethical responsibility not only to acknowledge students' diverse experiences from

118

outside of school, but also, to help students to become skilled at using the various forms of discourse that will result in their eventual success in our literate society (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gee, 1996).

As the data in Chapter Five were meant to display, I gave explicit instruction about the kind of talk, behaviors, and learning strategies that were most desired in our literate classroom community. This explicit instruction developed students' declarative (what they know), procedural (how to use what they know), and conditional (when to use what they know and why it is important) knowledge about talk and writing (Englert et al, 1992). This explicit instruction seemed necessary because the climate of Spring Street Middle School did not sanction social discourse about learning, and generally viewed "talking" as off-task behavior (see Chapter Three). In the past, my students had not been expected to engage in discourse about their own thinking and learning, let alone their own reading and writing. Unlike the members of the Women's Journal Group, it was difficult for my students to naturally assume leadership roles during social discourse and self-initiate talk about their multi-media journal writing in our literate classroom community.

Another substantial part of my responsibility was to model meaningful talk, involve students in meaningful talk, and support the students' efforts as they engaged in meaningful talk with each other. On numerous occasions I postponed lesson plans in order to address our talking and writing practices. Sometimes, I even asserted my authority as teacher in order for meaningful talk to continue as seen in the previously described cases of Nate and Sam. Explicit instruction in talk was necessary because the nature of our multi-media journals and literate classroom community caused us to be in

119

constant, close, and personal proximity to one another. Much of the time, I used talk about topic choice, the outside world, and significant literature to steer students toward relevant, interesting subjects to write about in their multi-media journals.

Facilitating classroom dialogue related to my students' writing practice in their multi-media journals was one element of how I scaffolded their learning and literacy growth. Scaffolded instruction provides students with a "temporary support system that is continually adjusted until their knowledge of writing is sufficiently strong enough to solve writing problems on their own" (Englert et al, 1992, p. 414). Teachers give scaffolded instruction in an "ongoing matter by continually monitoring the dialogue and actions of students during writing, not merely providing feedback on a final product" (Englert et al, 1992, p. 414). Scaffolded instruction is also what assists students in moving into the "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978) and working in collaboration with their peers.

I also learned from my eighth grade language arts students that consistency was an integral part of their classroom discourse. It was fundamental to my students' success that they knew in advance that every class period included a special place (the share center) and time reserved just for talk (Newkirk and McClure, 1992). While in the share center, all classroom members received opportunities to talk with each other about their multi-media journal writing as well as the undivided attention of their teacher and peers. My students also recognized that I, as their literacy instructor, placed great value on their talk because we spent many hours conversing, and I wrote down in my own multi-media journal what they said. To further emphasize the merit of my students' talk, I reflected their

120

words back to them in the weekly letters and praised them when they engaged in productive talk. I also intervened when their talk was not productive and/or hurtful. These efforts helped students to use talk about writing in ways they may not have if they were left to their own accord.

Another way that I was consistent in my teaching approach was that I spoke to my students in the same calm and caring conversational tone each day. My conversational tone invited students to contribute more of themselves to our literate classroom community and showed students how I wished for them to talk to each other (Kaufman, 1998). I was particularly amused one afternoon when I discovered that my students had copied into their multi-media journals the statements I said continuously in our literate classroom community. Lee had recorded the following words in his multi-media journal: "We read, we write, we learn" and "Being a reader of the world is an essential part of the learning process." Underneath he added, "From the many words of wisdom given by Mrs. Pantano." As the school year went on, my students often repeated, practiced, and internalized the talk they heard modeled in the classroom (Vygotsky, 1986; Bakhtin, 1981; Wertsch, 1991). Consequently, they became familiar with various modes of discourse and writing genres. My students also advocated for certain talk practices, especially when they observed their peers violating the norms we had agreed upon for talk. On one occasion, Trey overheard two of his classmates arguing in the share center and reminded them, "We are not allowed to say shut-up to each other."

Visitors to my classroom (especially my administrators) frequently were amazed at how capable my students were at engaging in social discourse that furthered their progress in their multi-media journals. Students who

121

were normally resistant to school (the same students who spent time sitting out class periods in the school office for misbehavior) would not act inappropriately in language arts and were productive, valued members of our literate classroom community. These observations strengthen my argument that all students desire and need forums to write and talk about their lives on a regular basis. Also, students will assume leadership roles in a literate classroom community if they receive explicit, scaffolded instruction related to talk and writing and abundant opportunities to practice such skills.

CHAPTER VI

THE INFLUENCE OF THE VISUAL ARTS ON STUDENTS
AS MULTI-MEDIA JOURNAL WRITERS

The members of the Women's Journal Group originally conceived of and adopted the multi-media approach to journal writing that my students and I used later in our literate classroom community (Brooks, 1997; Hansen, 1998; see Chapter One). From my own experience and the experiences of the other women in the Women's Journal Group, I knew that the multi-media approach to journal writing was instrumental in moving us beyond our writing apprehensions and sustaining our writing practice over the long term. The multi-media approach to journal writing also contributed to enjoyment of writing and feelings of accomplishment. One member, Gail, said that the accessibility to other mediums as she wrote in her multi-media journal gave her permission to save and record the ordinary, even dull, moments from her days. Another member, Kerry, said the multi-media approach to journal writing provided her not only with subjects to write about, but also, allowed her to put more of herself into her writing.

What I observed about the multi-media approach to journal writing during the two year period over which the Women's Journal Group met was that it brought a life force to our writing and literate community that wasn't there in the beginning. Once Kerry told the other Women's Journal Group members that "to journal is to breathe and breathe." I thought then, "Yes! That's it." Multi-media journals are not just blank books with dates and handwriting. They live. They breathe. They think. They feel. They survive.

123

I noticed that my own multi-media journal was starting to resemble the pop-up books I had treasured as a child. There was a three-dimensional sensation to the writing and art on its pages. Another Women's Journal Group Member, Stephanie, described her multi-media journal like this:

> I think of the journal I just finished, full of water color painting, collage, photographs, essays, articles, book reviews. . . . I just pour the stuff of life into this all encompassing container and hope that some day I can get a sense of my days, a sense of how I was feeling and what was going on. And if I never look back, I know the writing and recording was instrumental for me to move through time.

It was the spirit of these words that I wanted my eighth grade language arts students to capture in their own multi-media journals. The visual arts portion of their multi-media journals could play an important part in my students' literacy learning and growth similar to the members of the Women's Journal Group.

In this chapter, I will examine the general uses of visual arts by my eighth grade language arts students in their multi-media journals. Next, I will present the story and process of one individual student as she engaged with the visual arts in her multi-media journal. Lastly, I discuss where the visual arts and multi-media journals fit in the larger theoretical framework of reading and writing methodology.

General Uses of the Visual Arts by Eighth Grade Language Arts Students

As I mentioned previously in Chapters One and Five, I endorsed the use of visual arts in my students' multi-media journals by modeling my own multi-media journal and keeping the art kits accessible in the share center.

124

All eighth grade language arts students included the visual arts in their multi-media journal on a regular basis, though the frequency of use varied among students. Over time I noticed as I compared my students' multi-media journal entries that students' uses of the visual arts in their multi-media journals and their reasons for doing so seemed to follow some general patterns.

One pattern I noticed was students used art directly related to their writing in order to begin and/or further their writing practice in their multi-media journals. In Figure 9, Laura used art because she wanted to write about the ocean, but she didn't know what to write. She told me later that the drawing in her multi-media journal furnished her with a story setting of "ocean waves crashing down." Another student, Jeff, had spent an entire language arts class period composing a story about evil, mystical creatures called the "Satan Wolves." Halfway through his story, he discovered that he was unsure about where he wanted the story to go next. He then stopped to spend some time illustrating what a Satan Wolf looked like before he continued the rest of the story (see Figure 10). Emily, on the other hand, found that writing and drawing simultaneously in the early stages of her writing process helped her to figure out the potential direction of her multi-media journal entry (see Figure 11).

Another use of the visual arts by my eighth grade language arts students was one that I dubbed symbolic and representational visual arts. This use of the visual arts usually dealt with my students' expression of their private feelings and thoughts before they wrote. In Elizabeth's multi-media journal entry (Figure 12), she told me that she drew a mushroom with light and dark shades because half of her day was good and half of her day was bad.
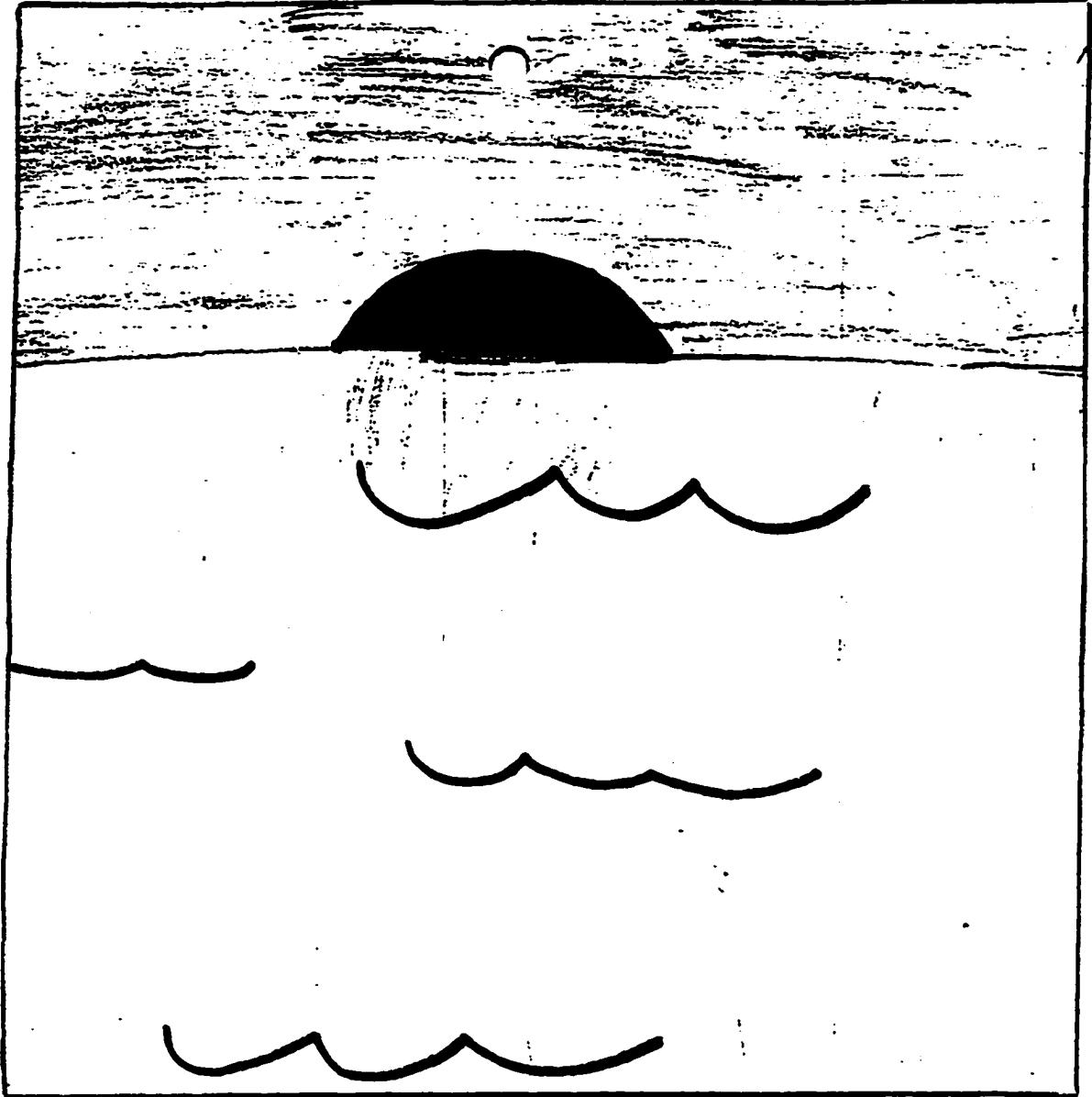
125

FIGURE 9

LAURA'S OCEAN

126

FIGURE 10

JEFF'S MULTI-MEDIA JOURNAL ENTRY

wolf was as big as a domestic cat. The
hole it came out was as big as a mini-
basketball.

12/3
That night I was trying to sleep when I heard
a noice outside my window. I was like a cat
rustling in the bushes. That was followed by a
scratching on the side of the house. Now I was
kindof nervous. I got out of my bed slowly.
I walked to the window and slowly raised
the shade. Right infront of me was a Satan-
wolf. I screamed. My dad came in with his
357 magnum and shot the thing right
between the eyes. It died instantly. The police
thought that It was trying to get even
with me for killing its brother. My family
and I decided to move. We packed all
of our things and were ready to go when
a pack of Satanwolves surrounded us. I
told my dad to step on it. There were
about 1400 wolves around us. We killed
about 8. We were saftly on our way
to the highway when we saw 3 more. I
had no Idea about what was going on.
These Satanwolves were real angry with
me so one jumped and it hit our windshild.

127

FIGURE 11
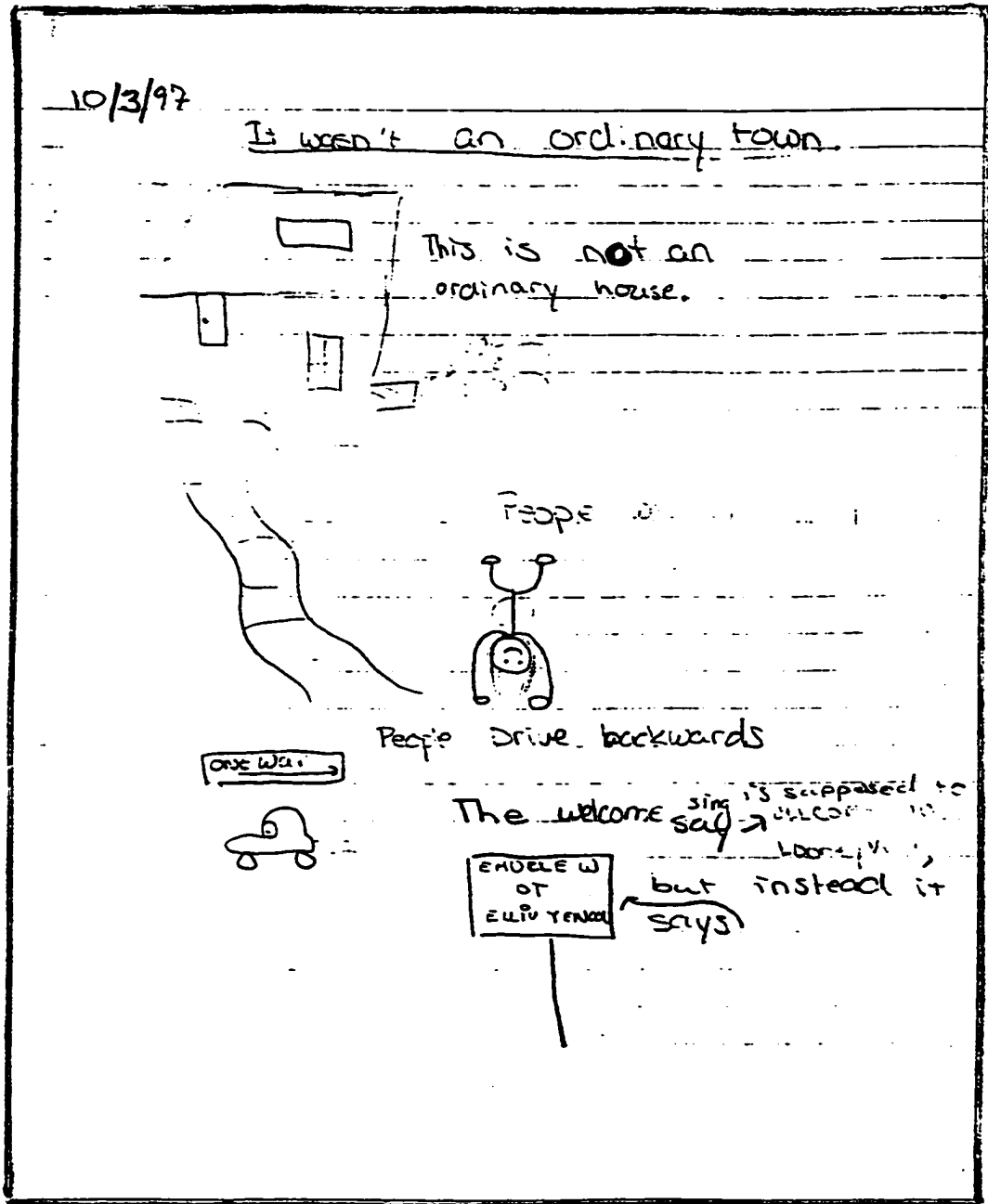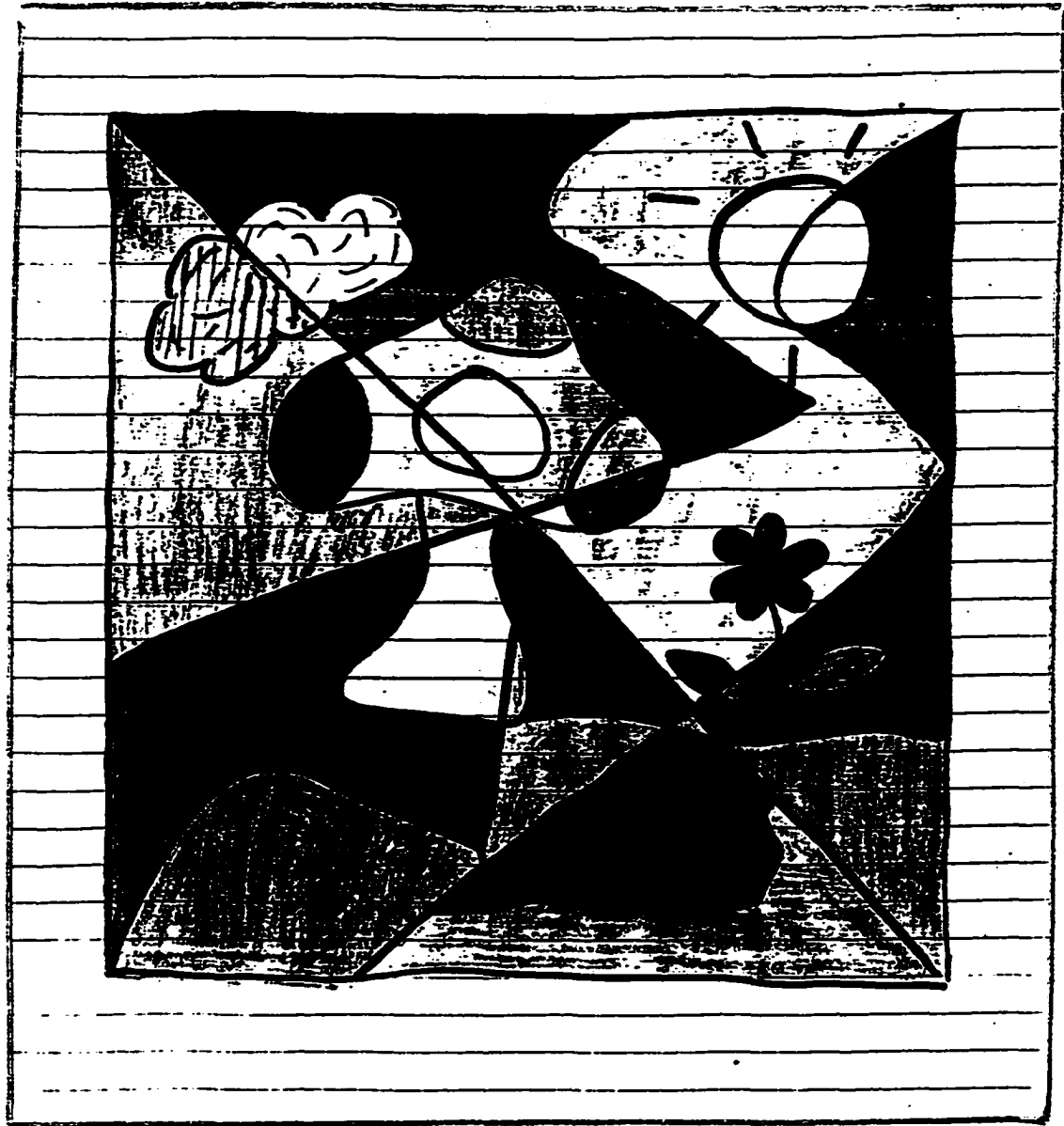
EMILY'S MULTI-MEDIA JOURNAL ENTRY

FIGURE 12

ELIZABETH'S MUSHROOM

129

Susan's multi-media journal entry shows letters and teardrops that were supposed to represent her school friendships (see Figure 13). Susan explained, "Sometimes when I get annoyed with my friends, I like to make something that represents our friendship. It reminds me of how much I value them and I try to forget why I'm annoyed." Chyna, when considering topics from her world that she wanted to write about in her multi-media journal, constructed a color-coded version of her world as she viewed it for one of her multi-media journal entries (see Figure 14). Whenever Natalie used the visual arts, she created different versions of suns, regardless of what she was writing. That was because the sun was a symbol she had picked at her old school to stand for herself. Natalie said the sun symbol made her happy, regardless of what her school day was like (see Figure 15).

Eighth grade language arts students often shared strategies for the visual arts through our classroom talk and weekly letters. One way that they liked to use the visual arts in their multi-media journals was doodle pages. Some students had particular pages in their multi-media journal reserved just for art because they preferred to organize their multi-media journals in this fashion. Brian worked daily on multi-media journal entries about his sister going away to college. They had a close relationship, and he missed her very much. However, whenever he got stuck in his writing, he would "turn to a special page dedicated to doodling." Brian said that he "got more ideas to write about" from his special page even though the drawings weren't necessarily directly connected to the multi-media journal entries about his sister (see Figure 16). Shelly, like Brian, also maintained a doodle page (see Figure 17). She was planning and writing a children's book in her multi-media journal, and the doodle page reflected the artwork she wanted to
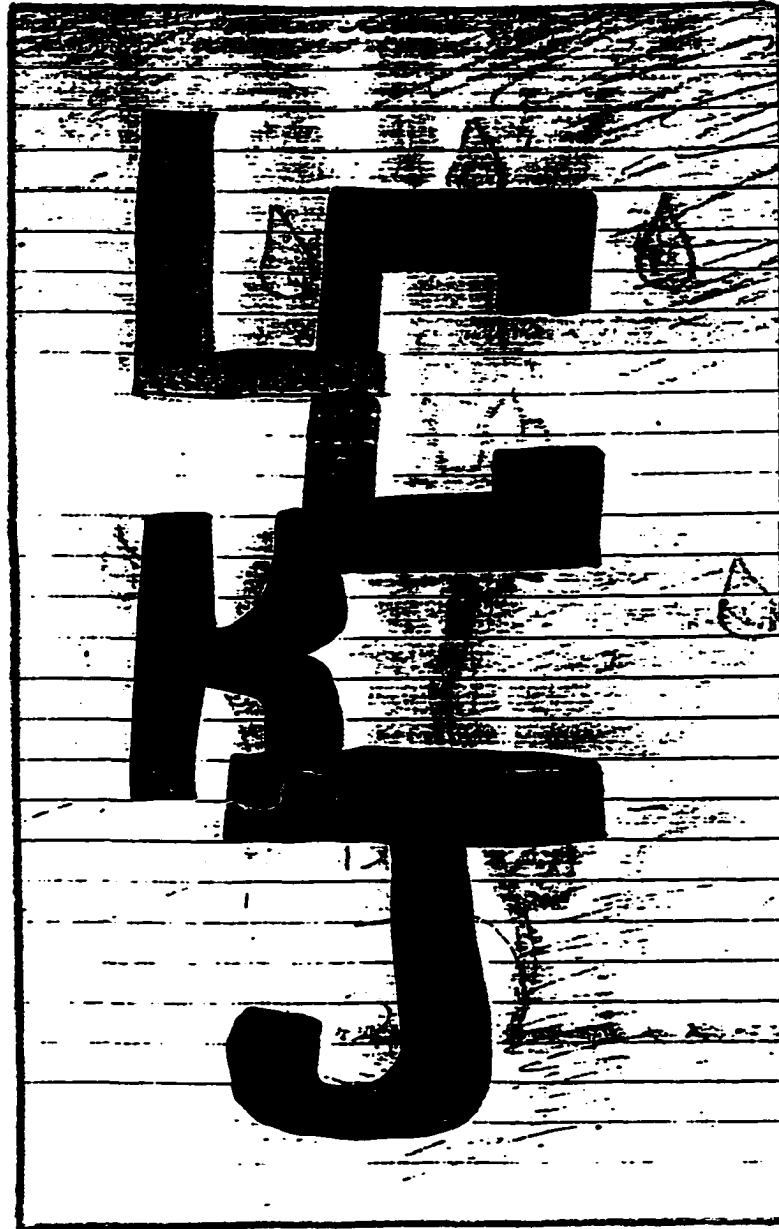
130

FIGURE 13

SUSAN'S MULTI-MEDIA JOURNAL ENTRY

131

FIGURE 14

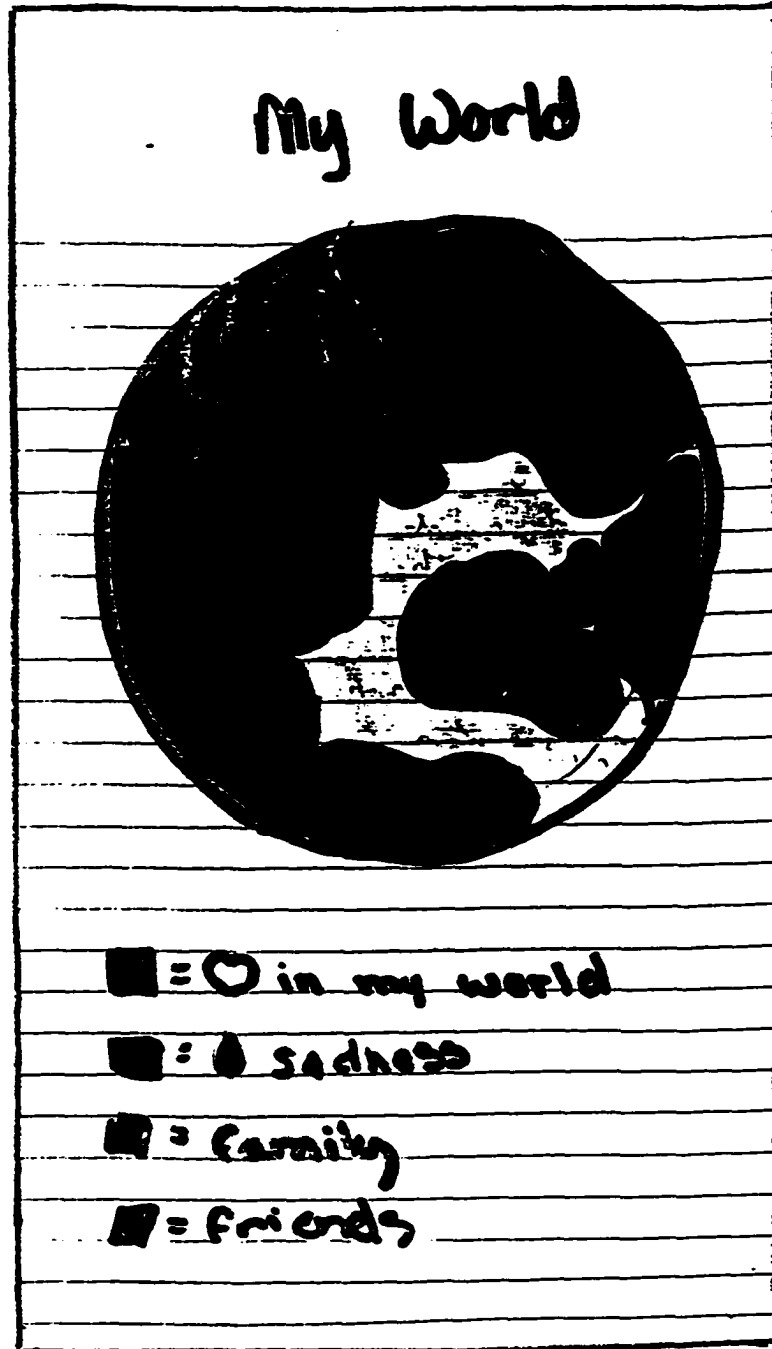## CHYNA'S WORLD

132

FIGURE 15
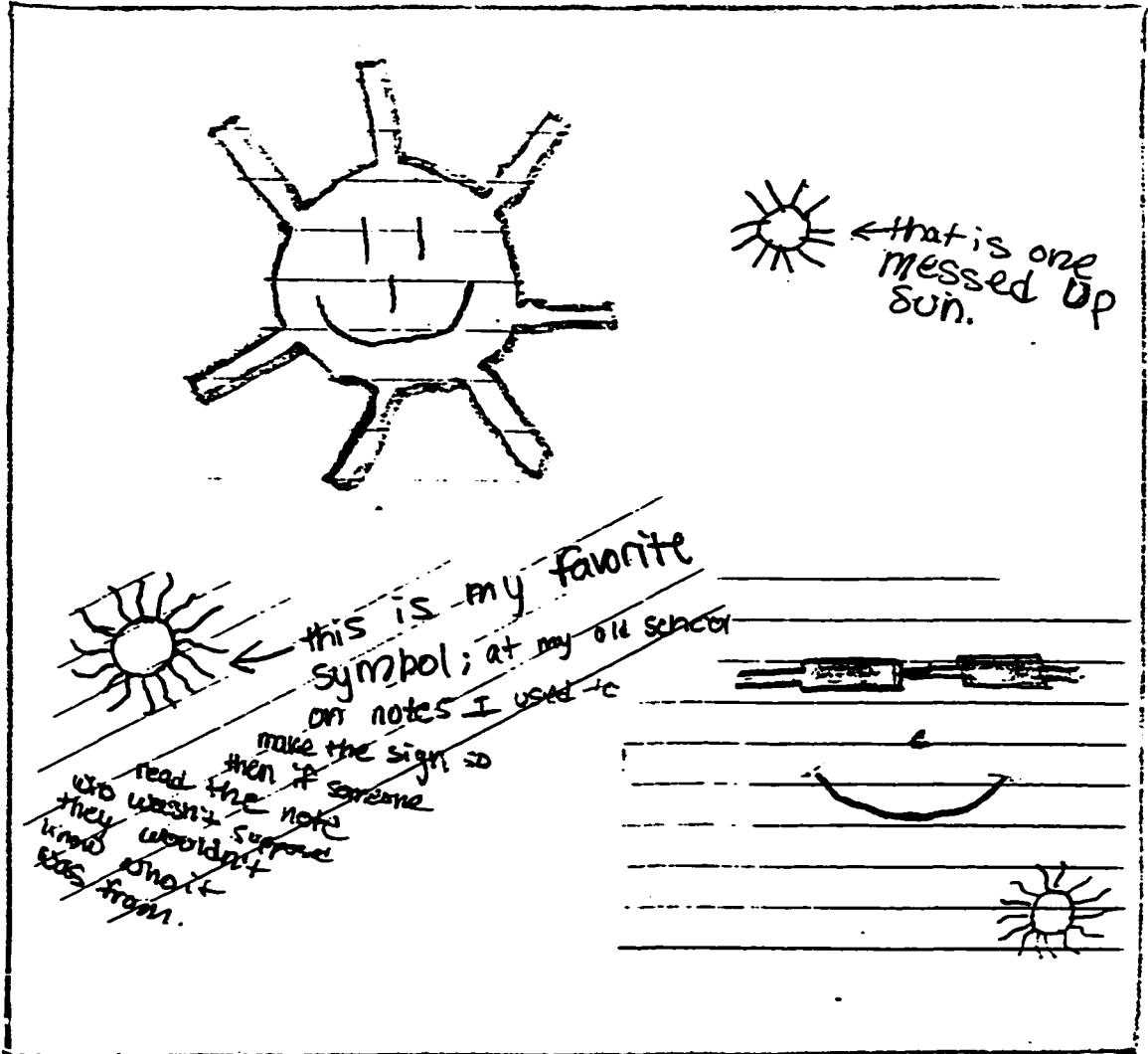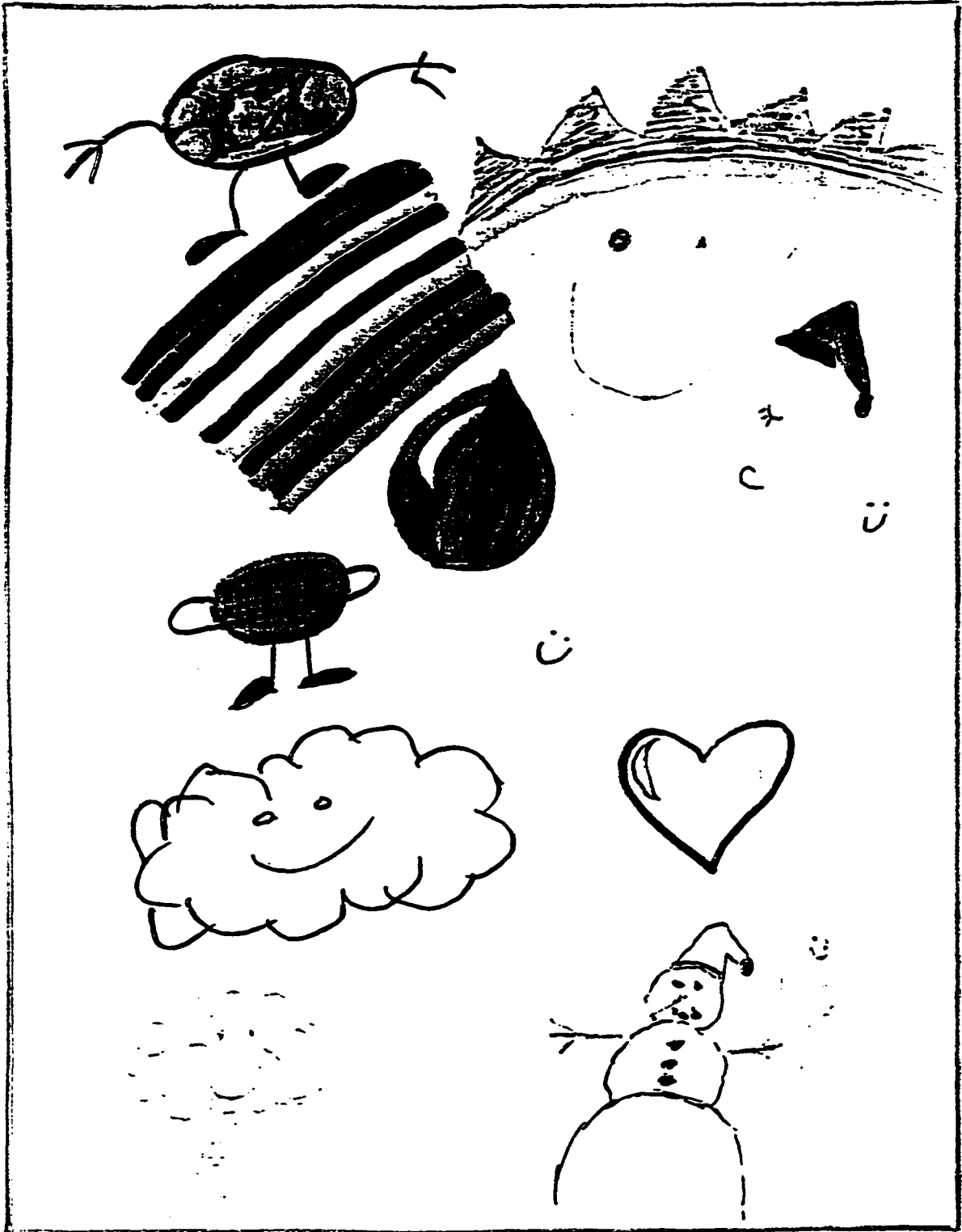
NATALIE'S SUNS

FIGURE 16

BRIAN'S DOODLE PAGE

134

FIGURE 17

SHELLY'S DOODLE PAGE

135

include in her children's book.

I also encouraged students to use the visual arts in their multi-media journals to demonstrate and extend their thinking and learning. Figure 18 shows Laura's response to a class discussion of Chief Seattle and the picture book, *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky*. In Figure 19, Elizabeth created illustrations to match the vocabulary words her classmates had taught the class from their readings. In the next section, I will describe how one student incorporated the visual arts into her multi-media journal over the six month research period and what influence the visual arts had on her as a multi-media journal writer.

Jyl
A Multi-Media Journal Writer

Engagement with different forms of creative expression is something that is not only important to eighth grade language arts student, Jyl, it is also important to Jyl's family members. For this reason, Jyl's mother, Virginia, had always shown a strong interest in Jyl's education, especially when it concerned the development of her daughter's artistic abilities. Virginia's father (Jyl's maternal grandfather) is an artist, but he did not paint during most of his adult life. Since art was not a practical, money-making venture, all of his time and effort went into supporting his family with a factory job. During a home interview, Virginia remembered a time much later in her father's life when her family went on a sightseeing trip across the United States. Virginia's father snapped many pictures. When the family returned back home, her father began to paint again after a seventeen year hiatus. He used the photographs from their family trip as his inspiration. After

136

FIGURE 18

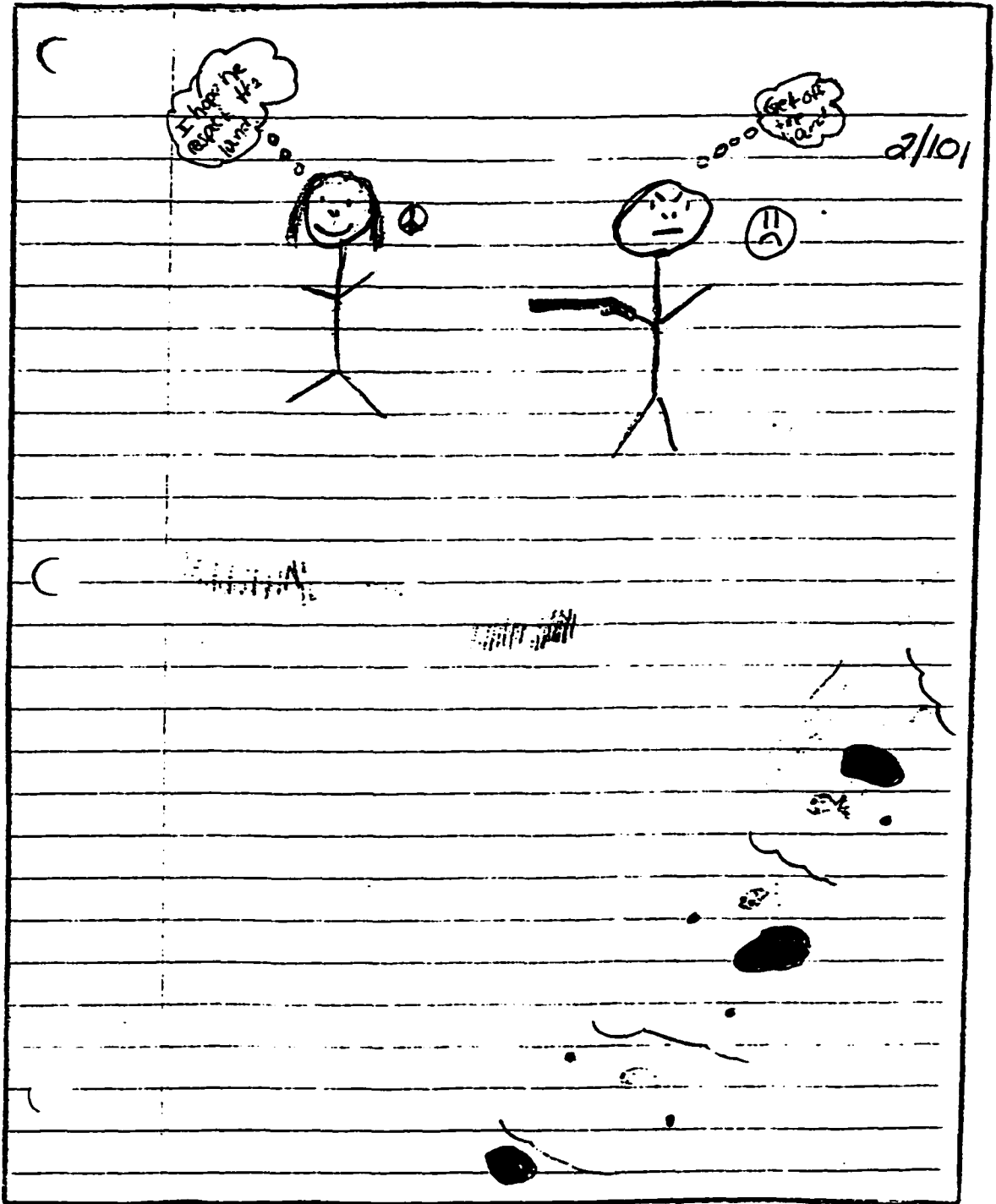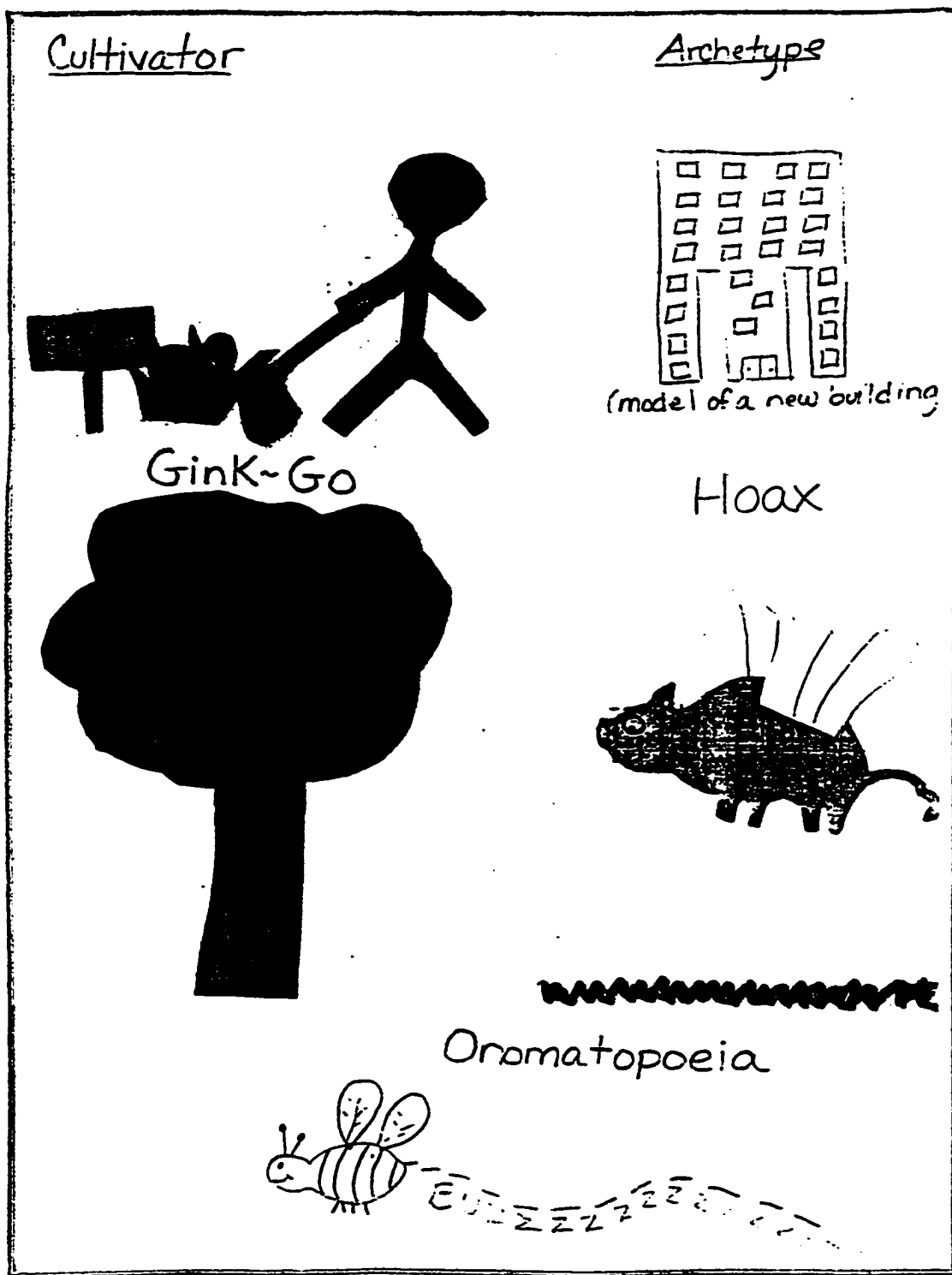## LAURA'S MULTI-MEDIA JOURNAL ENTRY ABOUT CHIEF SEATTLE

137

FIGURE 19

ELIZABETH'S VOCABULARY WORDS

Cultivator

GinK~Go

Archetype

(model of a new building)

Hoax

Oromatopoeia

observing what a catharsis this renewed commitment to art was for her father, Virginia was determined to never displace creative expression in her own life and the lives of her children.

Due to Virginia's beliefs, Jyl had participated in many other forms of creative expression since she was a young child; as an adolescent, she was quite proficient in music, drawing, theater, and dance. When Jyl was a small child, Virginia envisioned the kind of school she wanted Jyl to attend. Virginia had studied the theories of progressive educators and wanted her oldest daughter to receive her education in a nurturing environment where other forms of expression were invited and developed. At one time, Virginia homeschooled Jyl, but after several relocations and the addition of two more children to their family, Virginia decided to enroll Jyl in the local public elementary school in Jordan. Although Jyl's public school education had focused on the textual print literacies, Virginia had continued to encourage her daughter's musical, artistic, and dance talents at home and arranged for after school lessons.

During Jyl's elementary and middle school years, she rarely used her outside talents to enhance her learning. Jyl remembered that "school was a mixture of things." "What I learned and how I felt depended on the teacher," she said. When Jyl did use her artistic talents in school, it was in a limited capacity. She said, "I used to take art classes for a whole class period in elementary school. Before eighth grade language arts, I decorated the covers for my book reports. I never used art and writing together before eighth grade."

Jyl's confident, articulate demeanor during our interview was quite different from the shy, silent student at the start of eighth grade language arts

139

in September. Jyl rarely talked aloud in the early days of school year. What I remembered most about Jyl in the beginning of eighth grade was how hard she worked to earn good grades and to please her teachers. This realization was most striking for me after I met Jyl's mother, Virginia, at a parent-middle school team teachers meeting sometime during the second month of school.

I noticed that when Virginia introduced herself and pronounced the family's last name, she used a soft consonant sound rather than the hard consonant sound that Jyl's teachers used. After Virginia left, I asked the other team teachers (some of whom had taught Jyl previous years) if they noticed that Virginia pronounced the family's last night differently than how we were pronouncing it. The next day in school I asked Jyl what the correct pronunciation of her last name was and I apologized for using the wrong pronunciation. "Why didn't you tell your teachers that they were pronouncing your last name wrong all this time?" I asked. "They always pronounce it wrong, even after I corrected them, so I don't correct them anymore," she answered. Through middle school, many of Jyl's teachers and peers had pronounced her last name incorrectly. After that day, I tried to make sure that the students in Jyl's language arts class and I always pronounced her last name correctly.

In time, Jyl assumed a more active role in the classroom. She said, "I felt like I was in the same position as everyone else. I didn't feel singled out because everyone had to share writing and be respectful. Usually I don't like to do anything oral. I've been a performer since age six, but I would not speak out in class. I like to talk to the person next to me in class, but I didn't like to talk aloud. But the environment in eighth grade language arts was a more comfortable environment because people paid attention to you. They didn't

140

block you out and fall asleep on you. My peers really listened to me when I was in the share center."

Jyl's experience in eighth grade language arts also changed how she felt about her classmates. "I didn't really know everyone," she said, "even though I had lived here most of my life. I had an idea of what they were. But after I heard someone's writing, I got a better idea of what he or she was. Sometimes I would see people [outside of language arts], and I thought they acted stupid and didn't put their mind to what they were doing. Then they wrote things down, and the writing was different, and it was good. I thought only certain people were gifted at writing. It's kinda weird. Some people don't have good speech so I thought their writing skills were the same. But if they get to write about their feelings and life experiences, it can be good. Other forms of expression makes it easier for everyone to write."

Jyl believed she had become a more outgoing student because of the share center and her multi-media journal. "The share center gave me practice to be more outgoing," she explained. "I felt like I knew everyone from the share center. The share center and the multi-media journal are good ways to get people who don't want to write to start to write, and helps them not to be afraid to write. Sometimes students feel that the teacher wants them to be good writers, but they aren't as good as the teacher expects, and so they are afraid to share their writing. When you [Mrs. Pantano] set up the classroom, you wanted everyone to write to his or her best ability. You said, 'Do it as good [sic] as you can for yourself.'"

The story of how Jyl used art and writing in her multi-media journal was one worth noting. Jyl's use of the visual arts in her multi-media journal stood out from my other eighth grade language arts students due to the fact

141

that this was a medium that she used almost daily. For Jyl, the combination of art and writing in language arts class was a freeing experience. She said, "I would just start to doodle and ideas would come to me. When I tried it for the first time, it was hard for me because I wasn't used to thinking that way in school. But it got easier for me as the school year went on."

Jyl's multi-media journal entries in the early weeks of school showed little writing and minimal art. She also relied on the suggested writing prompts that the students and I wrote on the blackboard (see Figure 20). Although Jyl liked to write and felt writing came naturally to her outside of school, she initially did not trust her natural abilities while inside the language arts classroom. To her, language arts class meant grammar exercises and book reports. In one of her weekly letters, Jyl wrote that she worried that I wasn't teaching enough grammar and that she wouldn't be prepared for ninth grade. However, Jyl soon noticed that her writing seemed to be improving. She enjoyed being with the other students in the share center, and they caused her to feel more at ease with her learning. Jyl began to appreciate having choices and the extended, uninterrupted periods of time for working in her multi-media journal. The inclusion of the visual arts in her multi-media journal elevated her confidence level with writing as well.

"Writing and art helped me to come up with more ideas for my writing and to get a better idea of what I wanted to write about. It just made it easier," Jyl said. "I approach my learning slowly. I have to think about it for a long time. I do better on things that I have an option. If I am given things to write about I don't do as well."

Once Jyl understood that writing was an evolving process, she would spend weeks drafting, revising, and sharing her multi-media journal entries.

142

FIGURE 20

JYL'S EARLY MULTI-MEDIA JOURNAL ENTRY

He told me that if I drank the
~~meeting~~ magic potion I would never
be sad again. ~~So~~ I took the potion
~~out of his head~~. And started walking
home. When I got home I raced ~~into~~
~~the~~ up the stairs and into my room.
I started to drink the potion ~~when on~~
I felt kind of strange. ~~the more complete~~
Soon I started laughing ~~and harder~~
but I didn't want to. The next day
I had been back to normal, well almo
~~when I seemed~~ whatever my friends sai
I laughed at even if ● it wasn't funny.
In history class I had gotten a bad
grade but all I did was laugh
Math came quickly that day, an
we were ~~having~~ a big test.
when the tests ~~past~~ out I w
too busy of thinking happy though
to even ~~see the~~ notice the tes
The ● potion wasn't ~~a~~ exactly helpi
it was making things worse but
luckily I didn't drink that much
The next day ~~every thi~~ the potion

143

Jyl often collaborated on writing with other students, especially with her friend, Shelly, who enjoyed poetry as much as she did. Jyl used art frequently during the writing process and in a variety of situations.

For instance, Jyl was fascinated with the subject of fairies. On the day of the first frost in November, Jyl spent a considerable amount of time sketching the "thickest wood" where "sprites hide" and "tiny crystals shimmer and glow"--before she began writing. In this particular situation, Jyl expressed with artwork her observation of the first frost that morning and personal knowledge of fairies to facilitate the writing of a poem in her multi-media journal (see Figure 21.)

In a later entry in her multi-media journal, Jyl demonstrated how she shifted back and forth between writing and art several times in order to express most accurately what she wanted to say. First, Jyl wrote an initial draft about the first snow. When she became stuck, Jyl scribbled out sections of writing and drew stars and snowflakes in the borders (see Figure 22.) Then, Jyl listed everything she wanted to say about the "winter's snow" (see Figure 23). Next, Jyl sketched a picture of what she visualized about the first snow (see Figure 24). Lastly, she began to write again about the first snow and was pleased that the words now reflected what she wanted to say about it (see Figure 25).

Another way that Jyl used the visual arts was that she liked to add special finishing touches to the final drafts of writing that she placed in her portfolio. On her poem, "Nightfall," Jyl said she worked hard on the revising and editing. Therefore, in her estimation, it deserved preferential attention when it was completed (see Figure 26).

Jyl seemed to find it helpful to represent understandings of and
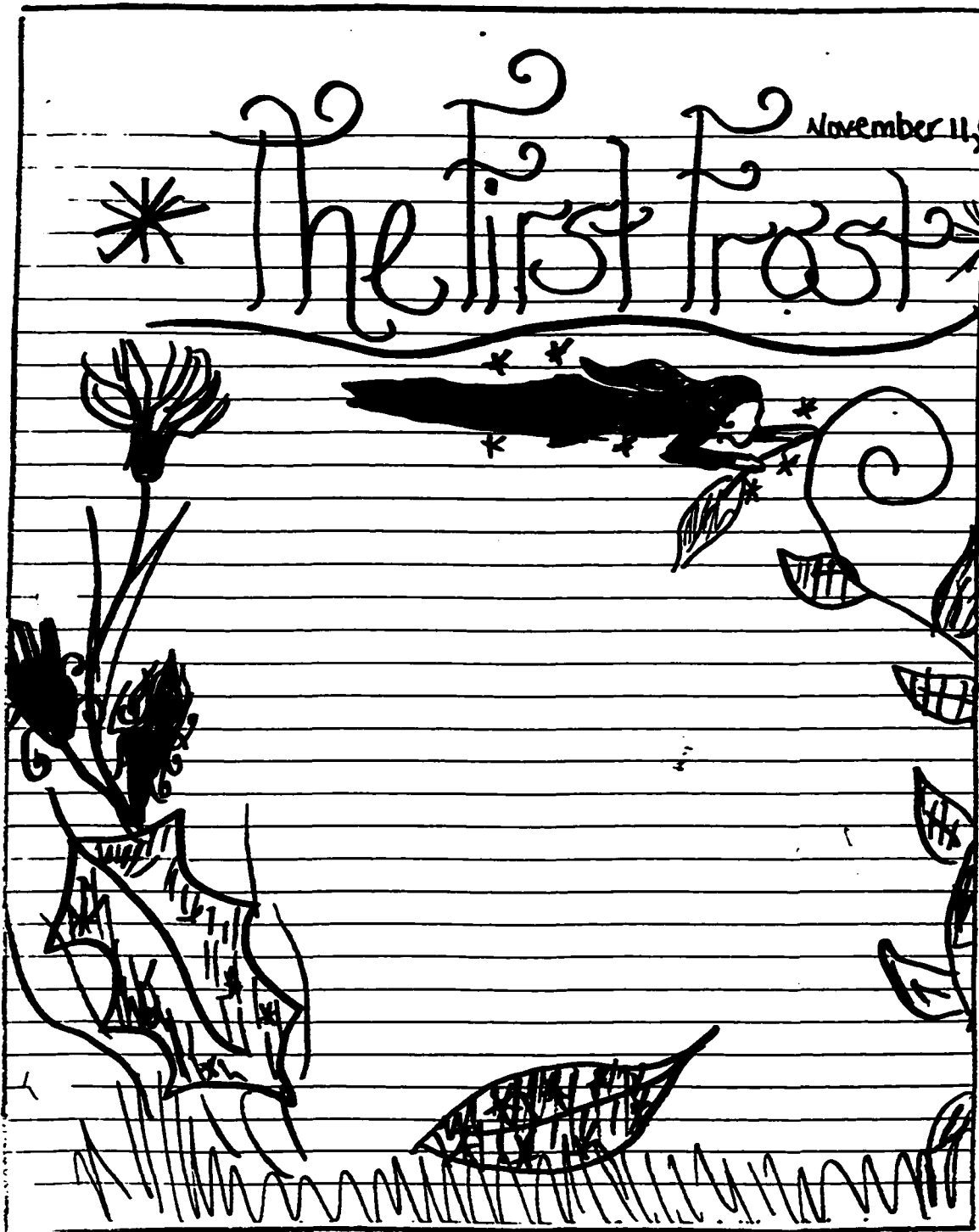
144

FIGURE 21

JYL'S FIRST FROST ENTRY

145

FIGURE 22

JYL'S INITIAL WINTER SNOW ENTRY

146

FIGURE 23

JYL'S SECOND WINTER SNOW ENTRY

FIGURE 24

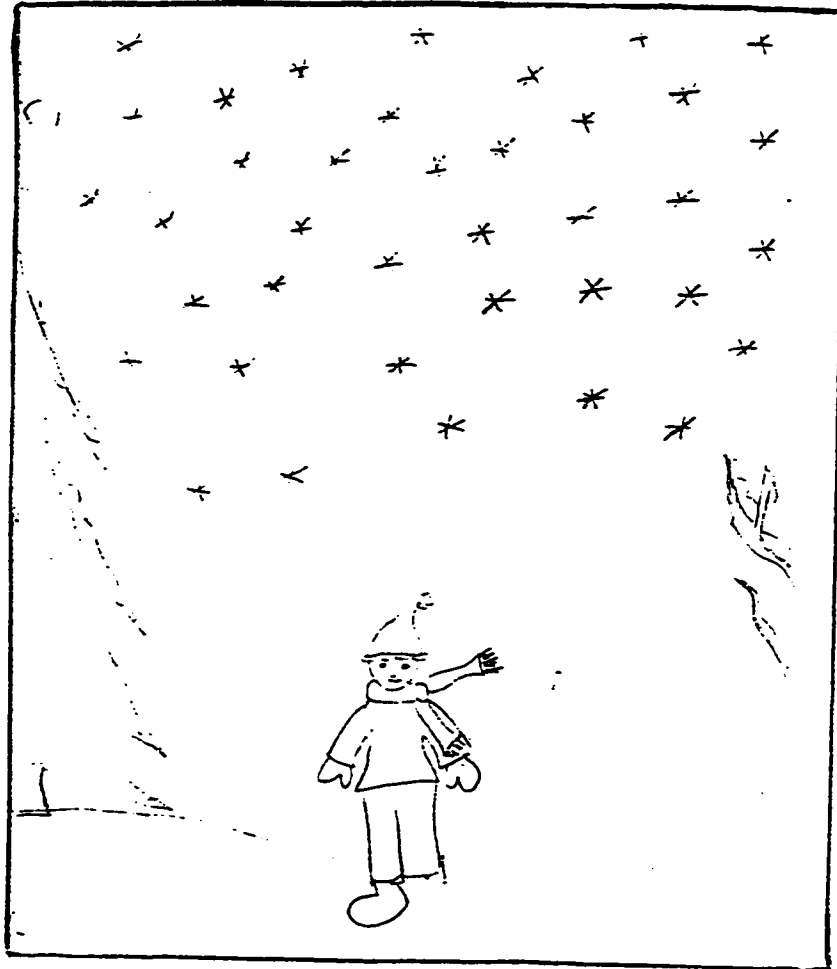## JYL'S THIRD WINTER SNOW ENTRY

148

FIGURE 25

JYL'S FINAL WINTER SNOW ENTRY

I looked out the window this morning to see snow falling. I always get excited when it snows. The snow started to fall harder and harder, so I decided to turn on the radio to see if there was going to be a snow-day. School was cancelled. I grabbed my hat, gloves, scarf, and coat and went out. While I could hear the snow crunching by my head. I picked up a piece of snow and ate it. I don't know what it is about the first snow of the winter, ~~making it the~~ the snow always seems to ___ better.

FIGURE 26

JYL'S NIGHTFALL POEM
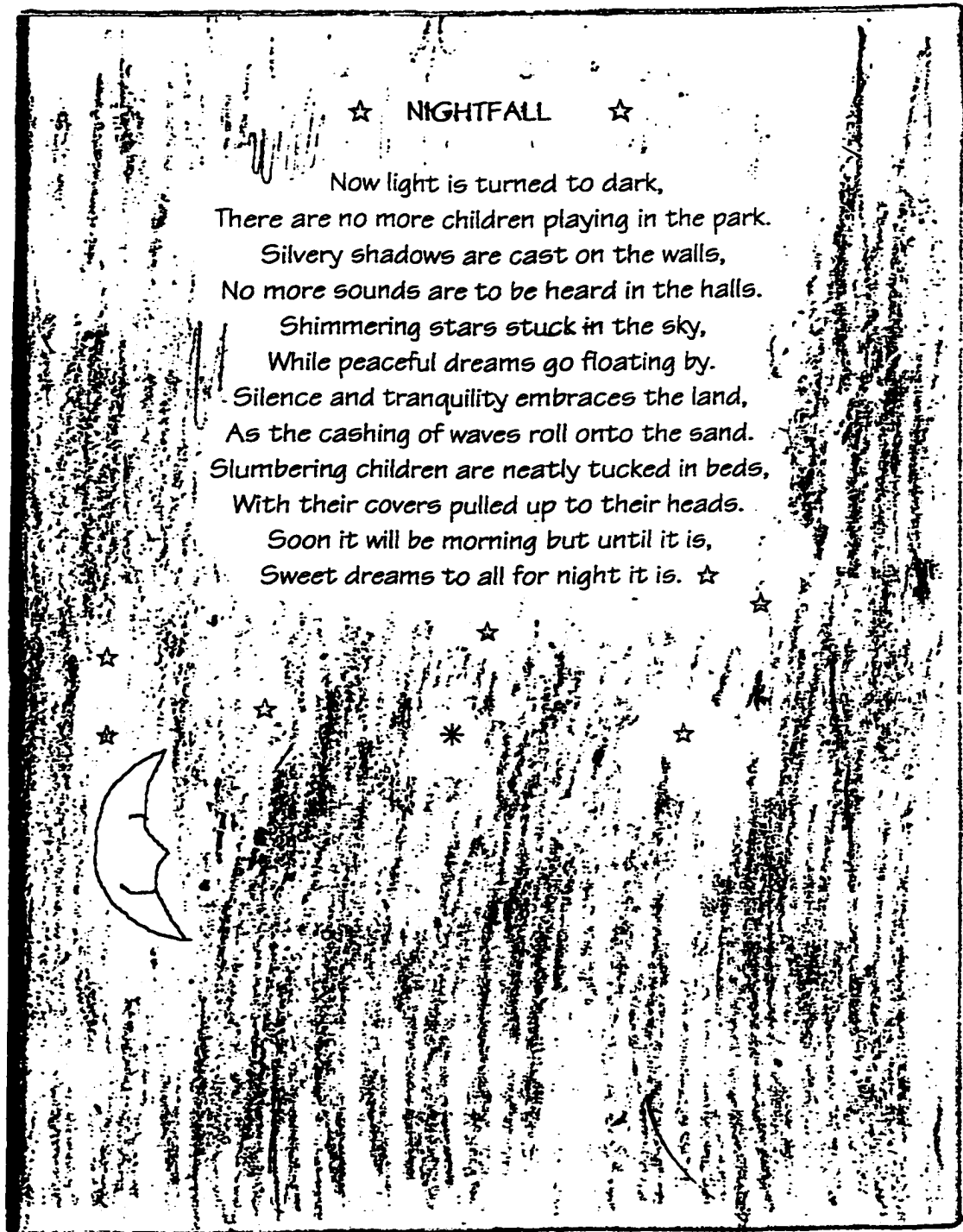
☆ NIGHTFALL ☆

Now light is turned to dark,
There are no more children playing in the park.
Silvery shadows are cast on the walls,
No more sounds are to be heard in the halls.
Shimmering stars stuck in the sky,
While peaceful dreams go floating by.
Silence and tranquility embraces the land,
As the cashing of waves roll onto the sand.
Slumbering children are neatly tucked in beds,
With their covers pulled up to their heads.
Soon it will be morning but until it is,
Sweet dreams to all for night it is. ☆

150

explorations with literature in her multi-media journal. Jyl said that in her free time, she read a lot of poetry books, but she never did any poetry work in school until eighth grade language arts. "When I could choose what I wanted to write about, I decided to write poetry in my multi-media journal," Jyl told me. The multi-media journal entry in Figure 27 is a poem Jyl wrote after reading the historical fiction novel, *Slave Dancer*. "This is a poem that is different than [sic] most of the poems I write. After reading the book *Slave Dancer*, I decided to put my feelings into poetry. This poem is from a slave's point of view."

The writing practice in Jyl's multi-media journal (such as the one described above) also enlarged her knowledge of what writers do as they write. Jyl saw correlations between her outside interests and her school literacy. "I like to do theater, especially the performing arts. One of my favorite types of dance is lyrical movement. In lyrical movement, I perform the movements that relate to the words of a song. I have to use my whole body to tell the story. So it makes sense to me that a writer has to use many different forms to tell a story."

By the end of the six month research period, the multi-media journal had helped Jyl to incorporate daily writing into her life, solve writing difficulties on her own, and put more of herself in her writing. "I remember you [Mrs. Pantano] saying that if you are a reader and writer of the world, you can influence others, that literacy is to help others. It's not just between you and your writing. I know now that if I saw something I didn't like, like kids in shelters, I can read books and write stories to help them. I can use my writing to influence others."

These experiences from eighth grade language arts affected how Jyl

151

FIGURE 27

JYL'S SLAVE DANCER POEM

152
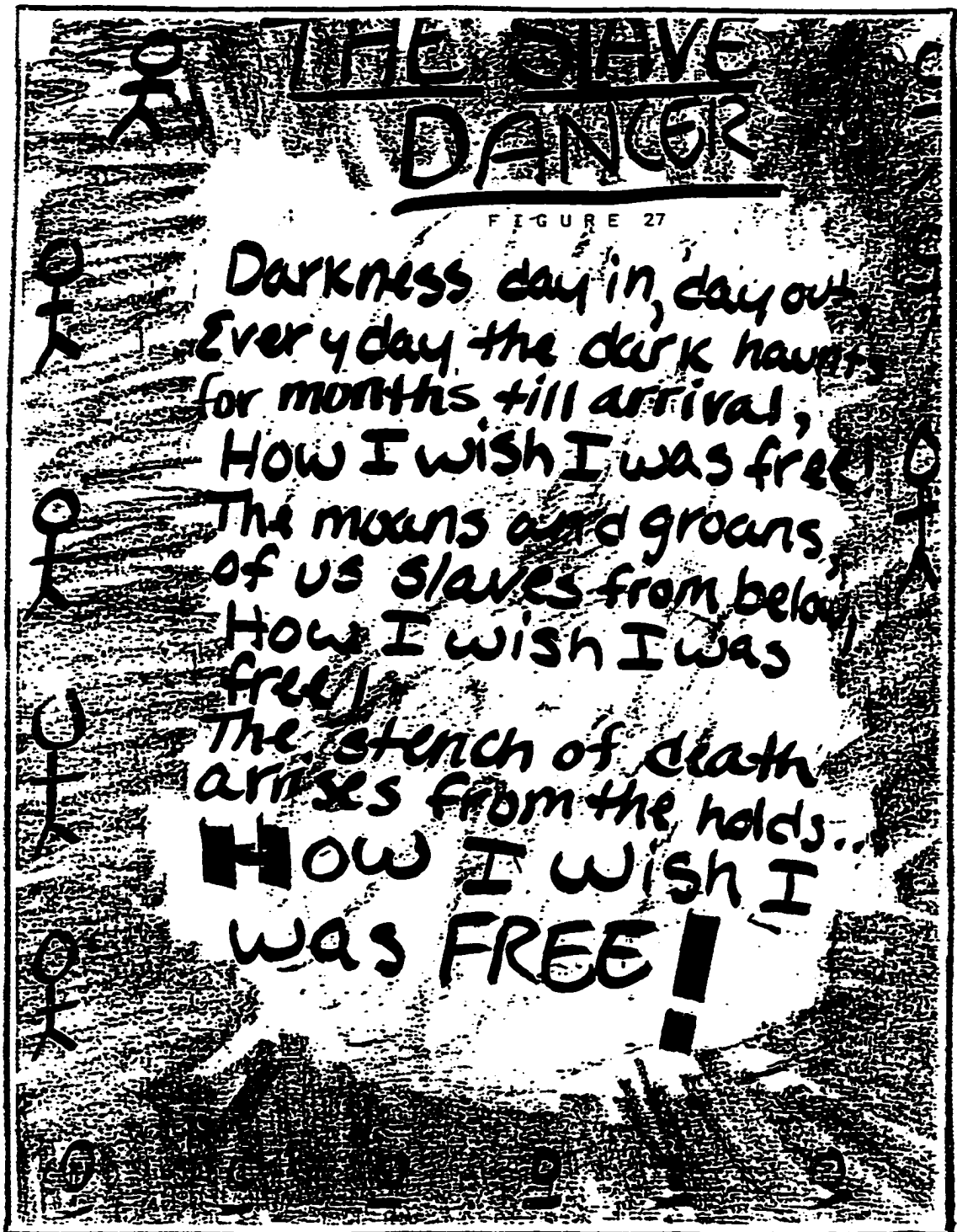
perceived the purpose of writing and herself as a literate individual. Jyl wrote an essay in which she reflected on her literacy, "Instead of writing only when I am forced to, I write practically everyday. I have learned how to be a writer of the world, and write about my surrounding environment. I write with feeling. For the most part, I have learned how to be a better writer in the years to come. . . . I first thought that literacy was only about reading and writing. I used to think literature was boring. Now that I've discovered that literacy is so much more than reading and writing, I find literacy far from boring. I consider literacy a privilege."

How the Multi-Media Journals Fit With Reading and Writing Theory

Many eighth grade language arts students such as Jyl, Laura, and Brian have suggested that the visual arts added an important dimension to the writing in their multi-media journals. This came as no surprise considering that several literacy researchers have investigated the influences of the visual arts on writing and have indicated that the learning processes involved in both writing and art are complementary (Ernst, 1994; Rief, 1999; Murray, 1997; Hubbard and Ernst, 1996; Blecher and Jaffee, 1998). Art is related to writing and overall literacy development because "it stimulates thinking by visual symbols" (Richardson, Richardson, Sacks, and Sacks, 1993).

Additionally, some researchers have suggested that the inclusion of the visual arts should not be confined to the elementary grades and/or one art period a week, but should be interwoven into the entire school curriculum since learners of all ages and abilities can reap its benefits (Hubbard and Ernst, 1996; Blecher and Jaffee, 1998; Varnon, 1997; Eisner, 1991). Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (1993) also would support the notion that

153

engagement with the visual arts should be promoted in schools across grade levels since visual/spatial intelligence is one of the seven components of human intelligence. Gardner has argued further that a broader definition of intelligence is needed in order to assist all children in reaching their educational potential and success. According to Hemysfeld (1997), "The arts are uniquely positioned to engage the senses and offer legitimate, appealing opportunities for students to learn through their preferred modalities, learning styles, and most developed intelligences" (p. 319). Others, including Hubbard (1989), Fueyo (1990), Voss (1996) and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988), have demanded a recognition of the multiple literacies of home and school in academic settings.

Certainly, I found that in both settings, the Women's Journal Group and my own eighth grade language arts classroom, the use of visual arts extended the walls of our writing workshop to include more diverse ways of making meaning in our literate lives. This was especially crucial for students whose "preferred" modalities and literacies were the visual arts. Not only did the visual arts help my eighth grade students to begin and continue writing, but the visual arts also increased the pleasure, interest, and excitement that students bought to the writing practice in their multi-media journals. Consequently, practicing the visual arts in the context of writing enabled "students to learn divergent thinking and creative problem-solving skills in ways that were individualized and meaningful and contributed to successful learning experiences" (Varnon, 1997, p. 326).

The visual arts portions of my students' multi-media journals also helped my students to look at and understand their writing topics from different angles and points of view. I liken this influence of the visual arts to

154

my trips to art museums. Whenever I visit an art museum, I like to "step up close" to the piece of art and study it for a few moments. Next I move far away and study it again. After spending an entire afternoon walking around and looking at all the displayed art in the museum, I return to study my favorite pieces again. Only after doing this can I begin to construct meanings for and connections among the pieces of art I admired.

This tandem of stepping in close, stepping back, and returning again later, was similar to how my eighth grade language arts students used the visual arts in their multi-media journals. Sometimes, eighth grade students would "step up close" with art in order to step back into their writing and vice versa; many students said the combination of art and writing together sustained them through the writing process. This was due to the fact that their decision to use the visual arts made "students' thinking visible in ways that their writing could not yet do" (Blecher and Jaffee, 1998, p.70). The visual arts enhanced and added another dimension to my students' thinking and learning in their multi-media journals and to our literate classroom community.

For a student like Jyl who was usually silent and passive while at school, the visual arts portion of her multi-media journal gave her a "real voice" (Elbow, 1981) in our literate classroom community. This occurred because the visual arts was a manner of expressing that she identified with and used outside of school in the other areas of her life. Print literacies was not the preferred way of learning for all of my eighth grade language arts students. Therefore, students such as Jyl needed options; the use of the visual arts allowed them to join our literate classroom community. Varnon (1997) asserted that the "multiple dimensions of visual art activities can further

155

children's communication and literacy skills and encourage creative expression in a refreshing and nonthreatening manner" (p. 328). Furthermore, a safe setting and audience, such as our literate classroom community, aided Jyl and others in practicing and celebrating their real voices (Elbow, 1981). The visual arts was Jyl's way of participating in the ongoing literacy conversation of our literate classroom community. The visual arts portion of Jyl's multi-media journal empowered her to answer the call to literacy.

Lastly, the visual arts portion of my students' multi-media journals engendered acceptance, inclusion, and collaboration among the members of the literate classroom community. The presence of these attributes seemed to cause students to feel more comfortable bringing their outside concerns, interests, and talents into the language arts classroom. Eighth grade language arts students felt liberated to be themselves in the presence of other literate individuals. This was evidenced by the fact that students created multi-media journal entries about their fears, sadnesses, angers, and joys, and all students used the visual arts to varying degrees. The opportunity to express in "multi-media" who they were as whole, literate beings transformed how some eighth grade language arts students viewed and used literacy in their lives.

CHAPTER VII

SOME MULTI-MEDIA JOURNAL WRITERS BECAME WRITERS

By the end of the six month research period, the majority of my eighth grade language arts students had reported to me how writing in their multimedia journals and holding membership in our literate classroom community had changed their attitudes about writing. Most expressed positive feelings about writing. In addition, some students said that their multi-media journal writing and our classroom environment had profound effects on how they saw themselves as literate individuals. As evidence of this, they began to use the written word to connect with and influence others inside and outside our literate classroom community. They took on characteristics that are attributed to "writers." The intent of this chapter is to tell specifically what happened when two multi-media journal writers assumed a writer's identity. I will also discuss in a general sense the overall influence of the multi-media journals on eighth grade language arts students as writers.

Jennifer,
A Multi-Media Journal Writer Who Became a Writer

Jennifer felt confident about her abilities when it came to school. Jennifer knew she was a good student because she received all A's on her report cards, and she believed that most teachers had assessed her fairly. Jennifer defined literacy as "being able to read and write," and she said that "someone becomes literate by learning how to read and write." To her,

157

"literacy" connotated "school" and "homework." According to Jennifer, literacy did not have functional purpose in her life outside of academic learning and tasks.

Although Jennifer admitted to reading frequently in her spare time, "more than" her peers do, she never attempted writing in her spare time. Good student or not, one thing Jennifer did not consider herself to be was a writer. Her earliest writing memory recalled nursery school and "always having trouble writing a lower case a in my last name." Jennifer said that she thought her writing was satisfactory because her teachers hadn't suggested otherwise, but she wasn't sure. Jennifer listed the following qualities that make someone a good writer: "Someone with thoughts, able to spell lots of words, likes to use her hands, and is patient with sitting for a little while." On the other hand, Jennifer knew without hesitation that she was a good reader. She described how her mother read to her regularly until she could read on her own. She told how much she enjoyed reading suspense novels by authors like Mary Stewart, Danielle Steele, and Mary Higgins Clark; she created a multi-media journal entry to represent her reading life (see Figure 28).

In the beginning of the school year, Jennifer would start a new entry in her multi-media journal every day. She did not connect the entries together in any way or continue one day's entry to the next day. She wrote a meager amount. Also, she saw little relationship between what she was reading and what she was writing. "I love reading," she commented, "but I don't want to write." However, Jennifer became more cognizant of her literacy growth once she began to spend longer periods of time on both her reading and multi-media journal writing in our literate classroom community and at home.

158

FIGURE 28

JENNIFER'S MULTI-MEDIA JOURNAL ENTRY ABOUT READING
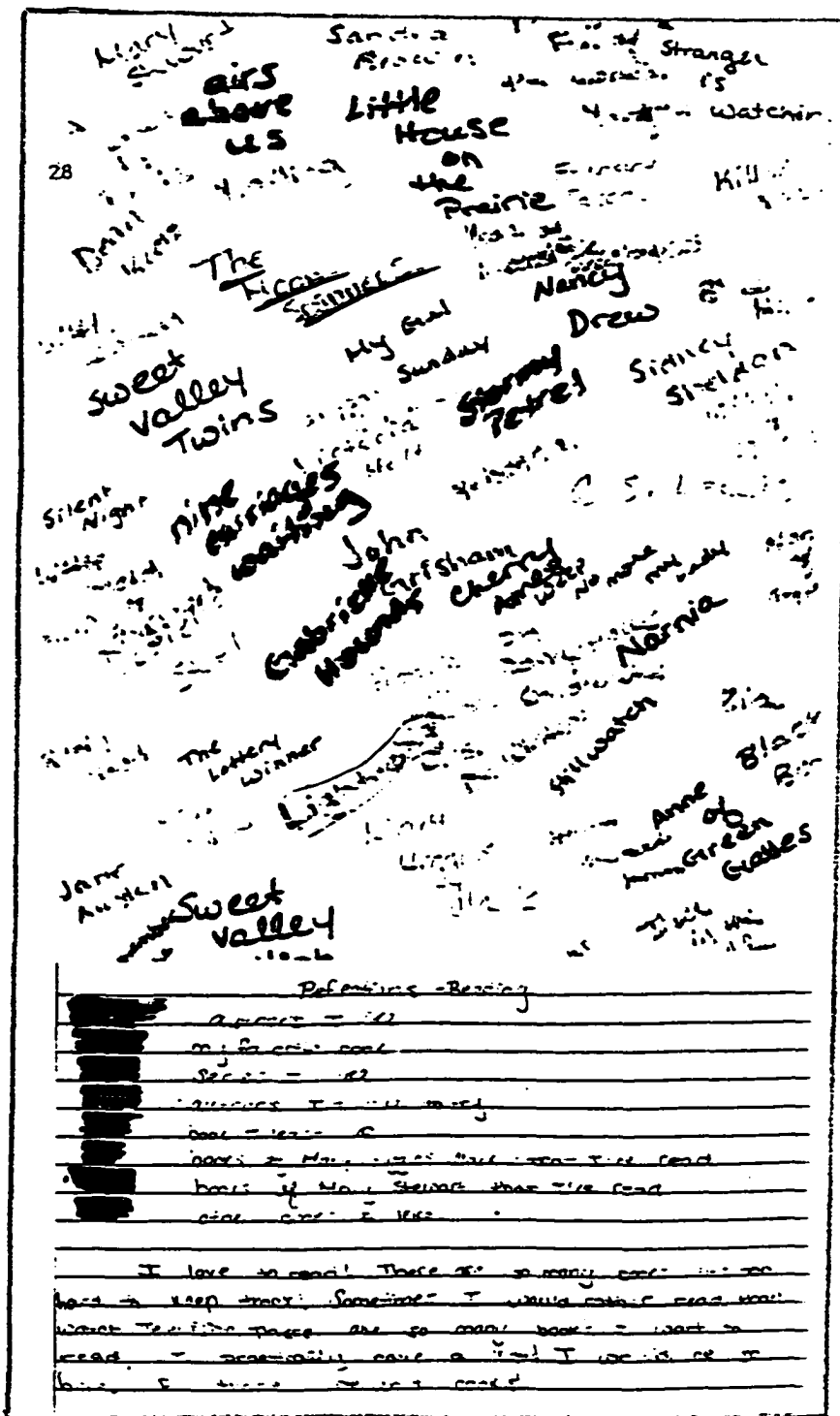
159

The first change that occurred for Jennifer was when she tried to write in her multi-media journal on the weekend. She seemed pleased by the result. On the following Monday in her weekly letter Jennifer wrote, "On Friday night I was extremely bored and just stared at a book I had finished a couple of days before. It was then that I realized that I could turn it into a book of my own! I changed the plot a little and I used it as a journal prompt. I've now completed six pages of it, and I can't wait to read it to the class."

Jennifer also became more aware of how the other writers in our literate classroom community were talking about their writing. She modeled her behavior after theirs and began to view writing as a process that developed over time. After listening to me read aloud from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Jennifer decided to write a story introduction to her own "different world." But after writing the beginning, Jennifer got stuck and decided she wouldn't be able to finish the story. However, Ally and Elizabeth motivated her to continue after they read aloud in the share center a mystery story on which they had collaborated. Jennifer said, "It [their story] had to do with a lake. I started to write a story similar to it. I realized that I could tie it in with the beginning that I didn't think I would use." From this experience, Jennifer understood that she needed to work on her writing daily in order for it to evolve. The process involved in writing crystallized for Jennifer.

Shortly after basketball season began in November, Jennifer and her best friend, Darla, complained to me and their classmates about the lack of middle and high school sports coverage in the local newspapers. We were sitting in the share center, and at one point in our conversation I asked Jennifer, "So what are you going to do about it?" A few weeks later, Jennifer

160

did do something about it. Jennifer wrote the following account:

> I got into the habit of looking at the newspaper and seeing nothing. For some reason, I also got fed up with the lack of coverage. I asked my dad why nobody was writing the stories. My dad replied, "Nobody wants to do it."
>
> In my moment of rage, I fiercely said I would do it. Of course, my father thought I was joking. However, inside I knew that I really did want to write the story. I brought it up many times and my father realized I was serious. . . .
>
> After watching the game and taking notes, I began with the bare facts and turned them into my first draft. From there, I revised and edited it many times. . . . At last, the final draft was complete.
>
> My father faxed it with a note of explanation. Around 7:00 pm that night, the editor called and informed me that she was extremely impressed and she would be more than willing to take future stories. . . . After the article was published, I received many offers to help in future stories. I was a little surprised. Many adults (some of whom I don't even know) came to congratulate me. The basketball players went out of their way to thank me.
>
> I took the article and taped it to the inside of my locker. Every time I opened it, someone would look at it. Everyone overlooked the author and asked me why I had it. Almost every time I had to point out the author. Everyone was amazed and told me that I did a great job. Needless to say, I was proud.[4]

Eventually, 14 year old Jennifer was hired as a freelance sports reporter at the local newspaper. This happened to someone who six months earlier did not consider herself to be a writer. Jennifer's accomplishment affected not only how others treated her in and outside the language arts classroom, but also, how she viewed herself as a literate individual: a writer who assumed the responsibility for writing what others won't, a writer who anticipated that her words and meanings will reach and connect her with others, a writer who has developed a writing voice and learned the strategies and purposes for writing. Jennifer also believed that her newly uncovered literacy will pull her toward other experiences in the future. She wrote in a final essay at the

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[4] Jennifer's newspaper articles are not included in the writing samples because they contain identifying information about Jennifer and the other students at Spring Street Middle School. The reproduction of these newspaper articles would make it difficult to retain confidentiality.

end of the research study period, "I think literacy is [like] the color red. The reason I think this is because red is the first color of a rainbow. Each color seeps into another. Red starts this pattern so a little bit of red is in the other colors. Literacy can be related to so many other things--just like the color red."

Lyn.
Another Multi-Media Journal Writer Who Became a Writer

Each school year Lyn's teachers told her parents how much they enjoyed teaching Lyn. Lyn completed all her homework. She earned good grades. She was never disruptive in class, and she acted politely toward her teachers and classmates. On most school days, Lyn preferred to fade into the backdrop of her rambunctious eighth grade peers. Lyn seemed capable of assuming supportive and/or leadership roles in the language arts classroom, but she rarely accepted such opportunities because she favored a more passive approach to her learning. Lyn said that her friends called her "neutral" concerning most things; for instance, Lyn didn't like school but she didn't dislike it either. "If I do get upset about something I don't like," Lyn said, "I just keep it inside and accept it. I want to make a good impression on both teachers and students." When Lyn filled out her personal literacy history questionnaire on the first day of school, she ranked reading, writing, and drawing as her least favorite activities. Lyn said that in prior language arts classes, there had been "no to little improvement" in her reading and writing skills.

Except for her large circle of school friends, Lyn felt no connections between her life inside of school and her life outside of school. In her weekly

162

letters to me, Lyn described the rich, fulfilling ways she spent her time away from school, usually at church, dance class, or performing community service. The following passages taken from her letters on two consecutive Mondays illustrate her giving, empathetic nature.

> . . . . One thing I did on Saturday was to go to the John Street Soup Kitchen. . . . We made shepherd's pie and served almost eighty people in three hours! The experience there was an interesting one. The people I saw don't look how I expected them to. Their clothes were clean, and they were very polite. There was one man who even offered to help pass out the meals with us. This surprised me because I would think that he would want to eat first. . . .

> . . . . Last week I wrote about the John Street Soup Kitchen and the experiences I had there. Today I want to talk about IHN. IHN stands for Interfaith Hospitality Network. My church is hosting 4-6 temporarily homeless families. . . . The families come to church at five, have a hot supper, sleep over, and have a quick breakfast around seven the next morning. During the day, the children go to school, while the parents go to work or job hunt, or look for a new apartment or home. . . . The Junior High Youth Group from my church is serving them dinner one night. . . .

In my experience, it was rare to meet an adolescent with such a developed, abiding concern for others. However, I was perplexed because her initial multi-media journal entries were devoid of Lyn's natural enthusiasm and personal interests. She seemed stuck at a plateau. She was still reading the same books and writing the same topics she had since elementary school. Lyn did what she knew was expected of her in order to please her instructors, but she was not challenged by or invested in her own learning. I now understood why Lyn said she had experienced little growth in previous years' language arts classes.

One week Lyn wrote to me in her weekly letter about her increasing interest in the emergency medical field:

163

. . . . For the past year or so, I have watched a lot of Rescue 911's and other shows like that, and it has me thinking about becoming a EMT or paramedic. I think that I would enjoy the position. I don't mind the sight of blood, and during past emergencies I have been calmer than a lot of people. I also enjoy helping others, and am training to be a peer mediator at school which might be of some use. . . .

After learning about Lyn's interest in the medical field, I decided to push her to read genres unfamiliar to her, especially non-fiction, poetry, and adult fiction. My goal was to get Lyn reading authors who wrote about the things Lyn cared about such as human interest stories and medical dramas. I hoped that once Lyn revitalized her reading life, her writing life would be invigorated as well. I also reminded Lyn that "if literacy is to help yourself and others, you should be writing about topics that reflect how you are helping yourself and others."

Lyn was hesitant the first time she attempted to use art while writing. Her intention was to write a poem that communicated the seriousness of drunk driving, and she sketched small tiny representations with colored markers as she wrote. Lyn explained in an interview with me how her poem, "The Driver," evolved (see Figure 29).

"I started out with an idea that one of my classmates had written on the board. [Students would write on the chalkboard writings ideas that they thought their classmates might like to use throughout the school week.] I decided to make it into a poem because at the time I was reading "Someone Should Have Taught Him" in the book, *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul.* I used art a little bit. A piece of a street and a bright blue flash. In one part I had a little trouble. In the part I scribbled out, I couldn't think of a word there. I didn't know if cunning was the right word. So then I had people in the share center read it and tell me if it was the right word."

164

FIGURE 29

LYN'S POEM, "THE DRIVER"

The Driver

The driver looked away
When he saw the bright blue flash
Only for a second
And then he heard the crash
He hoped it wasn't him
as he looked around the street
He hoped it wasn't his blood
when he looked down at the seat
He hoped it wasn't him
when he saw the big dark stain
He hoped it wasn't him
when he felt the deep sharp pain
He hoped it wasn't his voice
when he heard a tiny "help!"
He hoped it wasn't him
when someone let out a yelp
He hoped it wasn't his breath
when he heard it coming slow
He hoped it wasn't him
when he thought it wasn't so
He hoped it wasn't his car
when he heard the Jaws of Life

After receiving response from her classmates in the share center, Lyn continued to work on the poem, "The Driver," and revised it several times during the six month research study period. Besides choosing to write about topics important to her, Lyn also discovered writers she wanted to emulate in her multi-media journal. One writer I introduced Lyn to that she particularly enjoyed was Patricia Cromwell. Patricia Cromwell writes suspenseful, entertaining medical mystery thrillers that contain reoccurring characters and predictable plot structures. Cromwell is also known to borrow real-life situations and people from medical examiner and police files and adapt them to her story lines. After hearing an arresting news story on the radio, Lyn wanted to try this as well. Lyn called this story in her multi-media journal "The Thuy Vu Story."

"I heard about what happened on a newsbreak. . . . I thought, wow, this murder is on the street that my parents' best friends live on. They didn't say the name of the victim at first. . . . just the street address. The next day I read about it in the newspaper."

"Then a few days afterward you [Mrs. Pantano] said to take something from the world, to read the world. I was surprised by what happened next. I remembered the facts I knew and wrote them down in my multi-media journal. Then over a few days I collected things from newspapers and highlighted them. I read through them again to find important things for my story. Then I started to create my own story" (see Figure 30).

Lyn was like myself and some of the members of the Women's Journal Group in that she didn't perceive herself as a "good artist," but recognized quickly that even cut and paste and simple drawings enhanced her writing process and kept the creative momentum going (see Figures 31 and 32). Over

166

FIGURE 30

LYN'S FACTS

FACTS
12 year old girl, shot once in the
chest at around 4:10 died at St
Vincent's hospital at around 4:50
killed inside her home. Lives at 38
Dale St. in Worcester. name is Trai
Vu. Lives near Phil + Marie
Metcalf. Shot with a pistol. weap
and suspect not found yet. Police
believe the gun went off
accidently went to a nearby friend
house & named their favorite cards
and talked about the boat
for a little while. Trai Vu, then
left for home. She was shot a
moments after she got home

Thuy Vu story

FIGURE 31

LYN'S NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Friends present Thuy's family with her birthday gift

By Winston W. Wiley
Telegram & Gazette Staff

WORCESTER — A birthday card friends of Thuy Kim Vu had planned to surprise her with was given yesterday to her grieving family.

The family also received a gift, a $15 virtual pet, that her friends hope will be placed in the casket with the girl at her funeral tomorrow.

Thuy, a Forest Grove Middle School seventh-grader who turned 12 on Sunday, was accidentally shot to death by an older sister Tuesday.

During her short life, friends say she touched many lives. Some of them, yesterday ...

... member the petite young girl many knew fondly as "Tweety."

Louis A. Ortiz, 15, Cecilia M. Ortiz, 14, and Juana L. Flores, 13, had a birthday card custom-made yesterday that wished Thuy a happy birthday, thanked her for being their friend and expressed condolences to Thuy's mother, Lang Nguyen.

"We wanted to tell her mom not to worry because there would always be a part of her that would live on," Cecilia said.

They had each pitched in Tuesday to buy the gift they planned to present to Thuy that day.

"I didn't know this was going to happen ..."

Cecilia, an eighth-grader at Forest Grove Middle School. "I thought we were all going to grow up and be college roommates."

Cecilia was so distraught she left school early yesterday. Two teachers visited her at home.

"It felt like a brush of cold air hit me and I wasn't able to breathe," the friend said. "Death. You never think about what that word means until you lose somebody close to you ..."

Jasmine L. Santos, a student at Worcester Vocational High School and a friend of Thuy's, said everyone at her school was talking about the ...

... many youths knew the girl.

Students at Forest Grove attended an assembly at which they were notified of Thuy's death and given a copy of her student ID photograph. School officials solicited donations to help with Thuy's funeral expenses, they said.

Danny Barretto gave $12 of the money he had and helped raise another, he said. After school, he, Jasmine, Cecilia and Jasmine discussed ways to raise more money. As they walked the streets of Main South, Jasmine cautioned the others to watch out.

"I don't want to lose any ..."

Brother bought gun for protection
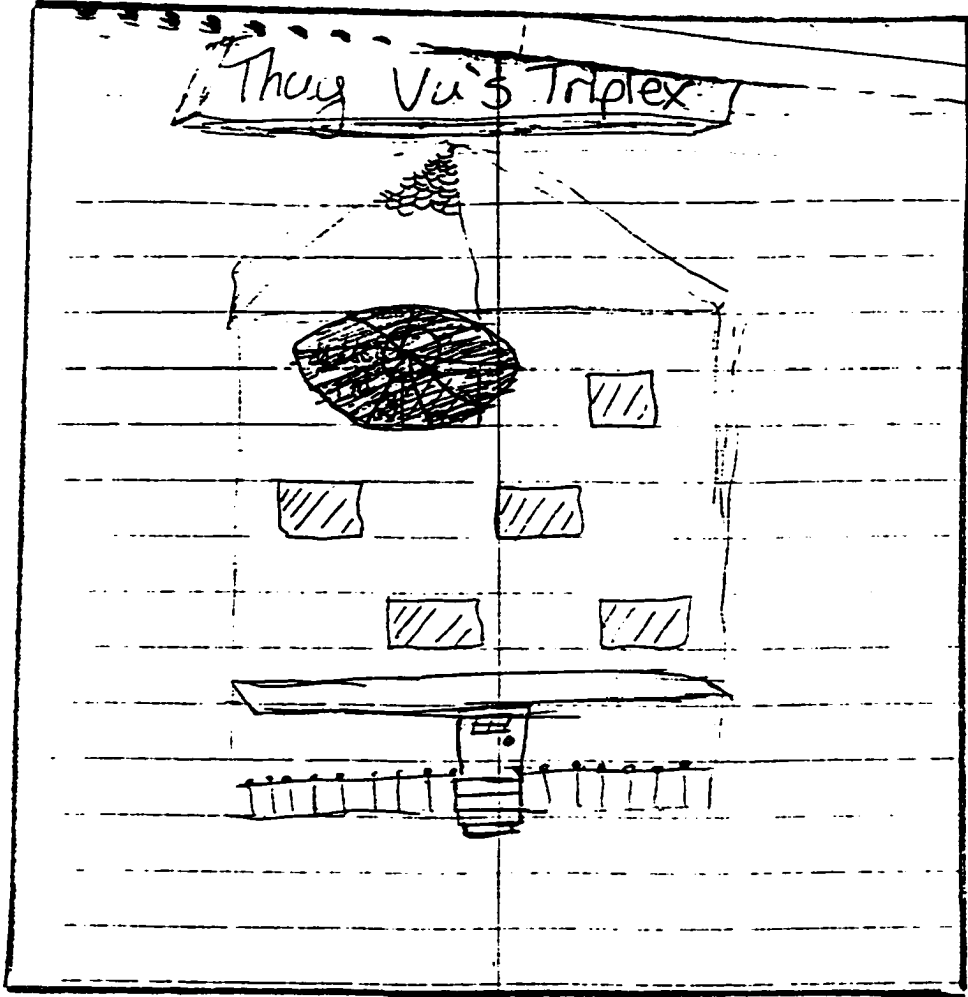
By George B. Griffin

WORCESTER — Twelve-year-old Thuy Kim Vu was fatally shot by her 16-year-old sister with a handgun police say was bought illegally on the street by her 18-year-old brother ...

Police say the death on Tuesday was an accident, a tragedy that happened when the 18-year-old picked up what she believed to be an unloaded weapon, pointed it at her sister and pulled the trigger.

Detective Lt. John J. McKiernan Jr. said the older sister, whom he declined to identify, may not be charged. But Dang Vu, the boy who bought the .380-caliber semiautomatic handgun on the street, may face firearms and other charges ...

Bullet's impact echoes in school

By Clive McFarlane
Telegram & Gazette Staff

WORCESTER — English teacher Peter A. Pryburg's writing assignment to his pupils at Forest Grove Middle School yesterday was not scheduled ...

FIGURE 32

LYN'S VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF THUY'S HOUSE

169

the next four months, Lyn concentrated most of her efforts in her multi-media journal on her Thuy Vu Story (see Figure 33). As she worked, Lyn occasionally would see or hear something that she might want to write about later, so she maintained an idea list in the back of her multi-media journal. Lyn also noticed profound changes in herself and her classmates as she spent more time practicing writing and working in her multi-media journal. She felt different. She sought a more dynamic stance in the configuration of who she wanted to become as a literate individual and a young adult. Lyn shared the following insights with me in a formal interview.

"When I read over my multi-media journal entry from the first day of school, I said to myself I can write better than that, I know better words to use. I can change my writing to make it sound the way I want."

"The first few days of school my classmates and I thought the share center was for kindergarten students. But then as the days passed, once we heard what it was about, we got more into it. We learned not to judge each other. That made me more comfortable as a writer. I wrote about what I wanted to in my multi-media journal, and not necessarily what someone else might like."

"Outside our language arts classroom, it was a lot different. I went out there and people were picking 'rubber' fights. Rubber fights are not fist fights, but badmouthing, making fun of something. Teachers may have been walking in the halls, but there wasn't anyone to stop it. When we walked into language arts though, it [rubber fighting] wasn't allowed. A couple of people in my language arts class surprised me. I had Rick in my class. I was surprised that he wasn't making fun of anyone. I saw him becoming a writer. To me, he didn't look like someone who would become a writer."

170

FIGURE 33

LYN'S MULTI-MEDIA JOURNAL ENTRY ABOUT THUY

"Is Thuy alright?" I asked him, my
voice shakier with each breath. "I'm
afraid there's been an accident" he said,
the phrase becoming all too familiar
to me." We'll have to ask you a few
questions once we get ~~here~~ to the
Vu's house." Scared, I started crying, I didn't
know what was going on or whether
Thuy was all right or not." We pulled
into the driveway and got out of the
car. I headed toward the back door,
the one I use all the time when coming

171

"I also remember Courtney writing this good poem about angels. Just because she was a little overweight, a lot people didn't like her and would pick on her. I wasn't friends with her, but I wouldn't tease her. I just wouldn't say anything to her. I was indifferent. But after that poem, I said to Courtney in the share center, 'This is awesome. You are a good writer. This is a good poem.'"

"I saw myself as a more mature person as I practiced my writing more and more. In the hallways, I saw people doing immature things. And I used to do them too. But then I got into language arts, and I told myself, 'Okay, I have to calm down now. Got to behave.' I was more aware of who I was as a person. I knew that hurting others wasn't the thing to do."

"It helped that my teacher, Mrs. Pantano, was always calm. She wouldn't yell. When teachers yell, we don't really listen anyway. We say to each other, 'She must have had a bad day at home.' Since she was calm, we respected that more. I remember that she had a nice journal with art. She always wrote and shared. It was kinda cool. She wasn't walking around and watching. She was writing and reading with us."

"I learned in eighth grade language arts that the things that I read and wrote about, the things that I thought were important, I can use them in my life. Having time in class to write in my multi-media journal made me feel like I was doing better as a writer. In the past when I struggled over a word or a line, I would have just said, 'Forget this.' I would have removed the line completely or stopped writing. I wouldn't have tried to work it out. Just scribbles sometimes seemed to help me."

"Before when other writers asked, 'Look at this, does this sound good?' I would respond, 'Yeah,' because I didn't know how to help other writers. I

172

would say, 'It's great,' even if it didn't sound great. But now I know how to explain to other writers when something doesn't sound right or doesn't work."

"Another way that I changed was in how I express my opinions around others. Sometimes in the youth group I belong to at my church, we read stories and discuss things that are important to us. But now when we read stories and discuss things, I remember other stories I have read—and stories I have written. And I will tell them about it."

The Influence of the Multi-Media Journals on Students as Writers

In many ways, Jennifer's and Lyn's stories were unique to themselves. However, there were some common threads that run through Jennifer and Lyn's experiences that also emerged in the stories of other students elsewhere in this dissertation. With this in mind, I will review the overall general influences of the multi-media journals on students as writers as well as posit that multi-media journals assisted students in becoming writers.

Although these eighth grade language arts students varied in the degrees to which they engaged with their multi-media journals, most of them reported that working on their multi-media journals in the environment of our literate classroom community increased their enjoyment of writing (see Chapter Four). Consequently, they engaged with their writing practice on their own and more often. As I described in Chapter Four, I carefully planned and nurtured the environment of our literate classroom community in order to support the students' work in their multi-media journals. At particular times, I put aside planned lessons and/or activities so I could address my students' needs. According to Graves (1991), "if the classroom environment

173

is not carefully designed and structured. . . and if it is not continually adapted to meet their shifting needs, then students' natural urge to express themselves will be thwarted" (p.7). Although the overall school environment and my students' literacy histories made it difficult at times, my students and I held ourselves to high expectations for our literacy learning and growth and the success of our literate classroom community.

Talk was a significant means through which students assumed active stances and roles in our literate classroom community (see Chapter Five). This happened because talk is a socializing tool; my students and I were able to make our literacy practices explicit through talk (Gee, 1996). Heath (1991) posited that with "intensive classroom opportunities to surround learning with different kinds of talk and much talk about talk, children from homes and communities whose uses of language do not match those of school can achieve academic success" (p. 87). Many students in this dissertation study attributed part of their success as writers to the talk in our literate classroom community. The talk of our literate classroom community also elevated students' comfort and confidence levels concerning writing, helped them to begin and continue the writing practice in their multi-media journals, and strengthened their relationships within our literate classroom community.

The added dimension of other forms of expression in my students' multi-media journals, especially the visual arts, also helped students to feel more comfortable with their writing (see Chapter Six). The multi-media *option* of the multi-media journals gave more students *ways* to participate in the talk and literacy practices. Thus, more eighth grade language arts students were willing to bring their outside experiences, interests, and talents into our literate classroom community. Through the work in their multi-

174

media journals, they learned how to "move in close and pay attention to the smallest details" (Rief, 1999, p. 64) of their literate lives.

Over time many eighth grade language arts students took on characteristics attributed to writers. For instance, they connected work in their multi-media journals to other areas of their lives. They learned from their peers. Eventually, they constructed personal awarenesses of their learning, thinking, and writing processes. Many of them enlarged their repertoire of writing strategies, writing genres, and purposes for writing. Graves (1991) has suggested that this is the desired progression of learning in a literate classroom community. As exemplied by Jennifer's and Lyn' stories in this current chapter, several students began the writing in their multi-media journal with a focus on themselves. Next, they extended their learning from themselves to others. Finally, they moved back again to themselves so that they could reflect on their own processes, evaluate their own growth, and plan for more entries in their multi-media journals. In this way, the multi-media journals influenced students as writers because the journals enabled them to make learning connections, self-evaluate, and take charge of their own literacy growth (Hansen, 1998; Ernst, 1994).

As my eighth grade language arts students chose, wrote, and shared subjects they cared deeply about and became more active participants in our literate classroom community, many of them uncovered strong, previously unacknowledged, writing voices in their multi-media journals (Elbow, 1981). Voice is the "driving force" of the writing process and the imprint of ourselves on our writing (Graves, 1995). To ignore your writing voice, is to ignore who and what you are (Fletcher, 1993; Friere, 1970; Belenky, Clinchy,

175

Goldberger, & Turule, 1986).

Many eighth grade language arts students said that their writing voices, which now commanded the attention of their peers in our literate classroom community, caused them to see and feel about themselves differently. Some students also said that they saw others differently. Due to these new feelings and perceptions, students acted differently toward their peers in our literate classroom community, even crossing the dividing lines and social boundaries that had been established in the overall school community (Gee, 1996).

Furthermore, a few eighth grade language arts students like Jennifer surmised that the power of their voices was not limited to their multi-media journals and our literate classroom community. By engaging with their multi-media journals, many eighth grade language arts students learned that "the power of writing lies in what it does and what it can be used for" (Graves, 1991, p. 7). In these instances, the multi-media journals influenced students as writers because they perceived themselves and others in our literate classroom community as individuals who "lived literacy." Lastly, they understood that their writing can affect others inside and outside our literate classroom community.

These multi-media journals made worthy and significant contributions to the lives of my eighth grade writers. As my students' writing voices became stronger, so did they become stronger as literate individuals. The diverse contributions of these many voices in our language arts classroom strengthened and sustained us. Thus, my students were ready to step into the outside world as literate individuals because they had the support and power of our literate learning community behind them.

176

CHAPTER VIII

RESEARCH STUDY REFLECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The intention of this research study was to show how middle school writers used talk and multi-media journals to forge a literate classroom community, but the study became much larger than I anticipated when the learning experiences of our language arts classroom began to transform us as people. After discovering that my multi-media journal assisted me in "living literacy" in my own life, I urged my eighth grade students use their multi-media journals in a similar fashion to help them become writers. During the course of this research study, some middle school students reported that the availability of and access to other forms of expression as they wrote increased their comfort and confidence levels with writing, sustained their writing practice for longer periods, and helped them to put more of themselves in their writing. The classroom talk and close student-student and teacher-student relationships of our literate classroom community also aided students in learning meaningful ways to express and use literacy in their lives.

When I began this research study, I wanted to show how the multi-media journal was a useful tool for helping students become writers. At first, I did not consider the "community" implication of this research study because of the pedagogical assumptions that I brought to my research site. Although I had successfully used journal writing and writing workshop to teach writing to my students in the past, I felt I had underutilized talk and the visual arts. I had done some "teacher inquiry" into my former students'

177

learning in order to improve my teaching, but I was not a teacher researcher and I wanted to become one. In the beginning of this research study, I was not planning to look at classroom community because I did not have serious concerns about the overall school or classroom environment at my last teaching jobs.

As many teacher-researchers will tell, sometimes the best laid research plans need to be adjusted and changed to include the necessary, appropriate interventions for our students (see Chapter One). This was the case with my research study. When I returned to teaching last year to do teacher research, I was in many ways naive about what awaited me there. The middle school environment surprised me because I didn't expect it to be as hard as it was to build community there. I was an experienced middle school language arts teacher who had taught successfully in the past with few problems. Particular characteristics of the middle school environment took on new meaning and significance for me. I did not arrive at Spring Street Middle School with a political agenda in mind, but my agenda soon became political. As I listened carefully to my students' voices, my concern about the current educational conditions at Spring Street Middle School and elsewhere grew. The forces outside my classroom door were much more complicated than I ever thought. They contradicted my perceptions of what a learning community was. I couldn't lock my classroom door or ignore the outside forces in the overall school community as much as I would have liked.

I had learned from the members of the Women's Journal Group that journal writing and talk about journal writing should be situated in a safe, caring, and supportive learning environment. However, my choice to establish a safe, caring, and supportive learning environment for my eighth

178

grade language arts students, a "literate classroom community" as I named it, would have profound consequences for myself and my students. At times, I conflicted with my students and peers at Spring Street Middle School. Other times, I felt alone and isolated. I found I would have to devote much class time to explicit instruction, modeling, and classroom talk about the kinds of social behaviors that I desired for my students to emulate.

Since talk, visual arts, and writing were central to my instruction and students' activities, I also have described specific occasions in this dissertation during which my students and I used talk, visual arts, and writing to forge a literate classroom community. An outgrowth of our literate classroom community was that some students became responsible for and invested in their own literacy learning and growth. By becoming agents for their own learning and literacy growth, they were able see themselves as literate individuals. They were able to reach out and connect with others in our classroom community and elsewhere. They saw a purpose for their literacy beyond their school needs. Although the maintenance of our literate classroom community required a large commitment from me and my students, the resulting transformation from a disparate group of individuals into a literate classroom community was worth our effort, time, and struggle.

The ideas which led to our transformation such as journal writing, multiple literacies, talk, community, writing workshop, and living literacy are not new notions to many professionals in the field of reading and writing instruction. With this research study, I meant to enlarge the conversation about how reading and writing instructors weave such practices and beliefs into their literacy instruction and classroom communities. I learned that my school and classroom environments were not something I could continue to

179

take for granted. My students and I had to assume active roles in the forging of our literate classroom community. Certain conditions for a literate classroom community had to be established, maintained, and respected. Only then could my students and I undertake together important, meaningful, authentic literacy work, the kind of work that leads to the *transformative* learning experience.

I submit that more research in the reading and writing instruction field could focus on community. The more stories and models that literacy instructors have to draw from when constructing their own literate classroom communities, the better. As I suggested in Chapter One, teacher researchers must share their success and failure stories. Through the sharing of these stories, potential teacher researchers can locate themselves and begin to tell their own stories. The total of these stories establishes a firmer foundation for all progressive educators to stand upon and take risks. We are sometimes afraid to share what didn't work for us and our students, yet we must be honest about what sometimes happens in public school classrooms when we try to teach reading and writing. I realized I needed to tell about my struggles in order to convey how difficult it sometimes is to create the community we read and hear about so often.

I also foresee the following implications for this research study in the future. Over the six month research period, I observed that a few students resisted ever becoming members of our literate classroom community. I would like to give more time and thought to what happened to these resistant and/or reluctant students and why they weren't transformed by the experiences in our language arts classroom. Perhaps, this study would be a useful starting point in thinking about secondary school staff development

180

and the overall improvement of the school community. I also noticed that there were some issues of gender connected to the multi-media journal that I was unable to focus on in this document. Although my male students engaged with the visual arts as frequently as my female students did in their multi-media journals, my male students did not seem to use the visual arts as often to move toward regular writing practice. Perhaps, future research on the multi-media journal will inform me as to why this occurred. Additionally, I would like to extend and integrate the use of the multi-media journal into other content areas and investigate its interdisciplinary uses. I also envision the multi-media journal as an instrument of teacher research. I would like to form research support communities where teacher researchers use multi-media journals to further their students' learning, inquire into their own practices and beliefs, and assist their peers to live literacy.

The year I spent doing teacher research has left me with some bittersweet memories. Even now as I drive into Jordan and past Spring Street Middle School, I am left with a heavy heart. I am heavy with the knowledge of the current educational state of many middle schools across the United States. I am heavy with stories of the students I met and loved. I am heavy with all that teacher researchers like myself still need to do. "At the heart of it" is hope. I hope that I made and will continue to make a difference in some students' lives.

181

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185

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APPENDIX A

MULTI-MEDIA JOURNAL FIELD NOTES ENTRY

190

APPENDIX B

WEEKLY LETTER

November 10, 1997

Friends of mine who normally care less about school are often asking me to read some great stories they're written.   Judy

Dear Students:

Today, we begin the second term of school! We have a lot to learn together during the next ten weeks so we will be very, very busy! Your permanent teacher will be returning in about 15 weeks. She and her children stopped in to see me after school last Thursday. I held her infant daughter in the share center while her older daughter colored on the board! You will like her very much.

Looking back over the last ten weeks, I believe that our most important accomplishment is we have all changed or altered our views on literacy. I chose the below quotes for this week's letter because they are representative of many student views expressed. I hope you notice that what the students say about their literacy is most insightful and significant! Some have asked why I include so many student ideas in the weekly letters. I believe I have not taught you well if you leave here with the impression that you only receive knowledge from "teachers." Rather, you must learn from each other, as well as, learn to support each other's learning struggles. The "quotes" are a good way to recognize student successes—and struggles. Sometimes, students are afraid to share their learning difficulties, but these learning difficulties are the foundation for future growth! Susan told, "One thing I really like about the letters is how you quote students. I like knowing how my peers feel about things, but unless they're my friends, I would feel stupid going up to them and asking how they feel about free write and share center."

For instance, Dana wrote, "I think my writing has gotten so much better. You told us to write about things we know and that is what I've been doing. I've been writing great stories just from dreams and small little things that have happened at school."

Jessica said, "One very important thing that has changed for me is that I view Language Arts very differently than I used to. I actually see the "art" in language. I guess I never stopped to think of it that way before. I also feel I have learned a lot about the contributions we each make to one another as we share what we read and write."

Jyl suggested, "I sometimes have a hard time writing, but I find when I doodle or do something artistic, ideas start to pop into my head."

Jon explained, "Sometimes I only read a book if I have to. Lately, I enjoy putting off the tv and enjoying a good book."

Josh said, "I think 'new and improved literacy' is the way people change and evolve their skills. Not just necessarily making new skills, it's taking the old ones and making them better."

Andrew shared, "From day one, I could not figure out what to write about. Now when I have something to write I can write quicker. From last month, I have noticed a change in my reading. I can read and get into a book."

Eric relates, "The everyday writing and reading has already had an effect on my skills. I can now get ideas down on paper faster and without as much thought. Reading books has increased my vocabulary and helped my writing."

Remember, we are going to adjust our share center routines a bit this week. We all need to be more conscious of share center clean-up, and the daily helper must insure that everyone picks up at the end of the period. This is a writing week in class. Also, please pay special attention to your journal this week. Does it represent a multi-media approach? Are you cutting out things you like and pasting them in there? Are you recording your favorite sayings? Are there "artifacts" stuck in your journal that you could write about? This week, your mini-lessons will focus on improving vocabulary, practicing different ways of "reading the world," and sharing our portfolios. You will have fun. I promise!

191

APPENDIX C

RESEARCH PERMISSION LETTER

September 15, 1997

Dear Students and Parents,

This school year I will be looking carefully at the daily activities comprising the reading and writing curriculum in grade eight English. More specifically, I will be focusing much attention on the multi-media journals as part of my doctoral research for the University of New Hampshire. I have used journal writing with much success during previous years of teaching, and I now believe a closer examination of my students' literacy behaviors and learning strategies could benefit a wider audience of educators.

Occasionally, I am called upon to speak at educational workshops and conferences. During those times, I will often refer to and describe "exemplary models" of student learning as I have seen in my own classroom and others. As a public school teacher who also works educating pre-service teachers and graduate students at the university level, I feel strongly that good teachers must record and share in a scholarly manner what "works" for different children in different learning environments. I am very fortunate because of many of us who work in higher education do not receive the opportunity to return to full-time teaching in public schools for an extended period, let alone the chance the talk and write about "real" teaching experiences!

For this research study, I will observe students during most daily activities and take careful notes in a reflective teaching journal. Occasionally, I will ask individual students to meet with me during free periods for interviews and conversations about their learning processes which I might audiotape. (Any audiotapes will be transcribed, but will be kept private and used for general research purposes only. I will contact you personally by phone and/or letter if I find that I want to use an audiotape for public presentation.) At times, I'll make photocopies of students' work with their permission. Student contribution to this research study is always strictly voluntary and does not affect grades or standings in any way. In any reports using this research, pseudonyms will be used to protect privacy.

I appreciate your signature and the prompt return of the permission form. Also, throughout the school year if you have any insights into your child's literacy behaviors or learning strategies, please share them with me. Contact me at   ext. 114 to talk or to express any concerns or questions.

Sincerely,

Julie Pantano
Teacher, Grade 8 English   Principal

192

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Please review the following questions for our hour interview. I will call to confirm our interview date and time. You can reach me at this phone number:

A) In what ways do the multi-media journals contribute to the students' membership in a literate classroom community?

1. Describe the overall school community at WB. What is a typical school day like? What are the students like? How do they get along with their teachers and each other?

2. Have you ever felt alone during a learning experience? Have you ever felt valued during a learning experience? Describe these experiences from elementary and middle school.

3. What is literacy? Have your ideas on literacy changed? How does it affect you and others?

4. How would you describe the classroom community of eighth grade language arts in the beginning? What about later? What did your teacher do and/or say that made a difference in the classroom community? What did other students do and/or say that made a difference?

5. What things you remember about journal writing in eighth grade language arts?

B) In what ways do students use visual arts to influence membership in the classroom literate community?

1. Did you ever use art and/or an art kit while writing in your multi-media journal for language arts?

2. How does art help you in your writing? What about other learning?

C) In what ways does the student talk surrounding the multi-media journals influence their membership in the classroom literate community?

1. What do you remember about the share center?

2. What did your teacher and other students talk about after writing in their journals? How did this talk affect you?

D) In what ways do the students' multi-media journals influence them as writers, which, in turn, influences their role/standing in the classroom literate community?

1. When did you become a "reader and writer of the world?"

2. What do those words mean to you? What other important words do you remember from eight grade language arts?

3. Before eight grade language arts, were you able to solve writing writing difficulties on your own? Can you now? Are you able to help other students with their writing difficulties?

4. How do you view yourself as a writer? How do you believe other people in eighth grade language arts viewed you as a writer?
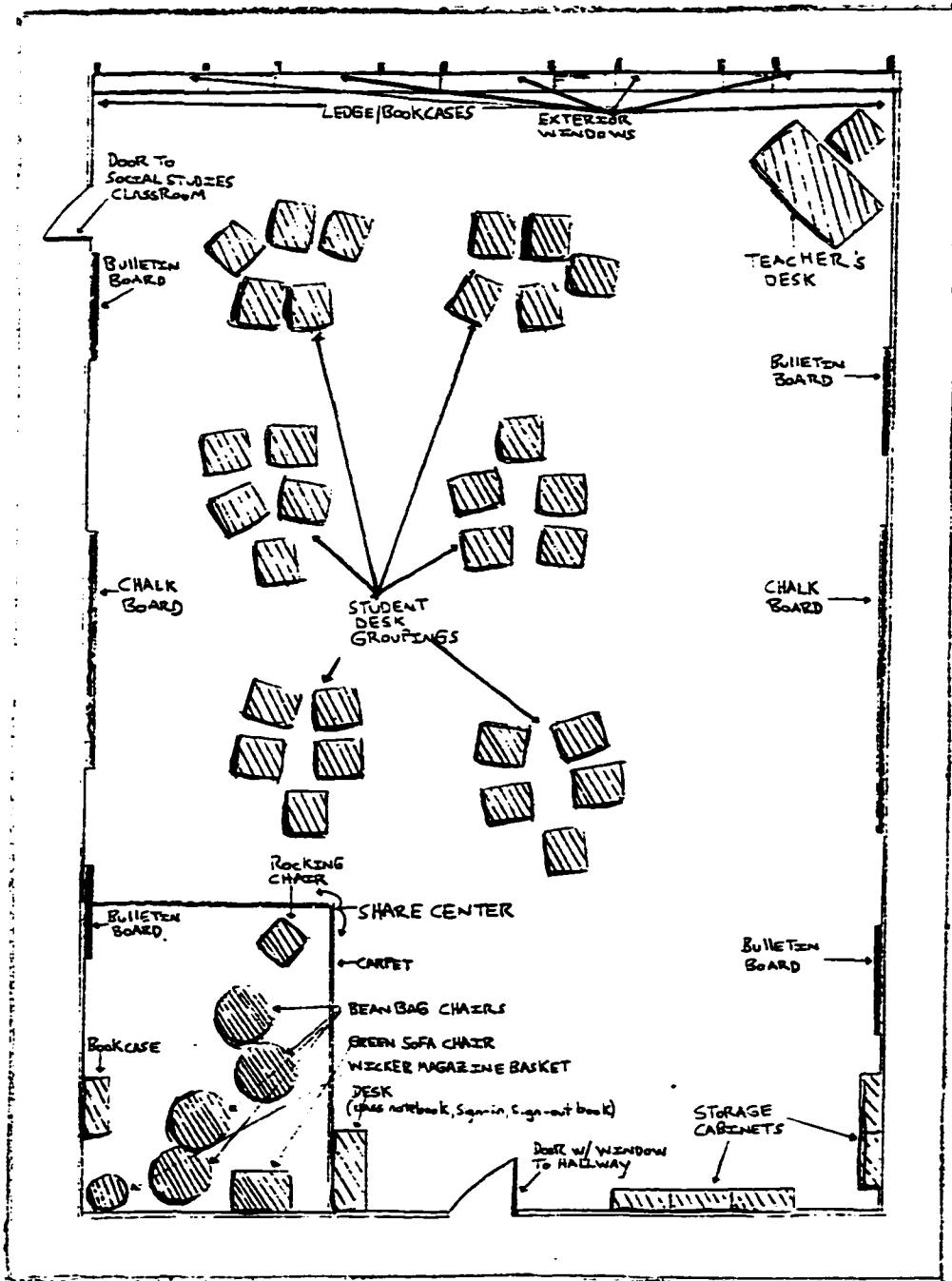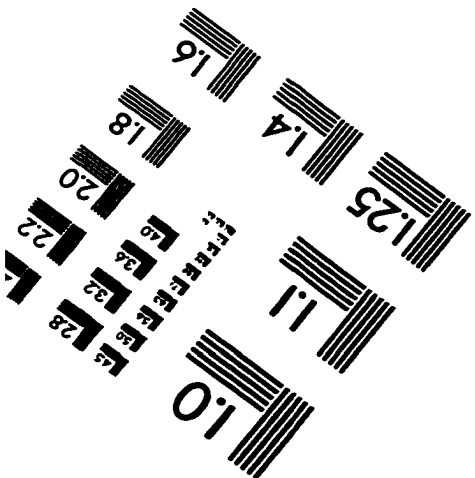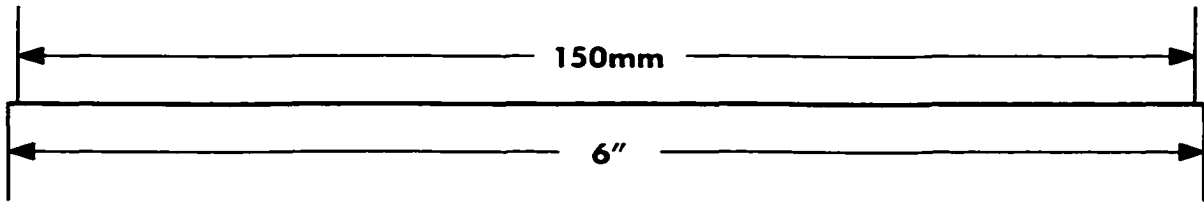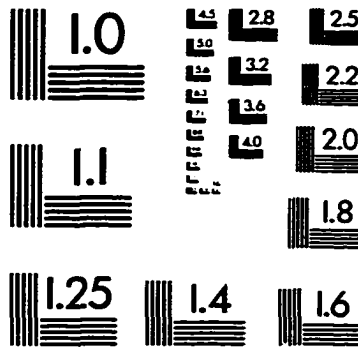
193

APPENDIX E

CLASSROOM LAYOUT

IMAGE EVALUATION
TEST TARGET (QA-3)

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      3.2   2.2
      3.6
      4.0   2.0
            1.8
1.1

1.25   1.4   1.6

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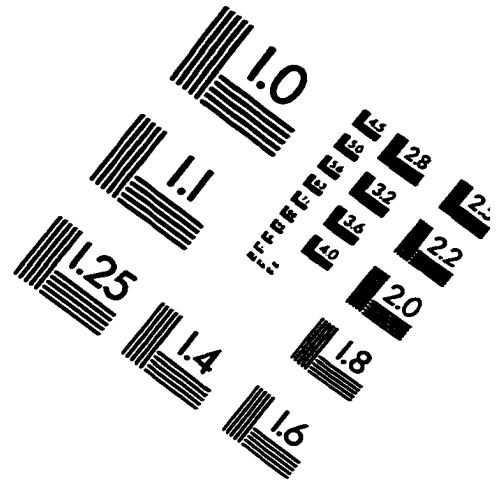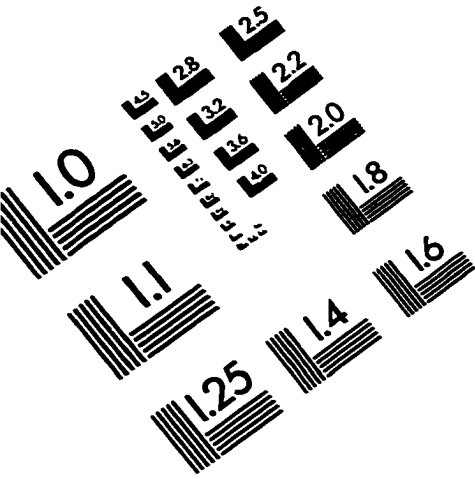
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