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# Understanding Choice As A Dimension Of Literature Based Reading Instruction

Barbara Wonder Olson

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UNDERSTANDING CHOICE AS A DIMENSION OF LITERATURE  
BASED READING INSTRUCTION

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Grand Forks, North Dakota

July  
1998

This dissertation, submitted by Barbara Wonder Olson in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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This dissertation meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

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Title            Understanding Choice as a Dimension of Literature Based  
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Department    Teaching and Learning

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Signature Barbara W. Olson

Date June 30, 1998

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## ABSTRACT

Literacy instruction is supported by educational theories of teaching and learning that put students at the center of the curriculum. In learner-centered classrooms students are actively involved in authentic reading and writing that allows them the autonomy to read and write for their own purposes. In these settings teachers share the responsibility for learning with students and create learning environments that support student ownership.

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate what happened in an elementary classroom when students were given literacy choices. This qualitative study provided an in-depth picture of literacy in a fourth grade classroom. It described the planning and organizational structure used by the teacher, as well as her perceptions of how she influenced and facilitated choice within the curriculum. Student interviews provided insight into their perceptions of literacy choices.

Data for this study came from classroom observations, classroom artifacts, and teacher and student interviews. Observations in the classroom were conducted for four months and occurred during reading, writers' workshop, social studies, sustained silent reading, and while students were at the school library. The student and teacher interviews were all completed at various times throughout the study.

As the data were analyzed, common themes emerged that resulted in the conclusions of this study. Three major assertions came from the data: (1) Choice is woven throughout the curriculum and does not lie solely in students' book choices; (2) when students were able to make choices in their learning, off-task behavior was minimal; and (3) students rely on the teacher's knowledge of good literature as they make their personal book choices.

This study has direct educational implications for literacy instruction. As teachers reconsider their role in the classroom they make a commitment to creating a balance between teacher support and guidance and student ownership. As they make this paradigm shift they create conditions that permit students to assume responsibility for their learning and make choices in reading to suit their own needs and interests.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

As a kindergartner, Shoshana had endured a very long year of a teacher-controlled skill-and-drill regimen that had her sitting in her seat, working on stacks of dittos. She was delighted when she entered first grade and encountered a teacher who believed in giving kids a say in planning their day. Shoshana bounded home after that first day of school and announced to her mother, "Guess what! We had this much work"--and she held her hands two inches apart. Then she stretched her arms out wide--"and all the rest was choosing!"

(Goodman, Bird, & Goodman, 1991, p. 21)

Shoshana and learners of all ages come to school eager to learn and motivated in their desire to become readers. Teachers support these learners as they acquire reading habits that we as adult readers have: the ability to choose books to read, numerous strategies used in the context of reading, ways of talking about the books they are reading, and, most importantly, a personal identity as a reader. Teachers strive to continually engage students in meaningful literacy activities and to organize reading instruction that kindles a sense of joy and ownership for readers (Reutzel & Cooter, 1991; Tierney, Readence, & Dishner, 1995).

"We want children not just to learn how to read, but to become readers" (Peterson & Eeds, 1990, p. 6). Hansen (1987) defines a reader as a

person who decides what to read. She believes that the reading process begins when a reader chooses a book, and that ownership is a natural occurrence in the reading process. Teachers of reading strive to help readers become independent. Children attain independence if we allow them the autonomy to make choices about what they will read (Atwell, 1987; Goodman, 1986; Sakrison, 1992; Weaver, 1994).

Giving readers the opportunity of self-selection of literature involves a responsibility on the part of teachers. It is important for the teacher to provide a wide variety of choices as well as numerous books from which to choose. It is not, however, enough to merely provide choices; children need guidance and support as they learn the process of selecting material appropriate to their interests, abilities, and needs (Butler & Turbill, 1984; Hagerty, 1992). Providing the necessary support and the freedom of choice will assure that reading is meaningful and that students share in the responsibility for their own learning (Jackson & Pillow, 1992; Miller, 1990).

“Current theory and practice in literacy education emphasizes the importance of student independence, autonomy, and choice--what has commonly been referred to as ‘ownership’” (Dudley-Marling & Searle, 1995, p. v). There is a delicate relationship between student ownership and teacher support and guidance. Good teaching involves knowing how much support to give without taking control of learning from the learner (Goodman et al., 1991). Teachers struggle to achieve a balance between teacher support and student control because they know that without their support students will find it difficult to exercise much control over their learning (Dudley-Marling, 1992).

Whole language educators and those who support the constructivist perspective (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991; Goodman, 1996; Weaver, 1994) believe that meaningful learning will always depend on the degree to which learners are able to make learning their own. They stress the importance of students having some measure of control over what they read and write, and that students who have control over their own learning, those who choose their own reading materials, will become lifelong readers. "If we want children to become lifelong readers, we need to approach reading from an authentic perspective" (Tierney et al., 1995, p. 82).

Reutzel and Cooter (1991) state four criteria in organizing for effective reading instruction:

1. Students should have ownership of their time.
2. Classroom environment and daily routine must encourage reading as a primary activity integrated with writing, speaking, and listening.
3. The teacher must communicate the importance of reading by setting an example.
4. There should be opportunities for regular demonstrations of reading strategies, for sharing in the reading process, and for evaluating individual reading progress.

According to Atwell (1987), the primary goal for teachers of reading should be the development of skilled readers who have positive attitudes toward reading, high levels of book involvement, and high achievement in reading ability. Young readers need ample time to develop fluency and to learn the value of reading. Children need choices in reading to suit their needs and interests, and opportunities to share responses and learn from

other readers in a supportive literary environment. "Selecting one's own books and reading them in school is the wellspring of student literacy and literary appreciation" (Atwell, 1998, p. 34). Giving children a say in decisions about the literature they will read and the responses they make will assure that they will grow to appreciate literature.

Children read more, comprehend better, read more fluently, and value books to a greater degree when we let them choose to read (Atwell, 1987). "The paths individual children take to literature are unique and personal for each child" (Sakrison, 1992, p. 61). Teachers who understand this concept are ones who allow and encourage children to take ownership of what they read through the literacy choices they make.

#### Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions are important:  
Whole language. A professional theory in practice. It uses learner-focused curricula and holds to a conception of the "whole child," of the active learner, of the classroom as a community, and of teachers who learn and learners who teach (Edelsky et al., 1991).

Choice. To select freely and after consideration (Mish, 1996).

Authentic. Classroom-based literacy lessons which are based on real-world reading and writing experiences (Kucer, 1991).

Constructivism. "Learners are active creators of knowledge. The learner gains meaning from imposing his or her own experiences on the text and checking possible interpretations against past experiences" (Heald-Taylor, 1996, p. 458).

Sociopsycholinguistics. The construction of meaning from language that draws upon the individual's unique constellation of prior knowledge, experience, background, and social contexts (Weaver, 1994).

Zone of proximal development. "The discrepancy between a child's actual mental age and the level he reaches in solving problems with assistance" (Vygotsky, as cited in Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner, & Souberman, 1978, p. 187).

Scaffolding. "The support a teacher uses to help students accomplish a task they could not do alone" (Graves, Watts, & Graves, 1994, p. 44).

Negotiation. "The involvement of students in decisions about their learning" (Wilson & Wing Jan, 1993, p. 55).

Trade books. Children's literature that is published by companies other than textbook companies.

### Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate what happens in a classroom when students are given literacy choices. As I examined the reading program in this particular classroom the following questions served as my guide:

1. What are the unique elements of this teacher's reading program?
2. How are some key principles of literature-based programs interpreted by this teacher? (response, self-selection, ownership, self-pacing, cooperation, social interaction) How does this reflect what the teacher believes about how students learn?
3. What are the perceptions of the students with regard to literacy choices?

4. What does the teacher do to establish a sense of community within the classroom and how does that affect literacy choices?

### Limitations

Because of the unique configuration of the classroom and the teacher's personal philosophy of teaching, the implications for teaching may not be generalizable to all classrooms.

My extensive teaching experience, 20 years, my constructivist philosophy, and the importance I place on giving students choices cannot help but affect my point of view as I analyze the data.

### Organization of the Study

Chapter I contains overview of student choice, ownership, and autonomy within an elementary school classroom. It provides a definition of terms and lays out the purpose of the study and its limitations.

In Chapter II the professional literature is reviewed and the theoretical framework for this study is provided. It reviews the theories that support teaching and learning in classrooms where students are actively involved and take responsibility for their own learning and discusses the implications for teaching practice.

The methodology used for this study is described in Chapter III. The chapter begins with my rationale for choosing a qualitative study and a discussion of reliability and validity within the study. I describe the setting and key informants as well as my procedure for data gathering and analysis.

In Chapter IV, the data are brought to life through the voices of the teacher and children in the classroom and from my observations in the



classroom as recorded in my fieldnotes. The chapter begins with a picture of the teacher's planning and organizational structure. The picture continues with thick description of the day to day happenings of reading/language arts. Finally, the children's voices are heard as they talk about themselves with regard to reading, both in and out of the school setting.

The reader is provided closure to the study as the themes that have emerged are discussed in Chapter V. Educational implications and recommendations for further research conclude this chapter.

### Summary

"If we want children to become lifelong readers, we need to approach reading from an authentic perspective" (Tierney et al., 1995, p. 82). To bring the real world of reading into the classroom and to provide a setting that allows students to have meaningful experiences in reading and writing, we as teachers must allow students to have the freedom of self-selection of literature. Through this study I hope to provide a sense of the importance of children making literacy choices as they become real readers.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter a review of the literature is presented related to the theories that support teaching and learning in classrooms where students are actively involved in making choices and taking responsibility for their own learning. The first section of this chapter contains a review of the literature as it pertains to the theories of the social nature of learning, the active role of the learner in constructing meaning, and the conditions which support these theories. The literature revolving around the implications of these theories as they are incorporated into teaching practice is reviewed in the second section of this chapter.

#### Theoretical Background

Vygotsky (1978) viewed learning as a social process that begins long before children attend school. His theory of learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them. The relationship between the learning of the individual and the influences of the social context are interrelated with the child's developmental level through the zone of proximal development.

Vygotsky (1978) defines the zone of proximal development 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). An essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development. Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers (Livdahl, 1991). Once these processes are internalized, they become part of the child's independent developmental achievement. In other words, what a child can do with assistance today (what is in the zone of proximal development, or ZPD), he will be able to do by himself tomorrow.

Tharp and Gallimore (1988) offer a general definition of teaching as a process of assisted performance. "Teaching can be said to occur when assistance is offered at points in the ZPD at which performance requires assistance" (p. 31). Teaching can be understood as assisted performance of apprentices in joint activity with experts. The zone of proximal development can be divided into four stages:

- Stage One: Performance is assisted by more capable others. During this stage the teacher is structuring the learning situations and the level of help that is provided. It should be noted that the assistance given to learners does not always come from the teacher, but very often comes from parents, siblings, and peers. During this stage there is a steady decline of teacher responsibility for learning and the child begins to influence the level of help provided.
- Stage Two: Performance is assisted by the learner. In this stage the learner carries out tasks himself, but still asks for assistance. Performance may not be fully developed or internalized.

- Stage Three: Performance is developed, automatized and fossilized. At this stage the learner moves into the actual developmental level for the performance and no outside assistance is needed. At this stage when performance is automatized, outside assistance may be a hindrance to the learner.
- Stage Four: De-automatization of performance leads to recursion back through the zone of proximal development. There is a recurrent cycle of self-assistance to other-assistance. During this stage learners move freely through all stages as they self-regulate the assistance they need (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

Vygotsky's zone of proximal development emphasizes both the important role teachers play in students' learning and the social aspects of learning. It stresses the importance of collaboration and acknowledges that what is learned about anything always includes the social relationships that surround the learning (Edelsky et al., 1991; Goodman, 1992; Holdaway, 1979; Tompkins, 1997).

The concept of supporting learners in achieving intended outcomes has been termed "scaffolding" (Applebee & Langer, 1983; Graves et al., 1994; Searle, 1995; Weaver, 1994). In the process of scaffolding the structure provided by the teacher is gradually internalized by the learner who eventually learns to carry through similar tasks independently. Scaffolding enables teachers to stretch students' thinking and performance as they move students toward independence. Applebee and Langer (1983) suggest that teachers use a set of criteria which emphasizes five aspects of natural language learning for judging the appropriateness of instructional scaffolding:

- Intentionality: The task has a clear overall purpose.
- Appropriateness: Instructional tasks pose problems that can be solved with help but which students could not successfully complete on their own.
- Structure: Activities are structured around a model of appropriate approaches to the task and lead to a natural sequence of thought and language.
- Collaboration: The teacher's response to student work recasts and expands upon the students' efforts without rejecting what they have accomplished on their own. The teacher's primary role is collaborative rather than evaluative.
- Internalization: External scaffolding for the activity is gradually withdrawn as the patterns are internalized by the students. (p. 170)

Scaffolding allows teachers to intervene in an environment and provide support in the form of modeling, cueing, coaching, feedback, direct instruction, questioning, and cognitive structuring (Graves, Graves, & Braaten, 1996). The process of scaffolding directly supports Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development. As teachers become knowledgeable about a child's zone of proximal development and provide the appropriate scaffolds, an important link is made between learning theory and pedagogy.

It is important to note that scaffolds are temporary supports and that eventually the scaffolding must be dismantled so that learners take ownership of their own learning (Rhodes, 1995). The gradual release of responsibility model suggests that teachers support learners as they gradually move away from the teacher and that teachers relinquish some of their power

to increase the responsibility of students for their own thinking and learning (Graves et al., 1994).

Cambourne (1988, 1995) in his efforts to promote literacy learning in schools has identified a set of conditions for learning that has sprung from his research on language learning in natural, everyday contexts. His early research on how children acquire language suggested that the acquisition of oral language is contingent upon environmental factors (conditions). He believed that if these conditions could be identified they could be applied to literacy learning and translated into classroom practice. The conditions for learning as they apply to literacy learning are:

- Immersion: Learners need to be immersed in text of all kinds.
- Demonstration: Learners need to receive many demonstrations of how texts are constructed and used.
- Expectation: Expectations of learners and their significant others are powerful coercers of behavior. There must be an expectation that learning can and will occur.
- Engagement: Learners must engage with demonstrations.  
Engagement occurs when learners believe that they are capable of learning, when they see a clear purpose for learning, and when they feel that they can attempt learning without fear of incorrect attempts.
- Responsibility: Learners need to make their own decisions about when, how, and what conventions they will attend to and internalize in any learning task.
- Employment: Learners must have time and opportunities to use their developing skills.

- Response: Learners must have relevant, appropriate, and timely response (feedback) as they interact in learning situations.
- Approximations: Learners must know that their approximations (mistakes) will be accepted and valued (Cambourne, 1988, 1995; Glessner, 1997; Weaver, 1994).

The interaction of thought and language and specifically how individuals learn and use language has been an area of common concern for both psychologists and linguists. Their research has provided us with a framework for a psycholinguistic model of teaching reading (Smith, 1978). The psycholinguistic model of reading rejects the notion that reading is a separate assortment of skills, but rather is an active process that is language and meaning centered.

Building on this theory of reading, the sociopsycholinguist's view of reading emphasizes the whole-to-part nature of language processing, the active role of the reader, and the frequently social nature of the reading process. Weaver (1994) offers this view of reading from a sociopsycholinguistic perspective:

Reading is a transaction between the mind (schema and personal contexts) of the reader and the language of the text, in a particular situational and social context. Thus, reading means bringing meaning to a text in order to get meaning from it. And perhaps most crucially, learning to read means learning to bring meaning to a text in order to construct meaning. (p. 42)

Reading is not merely a psycholinguistic process involving thought and language, but rather is a sociopsycholinguistic process because the transaction occurs within a social context. In an elementary school classroom

these contexts would include shared book experience, literature study groups, reading clubs, and reading with a partner. Tompkins (1997) identifies the key concepts of a sociopsycholinguistic view of reading as they apply to teaching and learning:

- Thought and language are interrelated.
- Social interaction is important in learning.
- Teachers provide scaffolds for students.
- Teachers plan instruction based on students' zone of proximal development. (p. 14)

The social nature of language and the reading process can be understood as a reader reads by himself as well. The potential always exists for sharing what is read with others. This eventual sharing may affect how a reader approaches a particular reading experience (Edelsky et al., 1991; Weaver, 1994).

"A person becomes a reader by virtue of a relationship with a text" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 116). Rosenblatt describes reading as a reciprocal or circular relationship between the reader and the text. She believes that the reader brings to the text all of his personal experiences along with the influence of the world around him. Her book, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, describes her transactional theory of reading as the ongoing transaction between the reader and the text. The transaction, or "poem," is the meaning that each individual creates. Rosenblatt uses the analogy of a musical performance. Even though the notes on the page of music are the same, no two musicians would create exactly the same sound. This transactional view of reading views students as already having rich prior knowledge and background, ample experience, and an innate ability and inclination to



construct their own knowledge (Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993; Weaver, 1994). "What readers bring to any act of reading is as important for successful reading as anything they use from the published text" (Goodman, 1996. p. 91).

The act of reading involves a continuous stream of choices on the readers' part. As readers approach the reading of a text they focus their attention in different ways. This focus of attention is the reader's stance. Early in the reading process a reader selects a general stance, a mental set, that provides the framework for the reading. If a reader is reading efferently, he will focus his attention on what is to be analyzed, abstracted, and retained after the reading, such as the information in the text. An aesthetic stance refers to the attention to the feelings the text arouses in the reader. It is associated with personal understanding and responses and reading for pleasure (Cox & Zarillo, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1978; Tompkins, 1997). It is important to note that the terms efferent and aesthetic refer to the reader's stance and not to the type of text that is read.

Efferent and aesthetic reading are not mutually exclusive. Despite the intentions of the author, any text may be read both efferently and aesthetically as the reader moves back and forth between the two stances. When students read novels, they usually read aesthetically as they become involved with the plot of the story and the lives of the characters. As teachers use these novels as a means of teaching literary elements, skills, and strategies, they ask students to read efferently for specific information, providing a mingling of the two stances.

This transactional view of reading is closely aligned with the more global learning theory of constructivism that describes how we come to know and understand the world around us. Constructivists believe that learning is

a process during which the learner actively constructs new knowledge and that knowledge is acquired as learners interact with the environment and modify their understandings. The key principles of constructivism are that learning is an active, self-regulatory process (Cox & Zarillo, 1993; Goodman et al., 1991; Heald-Taylor, 1996).

### Theory Into Practice

These theories of learning can all be said to embrace the transactional model of learning (Calkins, 1986; Weaver, 1990). The paradigm shift from a transmission model of learning (which embraces the concept of forming habits of learning and practicing and memorizing skills and information) to the transaction model is reflected in the principles of whole language. Goodman (1992) describes whole language as “a dynamic, evolving grassroots movement” (p. 48) based on a sound theoretical foundation of how language, thought, and knowledge develop holistically and in support of each other. It provides a philosophical construct for teaching and the role of teachers based on a learner-centered view of the curriculum (Goodman, 1986). Weaver (1994) characterizes whole language as theory in practice, practicable theory, and as a belief system open to new insights and continually evolving.

Since the coining of the term “whole language” at the beginning of the whole language “movement,” the true definition of whole language has been elusive at best. Rather than trying to arrive at that perfect definition it would be better to look at whole language within the framework of the principles that characterize it:

- When learning is perceived as functional to and purposeful for the learner, it is more likely to endure. Reading and writing are learned

through real reading and writing. Authentic reading and writing experiences that provide a real purpose and are functional are the basis for instruction. The learning belongs to the learner (Goodman, 1986).

- Process, product, and content are all interrelated. Although processes are of primary interest to whole language educators, products and content are the visible means to examine processes.
- There is a respect for and trust of learners. A community of learners exists in which everyone feels free to take risks without fear of negative consequences. There is true collaboration where everyone supports the learning of others.
- Direct and indirect instruction occurs in the context of the whole, and in the context of students' needs and interests.
- Individual learning is promoted by social collaboration.
- The construction of meaning is always the goal and is constructed by learners as they actively interact with people, books, and materials (Edelsky et al., 1991; Goodman, 1986, 1992; Goodman et al., 1991; Weaver, 1990, 1994).

The role of the teacher in whole language classrooms is very different from that of more traditional classrooms (Edelsky, Draper, & Smith, 1983). In whole language classrooms the teacher takes on the role of mentor, collaborator, and facilitator. She supports learning without controlling it and realizes that there is a delicate balance between knowing how much support to give without taking control of learning from the learner (Goodman et al., 1991).

Vygotsky (1978) offered a view of teachers as mediators who facilitate learners' transaction with the world. Whole language teachers embrace and accept this view of their role. They support learning, but do not see themselves as controlling it (Goodman, 1992).

Teachers in whole language classrooms have faith in themselves as teachers and their students as learners, always putting the learner at the center of the curriculum. This does not mean that the teacher assumes less of a role, but rather that her role becomes one of an initiator, using professional knowledge and the art of teaching to create exciting and inviting situations and contexts for learning to occur.

Whole language teachers know their students well. They know how to create conditions that will cause learners to exhibit and make the most of their zone of proximal development, and they know when students reach independent learning levels so that teacher support can be withdrawn (Goodman et al., 1991; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978).

In whole language classrooms the real curriculum is what happens to each learner. Students see themselves as capable of learning and in control of their own learning. They develop a strong sense of themselves as readers and writers because they make their own reading and writing choices. These classrooms are shaped by the teacher's beliefs about how children learn best, by their love and knowledge of literature, and by their awareness of children's interests (Peterson & Eeds, 1990).

Whole language philosophy offers teachers and students more control over learning. It is not a question of who is in control, but rather a sharing of control between teacher and learner. Whole language advocates believe that literacy lessons are to be negotiations between and among students and

teachers (Shannon, 1991) and that the curriculum is negotiated as teachers and children learn together (Weaver, 1990).

Wilson and Wing Jan (1993) refer to negotiation as “the involvement of students in decisions about their learning. It entails them becoming aware of their learning and of the conditions they require to become more effective learners” (p. 55). In classrooms today more and more teachers are guiding students to make decisions about what, when, and how learning should take place. This act of negotiation helps to develop learners who take responsibility for their learning. As teachers involve students in literature study the act of negotiation is at work. Students make an initial choice of a piece of literature and then join a group of their peers to begin the study. This group takes the responsibility for making decisions about such things as the management of the group, the schedule for reading the book, the focus of the discussion, and responding to what was read.

The focus of the negotiation of the curriculum is bringing about the best possible learning for the learners. Cook (1992) emphasizes the importance of negotiating curriculum with students. He states, “Learners will work harder and learn better, and what they learn will mean more to them, if they are discovering their own ideas, asking their own questions and fighting hard to answer them for themselves” (p. 16).

In traditional classrooms the teacher is seen as the sole authority figure and in control of what will be learned, and when and how it will be learned. As students are brought into the picture and curriculum becomes learner-centered, teachers must ensure that they are involved in their own learning. While it is true that the teacher has the major responsibility for broad curricular objectives, and that these are non-negotiable, certain aspects

of learning can be negotiated. Wilson and Wing Jan (1993) offer suggestions for negotiable aspects of learning. Students should have input into the physical organization of the classroom. Seating arrangements, the placement of furniture, the storage of resources, and personal material storage should all be planned between teachers and students. Working conditions within the classroom, such as group membership, classroom rules and procedure, and the organization of routines, must be worked out with input from both teacher and students. Other aspects of learning such as topics for personal investigations, the structuring of learning situations, ways of recording, presenting, and assessing work, and the setting of goals should all be negotiated with students.

Onore (1992) offers a word of caution about the negotiation of the curriculum. Because the act of negotiation is such a powerful way of engaging students in their own learning, it too easily could become simply a better way to control students and their learning. If teachers are not committed to the concept of a democratic classroom, and to helping students become independent learners, the negotiation of the curriculum can become "another way to seize and maintain power over students" (p. 192). "In order to negotiate, there has to be a strong understanding of your role as teacher, a curriculum which invites inquiry, and knowledge about your students and an understanding of their role as fellow inquirers" (Siegel & Skelly, 1992, p. 84).

Boomer (1992) refers to the negotiations that we engage in with students as "the dance between teacher and taught which represents a continuing negotiation of meaning" (p. 96). One of the advantages to negotiation, according to Wilson and Wing Jan (1993), is that it leads to a

sense of ownership, which in turn helps learners to develop a fuller commitment to their own learning within the choices they make.

Current theory and practice in literacy education emphasizes the importance of student independence, autonomy, and choice--what has commonly been referred to as ownership (Atwell, 1987; Edelsky et al., 1991; Goodman, 1986; Routman, 1991). The concept of ownership has been closely tied with the authoring cycle and the importance of student ownership of their topics, audience, and the students' personal investment in their writing (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983, 1994; Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996). Writing theorists identify ownership as central to students' growth as writers. The view of writing as a process owned by the writer has direct implications for literacy education and the importance of fostering a climate that provides for student ownership.

Finding a good balance between teacher support and guidance and student ownership is vital. Student ownership does not mean that teachers withdraw their support for student learning. In fact, the withdrawal of support may make it difficult for students to make learning their own. "Ownership isn't something we can give to our students; however, even if we can't give it, we can create conditions that permit students opportunities to assume responsibility for decisions affecting their learning" (Dudley-Marling & Searle, 1995, p. 14). These conditions ensure that learners are able to inquire independently about everything that interests them, choose to read and write for their own purposes, find and use resources to seek the knowledge and information they desire, and that they read and write to learn, reflect, think, modify their thinking, and take new action (Routman, 1996). "If learners have basically made their new understanding through

their own constructivist efforts, then--so the thinking goes--their learning belongs to them" (Dillon et al., 1995, p. 191).

The concept of ownership can be closely linked with authenticity which is an important aspect of the literacy environment. According to Kucer (1991), "the ability to link classroom-based literacy lessons with real-world, authentic reading and writing experiences is critical if our instruction is to promote literacy development in the children we teach" (p. 532). Children should be engaged in reading and writing that is genuine and real and that focuses on meaning construction. Newmann and Wehlage (1993) suggest that authenticity is achieved if students construct meaning and produce knowledge, use disciplined inquiry to construct meaning, and their work has value and meaning beyond success in school.

Cronin (1993) encourages teachers to think of authenticity as existing on a continuum and to gradually move in a more authentic direction along that continuum remembering that the goal is to let students encounter and master situations that resemble real life. Rhodes and Shanklin (1993) suggest three ways for teachers to begin to increase the authenticity of reading and writing in the classroom: (1) provide students with literacy materials and opportunities that let them use language cues in natural social contexts, (2) provide students with choices, and (3) follow students' leads.

Moving toward more authentic literacy instruction means that children will be engaged in reading "real literature." Proponents of literature based reading instruction believe that the teaching of reading should be a holistic endeavor designed to immerse children in reading real books for functional purposes (Hiebert & Colt, 1989). "If we want children to become lifelong readers, we need to approach reading from an authentic perspective"



(Tierney et al., 1995, p. 82). A comprehensive literature based approach to reading instruction attempts to engage students in meaningful literacy activities and to develop strategic approaches to reading. Literature based methods support students as they acquire the same kinds of reading habits that good adult readers have: the ability to choose books to read, numerous strategies used in the context of reading, ways of talking about the books they are reading, and, most importantly, personal identity as a reader (Heald-Taylor, 1996; Hiebert & Colt, 1989; Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993; Tierney et al., 1995; Zarillo, 1989).

Atwell (1987) states the primary goal for teachers of reading should be the development of readers who have positive attitudes toward reading, high levels of book involvement, and high achievement in reading ability. According to Atwell, readers need ample time to develop fluency and learn the value of reading. "We want children not just to learn how to read, but to become readers" (Peterson & Eeds, 1990, p. 6). Children need choices in reading to suit their needs and interests, and opportunities to share responses and learn from other readers in a supportive literary environment. "Choice is a central element as students use self-determined reasons and relevant purposes to decide upon their work and interactions" (Kieffer & Morrison, 1994, p. 411).

Hansen (1987) defines a reader as a person who decides what to read. She believes that the reading process begins when a reader chooses a book. Atwell (1987) found that children read more, comprehend better, read more fluently, and value books to a greater degree when they have the ability to make choices about what they read. Providing children with the opportunity

of self-selection of literature allows students to personalize literacy by permitting students to tailor it to their own interests and needs.

Students who have control over their own learning and choose their own reading materials will become lifelong readers because they understand that there is a reason for becoming proficient at it. Through self-selection, self-pacing, sharing, listening, and spending significant amounts of time reading, children learn what reading is about (Goodman et al., 1991; Hagerty, 1992).

Giving readers the opportunity of self-selection of literature involves a responsibility on the part of teachers. According to Reutzel and Cooter (1991), organizing reading instruction that supports learners as they assume ownership in and responsibility for their learning should be guided by the following criteria:

- Students should have ownership of their time.
- Classroom environment and daily routine must encourage reading as a primary activity integrated with writing, speaking, and listening.
- The teacher must communicate the importance of reading by setting an example.
- There should be opportunities for regular demonstrations of reading strategies, for sharing in the reading process, and for evaluating individual reading progress.

The message that teachers give to students about the value of reading has a powerful impact on students. Students taught in a classroom organized to support reading and writing will become readers and writers (Goodman et al., 1991) and further will attain independence if we allow them the

autonomy to make choices about what they will read (Atwell, 1987; Goodman, 1986; Sakrison, 1992; Weaver, 1994).

“We want children to take ownership of their own learning and responsibility for their own reading” (Rhodes, 1995, p. 30), but simply giving students the gift of choice is not enough. Children need guidance and support as they learn the process of selecting material appropriate to their interests, abilities, and needs (Butler & Turbill, 1984; Hagerty, 1992). Teachers guide readers in choosing their own books in many ways: They use a read aloud time to share quality literature with their students and to introduce different genres and authors, they introduce students to the books in the classroom library, they teach students to choose books at their own reading level, and they provide time for readers to confer with their peers about recommendations they may have (Atwell, 1987; Hagerty, 1992; Hindley, 1996; Tompkins, 1997). It is the teacher’s responsibility to provide a range of choices and to gradually extend children’s interests without restricting their choice (Hancock & Hill, 1987).

Glessner’s (1997) recent study of student choice in an elementary classroom focused on the teachers’ and students’ perception of choice. She found that the variety of learning situations presented to students affected their ownership in the learning process. Her labels for these situations are controlled choice, framed choice, and open choice and suggests that they provide a continuum of choice. “Controlled choice can be thought of as classroom instruction that is shaped by the curriculum materials or directed by the classroom teacher” (p. 106). At this end of the continuum, learning tasks are devised, explained, and assigned by the teacher. According to

Glessner, students recognize this type of learning as schoolwork and find few connections to learning opportunities outside of the classroom.

Toward the center of the continuum lies framed choice. "Although framed choice is somewhat guided by curricular mandates, the classroom teacher and students are provided with more opportunities to take control of their teaching and learning" (Glessner, 1997, p. 107). Within framed choice there is more room for students to make personal connections with their learning. They still see the learning tasks as mandated by the teacher, but they are free to alter an assignment in order to make it more personally relevant to their learning.

Open choice at the far end of the continuum "allows students the most flexibility for making choices about their learning" (Glessner, 1997, p. 107). Open choice situations allow for optimum student ownership as students' interests drive learning. Glessner suggests that educators need to find a balance between controlling children's choices and allowing for total choice. She states that "in whole language classrooms, where choice is valued, there is a continuum of choice which reflects the natural conditions of learning" (Glessner, 1997, p. 108).

An approach to literacy instruction that fosters real reading and the self-selection of literature and that falls on the open choice end of Glessner's (1997) continuum is the readers' workshop. It was first introduced by Nancie Atwell in 1987 and used with middle school students. Since then it has been adapted and used effectively at all grade levels. The readers' workshop supports students as they acquire the same kinds of reading habits that good adult readers have: the ability to choose books to read, numerous strategies used in the context of reading, ways of talking about the books they are

reading, and, most importantly, a personal identity as a reader. It encourages children to connect to their own life experiences and interests by giving them choices in what they read and how they respond (Short et al., 1996).

Readers' workshop "is a child-centered approach to teaching reading that brings the real world of reading into the classroom" (Hagerty, 1992, p. 3). It provides the support and freedom necessary so that students can make reading meaningful for themselves and to share the responsibility for their own learning (Miller, 1990; Jackson & Pillow, 1992). Readers' workshop provides a framework for the organization of a classroom reading program. It has three components: a mini-lesson, the reading time, and a time for response and sharing.

The mini-lesson brings form and unity to the workshop (Calkins, 1986). It is a 5-10 minute lesson (activity) that teaches what students need to learn to become better readers. Harwayne (1992) in discussing the ritual of the mini-lesson emphasizes the value of this activity as it adds a sense of direction, rigor, and information to the reading that is to come. Mini-lessons include a wide variety of topics and activities that are relevant to the students' actual reading (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Hagerty, 1992; Tierney et al., 1995). Teachers will make decisions about the contents of the mini-lesson during conferences with students, and by listening to individual students as they apply reading strategies and skills.

What real readers do is read. They learn to do real reading when they are reading real books (Hade, 1991; Smith, 1978). The heart of readers' workshop is the reading time. During this time students are given the opportunity to read for an uninterrupted period of time and make their own choices about how, where, and what to read. The reading time will find

students reading independently or with a partner, conferring with others about their reading, or responding in various ways about what they have read. Having a predictable time each day for students to engage in real reading can help create the habit of reading. If children know that their daily routine gives them a large block of uninterrupted reading time they know that they can become thoroughly involved with books (Hansen, 1987; Reutzel & Cooter, 1991). The reading time that is provided for students gives them the opportunity to lose themselves in the adventures of books. They can give their full attention to the choice that they have so carefully made, involve themselves in the action of a story, become one with characters, and live intensely with the imaginary world created by the author (Peterson & Eeds, 1990). Atwell (1997) says that “periods of silent, independent reading are perhaps the strongest experience I can provide students to demonstrate the value of literacy” (p. 157).

Just as children have a choice in what they read, they should have a choice in the manner in which they respond (Hansen, 1987). “We must create a learning environment that invites the response, one that surrounds kids with books and invites them to interact with print in hundreds of creative, probing, and enlightening ways” (Pelton, 1993, p. xiii).

Giving children time to respond to what they have read gives them the opportunity to reflect and share. Responses focus reactions to literature, demonstrate an internalization of concepts taught during the mini-lesson or individual conference, and stimulate class discussion (Miller, 1990). In classrooms where children honestly and naturally respond to what they are reading response becomes an authentic reading activity (Tierney et al., 1995). Through response children tell us what they know, we honor their

knowledge, and they develop confidence in themselves as readers (Hansen, 1987).

According to Goodman (1985), "what can make the difference in any school reading activity is how sensitive the teacher is to background and interests of the students, how the teacher involves students in planning and self-selection, and how highly motivated the students become" (p. 830). "The paths individual children take to literature are unique and personal for each child" (Sakrison, 1992, p. 61). Teachers who understand this concept are ones who allow and encourage children to take ownership of what they read through the choices they make.

## CHAPTER III METHODOLOGY

### Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate what happens in an elementary school classroom when students are given literacy choices. This research study was conducted in a literature based classroom in which the teacher used real literature to teach reading.

### Rationale for Qualitative Design

“As teachers must plan their objectives and how their methods fit those objectives in order to be responsive to what they meet in their classrooms, so too must researchers plan carefully for research” (Seidman, 1991, p. 30). A carefully planned research study must begin with the choice of the method for research. “The research methods we choose say something about our views on what qualifies as valuable knowledge and our perspective on the nature of reality” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 5).

The issue of qualitative versus quantitative methods has been a heated topic for some time (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Kvale, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). While it is true that quantitative and qualitative researchers do use similar elements in their work, the paradigms that support each mode are quite different.



Quantitative research embraces the positivistic paradigm where the world is made up of observable, measurable facts and there is one truth (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). It begins with a hypothesis or theory and systematically and deductively, with little regard for the subjective state of individuals, seeks to prove or disprove the hypothesis.

Qualitative research assumes that there are multiple, intangible realities that can be studied holistically. It is supported by the interpretivist paradigm which assumes a dynamic reality and is ever changing. The methodology of qualitative research refers to strategies that allow the researcher to obtain firsthand knowledge about the social world in question (Rist, 1977). The aim of qualitative research is discovery that leads to new insights and the understanding of the participants' experience and the meaning-perspectives of the people studied (Erickson, 1986; Sherman & Webb, 1988).

Rist (1997) states that a researcher's methodology should align itself with the guiding questions of the study. I believe that my research questions combined with the following characteristics of qualitative research support the use of this type of research for my study.

1. Qualitative research has the natural setting as the direct source of data and the researcher is the key instrument.
2. Qualitative research is descriptive.
3. Qualitative researchers are concerned with process rather than simply with outcomes or products.
4. Qualitative researchers tend to analyze their data inductively.
5. "Meaning" is of essential concern to the qualitative approach.  
(Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, pp. 27-30; Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996)

## Reliability and Validity

Throughout the course of this research project continued emphasis will be placed on the reliability and validity of the process of gathering data and the analysis of the findings. Maxwell (1992) states that validity is relative to purposes and circumstances:

The applicability of the concept of validity does not depend on the existence of some absolute truth or reality to which an account can be compared, but only on the fact that there exist ways of assessing account that do not depend entirely on features of the account itself, but in some way relate to those things that the account claims to be about.  
(p. 283)

Many qualitative researchers think about the issue of validity not from the viewpoint of the validity of the data, but of the inferences and understanding drawn from the data. They have further described reliability in such ordinary terms as trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Kvale, 1996). Fraenkel and Wallen (1996) refer to validity as the appropriateness, meaningfulness, and usefulness of the inferences researchers make based on the data they collect. Kvale (1996) suggests that the emphasis on validity should be ongoing throughout all stages of the study and that craftsmanship and credibility of the researcher are essential components for the evaluation of the quality of the knowledge produced.

Because qualitative research depends so much on the perspective of the researcher, I must be continually aware of my own biases and subjectivity to assure reliability of the study. Fraenkel and Wallen (1996) have outlined a number of techniques to enhance reliability and validity:

- Triangulation of the data. During this study I collected data in three forms--observation, interviews, and document collection--and confirmed or disconfirmed patterns as I compared and contrasted this data.
- Learning to understand and speak the language of the group being studied. My 18 years of experience as a classroom teacher gave me the ability to work very comfortably in this research setting.
- Writing down questions asked of the researcher. As I made classroom observations and conducted interviews, I continually made notes of conversations that I had with students and the classroom teacher.
- Recording the researcher's thoughts and questions throughout the study. Before beginning the data collection I began a journal which initially included any preconceived ideas or biases that I may have had about this study. As the study continued this journal was used for my personal thoughts and questions.
- Careful documentation of observations and interviews. Immediately following each observation I elaborated my fieldnotes and entered them into a computer program. The program I used, QSR NUD•IST (1997), was designed for the management of qualitative data.
- Using audiotapes when appropriate and making sure the transcribing of the tapes is accurate. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim.
- Interviewing individuals more than once. The classroom teacher and students were interviewed several times formally and as I spent

time in this classroom, conversations that I had were carefully documented.

- Making observations over a period of time. The data collection portion of this study began on the first day of school in August and continued until the break in December.

While it is true that the human condition does not allow for total objectivity, researchers must make every effort to be aware of and control biases that may exist.

### Negotiating Entry

At the university where this study was conducted any research that involves human subjects must be reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Before gaining entry to my research site the proper paperwork was filed with the IRB and approval was given. The IRB asked that I provide for them letters of permission from the school district, the classroom teacher, building principal, and parents (see Appendix A) before data collection could begin.

### Selection of Teacher and Setting

The university's College of Education and Human Development and the local public schools have for the past seven years been involved in a collaboration that resulted in one of its elementary schools becoming a Professional Development School. This school's principal and teachers embrace the opportunity for research to be conducted that will inform their practice and ultimately improve student learning. Having worked as a teacher in this school I have firsthand knowledge of its reputation for excellence. While I am aware of the current literature that warns of choosing

a site where the researcher already has a connection, I chose this site because of its reputation and the philosophical grounding it has with regard to current best practice in the teaching of reading (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Seidman, 1991).

Having had a previous professional relationship with the faculty and principal at this elementary school, I was able to negotiate and establish a fieldwork relationship that was cordial and direct. I initially met with the principal and obtained her written permission for my research and filed the appropriate paperwork with the school district that approved this study as well.

Because I had previously done a pilot study in a fourth grade classroom at this elementary school I knew that I wanted to continue this study at this grade level. Fourth graders are beginning their transition from reading single sitting picture books to chapter books. I believed that this transition, combined with students' ability to talk about what they are reading at a deeper level, would provide an excellent setting for my data collection.

I chose to work with the same teacher with whom I worked during my pilot study, whom I will call Jill. My reasons for choosing Jill included her willingness to be a part of this study, her pedagogy, her emphasis on a learner-centered curriculum, and her ability to reflect about her practice.

#### Selection of Key Student Informants

I began the data collection phase of this study during the first week of school in August 1997. I wrote a letter to parents introducing myself and my purpose for being in the classroom. I asked that they give their permission for me to interact with their child in the classroom, to look at their work, and to interview them. I assured the parents that their child's identity would be

protected and that their inclusion in this study would in no way have an impact on the evaluation or assessment of their child in the classroom. I randomly chose six students, three boys and three girls, from the permission slips that were returned. Because I believe, "children can be thoughtful about their experience in and out of school and are capable of reflection that is informative and compelling" (Seidman, 1991, p. 80); I looked forward to getting to know these students and to understanding their experiences.

### Data Gathering

#### Observation

In qualitative research there is a need for specific understanding of what is happening through documentation of concrete details of practice (Erickson, 1986). My role of participant observer began in the most comprehensive fashion possible and later moved to more specific observations (Erickson, 1986; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). I was in this classroom from August 1997 to December 1997 and observed anywhere from two to four times each week, resulting in 37 classroom observations that varied in time from one to two hours. Initially I made every attempt to be as unobtrusive as possible. I would choose a kid-sized chair at the back of the room, moving when necessary as students moved. I observed students reading during the language arts block of time, sustained silent reading, and social studies.

As I observed in the classroom I made rough fieldnotes, paying particular attention to what students were doing and saying. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) recommend that participant observers should consciously observe the research setting, its participants, and the events, acts, and gestures that occur within them. As students worked in small groups, individually, or

with a partner I moved about the classroom in an attempt to more closely and accurately observe and listen. I was careful to remain on the periphery and not interfere with the work these students were doing. During the observations any questions that I had either for the teacher or for students would be recorded with my fieldnotes and later transferred to a file that I kept for interviews.

As soon as possible after leaving the setting I would elaborate my fieldnotes, striving for accuracy of what I have observed without being judgmental. I have chosen to use qualitative research software to handle the data, and so the elaborated fieldnotes were entered into this program so that coding could take place immediately while the data were fresh in my mind.

During the course of this study I kept a journal. As Glesne and Peshkin (1992) point out, "The qualitative researcher takes time for reflective and analytic noting" (p. 49). My journal was the place for my personal comments. I used it for my reflections, reactions, questions, problems, ideas, and patterns that I saw emerging.

### Interviews

"At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 1991, p. 3). As stated earlier, I randomly chose six students to interview based on permission given by their parents. During the course of this study they were interviewed one on one in a formal interview setting as well as informally as they were working in the classroom. According to Fetterman (1989), the best way to learn how to ask the right questions is to go into the field and find out what people do day to day. I did not interview the students until I had spent some time in the classroom. The

goals of my interviews remained consistent with my research questions. I was particularly interested in talking with students about the literacy choices they make and how their teacher influences those choices. These interviews were audiotaped with students' permission and then transcribed verbatim and entered into my computer program.

I conducted a series of three interviews with the classroom teacher. I began with a general interview to establish a context for the teacher's experience and background. The remaining interviews dealt with more concrete details as they applied to what I was observing and to increase my understanding of what I was seeing. A final interview was conducted after the data analysis was complete for verification purposes. I used all of these interview opportunities to learn about what I could not see and to explore alternative explanations of what I did see (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

### Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis are interwoven processes and should occur simultaneously (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As I began data collection for this study, I quickly realized that the magnitude of data that I would be collecting would necessitate the ongoing and methodical organization of the data.

"By putting like-minded pieces together into data clumps, we create an organizational framework" (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 133). I began the process of sorting my data by developing codes. "Open coding is the part of analysis that pertains specifically to the naming and categorizing of phenomena through close examination of data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 62). Because I had chosen to elaborate my fieldnotes and transcribe the interviews into the computer the process of coding could occur immediately.



I used the coding process not only to organize my data but to develop a more specific focus to my observations and interviews as the study progressed. It should be noted that I used the same coding scheme for both observation and interview data.

Upon completion of the data collection, I began to organize and then analyze all the information I had collected. I began by reading all the interviews and fieldnotes. I started here because there had been a considerable lapse in time from the first classroom observation until data analysis began. As I read all the data I made note of themes that were beginning to emerge and questions that I had.

Because I had used a computer program to code my data the task of sorting was an effortless one. I asked the computer to first provide for me a list of all the codes I had used. From that list I began to print the information in each code so that I could begin to organize it. What I found was that the 97 codes I had at this point were too many.

I had, at this point, a clear picture in my mind of themes that were emerging and so I sorted the data by themes. The three major themes that provided the organizational structure were (1) teacher planning and organization, (2) formal reading instruction, and (3) student interviews. I would have been able to do this with the use of my computer program; however, I felt that I needed to physically manipulate and read the data as I was organizing. The collapsing of codes came naturally as I sorted the data, and I was able to work with 58 codes, which was much more manageable (see Appendix B). I found that because of the organizational structure that was emerging it would work best if I handled the teacher and student interviews separately from the classroom observations and then weave them together

during the presentation of the data. What I had when I finished sorting and organizing was a series of file folders that contained all of my data.

I believe that Glesne and Peshkin (1992) summarize the essence of this study best: "Qualitative inquiry is an odyssey into our discipline, our practice, and perhaps our souls. We cannot be sure of what we will find, but we invariably get caught up in the search" (p. 179).

## CHAPTER IV

### CLASSROOM PORTRAIT

In this chapter the data are brought to life through the voices of Jill and her students and through my observations in the classroom. It examines reading/language arts in this fourth grade classroom through themes that emerged as the data were analyzed. There are three components that contribute to form a picture of the element of choice in this fourth grade classroom.

Within the first component is an in-depth description that provides insight into Jill's planning and organizational structure as well as her perception of choice. Next follows a description of what happens as students read and write, as well as how choice is or is not facilitated. It has been divided into three sections: before reading, during reading, and after reading. In the last component the students' voices are heard as they talk about themselves with regard to reading, both in and out of the school setting, as well as their perceptions of choice.

#### Teacher Preparation and Organization

Jill has been a teacher for four years. During these four years she has taught fourth grade and a fourth and fifth grade combination class. She is currently working on her master's degree in special education with a focus on the learning disabled. I asked Jill if she uses her special education background in the regular classroom. She said,

I use it all of the time . . . for things that I learned in classes like methods and materials, some of the different strategies that are taught specifically for learning disabled children. You take that and transfer it in and use it with all kids. . . . a lot of basic things that started out for special need kids are now used in the regular education program, such as bold titles, picking out specifics, and using concept maps.

Jill's classroom is arranged with student desks in the center. There is a classroom library complete with a rocking chair in one corner. Adjacent to this area is the computer center that includes four computers that are used by both the students and the teacher. Jill's desk, files, and books are in one corner with an overhead projector and screen next to them. At the front of the room are a large chalkboard, an easel, and a round table for conferencing.

During my first interview, I spoke with Jill about how she begins the year. She told me that she usually takes the first week of school to let everyone get to know each other. She feels that the first couple of weeks of school are the best time to be on a schedule, so her planning follows the schedule that she will use throughout the year. She indicated that establishing a routine right at the beginning of the year is important because eventually outside influences begin to emerge in the form of specialist support for individual students and band and orchestra schedules.

During the second week of school Jill formed cooperative groups and arranged students' desks in pods to facilitate interaction. She said that her style of teaching leans mostly toward using cooperative groups. "I'd much rather have students do group things and have them use their cooperative group rules and jobs." She teaches students about group work and about the job responsibilities that are related to working within a group.

I talk about what you do in a cooperative group, what the purpose is of each of the different jobs and we go over the cooperative group rules. I've been trying to work on life skills and how having those skills will help with what you do in your group and how you relate with other members of the group as well as with the rest of your classmates.

I asked Jill if she has a process that she uses when she initially groups students. She said that as she puts them together she considers personalities and behaviors as well as abilities. She feels that it does not work well to form cooperative groups homogeneously. She stated, "It doesn't work well if you have a group of kids who struggle with reading, for example, and then you ask them to do a reading assignment as a group."

Cooperative groups are changed often throughout the year so that students have a chance to work with most everyone in the class and so they can have a change from time to time. There are students who ask to change groups. I asked Jill how she handles that. She stated,

I let students know that we will always have groups with an exceptional few times when maybe everybody just needs a break from each other. I pretty much tell them that throughout the rest of their lives they'll probably have to deal with people that they don't necessarily get along with. I remind them that there are skills they have to learn in order to problem solve their way through different situations.

### Organizing for Reading Instruction

During our interviews Jill talked with me about how she organizes for reading instruction. What follows is a description of her planning process,

the curriculum she uses, the components of her reading program, and how the element of choice is woven throughout the types of responses that students make.

### Planning and Curriculum

Jill is one of two fourth grade teachers at this school. Jill and Helen are not team teaching in the truest sense of the word; that is, they do not merge their two classes for instruction or teach each other's class, but they do their planning together. I asked Jill what seems to work best for the two of them with regard to team planning. She stated,

What Helen and I do is kind of throw ideas off of each other and get a skeleton of what it is that we want to do and we try to follow somewhat the same plan. In addition to long range planning we do plan from week to week. She may choose to do something that I'm not going to do, but that's not a big deal. We sometimes do our own thing, but it's nice to have a sounding board in order to talk through ideas.

Before the school year begins Jill and Helen develop a planning grid that guides their instruction for the upcoming year. I asked Jill how they designed this grid and the philosophy that influenced their planning. She stated,

I personally like to have some kind of connection from one content area to the other in what I teach. You could call it thematic or integrated. What we do is to take the curriculum and we try to make connections with the different areas of the curriculum that we're supposed to cover. We look more specifically at language arts and social studies and try to get those two to connect and then put science in where it would seem to make the most sense. There aren't a lot of

science units designed for fourth grade so we actually add a unit or two. Math is the hardest one to make any kind of connection, so I guess we're not totally thematic.

An example of how she integrates the curriculum comes from an integrated unit she used last year. In social studies they were studying the American Revolution. The reading book that Jill chose for language arts was a book on Benjamin Franklin that was told from the perspective of a mouse that is his friend. It focuses on Benjamin Franklin's discovery of electricity, and so the study of electricity in science became a natural curricular link.

Jill uses the school district's reading curriculum as a guide. The fourth grade reading series is divided into themes based on genres. As Jill and Helen are doing their initial planning they fit the genres into their planning grid. When Jill talked with me about this she gave the example of a mystery theme that they designed. They used the teacher's resource guide as a source of information about the parts of a mystery and how a mystery is designed. The student anthology had several mysteries. They chose to use just one of the stories and used it as the basis for an introduction to mysteries and as a core story that everyone read. They used the student journal to design a mystery packet that included building background knowledge about mysteries, accessing prior knowledge, previewing and predicting, completing a story map, and writing mysteries. As students are reading the story and working in their packets, Jill collects them from time to time and responds in writing. She does this as a means of providing feedback for students and assessment information for herself. Jill stated,

We use the anthology and supplement it. When we did the Laura Ingalls Wilder author study we didn't just use the anthology. We used

other sources to get information about her and read many of her books that we got from the school library. The fantasy theme was really fun to do because there was so much other than the anthology to use as resources.

As a supplement to the suggested curriculum, Jill uses computer technology in the form of laser disks. The school district has invested heavily in technology and there are an abundance of laser disks that are available for use in classrooms. As part of the mystery genre study Jill used a laser disk. She stated,

Kids love them. They love disks. It's set up so that at the beginning they do the elements of whatever genre is on the disk, and then they set up the story and develop the characters. As the story happens, then kids use what was taught at the first part of the laser disk.

Jill uses trade books as a part of her reading curriculum. During the course of this study when trade books were used, all students were reading the same book. Jill described the planning process that she used for a book they read called *The Best School Year Ever* (Robinson, 1994).

As an introduction to the whole book, we talk a lot about background information about either the author or the characters or about previous books students have read by this author. We talk about the setting and then we usually go chapter by chapter and do activities and writing responses after each chapter. What ends up happening to me is that I have one plan of say a response question, and as I'm reading with the kids and talking and discussing we might be talking about something specifically, and what I end up asking them to respond to may be more geared toward what we talked about. This way I can see if



what we talk about is being absorbed. Some of the responses I have them do are more basic and deal with factual information and others are open-ended and students have a choice about how they will respond and what information they will key in to.

In Jill's opinion some trade books lend themselves more toward responses that can be student centered and more open-ended. As Jill's class was involved in a genre study of realistic fiction, they were reading the book *Miracles on Maple Hill* (Sorensen, 1956).

This is the way I like to do reading. With this book there are more opportunities for readers' theatre and responses that come from students. I do some teacher-directed reading, but with this book I had students reading independently and in small groups.

### Reading

In Jill's classroom reading happens throughout the day. In addition to the time specified for reading, students are reading during sustained silent reading, as they are writing during writers' workshop, and during science and social studies. Jill stated,

I would say they read about half the day or more. They do silent reading most days right after recess for about 20 minutes, then I do a read aloud period of time during their snack time when they come back after their break, and then of course, they read during other content area times. I write on the easel, the chalkboard, and the overhead, so they've got to be reading.

Although Jill stated that students read half of the day or more, I had no data to either support or refute this. I did, however, observe students as they read

during sustained silent reading, social studies, writing workshop, and during the structured reading time.

Jill teaches reading skills and strategies in the context of real reading. She indicated that at the beginning of the year she covers basic reading strategies, such as what you do when you come to a word you do not know, and the importance of reading for meaning and not being overly concerned that every word is read correctly. Jill talked about how she combines the teaching of skills and strategies with everyday reading.

It's not taught specifically, it's taught as you go. It's more through inferential questioning than anything. If I were to follow the anthology there would be more fill in the blank types of things, but I like to do the comprehension and those types of things through questions and responses and projects. If we do something like fill in the blank workbook pages, it would have to be attached to something we were doing.

### Spelling

During our first interview at the beginning of the school year Jill talked about her vision of how the spelling program just implemented by the school district will link with her writing program.

I just started introducing the spelling program and so right now it's a separate thing that happens before their reading time starts. At certain points during the year what I'd like to do is incorporate the writing workshop and the spelling time together. I haven't quite thought that whole process out yet, but I'm working on that.

## Writing

Jill uses a writers' workshop format for her writing instruction. At the beginning of the workshop Jill asks each student where he or she is in the writing process and if they need any particular assistance that day--a status of the class. Jill follows the status of the class with a mini-lesson. The mini-lessons are student centered, based on what students need as they are writing. "For example, I've been looking at students' work and I find that a lot of them are having trouble using possessives; well then let's back up and do a mini-lesson on that."

During the writing time students are engaged in actual writing on topics of their own choice. They have a writers' workshop folder where their writing is kept. In this folder each student has a skills list (see Appendix C). As Jill moves around and conferences with individual students, she records on this list the writing skills that each writer can use successfully. Included on this skills list might be items related to literary craft, such as strategies for editing, organizational skills, and character development; or to the conventions of writing, such as punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and paragraphing. In addition to the skills list, each student has a writing worksheet in his or her folder (see Appendix D). This worksheet is used as a checklist as students move through the stages of writing.

After students finish their rough drafts they conference with a peer before revising their work. During these conferences students are encouraged to focus on the content of their pieces. Students listen for clarity and give each other ideas for revision. After their first revision students have individual conferences with Jill. At this time she reads their pieces and works with students to edit their work. Jill stressed the importance of

working with students and not editing for them. After these conferences students edit their writing for mechanics and conventions and then have the option of publishing their work. Jill indicated that while students are not required to publish their work, most have chosen to publish all their pieces and include them in their portfolio.

### Sustained Silent Reading

Students are involved in silent reading each day for 20 to 25 minutes. During this time they read books of their own choice that they get from the classroom library, the school library, or that they bring from home. I observed in Jill's classroom during sustained silent reading, and after one of those times I asked students to complete a survey for me (see Appendix E). Nineteen students filled out a survey. Of those 19, 13 indicated they read the whole time, 5 said they read most of the time, and only 1 person said he or she read hardly any of the time.

Jill uses a reading record as a means of tracking students' independent reading (see Appendix F). During our first interview Jill talked about how the reading record was used. She said,

They have a reading log, a reading record I should say, that they have to keep track of their pages that they read during that time . . . they can take their book home if it's like a library book or something and read at home but that has to also be recorded in their reading record. They're mostly for their own information. They keep them for the entire year so that at the end of the year they have documentation of their personal reading.

Jill requires that students do book reports as they complete books they are reading during sustained silent reading. The book reports include basic

information such as the title, author, illustrator, pages, setting, character, plot, and the student's favorite part of the book. Jill indicated that this is a way for her to know what students are reading and that they read at silent reading time. I asked Jill about her purpose for using book reports. She stated,

. . . for some reason it has become a successful thing for me because it gives them purpose for reading. They know that at the end of that book they need to do a book report and there's a purpose behind the reading that they're doing. Now, maybe that's not very good, but what ends up happening otherwise, at least for me, is I'll say to kids it's time for silent reading, and if there is no recourse for what it is that they're doing, they won't read, they'll sit there and daydream. That's just kinda been my experience.

### Response

In Jill's classroom, students respond to literature in a variety of ways. Jill talked with me about her use of language arts notebooks, journals, and response projects as ways for students to express themselves and to show what they have learned. She provided the following example from the beginning of the school year of how students use their language arts notebook:

Right now they've been using their language arts notebook for specific language things and writing workshop mini-lessons. If there is something that needs to be written independently on their own in reference to reading . . . they might do it in there.

Jill indicated that the language arts notebooks tend to be more structured and teacher directed.

Students keep a monthly journal that is used for independent writing and response questions. Jill described how the journals are used. She stated, I ask them to do some personal writing, maybe every other morning. I usually give them some kind of starter, but I always give them the option if there's something they want to write about that's totally off the subject they have the option to do that. I find that if I ask them to write too much they end up getting writer's block, and they can't write about anything ,and they don't want to write. Then you actually have a writing activity they don't want to do . . . and that can be as detrimental as not ever having them write.

As I observed in the classroom, I noticed that when Jill would ask students to answer a particular question, she required that they cite something from the book to support their answer or to tell why they gave that answer. When asked for her rationale for this Jill said, "The reason I do that is because if I don't ask them to tell me why, I get a "yes" or a "no" and that's their response. They are generally able to cite something from the book."

Jill provides written feedback in students' journals on a regular basis. She talked about the importance of timely response and how she organizes her time in order to accomplish that. She stated,

I hate to have kids do something and not respond immediately. The trick is not being overwhelmed with all of this writing to read and respond to. So I usually do it a group or two at a time. I always write something in response to what they've written.

During the course of this study, the books that students read correlated to the theme being studied at the particular time. Students were not given choices in the books selected, and all students read the same books; however,

within the context of reading these books, Jill did allow for student choice in the types of response projects in which students were involved. Examples of these include readers' theatre, skits, making character mobiles and character sketches, making dioramas, writing short stories, and doing additional research for a presentation about Native American culture and lifestyle. Jill explained why she believes it is important for students to have a variety of ways to show what they have learned. She said, "I think there's a nice way to be able to combine paper and pencil and rote learning with being able to do some hands on things and still show what it is that students are learning."

An example of how Jill provides for choice in response comes from a thematic unit on Native Americans during which all students read the book *Buffalo Hunt* (Freedman, 1988). Jill gave students five options for projects and within these options Jill provided guidelines for students to follow to complete the projects. Students were free to choose with whom they would work and how they approached the work within their groups. This act of negotiation within the framework of response allowed students to take responsibility for their learning and to be aware of the conditions they require to become more effective learners (Wilson & Wing Jan, 1993).

Upon completion of the projects I spoke with Jill about her reasons for structuring the responses. She stated,

One of the biggest things I found is that if you're not extremely clear in your directions and very, very specific about what it is that you want them to do, they're not able to focus in and come up with something on their own.

I asked Jill what she thought would happen if there were no guidelines and students had total autonomy in the project they chose to do as long as it

demonstrated what they had learned. She indicated that "it would just be a thousand question session and in the process of answering their questions, I'd end up telling them exactly what I wanted anyway."

Students presented these projects to their classmates. As presentations were made Jill videotaped them. On a rotating basis each student took the tape home so that families could see what they had accomplished. As students presented their information, Jill evaluated their work using a project evaluation checklist (see Appendix G). These evaluations were returned to students and copies were added to each student's portfolio. Jill had taken photographs of each project, which were included with the evaluation. Jill talked about these presentations during an interview shortly after they were done. She stated,

For the most part they were very good. They just did a terrific job with it. I had a couple [of students] who were maybe uncomfortable; in fact that day that we did them a couple of the girls had not gotten their information written down and did not feel ready. They came up and did an absolutely great job . . . in this case the students got the information down that indicated that they had acquired some type of knowledge about it [their topics], and did a very good job with their presentation. They were organized and they did just fine.

### Choice

As I talked with Jill during the interviews, she discussed with me how she influences students' book choice, the concept of allowing total student choice in a reading program, and factors that shape her decisions regarding the extent to which students have autonomy in what they read. One of our interviews was done during the time of the mystery theme. Jill talked about



how students were extending this theme into their own reading time. She said,

I noticed that now that we are doing mysteries a lot of them want to read mysteries. I filled in my classroom library with mysteries that I checked out of the [school] library, so a lot of kids are reading them. They look for mysteries when we go to the library. I think because their focus right now is mysteries a lot of them are reading mysteries. I've got some students who are bringing mysteries from home. Their favorites are the Olson twins series and the Babysitters Club.

Jill believes that fourth grade students should be moving into reading longer books such as chapter books, but at the same time she does not want to eliminate picture books from the choices that students can make. She talked about the importance of students reading books at their developmental level. She stated,

When they have a choice of what to read, preferably whatever they choose to read needs to be at their level. If they bring a book to me and ask me if it's something that they can read and it's a picture book that has maybe 10 to 15 words on a page, I'll tell them that they need to find something more challenging. What's hard is that I do have a couple of students who are at that picture book level, so those books are challenging enough for those students.

As Jill talked with me about the influence she has on the books that students read, she recalled a book she had used the previous year as part of a social studies theme. The book was *Ben and Me* (Lawson, 1988) and was about Benjamin Franklin. Jill said,

There would have been maybe four kids who would have picked that book up off the shelf. It's a wonderful piece of literature . . . a great book. There are many who just never would have picked that up, so I think you have to expose them to good literature and not worry about if they read R. L. Stine. This is the approach I use with my read aloud books. I choose quality literature that students wouldn't necessarily pick off the shelf.

Jill talked about the enjoyment of becoming part of a book you are reading and putting yourself into the lives of the characters. She believes that exposing children to high quality literature, literature that is written with rich vocabulary, will allow students to experience the pleasure of a really good book. The books that Jill chooses are very often read by all students. She explains her rationale for this decision.

I believe that they are getting that enjoyment level from the teacher directed reading. I think there are so many kids who don't see reading a book of their choice as being enjoyable. I don't think there are a whole lot of kids who can read a book and take this up to that next level to be there in the book and see the scene in their mind and hear the characters talking. Even though we do that together I don't always think that they transfer that skill to their own reading.

Jill expressed concern for struggling readers in a reading program where students are independently reading books of their own choice.

When you've got such a range of readers from very, very good virtually independent readers to ones who aren't reading anywhere near the grade level they're at, if you don't do some teacher directed

reading the struggling readers will lose too much . . . what I mean is that they need that support.

According to Graves et al. (1996), scaffolding is a means for the teacher to intervene and provide support in the form of modeling, cueing, coaching, feedback, direct instruction, questioning, and cognitive structuring.

Providing scaffolds for student learning in an environment where students make their own book selections enables teachers to assure that readers of all abilities are supported.

Pacing of reading to meet the needs of all levels of reading abilities is a factor that Jill identified as being important as she conceptualized total student choice and autonomy in a reading program. She stated,

I think that the kids . . . who want that choice so bad[ly] are the ones who are very good readers, can read faster, and who want to move on--I don't want to dilly dally with this anymore, I want to move on to the next chapter. That's where they get the pleasure from being able to have a choice . . . they go at their own pace and that's what they like.

At the end of the previous school year the students in Jill's class were given total choice of what they read. One of Jill's frustrations during this time was her struggle to find enough reading material at appropriate reading levels for all students. I asked Jill if she planned to, at the end of this school year, implement the same type of reading format where students were given the responsibility for the self-selection of literature. She stated,

I would like to try it again. At the beginning of the year I'm always concerned that I'm teaching the skills that students need, but toward the end of the year, depending on the students in the class, I would try it again. They always have a choice of what they read at certain times

like SSR [sustained silent reading] and responses they make, but I do see the enjoyment they get from the choices they make.

### Preparing to Read

"When students have purposes for reading, their comprehension of the selection they are reading is enhanced . . . whether teachers provide the purpose or students set their own purpose. Having a purpose provides motivation and direction for reading" (Tompkins, 1997, p. 252). Jill spends time each day in a variety of pre-reading activities that prepare students for the reading that will follow. This section will describe how students are actively involved in building background knowledge, setting purposes to read, predicting, understanding character development, and organizing to read.

As each new book was introduced, Jill involved students in previewing the text and making predictions. The following excerpt describes this process as students began to read *Miracles on Maple Hill* (Sorensen, 1956).

A student is passing out the books, one to each student. Jill asks students what the cover tells them about the story. Students' responses include that it is a Newberry Medal winner, there are trees, it's about a hill, there are buckets on the trees to catch the sap, and there is a girl walking. Jill asks students to talk about the girl and what purpose she has. Many students raised their hands and gave ideas. Jill asks students to turn to the table of contents. There are 14 chapters; she reads the title of the first chapter. Brandon tells the class about the dedication. (November 12, 1997; Classroom Observation)

Another dimension of preparing to read involved the development of characters. It was evident to me throughout my observations that Jill's focus

on character development enhanced reading for students and that as they read they paid close attention to character details. The following example from my initial observation in Jill's classroom illustrates this.

They started reading *The Best School Year Ever* (Robinson, 1994) yesterday. Jill went to the easel where the characters were listed. She pointed to each and read them. Two names had something written beside them that they found out about that person yesterday. Jill flipped to a different chart page that she had prepared for information about the Herdmans. She asked students for information about all the Herdmans. She asked what the storyteller had said about them. Several students volunteered information and Jill added it to the chart. Jill talked about things they read yesterday and added them to the chart. She asked what to add about Ollie. Mike answered and Jill wrote what he said on the chart. Kathy added that Ollie locked Claude in the bathroom--Jill added it to the chart. She reminded students that they read a lot about LeRoy--immediately many hands raised and as students told about him, Jill added what they said to the chart. Jill asked if there was anything else from yesterday. Annie told something that Jill hadn't remembered had happened. (August 29, 1997; Classroom Observation)

Many of my fieldnotes from observations in the classroom include entries about Jill's careful consideration of building students' vocabulary to enhance the meaning of what is read. Jill used both the dictionary and thesaurus as resources for students to use as is shown in the following excerpts.

Students have a list of vocabulary words to define before they begin reading. Each group is to find the meaning of two of the words. In their groups students work together to do this . . . one of them is the recorder and one the reporter for each group. After all groups are finished the reporter for each group stands and reads their definitions. Jill has a bulletin board prepared where the definitions will be displayed. (November 14, 1997; Classroom Observation)

Jill tells students that the names of the characters are a play on words that have a particular meaning. She shows students what a thesaurus is and uses it to look up the names and then reads all the similar words for each character. (August 18, 1997; Classroom Observation)

During one of our interviews I asked Jill why she devotes so much time to vocabulary development. She said,

I think right now I've got a few [students] who are curious about what words mean, but unless there is one student in a group who is wondering what that word means, I think they would just go right over it.

As Jill began a genre study on mysteries, she helped students connect what they already knew about mysteries to the one they would be reading as a class. As a beginning, she made a curricular connection to the world around us and talked with students about the mysteries they can find in science and math. In order to access their prior knowledge Jill asked students to tell her what a mystery was. Will offered this definition, "It's something we don't know about--a question we don't know the answer to." Angela added that the goal of a mystery is "to try to figure it out." The following is an excerpt from

my observation of how Jill continued to build background knowledge about mysteries.

Jill had chart paper ready and prepared with headings. She put them [charts] up on the chalkboard so all of them could be seen at once. The headings are written in black with spaces left for ideas. She uses different colored markers as she takes ideas from students. On the first chart is the question, What are the characters like? Students' answers include curious, interested, problem solvers, many are suspects, sneaky. On the next chart is the question, Where do they take place? Student ideas include haunted place, suspicious houses, stores, ice cream parlors, motels, and pet stores. Jill asked students if mysteries all had to be inside. Students then added the following to their previous ideas: parks, schools, woods, canyons, middle of nowhere. The question on the next chart is, What are the problems that occur in a mystery? Six students offered ideas that include things missing, someone missing, someone has died, phantom, get caught, and smuggling. The question on the next chart is, What are clues? Jill reminded students that she needs everyone taking part in this. Student answers included handprints, footprints, weapons, blood, tire tracks, broken windows, hair. Three students shared personal stories about mysteries. The next question is, Who solves the mystery? Jill talked about elements of mysteries and that they aren't mysteries unless they all have those elements. She said that in a mystery someone always solves the mystery. Student ideas for who solves mysteries include kids, main characters, characters other than the main character, and animals. The last question is, Who are famous

detectives? Student responses include Sherlock Holmes, Nancy Drew, Shelby Woo, Encyclopedia Brown, Boxcar Children, Bailey School Kids, and the Olson twins. At this point Annie took out two books from her desk and held them up for the kids to see. They were Bailey School Kids books. (September 8, 1997; Classroom Observation)

Jill concluded this session by showing examples of the mysteries that she had added to the classroom library.

She showed the class *Boxcar Children*, *Babysitters Club* (tells students that these are numbered), *Hardy Boys*, *Nancy Drew*, *Encyclopedia Brown*, and a variety of others. She told students that she had chosen *Nancy Drew*, *The Hidden Staircase* (Keene, 1959), for read aloud. (September 8, 1997; Classroom Observation)

I made a personal observation as a note to myself after this observation. I wrote:

Students seem to be excited about this genre study. They were very attentive during the entire 45 minutes. Students related mysteries to those they've read and seen on TV. It appears to me that most students have had some experience with mysteries and are excited to begin reading. I wonder if they will choose to read mysteries on their own. (September 8, 1997; Journal Entry)

Very often when students would be reading with a partner or in a small group, Jill would preface this reading with questions for thought or for students to answer in writing, either as they were reading or when they finished. The following are excerpts from my fieldnotes that illustrate how Jill assisted students as they prepared to read.



Jill paired students randomly and then reminded them to read the question first so they know what they are reading to find out. She also told students to find a method for recording the information that worked well for them, either as they read or when they were finished. (October 17, 1997; Classroom Observation)

This observation was made as students were reading *The Best School Year Ever* (Robinson, 1994).

Jill tells students that while they are reading today they should be thinking about the idea of compliments and how you compliment someone. Not the kind of compliment about someone's appearance, but about their personality, character, and what kind of person they are. (September 5, 1997; Classroom Observation)

There were many times during the course of this study that students were involved in readers' theatre. Jill prepared students for this before they began to read as illustrated here.

Jill told students that they will be reading chapter five today in their groups and then will be acting it out. They are to figure out who is going to be which character and how to handle it if there are too many people in their group for the number of characters. She tells students that they won't be saying exactly the same words that are in the book. They will have to decide which parts to keep in and which parts to take out. Because of time constraints they will have to pick out the parts that are important events from the beginning, middle, and end of the story. They need to plan movements, props, and what people are saying. (November 20, 1997; Classroom Observation)

## Reading

During the course of this study I observed Jill using three types of teaching methods as students were involved in reading trade books and from the basal anthology. Through the description from my observations I will describe students reading as a whole group, in small groups, and independently. Additionally, it will provide a picture of the variety of choices students could make as they read.

### Whole Group

When all students were involved in reading the same text, Jill would often use a story from the reading series anthology. Most often she would use the anthology as she was beginning a new genre study. It was apparent to me that students enjoyed these stories and that they provided motivation for reading as illustrated by this observation.

Jill asks the book person to get the anthologies and pass them out. She tells students to open to the front cover and put their name where it says to. Kathy opens her book and sees *Jumanji* (Van Allsburg, 1981) and says, "Yeah, I want to read it." Others in her group turn to look at it. Kathy says she loves the pictures. Jill asks students to turn to page 298 and to get out a piece of paper. They are to spot 20 differences in the two pictures. She tells students that as they find them they are to write them down. They can work by themselves or with their group.

(September 9, 1997; Classroom Observation)

Many of my observations of whole group reading include Jill reading to students. In our initial interview I asked her to explain to me her reasons for this. She said,

If we're short on time, then I'll read. I hate that when it happens.

Some of them prefer to have me read to them because I think they like to listen more than have to worry about following along. There are always those who much rather listen and that's ok sometimes.

As Jill was reading, or when students read during the whole group time, I observed that students for the most part were following along in their books as illustrated by this observation.

Jill reads as students follow along in their books. She stops to ask about the setting then reads again. As she reads she stops several times for discussion. All students are following along and all are silent.

(November 12, 1997; Classroom Observation)

As Jill told me, she does not "hassle" kids about not following along when she is reading, especially when she can see by their body language that they are engaged in what she is reading.

The whole group setting makes it possible for Jill to guide reading. She does this in a number of ways. As she is reading if there is vocabulary that she thinks students may be unfamiliar with, or that students ask for definitions of, she stops to check for understanding. Another way that she assures that students are getting meaning from what is read is by stopping frequently to summarize and ask clarifying and comprehension questions.

Jill stops to ask what the kids are doing. She says that the Herdmans are hanging around and asks what is happening to the kids. Students answer that they are scared. Jill tells students that a fancy word for that is paranoid. She continues to read. Annie raises her hand and says that the book said Ollie was in third grade. Jill reminds students that the book hadn't told that before.

Jill does not always do all of the reading when students are together in the large group. When students read they participate in something called "popcorn." When they popcorn the person reading chooses the next one to read. That person can choose to pass; however, if three people pass the next person chosen must read. It seemed to me that the majority of students were comfortable reading in front of their peers. There were some who always passed, however, and so I asked Jill about that. She said,

Some choose not to read because of their abilities, but mostly I think it's just because they're shy. They don't like the focus of attention on them. Even when they read in small groups or one on one they don't like it. It seems to me that, for the most part, girls are more apt to read out loud than boys are.

During the whole group reading time students did exhibit behavior that was off-task. Examples of this type of behavior include getting up to use the bathroom, getting drinks, playing with something from their desks, sharpening pencils, and washing hands. This example occurred as Jill was reading a chapter from a trade book.

Jill begins reading while students are following along in their books. Annie is making a card and puts marker on her finger to make a fingerprint. She gets up to go wash her hands. Jill ignores her at first, then asks her to hurry. Annie finishes washing, then goes back to her desk and continues working on her card. Jill asks her to put it away.

(November 18, 1997; Classroom Observation)

### Small Groups

When students read in groups they are given options in their reading. They are in control of the management and organization of the group, but Jill does provide some suggestions and support as seen in this observation.

Jill tells students that they will be reading in groups. They are to take a pencil and their book and find a spot, but not right next to another group because that makes it hard to hear. She tells students that she doesn't want to hear any arguing. If they have questions they should raise their hand. She reminds students that if they read too loudly everyone's voice raises and it gets too loud and that if they read too softly their group can't hear them. Students ask how they should read and Jill says what is logical is for each one to read a paragraph, but they could read more if they chose. She wants everyone to read. If group members need help they are to help each other. (November 17, 1997; Classroom Observation)

As illustrated in this example, students were able to organize themselves and provide assistance when needed.

Laura, Tanya, and Jennifer find a spot and Laura begins reading immediately. The others follow along in their books. Jennifer reads next. Laura helps her with words--she leans toward her--she anticipates when she'll need help. Laura asks Tanya if she wants to read next and shows her where to start.

Among Jill's goals for group work were participation and cooperation. This was evident during many of my observations. The following is an excerpt from the classroom observation where students were working on definitions of words.

Mike's group is spelling the first word out loud as they write it. They read the next sentence together. They differ on the answer, then decide on one. Annie starts reading the next sentence and Kathy asks them to wait until she is ready. They do. Mike reads the next sentence, then Kathy reads it, and they decide on an answer. It was used in sentence number one so they erase and change it. They take turns reading and answering the next three. Kathy says the answer for the last one doesn't make sense, so they figure out which words they haven't used yet and find the correct answer. Annie gets up to go to the bathroom--when she comes back Kathy tells her what to write on the last line. (September 9, 1997; Classroom Observation)

There were times when students were working in small groups that off-task behavior interfered with their reading as shown by the following example.

Will is reading really fast and the others are not following along. Kathy reads and wants to read more. The others are arguing about how much to read and whose turn it is. Kathy throws her book. Sherry comes over from the next group to help. (November 20, 1997; Classroom Observation)

When students were unsure of what to do in their groups and needed direction, they would leave their group to ask Jill for clarification. Many times after one or two students began to ask for help, others would follow suit with the result being much noise and confusion. The following is one example of how off-task behavior affected group work.

Jill tells students that in their groups they are to write a false clue. She gives an example and then sends them to their groups. Justin immediately goes to Jill and says, "I don't get it." Amanda walks over to Jill and waits to talk to her until Jake is finished. One of the groups gets noisy and the students ask them to be quiet. Jill moves to this group to help. Rob takes his paper to show Jill, and then two more students do the same. Sherry looks in her book for awhile, then visits with the people around her. She hasn't written anything. Angela asks her group about apostrophe. She then looks at the word wall to spell a word. Six more students are over by Jill--she sends them back to their desks. (September 16, 1997; Classroom Observation)

After students worked in their groups, Jill would call them back together as a class to provide some closure for the day's activities. At times the off-task behavior exhibited in the small groups would carry through to this time.

Jill has the reporter from each group talk about what they have done in their group. Brandon's group is still working. Amanda takes the notebook from Blake--Sherry takes it and gives it back. Angela is playing with her necklace, Will is coloring letters in his packet, Rob is playing with his markers, and Brandon and Sherry are balancing pencils on their fingers. Laura turns around and asks Sherry if she's double jointed. Sherry asks what that means. Jill quiets them and asks for their attention. (September 9, 1997; Classroom Observation)

As students are participating in small group work Jill monitors their progress by moving around the room. She does not always interact with groups; she sometimes is just an observer. At other times she will join a group to simply listen or to assist students with an assignment or with their

reading. If students are having difficulty managing their behavior, she intervenes where appropriate. Jill talked about her role during group work. She said,

It really varies. Sometimes I listen to them read and sometimes I even have a chance to work on something at my desk if I need time to prepare something to finish up the lesson. Certain groups have such a hard time and that requires my constant attention.

### Independent Reading

Although students did not read independently during the reading time during the course of my study, they did participate in sustained silent reading (SSR). Jill told me at the time of our first interview that the students in her class were a “nice group of readers.” She stated,

These kids read. I have five Riley [the acronym for Reading Is Life-long Enjoyment for You] kids and they are really good about reading too, which is nice. These kids actually sit down and read for extended periods of time. It took maybe a little bit at the beginning of the year to get them started with actually having a book to read, but they’ve gotten pretty good at it now. I try my best to note if they don’t have a book or have to look during SSR, and then when we get the library I make sure they are looking. I do have kids that will read during down times in our day, and when I see somebody doing that I’ll definitely pick up on it and say something to reinforce it.

Students choose books to read independently from a number of sources. They bring books from home, they use the school library, and they choose books from the classroom library. Jill told me that students often choose books that pertain to their theme or genre study—either books they



have at home or ones that Jill has chosen to highlight in her classroom library. What follows is a portion of an observation I made during SSR.

Students came in from recess and went to their desks. One student chose a book from the classroom library and asked Jill if she could read it. Jill smiled and said yes. Jill reminded students that there are "no voices" during SSR. As students began to read Jill worked one on one with several students at her desk. (November 19, 1997; Classroom Observation)

On one of the days that I observed students during sustained silent reading, I calculated a participation ratio in order to determine the level of student involvement. As students were reading I watched each one on a rotating basis and used a tally mark if, when I was watching them, they were reading. I watched 19 students read for 10 minutes. During this time they were involved in actual reading 89% of the time.

As discussed earlier, after SSR one day I asked students to complete a survey for me (see Appendix E). I asked that they not include their name on their survey to assure that answers would be given freely. The majority of students indicated that they read for the entire period. Students' responses to why they chose the book they were reading fell into six categories: (1) book in a series, (2) picture on the cover, (3) pictures within the book, (4) re-read a favorite, (5) a friend had read it, and (6) it sounded interesting. I found that their responses were both interesting and thoughtful as is shown in this example.

. . . because I am in the Babysitters Club and I like to learn more about what they do and what they discover and what happens. This one is #4 [in the series].

When I interviewed students I asked a variety of questions about SSR. What follows is a sampling of their responses to my questions.

Researcher: What kinds of books do you read during SSR?

A: Right now I'm reading Thomas Jefferson. I'm going to see if I can do a book report on this guy.

Researcher: At SSR time does everybody read?

L: Yeah, except for the ones who go on the computer.

Researcher: Is it quiet during SSR?

L: Really quiet. I like it quiet because I try to concentrate on what I'm reading.

Researcher: During SSR do you get to choose whatever you want to read?

D: Yeah, sometimes I bring some from home and if I forget I use ones from the classroom.

Researcher: Do you like SSR time?

W: Yeah, I like it a lot because it's a time where I can sit down, you know, and it's quiet. People can't talk--it's just reading time.

### After Reading

An important part of the reading process happens as students respond, explore, and extend their reading. In this classroom students responded to what they read in a variety of ways. These responses were at times teacher directed and at other times students had more autonomy to choose how they would respond. It should be noted that even though Jill provided the organization and structure for some of the responses, students had the

freedom to expand their ideas, express their interpretations, and demonstrate their knowledge within her guidelines.

Students provided written responses to their reading in journals, language arts notebooks, and in packets that Jill made for them. These responses were done on an individual basis and often asked for answers to questions as well as personal opinions. The following excerpt demonstrates the direction Jill provided as students responded in their journals.

After the chapter was finished Jill asked students to get out their journals. On the chart she writes "Reading Response" and the date. She asks students to write that in their journal. She then writes three questions: Who is the main character in the story? What kind of person is this character? How do you know? She asked students to first write the questions in their journals and then answer them in complete sentences. (November 12, 1997; Classroom Observation)

Many of the activities that students did after reading involved the development of characters. As is shown in this example, Jill provided the overlying structure of this response, and students filled in with their interpretations.

Jill drew a big rectangle on the chart paper. She asked if anyone knew what a wanted poster was and what it looked like. She drew one on the chart as students told her what was included. She reviewed what things the Herdmans did and what they were like. She told them that they would be designing a wanted poster. They are to pick out one of the Herdmans and refer to the charts they made about them for information. When they draw the picture they are to draw only the face and use their imaginations about what that person looks like. She

reminded them to include the person's name and what they were wanted for and that they could add a reward if they would like.

(August 27, 1997; Classroom Observation)

After this observation I made an entry in my journal about students' perception of this activity and the ease with which they tackled this work.

After Jill gave directions she asked for questions, but there were none. Students seem to feel comfortable using their judgment about how to organize this project. They worked hard on it with very few interactions with others. Were they so engaged because it was so open-ended? (August 27, 1997; Journal Entry)

There were several times that Jill used the after reading time for shared responses. What follows is an example of how Jill extended the reading of *The Best School Year Ever* (Robinson, 1994) and included everyone in the class.

Jill tells students that they will get a blank sheet of paper. They are to put their name at the top. She tells students that they will pass it to the person beside them and then shows them which direction. Now that they have another person's paper they are to write a compliment at the bottom of the paper, fold it to cover up what they wrote, and pass it to the next person. After they all have passed theirs she tells them to keep doing this until the paper they have is full. As students are passing, Jill goes around to help with the passing. . . . After students were all finished, she asked them to return the one they have to the person whose name is at the top. As students get theirs back, they read what others wrote about them and share theirs with their neighbor.

Some students are reading theirs out loud. (September 5, 1997; Classroom Observation)

Jill provides students with opportunities to demonstrate what they have learned as she provides options for their responses. At the culmination of an integrated theme on Native Americans, students made choices about how they would demonstrate their knowledge and with whom they would work. Jill presented students with five options for these projects and the guidelines that should be followed for each.

Jill told students that they would be doing Native American projects for social studies and reading and that they would be doing the majority of the work in school. She listed the options on the overhead:

1. Write a report with illustrations about the buffalo. Use index cards to record information such as the uses of buffalo for making food, weapons, utensils, clothing, and shelter.
2. Make a mural of the buffalo hunt using the big roll of paper. It should be colored and realistic. Write information about the hunt, the ceremony before the hunt, and events during and after the hunt.
3. Make a diorama of a teepee village or earth lodge village. (Students said, "Yes!") Find information about construction, how they are set up, and what they looked like inside and outside. She showed students an example of one a student made last year.
4. Research and write a report about a tribe. Include illustrations.
5. Make a map of North Dakota showing the tribe locations. Include information about each tribe. (October 29, 1997; Classroom Observation)

It appeared to me that after Jill had gone over the options and set students loose to begin planning that there was a great deal of excitement about the projects. Students quickly formed groups and began to make plans. I observed one group of boys as they began to organize themselves.

Brandon, Justin, and David are working together. Brandon has already drawn a picture of theirs and they are talking about what materials to use. Justin is getting construction paper then says to his group, "It has to be realistic." (October 29, 1997; Classroom Observation)

As students were given choices within this framework they were both motivated and engaged. They made decisions about how to structure their presentation and systematically went about gathering information that was appropriate to their project. They used both the school and classroom libraries for factual information. I observed students while they were at the school library.

Students are looking for books about Native Americans. Mike and Rob found a book about how to draw a canoe. Laura found a fact book with pictures of Native American homes. Brandon has a fact book and is tearing strips of paper to mark spots. (October 30, 1997; Classroom Observation)

Other than logistical questions, students worked on these projects without Jill's help. The noise level was high as they were working, but I noted in my fieldnotes that only a few students were making most of the noise. Students had a set amount of time to work each day and used this time productively. I observed that they spent the majority of their time constructing the visual and only a small amount of time on background information and research. After the projects had been presented to the class,

Jill told me that she was worried that students would not have enough information, but that she found that they did.

### Student Interviews

During the course of this study I conducted formal interviews with six students. I met with each student individually in an unused office in the school building. I began each interview with a time for general conversation in order to put the student at ease, and then gradually moved into discussions which revolved around reading and writing. Before I met with students I prepared a list of possible questions that I could ask. My intention was that these questions would provide a loose framework for our discussion rather than having each student answer each of the questions. Because I used a tape recorder I did not take notes during the interviews. The tapes were transcribed verbatim and then coded for analysis. As I analyzed these interviews I identified five common themes that provide information about students' personal reading preferences, the reading and writing they do in the classroom, and their perception of choice. The themes are (1) writing, (2) book reports, (3) reading times, (4) students' likes, and (5) how students choose. As a way of organizing this data I will present it here in question and answer format. Each student will not necessarily have a response to each question. What the reader will see will be selected responses. What will emerge will be the students' voices as they talk about themselves as readers and writers.

Researcher: What kind of books do you like to read?

Annie: Mostly Newberry Medal winners and Caldecott books.

My favorite was *The Polar Express* (Van Allsburg, 1985).

- Laura: I like to read chapter books. I read basketball books and sometimes I read picture books, but not a lot.
- Mike: I like adventure books and mysteries and books about the jungle. My mom's friend from Iraq brought me books and so I started reading them.
- Will: I like science fiction. Last year at the book fair there was this one and I wanted to try reading those and I read them and thought they were pretty interesting, so I just started reading other science fiction. I also like books about rocks . . . I just like reading.
- David: I choose books about kids, and, oh yeah, computers. The last book I read was about computers--we got a new one.
- Researcher: When are the times during the day that you read?
- Julie: I read in school and I read at night with my Mom.
- Annie: Usually when there's nothing to do and nobody wants to play or something like that.
- Will: After school and before I go to bed.
- Mike: We read during social studies, SSR, or when we're done with our work usually she [teacher] makes us read.
- Laura: Yeah, for like when we list people of North Dakota, it's an Indian book and, um, social studies--can't remember what we're reading in social studies but in science we've just got our local books called The Properties of Matter or something like that. So that was a pretty good book--it has



a lot of things we try out, like we put ice cubes in a glass of hot water.

Researcher: Can you tell me about the book reports you do?

Julie: Well, like they ask you the author's name and stuff and they ask you what you thought the best part was and you have to tell the beginning, middle, and ending.

David: Sometimes it's challenging to find the most interesting part because I can't think about what the best part was. I always choose books that I can tell by the cover if it's gonna be interesting.

Laura: We only have to do nine book reports for the year and I've already done five!

Researcher: Do you like to do book reports?

Mike: Yep. I like writing about books. (All students I interviewed indicated they liked to do book reports.)

Researcher: Would you tell me about the kind of writing you do?

Annie: Last year I really wasn't into writing, I was more into reading. Now this year we wrote our mysteries and right after that I just started writing more mystery books.

David: It's very challenging because you sit there and wonder what I could write. I had all these ideas I just couldn't throw 'em all in. My rough draft was six pages and then when I wrote my original copy it was about five pages.

Laura: I wrote a mystery. It was really funny. I published it and I'm gonna maybe do authors' chair and read it to the class.

- Researcher: When you go to the library how do you go about choosing a book?
- Mike: I look for books about presidents. I've read Andrew Jackson, Bill Clinton, Ronald Reagan, and that's all I can think of. I just was walking around the front of the library and that looks like a president's book so I took a book and there were presidents all over the place.
- Laura: I just look around. I look at the new books like the chapter ones that they have for fourth grade and if there's one there that I want I go look around and if I find a chapter book that sounds like the title sounds good, I read a page and if I can't read five words, I don't know what they say, then I put the book back and go look for a different one.
- Will: Right now I'm reading the Elba books.
- David: First I started out with the little mysteries and I started reading them. Then the librarian got me into chapter books and I got hooked. Now I usually look at the book and I'll just say, "No, too long," and then I go and look at the mysteries, because I know where they are and there's usually about 10 of them I want to check out. You can only check out four books and a magazine. I usually check out three cuz I can read them in one week.
- Annie: I like Laura Ingalls Wilder. They are great books to read. I was at my cousin's house and she said we should read

some books, so we started reading Laura Ingalls Wilder. My teacher has those in our library too.

Julie: Well, if I find a book I see, I do the five fingers and see if I can read a page. If I get five words wrong I see that the book is not for me, so I take a different one. I usually try for chapter books, but I don't always get them read in one week.

Researcher: Would you have read mysteries if Mrs. L wouldn't have chosen them to read in class?

David: After we read Babe Ruth together I read Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew.

Will: I don't know. I'm not really a mystery lover, but now I like to read them a little.

Julie: I've read a couple, but I can't remember the titles. Mrs. L read some with us and there were some at the back of the room, but I didn't take one, cuz you can't take them home.

Laura: No, but then I read a Mary Kate and Ashley one. She got me interested in them.

Researcher: Would you rather have Mrs. L choose the books you read during your reading time, or would you want to be able to choose?

Annie: I'd rather have her choose because she chooses good books. She knows a lot about books.

Will: I'd have her pick. She picks better books that the whole class likes.

- Mike: I would choose because I get to pick the book I would like to read and it's usually fun for me to take one that I would like. But she picks good ones like that funny one about the Herdmans.
- Julie: I'd rather choose. Mrs. L does make good choices though. I like the one we're reading about Indians and, oh ya, I also liked reading the mysteries.
- David: Well, see, I like books, but I like Mrs. L to pick out books because a lot of books are really good books and you just look at the cover and they don't seem good, but if you read them they really are interesting, so I like when she picks out the books.
- Laura: I like the ones she chooses, especially that Indian book--it's really interesting. It has all this stuff about Indians and how they lived and how they survived. If I was supposed to read it by myself, I wouldn't have chosen it.

As I interpreted the data that emerged from my discussions with these students about reading, writing, and how they approached the selection of books, what was most interesting to me was their respect and appreciation of the teacher's knowledge and love of books. Many of the students acknowledged the fact that had the teacher not introduced books to them they would have missed reading many good books. This seemed to be particularly true of informational books. Students also talked about the teacher's knowledge of the interests of the class as a whole and that she is careful to choose books that most children would like.

## Summary

In this chapter I have provided a detailed description of the reading/language arts program in a fourth grade classroom. I have described how the element of choice has been woven into the curriculum and have presented profiles of the classroom teacher and six of her students. In the next chapter I will discuss the following assertions that arose from the data:

Assertion #1: Choice is woven throughout the curriculum and does not lie solely in students' book choices.

Assertion #2: When students were able to make choices in their learning, off-task behavior was minimal.

Assertion #3: Students rely on the teacher's knowledge of good literature as they make their personal book choices.

CHAPTER V  
CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate what happens in a classroom when students are given literacy choices. The study covered a four month period of time and included classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student interviews. Upon careful analysis of all the data collected, themes emerged and I was able to make three assertions. Chapter IV provided rich description of the data that support these assertions, and they will be summarized here.

Assertion #1: Choice Is Woven Throughout the Curriculum and Does Not Lie Solely in Students' Book Choices.

In this fourth grade classroom during this study students made decisions about what they would read only during sustained silent reading. On the surface it might appear that students had little freedom of choice in this classroom; however, I found that there were certain aspects of student learning that were negotiated. The teacher did not assume the role of the sole authority figure. Within the context of her reading program, Jill created conditions that permitted students opportunities to assume responsibility for their learning and make choices within her guidelines.

In this classroom personal responses to what was read were generated by students individually through journals, language arts notebooks, and book reports. When students wrote in their journals or notebooks, Jill usually provided suggestions for entries, but always gave students the option of writing about topics of their choice. While it was true that many times Jill asked for factual information in these responses, she usually asked students for their personal opinion as well. The book reports that students wrote were in response to books they chose to read. Other than providing a format for students, these book reports were open-ended.

Students made choices during writers' workshop. This was a time where they wrote for their own purposes. Within the workshop students were in control of their piece from beginning to end. They were involved in peer conferencing and handled the editing and revision of their work with a limited amount of guidance from the teacher.

When students were involved in reading in small groups, the choices that they made centered around how to share the responsibility for the reading, ways of recording and presenting their work, the types of responses that were generated, and at times the formation of the group itself. Group responses provided students with opportunities to make choices about design, structure, content, and, finally, the presentation of their projects. Many of the response projects involved students in reading for their own purposes as they found and used resources to gather the information that they needed.

Assertion #2: When Students Were Able to Make Choices in Their Learning, Off-Task Behavior Was Minimal.

Throughout the course of this study I was able to observe students in a variety of activities where they made choices about their learning. Some of these observations found students working independently, others involved students in group work. As I analyzed the data surrounding these choice situations and compared it with times when students' reading and responses were structured and teacher directed, I found that there were fewer instances of off-task behavior during the choice situations. It appeared to me that students managed themselves appropriately and relied less on Jill for direction during these times. There were, of course, instances of some off-task behavior during the choice situations, but not nearly to the extent of the teacher directed situations.

When given choices students appeared to be more engaged and assumed more control over their learning. As Cambourne (1988, 1995) suggests, when learners are engaged they believe that they are capable of learning and they see a clear purpose for learning. He explains that engagement is fostered as students take responsibility and ownership for when, how, and what they will learn from literacy events. Engagement in a learning task allows students to "personalize literacy by tailoring it to their own interests, knowledge, and needs" (Guthrie, 1996, p. 438).

My observations in Jill's classroom indicated that students were both motivated and engaged when they were given opportunities to personalize their learning. As they worked independently on open-ended response projects, I noted that they relied less on Jill's input about the structure of the project than they did when asked to work within a tight framework. As they



worked on self-identified group projects, my observations indicated that they were able to systematically gather information appropriate to their project without assistance from Jill. They used their time productively, shared responsibility for the group's work, and worked together cooperatively.

As the students in Jill's classroom were given opportunities to make choices in their learning, they became active creators of knowledge as they constructed their own meaning through their experiences, both past and present, which supports the constructive nature of learning (Heald-Taylor, 1996).

Assertion #3: Students Rely on the Teacher's Knowledge of Good Literature as They Make Their Personal Book Choices.

As I talked with and observed the students in Jill's class it was apparent to me that they valued Jill's knowledge of books. Many of them indicated that had they not been exposed to different genres, and they would never have chosen that particular type of book to read. Most students indicated that they would rather have Jill choose books for formal reading instruction than to choose them themselves.

A few students talked with me about their fears of books being too difficult for them and then finding through Jill's guidance that not only were they able to read that book, but that they enjoyed it. Jill values the pleasure that can be derived from reading a really good book and this attitude, I believe, has a positive influence on students as they make their own book choices. It appeared to me that not only do they value her book knowledge, but her knowledge of their own personal reading abilities and interests as well.

Students need guidance and support as they learn how to select material appropriate to their interests, abilities, and needs (Butler & Turbill, 1984; Hagerty, 1992). Jill provides this guidance and support as she spends time sharing quality literature, introduces different genre and authors, organizes curriculum around themes, takes students to the classroom library, and teaches students to choose books at their own reading level. The support and guidance that Jill provides are scaffolds that stretch students' thinking and move them toward independence. As the school year progresses and the teacher and students get to know each other, they begin to share control over learning. As Rhodes (1995) suggests, scaffolds are temporary and eventually must be dismantled. The scaffolds that have so carefully been placed eventually begin to fade and responsibility is released over time to the learner. In other words, there is a movement toward a more student centered, constructivist classroom environment.

### Educational Implications

Current educational theory supports a view of teaching and learning that is learner-centered and has students actively involved in making choices and taking responsibility for their learning. Literacy instruction has moved from rote memorization and drill and practice toward a model that promotes authentic reading and writing experiences where children read and write for their own purposes.

Making this paradigm shift means that educators must reconsider their role in the classroom. Teachers in learner-centered classrooms are mentors, collaborators, and facilitators. They support learning without controlling it. Sharing control of literacy means that teachers and students will be involved

in negotiating the curriculum. As the literacy curriculum is negotiated, teachers will guide students in making decisions about what, when, and how learning will happen, which will include allowing students autonomy to make choices in reading to suit their needs and interests. In order for teachers to support learners in this way, they will have to have a strong understanding of their role as a teacher, as well as knowledge about students and an understanding of their role in shaping their learning. In learner-centered, constructivist classrooms, teachers value the negotiation of the curriculum and giving children choices, but often face the difficulty of implementing this philosophy into their practice. Because they have such a strong sense of responsibility for the learning that takes place under their guidance, and are bound by curricular objectives put into place by school districts in which they work, creating classrooms in which teachers and students learn together becomes a challenging task.

As I talked with Jill, she discussed several factors that shape her decisions about the extent to which students have autonomy in what they read. One of her concerns is for struggling readers in an environment where students have the freedom of self-selection of literature. She feels that providing support in the form of scaffolds for student learning is particularly important for struggling readers. Another concern is her frustration with finding enough reading material at various reading levels that will accommodate the wide range of abilities and interests of the students in her class.

Theorists have identified ownership as central to students' literacy growth (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Routman, 1991; Short et al., 1996). Finding a good balance between teacher support and guidance and

student ownership is vital as practitioners create conditions that permit students to assume responsibility for their learning (Peterson, 1992).

Cambourne (1988) provides a set of conditions for learning that can be applied to literacy learning and then translated into classroom practice. As teachers apply these conditions in their classrooms, they will create a climate that assures that students have ownership in their learning.

Teachers who are committed to sharing the responsibility for learning with students must be thoroughly committed to experiencing new ways of structuring the learning environment and to sharing control in the classroom. As teachers share control, they support students by providing scaffolds within the zone of proximal development (Applebee & Langer, 1983; Graves et al., 1994; Searle, 1995; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978; Weaver, 1994). They must be convinced of the benefits of creating an environment that invites students to take ownership of what they read through the choices they make.

As teachers make these paradigm shifts, it is vital that they have a supportive environment in which to work. Teaching is very often done in isolation. It is important that as teachers make changes in their practice they have someone to talk openly with about their experiences. Allowing teachers the time they need to read, explore, discuss, and reflect upon ideas presented in research literature is currently seen as a luxury. My belief is that it should become a natural part of their practice. Respect for teachers as learners can be so easily facilitated with the gift of time and a supportive teaching and learning environment.

### Suggestions for Further Research

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) define research as a careful and diligent search . . . where one bit of information leads to another, which leads to another, and so on. Now that my research has come to an end, I am able to take time to reflect on this study as well as consider possibilities for further research.

One of the most important considerations in any research project is the selection of the site. To fully capture the essence of student choice in a literacy environment, a classroom should be chosen where students have complete freedom in the self-selection of literature. My recommendation to researchers is that they take time initially to be sure that they choose a site that carefully aligns itself with the purposes laid out in the research proposal. This may involve talking with teachers and making observations in several classrooms and at various grade levels prior to the commencement of the study.

The consideration of the duration of the study is important to the results that can be obtained. I had the opportunity to talk with Jill at the end of the school year during which this study was conducted. She told me that students were currently involved in a genre study of fantasy and that students were given complete autonomy in the self-selection of literature within this genre. She indicated that she did not feel comfortable with this freedom of choice at the beginning of the year; but now that she knows students better and she is more confident about their ability to handle this freedom, it has been a very positive experience. Had I been able to devote an entire school year to this research study, I feel that the additional data would have enhanced this study.

As a researcher with limited experience, I am aware of limitations to this study. I have come to the realization that interviewing children is an art. It is important to make them feel at ease in order for them to open up and talk at length about their classroom experiences. The interviews that I conducted were largely done outside of the classroom and were more formal in nature. This may have inhibited students' responses. In future research studies I would like to find a balance between formal and informal interviews. As I was interviewing the students for this study, I realized that knowing when to probe and when to just listen is a skill that certainly will come from more experience. As I analyzed the interviews, it was evident to me that in an effort to keep students talking I often interrupted with a probing question. I felt that at times my interruption had a negative effect, often resulting in short "yes" or "no" responses.

Seidman (1991) suggests that if a researcher is interested in what it is like for students to be in the classroom, what their experiences are, and how they make meaning of their experiences, then participant observation might be the best method of inquiry. The importance of talking with students about their learning should not be overlooked in qualitative studies such as this one. My interactions with students in the classroom were limited. For the most part I found an inconspicuous spot and merely observed. As I become more confident in my abilities as a researcher I feel that I will become more of a participant observer.

It would be pertinent to study the implications of the social nature of learning within the realm of literacy. The building of classroom community has a very powerful effect on the interactions among students and teachers and how they approach learning together (Routman, 1996; Tompkins, 1997;

Weaver, 1994). It would be interesting to focus on how the classroom community influences the element of choice in the classroom.

As this research study comes to a close, I am able to reflect on the experiences I have had. First, I have learned a valuable lesson about life as a researcher. I have found that the ability to manage one's time is a key factor in maintaining perspective throughout the duration of a study. Having a research agenda that is adhered to consistently greatly enhances the success of any research endeavor.

As I complete this dissertation, I realize that I have found my professional writing voice. I have always been reluctant to consider the possibility that what I have written would be of benefit to others and would be written in a way that could be published. As I complete the writing of this piece, I can see that what I have written may be valuable to teachers as they consider current educational research and use it to guide their practice.

## APPENDICES



APPENDIX A  
CONSENT FORMS

August 25, 1997

As principal of \_\_\_\_\_ School, I give my permission for Barbara Olson to conduct a research study in a fourth grade classroom in this building. I understand that all the appropriate paperwork is on file and that parental permission will be given before she interacts with any of the children in that classroom. Additionally, I understand that pseudonyms will be used for all people involved in this study and that Barbara's presence in the classroom will in no way affect the evaluation and assessment of any child or the teacher.

---

Name  
Principal

August 25, 1997

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for the opportunity to do my research in your classroom. I will begin during the first week of school and continue until the Christmas break. I will schedule my observations on a monthly basis after conferring with you as to the appropriateness of the dates I have chosen. I realize that schedules in an elementary school can change quickly, so please call me on any given day if we need to make a change.

Please understand that my presence in your classroom in no way will affect the assessment or evaluation of yourself as a teacher. My observations and subsequent dissertation will protect your identity by using a pseudonym. You, of course, will have access to my final research findings.

I will want to conduct a series of three or four interviews with you. Again, this information will be for my use only. Additionally, I will want to interact with and interview students in your classroom. I will do this only after parental consent has been given. Your students' anonymity will be protected as well.

If you agree to my presence in your classroom as a researcher, please sign and date this letter. Again, thank you for this opportunity.

Sincerely,

Barbara W. Olson

I give my permission for Barbara Olson to conduct a research study in my classroom.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

August 25, 1997

Dear Parent,

I am a student at the University of North Dakota pursuing a doctoral degree in Teaching and Learning. I will be conducting a research study in your child's classroom from August to December of this year. I would like to have your permission to interact with your child during the course of this study. If you will give your permission, I would talk with your child as well as look at his/her schoolwork. I can assure you that your child's identity will not be revealed. If any work or conversations are used in my final document I will assign a pseudonym. Please be assured that involvement in this study will in no way affect your child's evaluation and assessment within the classroom.

If you will give your permission, please sign the following and return it to your child's classroom teacher. If you have questions or concerns I encourage you to call me. My phone number is 772-5214.

Thank you,

Barbara W. Olson

---

I give my permission for \_\_\_\_\_ to take part in this research study.  
(child's name)

---

Your signature

---

Date

APPENDIX B  
CODE BOOK AND CODING SCHEMES

## Code Book

Begin School	The organizational structure that the teacher uses at the beginning of the school year.
Book Choices	The choices students make as they choose books to read independently.
Book Reports	Students write book reports in response to books read during sustained silent reading.
Classroom Library	An area in the classroom where books for students to read independently are kept.
Comp. Questions	The questions the teacher asks to check on student comprehension.
Computer	The use of laser disk technology in the classroom.
Cooperative Groups	How the teacher groups students. Includes the responsibilities they have in the group.
Curricular Connections	How the curriculum is organized to provide connections across subject areas.
Directions	When the teacher provides organization for students as they work either in groups or independently.
District Curriculum	The curriculum that the school district has prescribed for this grade level.
How Students Choose	How students choose the books that they read.
Journals	A form of written response done individually by students.
Lang. Arts Notebook	A form of written response done individually by students.
Literature/Characters	Teacher and student activities that develop characters.

Literature Choices	The books and stories the teacher chooses for the students to read.
Literature/Mysteries	The literature that was included in the mystery theme.
Reading Record	How students keep a record of their independent reading.
Reading Times	The various times during the day when students are reading or when the teacher reads to them.
Response Project	Projects students do either in groups or individually in response to literature.
Response Project/ Organize	How students organize their groups and the work within their groups.
Response Project/ Presentations	When students present their projects to the class.
Response Project/ Student Choice	When students have a choice in a response project.
Silent Reading	When students are reading to themselves.
SSR	Sustained Silent Reading.
Students Follow Along	As either the teacher or another student reads, the rest of the class follows along in their own books.
Students Help	When students help each other with words or assignments.
Students' Likes	The types of books that students like to read.
Students Off Task	The times when students aren't participating as expected by the teacher.
Students Organize	When students, either in groups or individually, spend time organizing before they work.
Students Read Aloud	When students are reading out loud.

Students Read/Pass	The times when students choose not to read out loud.
Students Relate Text	The background knowledge that students have about a particular subject and the connections that students make to their own lives.
Students to Teacher	The times when students leave their desks or group to ask the teacher a question or to show their work.
Students Work With	The times when students work with either one other person or in a small group.
Teacher Conferences	Incudes times the teacher conferences with groups or individual students.
Teacher Influences Student Choice	The influences the teacher has over what students choose to read or how they choose to respond.
Teacher Organizes	How the teacher organizes for instruction. Includes how she uses charts and the directions she gives.
Teacher Planning	The planning that the teachers does. Includes long range and short range planning.
Teacher Reads	When the teacher reads to students.
Teacher Walks Around	How the teacher monitors group or individual work.
Vocabulary	Teacher and students define vocabulary words.
Writing	The times when students are writing, including writers' workshop.



## Preparation and Organization Codes

Literature Choices ————— Planning  
Teacher Planning ————— Planning

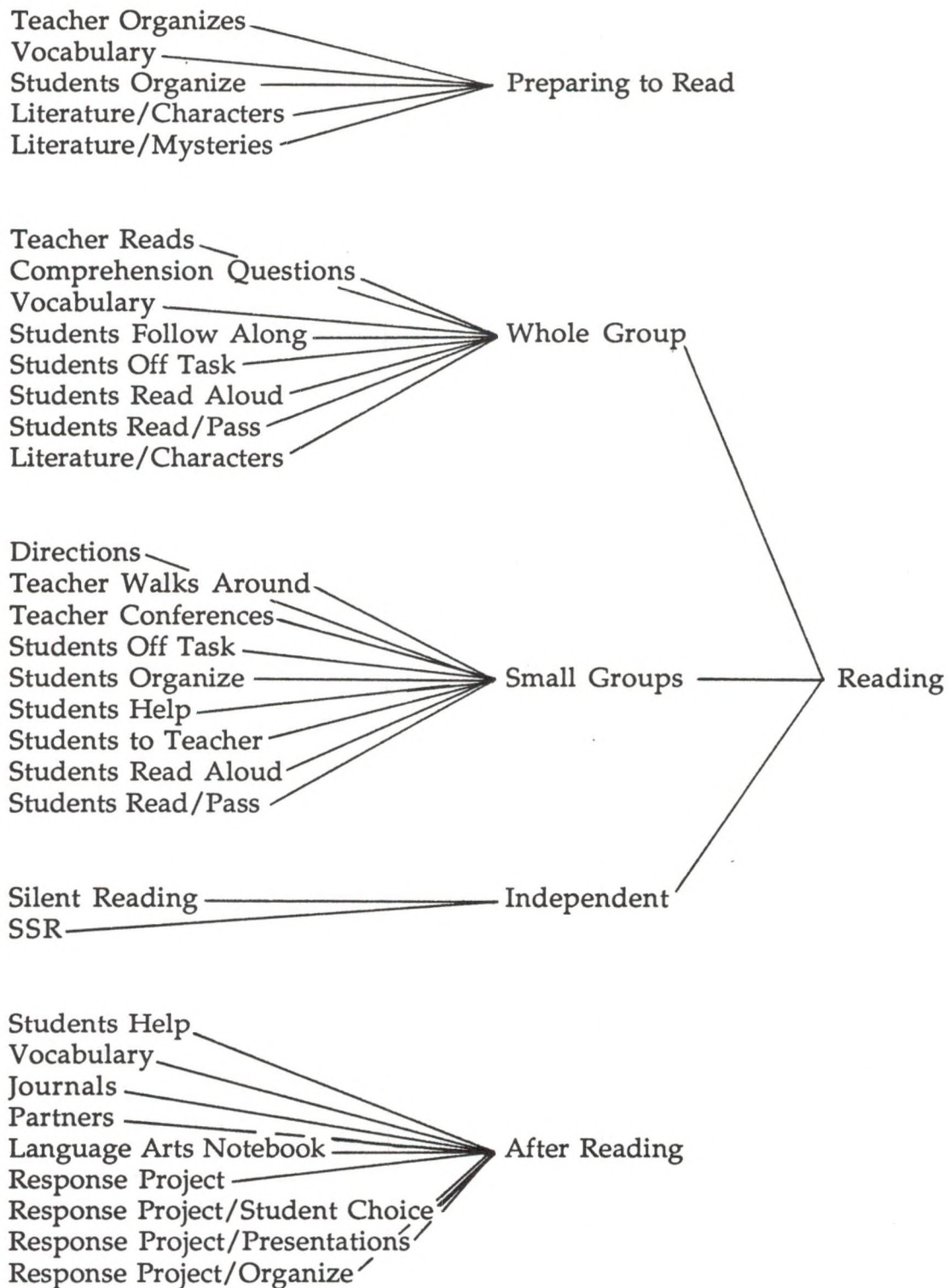
Teacher Organizes ————— Curriculum  
Reading Times ————— Curriculum  
Computer ————— Curriculum  
District Curriculum ————— Curriculum  
Curricular Connections ————— Curriculum

Cooperative Groups ————— Grouping  
Begin School ————— Grouping

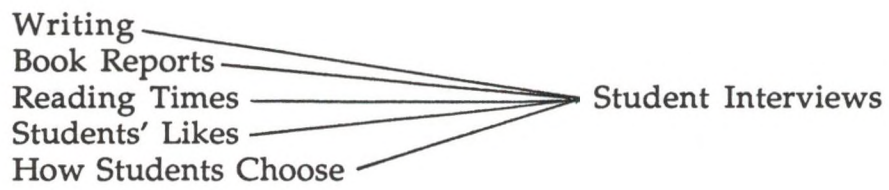
Book Reports ————— Response  
Reading Record ————— Response  
Journals ————— Response  
Language Arts Notebook ————— Response  
Response Project ————— Response  
Response Project/Student Choice ————— Response  
Response Project/Presentations ————— Response  
Response Project/Organize ————— Response

Book Choices ————— Teacher Influences Choice  
Teacher Influences Student Choice ————— Teacher Influences Choice  
Classroom Library ————— Teacher Influences Choice

## Formal Reading Instruction Codes



Student Interview Codes



APPENDIX C

SKILLS LIST

Skills List

Things that \_\_\_\_\_ can do as a writer.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.
- 11.
- 12.
- 13.
- 14.
- 15.
- 16.
- 17.
- 18.
- 19.
- 20.

APPENDIX D  
WRITING WORKSHEET

## Writing Worksheet

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. Write rough draft on every other line \_\_\_\_\_
2. Peer-conference  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 (peer-signature) \_\_\_\_\_
3. Revise \_\_\_\_\_
4. Peer/teacher conference  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 (signature) \_\_\_\_\_
5. Revise \_\_\_\_\_
6. Edit:
  - a. capitals \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. punctuation \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. margins \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. paragraphs \_\_\_\_\_
  - e. spelling \_\_\_\_\_
  - f. makes sense \_\_\_\_\_
  - g. sequence \_\_\_\_\_
7. Write final copy \_\_\_\_\_
8. If you are not going to publish, attach to writing and hand in. \_\_\_\_\_
9. Publish:
  - a. cover \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. author \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. title page \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. illustrations  
 (optional) \_\_\_\_\_
10. Hand in published writing with this sheet attached to it. \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX E  
STUDENT SURVEY



Student Survey

What book are you reading? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Why did you choose this book? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

During SSR time I read:

\_\_\_\_\_ the whole time

\_\_\_\_\_ most of the time

\_\_\_\_\_ hardly any of the time

My favorite book is: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX F  
READING RECORD



APPENDIX G  
PROJECT EVALUATION CHECKLIST

Project Evaluation

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Project Description \_\_\_\_\_

- 1 = Poor
- 2 = Fair
- 3 = Okay
- 4 = Good
- 5 = Great

1 2 3 4 5 **Quality of Ideas** (includes important concepts in writing and illustrations, maps, graphs, and/or models)

1 2 3 4 5 **Expression of Ideas** (introduces topic, develops topic, has an appropriate conclusion)

1 2 3 4 5 **Creativity** (expands assignment, is visually interesting, shows creativity)

1 2 3 4 5 **Conventions** (uses conventional spelling, punctuation, and grammar, shows effort in editing, polished final product)

1 2 3 4 5 **Clear Presentation** (organized, audible, clearly explained)

1 2 3 4 5 **Participation** (communicated clearly, shared in the work, listened to others)

**Comments:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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## REFERENCES

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