

## Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research

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Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 4

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1-1-2003

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#### Recommended Citation

Kowal, Maria (2003) "Creating a Classroom of Connoisseurs: Grade 7 Students and Their Teacher Investigate Their Growth As Readers," *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2470-6353.1172>

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# Creating a Classroom of Connoisseurs: Grade 7 Students and Their Teacher Investigate Their Growth As Readers

by *Maria Kowal*

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Maria Pia Perez

## Introduction

Maria Pia's poem illustrates the state of mind I was in. It was August and I was preparing for the upcoming school year. My assignment, as it had been for a few years, was Grade 7 home room teacher, responsible for teaching language arts, social studies and math to 12 and 13 year olds. My thoughts were tuned in to my language arts program; the reading component in particular. The purpose of this paper is to show how over the course of a school year, through coinvestigating this aspect of my program with my students, I and they came to gain a deeper understanding of how young adolescent readers can make meaning from the texts they read.

So what is the most challenging part about helping a group of 33 grade 7 students grow as readers? Motivating them? Being responsive to the particular needs of the 5 ESL students? Integrating the 3 students with formally identified learning disabilities? Trying to get students hooked on a short story when the phone rings three times during the reading of it? Helping them to create meaning from the texts we read? Challenging the avid readers? As I began to prepare for a new school year, the challenge for me was "trying to help them achieve their potential and to help them know that they have progressed as readers."

Early on in my teaching of senior elementary students, I had read Nancy Atwell's *In the Middle* (1987) and saw her use of the reading journal as an excellent means of individualizing my language arts program. I could select themes and areas of study from the curriculum which we would focus on in class e.g. the short story, biography, and then the students would get a chance to encounter them at further length through self-selected reading materials. They would be able to write in their journals about what they noticed from their reading, and enter into a dialogue with me, which I would make sure was responsive to their level of reading development. My

responses would lie within their zones of proximal development, to use Vygotsky's metaphor (1978). The students would progress as readers, and I would have a successful reading program!

My interpretation of Atwell's ideas worked well for the good readers who had no trouble in identifying themes and points of interest in their reading and who enjoyed the challenge of my questions. I loved reading their work. But then how to help the students who would write pages telling me the story of their novel with no further reflection? And that other group of students who would write concise two liners, "I really liked this story it had lots of good description. progressing by June to " I really liked this story it had lots of good description, see p.96.", sometimes followed by a paragraph long quotation. Over the years, I refined the journal and had something that worked for a larger subset of the class. It had more structure, compulsory and optional entries to help students with their responses. I somewhat guiltily evaluated it too!

Nevertheless, there was still an element of dissatisfaction. I wasn't convinced that, at the end of the year, my students knew whether they had grown as readers. From my experience, reading growth can be difficult for students (and their parents) to see or quantify. It's not like math, where one day you don't know how to calculate the area of a parallelogram and the next day you do. It's a process, and where you start at the beginning of the year will at least partly determine how far you progress by the end of the year. Simply telling a reluctant reader who is not quite working at the expected level for a particular grade to read regularly every night so that we can see how much improvement is gained by June is not going to be inspirational for the student or his/her parents. There are no immediate benefits, so why begin? And on the other hand, if you're a strong reader, what more growth is there to make? The question which I was beginning to formulate in my mind was whether it would be possible to help the students to become aware of how they were progressing; to help them identify their needs as readers and whether this awareness would help them to try harder and to achieve more.

A second focus was to coinvestigate this topic with my students. Involving our students as coresearchers of an area of investigation was the focus that my teacher research group was examining for our current two year cycle. Hume (2001) showed in her research with gifted students that it is possible to engage middle-school students as coresearchers in classroom-based research. Indeed, her students' increased understanding of the role of talk in the teaching/learning process helped them to understand why she chose to organize her learning opportunities as she did and enabled them to take more advantage of this learning tool in their studies. My own classroom investigations (Kowal 2001) had led me to believe that, even though I know why I organize learning opportunities in a particular way, my students will not necessarily share that understanding. So encouraging them to develop a meta-awareness of how learning opportunities are organized and function might help students to benefit more from them. However, how do you encourage students to participate in coresearch with their teacher? What does coresearch look like? How can coresearch be conducted in the mainstream classroom of 30+ students within the confines of mandated curricula, rigid timetables and public demands for more accountability from school boards? These were all questions which I as a teacher was facing as I prepared to launch an investigation with my class.

## Cycle One: Testing the Waters

In October, our reading journal was up and running and was still our main vehicle for responding to literature. We had worked through a few cycles of it and the time was right for me to initiate a dialogue about our reading program: what we had achieved and where it was heading. I also introduced the idea of coresearch: investigating and learning together about parts of our program in order to improve it; jointly setting goals which could help us to improve as readers. As is usually the case, the students were very excited about real life research being conducted in our classroom and the idea that other educators might be interested in our findings. I think they were also a little bewildered at the suggestion that they would be active participants in the research.

I invited the students to write to me about what they liked about reading journal. What was good about it? What needed to be changed? What did they think they learned through completing it? Why I would ask them to have a reading journal? I eagerly took their responses home and read them.

I was left with a deflated feeling of "so what?" There was lots of feedback. The students had answered my questions seriously and thoroughly, but there were no "aha" moments of new insight for me. There was general approval that reading journal was better than the monthly book reports they had done in the junior grades. There were a few students who didn't like reading journal and some suggestions as to how to improve it.

For instance, some students wanted more time in class to complete their journal activities. They had difficulty remembering when it was due and organizing their time. But this was one area which I told the students I saw as non-negotiable. Reading journal was an independent part of our program and as such, the majority of the reading and writing was to be completed as homework activity. Some students wanted me to provide them with specific activities. Some wanted more small and large group talks in addition to the individualized reading program. Both of these areas are anticipated and dealt with in our first unit of study. In September when we are setting up the reading journal component, it takes up much of our reading time and the activities are deliberately open-ended with more guidance regarding content, more small and large group discussion of shared reading being introduced once we begin our first unit on short stories.

With hindsight, I now appreciate that these data actually suggest that we had a good level of intersubjectivity, or common understanding in our classroom. I did have a good intuitive grasp of the students' self-reported needs and wants. This turned out to be a firm foundation for us to build on, which I then underappreciated, but which, after having listened to colleagues (Angus, this issue) and subsequent experiences of my own, realize I should have valued a great deal more!

At the end of the short story unit I went again to the class for feedback. This time, however, I also wanted the students to try to analyze how they had grown as readers. I wanted them to have a sense of achievement and for us to set goals together for promoting and studying further reading growth. The problem I had was how to move us beyond what I think was really their feedback in my research to the beginnings of coresearch.

## Cycle Two: Finding an Improvable Object

The difficulty as I saw it, was that the notion of "reading growth" was too abstract for us to work with. In the science classroom, for instance, there are many accounts of students working together to co-construct deepening understandings of scientific concepts (Roth 2002, Van Tassel 2001) as they work with a concrete "improvable object" (Wells 1999), observing how plants grow from seeds, building a rubber band powered car, examining how light refracts as it passes through a liquid. As students co-construct the object, they wonderfully build and refine scientific hypotheses and explanations of the phenomena they are observing. What I needed for an improvable object was an image, a metaphor for the students of themselves as readers; something tangible that we could build and rebuild together. The "aha" moment came shortly after we had been discussing Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado*. Our discussion of what was meant by a connoisseur of wine recalled to mind the work of Elliot Eisner (1991) and his use of the idea of connoisseurship in teaching. He used the image to describe the art of good teaching, the need for teachers to be responsive to the varying contexts they face.

For me, this metaphor summed up completely the complex nature of responding to literature and the many levels on which individual readers interact with a text at different times in their development as readers. It was open-ended and complex enough for all the students in my class to appropriate and use as a reflective tool, provided they could appreciate the basic notion of what is meant by a connoisseur. At the end of the short story unit I provided the students with a second chance to reflect on the activities we had completed. I also asked them to rate themselves as connoisseurs of pizza, hockey cards and Saturday morning cartoons, using a scale of 1 (poor) - 5 (excellent) and to justify their evaluation of one area. It was clear from their responses that the students had no problem in using the term.

PIZZA: I'm the highest on this because I don't like pizza the best, but I still eat it quite often so if I find a good pizza I can tell it apart from something else. For example: Classico Pizza is better than Pizza Pizza because it has a thinner crust and more flavour. (Jane)

Applying the term to the more abstract area of the short story or poetry was also well within their grasp:

I have rated myself 4 because I have learned more: 1) Notice good authors, e.g. Edgar Allen Poe, 2) Notice how to investigate about foreshadowing, 3) how to find good stories. (Andrew)

A 1 because I don't know much, but I know that they are in raims [sic]. (Nona)

We had our improvable object and we could begin our coinvestigation. Moreover, I could see that the examples the students chose to justify their reasoning also provided me with an important insight into what they were valuing as elements that an expert reader would take from a text. In referring to the short story, for example, many of the students chose to mention technical devices which we had identified in class, such as foreshadowing. I was indirectly

getting feedback on what the students were picking up as being important from my teaching of the unit.

### **Cycle Three: Beginning the Co-research**

Our next unit was a poetry unit, which we began with a discussion about the goals we would like to achieve by its completion; how we would like to develop our connoisseurship. The students and I listed our goals in individual poetry reading journals. My goals included to make poetry accessible to the students, to get my reluctant readers on board, to have fun with poetry, and to help students identify devices that poets use to create meaning for the reader. We were maintaining a good level of intersubjectivity; these goals were not far apart from what the students mentioned: not to be afraid when faced with a poem, to be able to understand what the poet wants to say, to be able to write a poem that makes sense. Our final posted list of goals included: to like poetry, to understand poetry, to become familiar with the work of famous poets, to write our own poems, to be able to identify the difference between poetry and prose.

As we went into our second term together, it was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore two things. The first was the near impossibility of separating reading from writing. Students had mentioned in their feedback to me on the short story how they would have enjoyed writing their own short story, to try out the elements they had encountered ; using their own work as a means of improving their connoisseurship.

The second thing was how our reading journal was just crying out to be brought into our class discussions; it could no longer be something that was used only in the individualized part of our program. During this unit, students would be given the chance to write in class in poetry journals (their choice to begin a new journal) whenever there was something of value to them to write about, as well as completing regular entries.

### **Cycle Four**

#### **1) How we investigated our developing connoisseurship and what we discovered**

As well as having a common vision to work with, there were also specific activities designed to encourage the students to reflect on how and what they were learning; activities which helped me to develop my understanding of how the way in which I organized learning opportunities influenced my students' learning. To this end, the "Stop the Action and Reflect" approach which we had developed at our DICEP meetings was an effective tool and easily completed within our lesson time.

A brief questionnaire encouraged the students to take a meta look at themselves as learners and provided me with an insight into how an activity, which I thought was an effective vehicle for student learning, was interpreted by the students. During the poetry unit, one of the activities the students completed was based on a Toronto Board of Education Language Benchmark activity (1989). It was designed to help a teacher assess students' comprehension of a poem. Working

individually, the students read the poem, *The Bullmoose*, by Canadian poet Aulen Nowlan. Then they were asked to assume the role of a newspaper reporter witnessing the events described in the poem and to think of two questions to ask of any three different characters mentioned in the poem. They were to choose the question they thought was the best, to asterisk it, and to explain why they thought it was the best. I have always liked this activity. It seems to me it is a great way to measure comprehension of a poem without asking the students to respond to a predetermined set of questions; a means perhaps of helping the students get something out of completing the activity too. But what and how? Reading the students' answers about why they thought I had asked them to complete it and what they took from it provided me with the insights I needed to get a better understanding of how it worked and to give me the confidence to defend my use of it, should the occasion arise. We stopped the action to reflect on two points: What did you get out of completing this activity? Why did the teacher ask you to complete this activity?

Only one student claimed to have got nothing out of the activity. In response to the first question, 25% of the responses given by the students said it made them look at the characters more closely. Another 25% of the responses said that it helped them to understand the poem better. Many of the other responses made reference to being prompted to think more about the meaning of the poem, to notice more in the poem. These comments were made from students of all ability levels. Almost all the responses implied the activity required higher level thinking skills for it to be completed:

... It made me get more involved in the poem (Kevin)

I think that asking questions helped me interupte [interpret] the poem because it made me think of all the chacters [characters'] points of view (Susan)

Some of the students' answers were more detailed than others and provided additional insights. For some it was a means of developing empathy with the characters:

Doing an activity like this helps me understand every character's point of view. I can put myself in another person,s shoes and think what they are thinking. (Enza)

For others of determining motivation:

I think by doing this activity [that] when you ask the question you would like to ask in your head, you are already trying to think of the answer. (Sharon)

I think this activity [helps] me to better understand this poem. I say this because as I am thinking of questions for the characters, I am also thinking of answers that better help me to understand this poem and its characters. (Theresa)

And for another still, an activity with generative characteristics which could be applied to other poems:

As I said before it dose [sic] make you think about the poem more. I think that you made us do this activite [sic] because maybe if we ever don,t understand a poem and we want to or need to understand it we can do this and it will help us. (Natasha)

These comments were reassuring. Here was an activity that the students appeared to find useful, which encouraged them to think, and which apparently required them to read and reread the poem to create a meaning based in the words of the poem. As I discuss shortly, one of my developing concerns throughout this unit was how to encourage the students to go back to the poem itself when interpreting it. It appears that this type of an activity is a good vehicle for promoting more than one cursory reading. Secondly, it is clear that the experience, whilst broadly similar for many of the students (trying to understand the meaning of the poem), was also experienced in a variety of ways from individual to individual (developing empathy with the characters, determining motivation for their acts). The data illustrate how, even though we are all completing the same activity, and have a similar goal (understanding the poem), we are interacting with it in different ways, but in ways which are appropriate for us as individuals. Whilst this is probably true for many if not all activities, I would suggest that, given that only one student claimed to have gained nothing from its completion, this was an effective activity to use with this group; one which "worked", in spite of the many individual differences between my learners.

About a week later, we stopped the action and reflected again in class. This time, I asked the students to reflect about the model we were using to respond to poems in class. It was adapted from Schwartz and Bone (1995). The Retell, Relate, and Reflect approach is, I understand, used in many Ontario classrooms and I believed that it provided a good way in to discussing a poem. Retell basically requires a student to explain in his/her own words what the poem is about. The Relate stage encourages students to make connections with the poem and their own experiences. In our class, we used the Reflect stage to look at the way the poem was put together, to ponder the effectiveness of a particular image, reasons the poet would have had for choosing a particular string of sounds etc. The model appeared to be an effective means of structuring large and small group discussions, and for completing reading journal entries. My purpose in asking the students how it "worked for them" was to understand their experience of using it, as well as making them articulate a meta-understanding of how it worked.

The data showed that the Relate stage was the easiest part of the model for the students to respond to. Fifty percent of the students mentioned this point. No students mentioned having any difficulty in completing it. Thirty-eight percent of the students said that retelling the poem was easy for them, but interestingly, a good number of students, (17%) found it difficult to tell what a poem was about, although they could find something to relate to in it. Reflecting on the poem was considered to be a challenging activity, regardless of a student's reading ability, although it tended to be the most proficient readers who were actively seeking out examples of the poet's creativity or use of specific devices from their reading.

I cannot explain why a poem is a good one or what the author has done to make it a good poem. (Andrew)



The hardest part is the interpreting [reflecting] part ... I am not good at finding little things [in a poem] and making sense of them, so that it completely makes sense, and is a link to a different part in the poem. (Theresa)

I think I need to prob[e] more and become more intimate and not to just walk around the outside of it I need to just get in there and prob[e]. (Cathy)

As connoisseurs, the students really valued the chance to discuss poems with one another. As had been the case with the short story unit, the majority of the students mentioned that discussing a poem in the large group setting was one of the most useful and interesting of the activities we did. Students valued the different interpretations that these discussions brought to light. Sometimes the poems discussed had already been read individually by all the students either alone or working in small groups, at times a poem was read for the first time in the large group. I tried not to over-manage the discussions, but to let students respond directly to other students' comments, an element of our teaching that we have investigated before in our DICEP research (Donoahue 2001). Students enjoyed asking each other for help in interpreting a particular element of a poem. When asked to read a poem and perform a group interpretation of it to the class, they enjoyed the different emphases given to a poem by each group; for example adding a percussion accompaniment to emphasize the rhythm of a poem, assigning a different stanza to a different person and reading the last one in unison to show the universality of the dilemma the poet was writing about. It was during one such discussion that Khalid made the, for me, exciting observation about the transactional quality (Rosenblatt 1994) of creating meaning: "the poet writes one half of the poem and you supply the other." It was a wonderful opportunity to open the discussion to the interactive nature of reading and meaning making. Later in the discussion, the comment "a poem can mean anything you want it to" led to very lively discussion. Can it? Should it? How can you justify an interpretation?

The issue of making meaning was one which really interested me. For just as I had found the first comment a delight to hear, the second sent shivers down my spine. One of the concerns I had in the back of my mind was whether I was being too liberal in my approach. From an accountability point of view, maybe I should have been giving the students more specific questions to answer in writing and, ostensibly at least, have kept the learning more under control. In other words, how was I doing in maintaining a balance between letting the students explore poetry and make meaning from the text they were reading, and working within that coveted zone of proximal development?

Another source of data provided me with a means of confronting this issue with my students. At various stages through the year I would videorecord students in their small group discussions so that I could get a better understanding of how the activity was played out from start to finish. As I watched students reading and discussing poems together, I could see how difficult it could be for the students to Retell and identify meaning in a poem, and how Relating to different parts of the poem could take over the discussion. Sometimes the students suspected there were things they just weren't getting but couldn't find a way around the problem. Sometimes they appeared to be working under the notion of the poem being able to mean whatever the reader wanted it to. During one discussion of the poem *Mid-term Break* by Irish poet Seamus Heaney, I listened in and realized the students were frustrated that they were only scratching the surface of its layers

of meaning. I suggested that they reread it. It helped a little, although I think our final large group discussion probably helped more. Should I then have omitted the small group discussions; saved time and gone straight to the large group discussions? Well some poems did only get discussed in the large group, but in my opinion, if these developing connoisseurs were to develop their skills, then they needed time to be left to their own devices too.

During the unit, I arranged with the students who had been videotaped to view themselves in action. We met over pizza during the lunch hour. I did not feel comfortable using class time for this type of analysis and was not sure that the students would want to be "exposed to the whole class", particularly as not all students had been taped. Some of the videos showed students interpreting poems. After watching the tapes, the students from one group pointed out how they had entered into a long discussion about the meaning of the poem they had been given, completely leaving the poem behind.

Their comments resonated with other members in the group. Even though we had discussed in class how important it was to keep going back to the text when interpreting a poem, it was not until they had seen themselves in action that the penny really dropped and they could see how loosely linked to the poem their remarks were. It was noticed too that the group reading the Seamus Heaney poem did have more success after rereading it.

In retrospect, I believe that this opportunity for the students to reflect on themselves in action was a significant learning event for them. It appeared to be significant in enabling them to take a meta-stance to their studies and might therefore have been a valuable experience for all the class to share. I suspect that, after this event, the students would have taken to heart a lot more seriously the need to refer back repeatedly to the poem whilst interpreting it, or have discovered the key to probing the meaning of a poem. This occasion was the only time I really shared our data with the students rather than reporting my findings to them, and I think it is an area that I shall continue to explore in future research.

My goal at the beginning of the year had been to coinvestigate reading growth with my students. As we explored the issue through our investigation I could see that an important aspect of my role was helping students make meaning from text. Of course, studying poetry is a wonderful vehicle for investigating this topic, but another issue which could not be ignored was the role of writing in promoting meaning making from text. I knew that once the students started to write their own poems they would be given the chance to see from the inside out how and why a poet uses language. And from within our connoisseurship metaphor, it was only logical that, once we had written our own poems, in small and large groups and individually, we would share them with each other to see for ourselves what the "second half of the poem", supplied by its readers, would look like. Now, I am not claiming that this type of writers' workshop was any kind of a revolutionary breakthrough. Some junior grade classrooms, in particular, are full of novels published by students, with a space for written comments added by readers. What, in my opinion., was exciting and vibrant in our classroom was the authenticity of doing these peer reviews. Because we were investigating the reading process, assuming the role of connoisseur, establishing the interactive nature of the reading process, there was a buzz about seeing what the responses to our writing were going to be.

I saw so much potential for how this could be developed; group poems which, when completed, would be shared with the other groups for interpretation and critique; a sharing of individually written poems with other students; poetry readings of student created work; reading journal entries where the text being critiqued was student written; students preparing an interpretation of their own poetry and then having the chance to compare it with others' interpretations of it. Throughout all of this, students would still be refining their connoisseurship, experiencing how meaning is created and recreated from texts; they would be reading for meaning, reading to respond, being forced to examine a text in detail.

Our poetry unit lasted much longer than it normally does and we just scratched the surface of exploring the possibilities of responding to each other's writing. However, students did get a chance to write their own interpretations of the poems they created as the introductory poem and footnote show. They did have some opportunities to read and respond to each other's work, and the class in which they created and shared group poems based on works of art produced by the Canadian group of artists known as The Group of Seven was full of enthusiasm, amazement and mutual admiration for each others' work.

Our reading journal work was changing too. Regardless of what I had said to the students at the beginning of the year, it was no longer appropriate to isolate it as an at home activity for poems read at home. We started to keep a poetry reading log in which reactions and responses to poems read alone at home and together in class were kept. There were times when we needed to just take out our journal and respond in it to a common moment that had happened in class. By the time we started our third unit, a study of the work of Jean Little, I knew I was going to be asking the students to use it in a very different way.

At the end of the poetry unit I went to the class again for feedback and reflections on how the unit had gone from their point of view. As usual, the first question asked the students to comment on their connoisseurship. All students stated that they could identify growth they had made. Sixty-seven percent of the students referred to a greater knowledge of technical devices used by poets, 57% of the students said that they had more confidence in being able to understand poems. And something else that I noticed was that some students were beginning to articulate an understanding of reading growth as something that was forever changing, the goal posts were always moving. The more they learned, the more they realized they still had to learn. Some students were beginning to articulate a meta understanding of themselves as learners.

As Sharon says:

I remember that at the beginning of the poetry unit I put I was a 5 in poetry connoisseurship, but I was wrong I was probably a 3.5 because I didn't know how much there was to learn...

And Nona:

I think I'm more 3.5 because I don't think that any body can be an expert because you're always learn[ing] something all the time you read a poem...

In terms of what aspects of the unit had been the most helpful, 90% of the students mentioned the importance of group (large or small) discussion. One of the things they enjoyed the most was the various interpretations of the poems these discussions generated. When asked to comment about the fact that we had read and written poetry during the unit, 48% of the students said how much writing poems had helped them in understanding how poems are put together and therefore how to interpret others' poetry, for example: "it made me see how a poet thinks" (John) and others mentioned that it helped them to understand better how devices are used.

## **2) Comparing our competence with provincial standards**

Midway through the year, the provincial government published a series of Exemplars for Ontario language arts programs (Ministry of Education of Ontario 2000); samples of student work to be used as a resource for teachers. They show examples of student work at all grades which correspond to Ministry levels of achievement and are supposed to be used to encourage better consistency in evaluating student work province-wide. Activities and assessment rubrics were also included. The grade 7 reading activity centered around the reading of a short story and a poem with questions which referred to both texts individually and as a pair. I knew that I should give this to my students to see how our developing connoisseurs were shaping up and how my program measured up. I was a little apprehensive. I had not seen the activities until we had completed both our short story and poetry units, although I had been referring to the Ministry Guidelines in planning my units and I did think the activities were a fair test of the Ministry's guidelines.

We currently have 4 levels of achievement. Levels 3 and 4 indicate that a student is working to the expectations of the grade, levels 1 and 2 indicate they are below or approaching grade expectations respectively. My students acquitted themselves well. The majority performed at grade level and the very few who were below grade expectations were students who had been identified as needing extra support from the Special Education department. Typically, this status would indicate that they were identified as performing at two grades below actual at the beginning of the school year.

I am not claiming that our success came from our connoisseurship metaphor, but I was very satisfied that I could teach my program in such a rewarding way and meet Ministry expectations. More importantly perhaps, I asked the students in a year-end questionnaire if they had felt well prepared going in to the assessment activity. Eighty-three percent of the answers indicated the students did feel well prepared for the benchmark. Of the three students who said they did not, one was a student receiving assistance from the special education department.

## **Cycle 4: Connoisseurs Doing it for Real**

At the beginning of the year, a student had enthusiastically shown me a letter that she had received from Canadian children's writer, Jean Little. The student was an avid fan of her books and had written to her to see if she did visits to schools. The answer was yes and we were able to work with the school librarian to get funding for Ms. Little to talk with several grade 6 and 7 classes. As the third term began, Ms. Little's visit was fast approaching. I was reading her autobiography, *Little by Little*, and had read none of her other works. She was not an author we

normally focussed on in our language arts program, although I knew that some students read her works in their independent reading and she was often studied in the late junior grades. This serendipitous opportunity which had presented itself at the beginning of the year was perfect for our classroom of connoisseurs. It was clear to me that both I and my students would still be learning more about responding to texts in the years to come but, as connoisseurs, it was now perfectly appropriate for me to let the students take the lead.

I was honest with the students about my limited reading of Ms. Little's work and proposed to them that, as connoisseurs, we should use our next unit to study her work. I would read her autobiography to the class, a little each day, and they in their individual reading program would read a variety of her books until she came to visit. Ever working within the connoisseur framework, I suggested to the class that in our discussions we would undoubtedly raise many questions and that we should see her visit as a chance to get some of them answered by Ms. Little herself. I also made it quite clear to the students that I had no other goals for the unit than for all students to read a variety of her works (biography, novels, picture books) and for us to discuss our reactions to them in class. I did ask the students to think a little about what they hoped to get out of the unit in terms of learning. The students responded individually and in a large group and we posted a list of what were no longer simply goals, but anticipated outcomes of the unit, based on other experiences in responding to literature to date. To summarize, they anticipated three overall outcomes: 1) that they would develop an appreciation of her style as an author, 2) be able to identify recurring themes in her work 3) learn something about what it is like for a person who is almost totally blind to write books.

The students were required to keep a log of their reading in their reading journals and to write responses and reactions to them. As I read aloud from her autobiography, students would interrupt to share similar events that had occurred in their reading of her fiction. They would comment on how closely a passage in their novel related to a passage I had just read. We talked about how real life events were changed in her fictionalized accounts, and they listened with interest to how she learned to read and write and work at school as her eyesight steadily worsened. At times, when a student made a comment, it made perfect sense for all the students to pull out their reading journals and to write a spontaneous response to the point that had been made.

I've noticed that a theme in Jean Little's writing is "challenges". The main characters have to face problems and hills in a flat ground. Also *From Anna* seems to be about a girl who is becoming blind, not unlike *Little by Little*. In both books, the alphabet is wobbly and shaking to the main character. Also I've noticed each character has a special person that they confide in: In *From Anna* her father, in *Little by Little* her mother. Also the majority of the main characters are female not male. (Jane)

Reading journal was now an integral part of our reading program and, in my opinion, was a dynamic and exciting tool to use for personal reflection. I too would write in my teacher research journal, responding to comments and events in the classroom at the same time as the children. I was not formally evaluating their journals. Completion of the required activities was what I was going to be looking for when I took them in.

A few days before her visit, the students wrote out questions for Ms. Little. They selected their best, and using a lottery system some students were able to put their question to her. They had been given the chance to lead the way and they responded well to it. It was true that her work was not to everyone's liking, but for the most part, the students remained motivated throughout the unit. As question time arrived, the first student asked her question. She wanted to know if fictionalizing so many of the challenges she had faced was in some way therapeutic for the writer. I was so happy for her when Ms. Little began her good natured reply by saying it was obvious that these were going to be "difficult questions" which would require some effort on her part!

### **Cycle 5. Students' Last words**

At the end of the year, I asked the students to complete one more questionnaire about themselves and the reading program. Ninety-six percent of the students who participated said they felt they had grown as readers during the course of the year. Only two said they had not. How the students described their growth varied greatly. The following selection of responses is typical of a large number of the respondents.

I think it did help me because at the beginning of the school year I didn't read any books but then I had to for the reading program. Now I like reading a lot and I understand stories way better than at the beginning of the year. (Viktor)

I can interpret things a lot easier. (John)

Through in depth looks at the workings of writing (climax, simile etc.) it has increased my enjoyment and worth that I get out of reading. (Jane)

And this, my personal favourite, which I am sure Vygotsky would be pleased to read too:

Yes in a way of connoisseurship. I think by discussing it in large or small groups, about what the author is trying to say through his/her writing, I can now clearly by myself try and find it [meaning]. (Sharon)

In terms of what activities they had found the most useful and why, many were mentioned, for example reading journal (20%), presentations to the class (10%) short story studies (10%) Jean Little (5%). The students appeared to value the role of talk in their learning. Group discussions were the most often cited (50%). For me, the large number of activities mentioned is indicative of the diversity of student preferences for ways of learning and therefore illustrates how important it is to use a variety of approaches in planning a program.

As far as reading journal was concerned, 55% of the answers given about its usefulness as a learning tool suggested that writing helped the students to clarify their thoughts about what they were reading. What they found the least useful varied greatly. Twenty percent of the answers said there was "nothing they didn't like about it." The time it took to complete was the second highest response (15%). In terms of assigning a grade to the work completed, 85% of the responses said that it should be graded and the reasons given were concerned with motivation,

incentive to do one's best work, and wanting quantitative feedback about the quality of their work.

Overall, the students had enjoyed our approach. Seventy-five percent of the students said they had read a lot through the year. The Jean Little unit was well received, with only a small group (10% of the responses) stating that they had not gained a lot from its completion. One student never wanted to hear the term *connoisseur* again!

## **Teacher reflections**

Finding an effective metaphor to explore the abstract notion of reading growth with my students was key to the success of this coinvestigation. My students were not all "A grade" students by the end of the year, but the majority of the students could articulate progress they had made as readers. Not only did the metaphor make the intangible concrete for the students, it also provided direction to our research, culminating in our study of Jean Little's work. It created wonderful energy in the classroom and also introduced the students to the idea that learning is a lifelong phenomenon. We predetermine goals, set objectives, evaluate our performance only to realize that, as we learn more, the goals and objectives change; we discover how much more there is still to learn. Becoming a *connoisseur*, learning, improving one's classroom practice, are like Poe's knight searching for El dorado; we never reach the final destination, but the journey alone is rewarding enough. And even though we in Ontario are dealing with centrally written curricula, it is still possible to organize our students' learning in a way that is creative and student-centred, yet appropriate for meeting the expectations of that curriculum. In our class, in fact, it was having the Ministry expectations which helped to validate the approach we used.

Through this coinvestigation, I gained a deeper understanding of the learners' perspective and their needs as learners. I now also understand better how to cope with the diverse needs of my students. As we complete activities together, there is a common understanding at the class level that is played out in many different ways on an individual level. I can set up a task, the students will reinvent it as they complete it in a way that is appropriate to their level of development.

I am pleased with the way in which our reading journal evolved from being an external, individualistic component of our program to one that was also incorporated into regular classroom activities, focussing more on emergent issues from the classroom. Analytical reflection on a text was difficult for all my students and, according to Grimmett et al (1990), is for many adults too. Perhaps a more spontaneous use of reading journal would be a means of promoting more of an analytical edge in the responses. And finally, although I shall be careful in devising an evaluation scheme for the reading journal, I shall no longer feel guilty about evaluating it!

As I begin to plan this August for another upcoming school year, I shall continue to incorporate coinvestigation into our program. As a result of this experience, I am going to try to look for ways of incorporating more opportunities for sharing the data with my students, more chances for them to reflect on themselves in action. At times during the year, I had a strong impression of myself as the person through whom many of the students' observations were channelled, especially as far as reading response journals were concerned. One way to deal with this issue

might be to encourage student-to-student dialogues; another might be through establishing a communal chat group around responses to our readings, either online or on a bulletin board (Hume 2001). In this way too, I might be able to promote more critical reflection on the texts we study.

In one of the discussions of a poem called *Hunger* by Laurence Binyon, Cathy suddenly came to understand why the poet had decided to personify hunger as an evil shadowy being in the face of which kings and armies are powerless. Here she is in action:

**Cathy:** This thing, (hunger) it's- it's an emotion, that's what it is, an emotion.

**Others:** Yeah!

**Cathy:** It's not a solid thing, it's so- it has many meanings and the only way to expose it is by metaphors and personification.

And that, I would suggest, is connoisseurship.

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## Notes

1. This research was funded by a grant from the Spencer Foundation. All students whose work is discussed agreed, with their parents' permission, to participate in this action research study.
2. Did you enjoy this? What did you think made it effective? Here is what the poet had to say about it. "In this poem, I like how it gets the reader "C-O-N-F-U-S-E-D- while trying to figure it out. Like how it sets an example and mood of confusion. Also, I like how it shows confusion because of all the mixed up and jumbled characters, suggesting that the poet is/was confused. Last, I like how the end of this concrete poem sort of shows a clear solution, (the question marks in a row of their own), and at the same time, suggests a question of confusion???, (am I confused?). I hope that while a reader is reading this poem he or she is confused at trying to figure it out, so that my point and the purpose of this poem got across. Are you confused?????????"
3. Reprinted with permission. Throughout the remainder of this paper, pseudonyms are used for all students.
4. This was the first year the students had not written their own short stories; we simply ran out of time before the end of term.
5. See the poem *Eldorado*.