Inquiries into Early Literacy

An inquiry stance is central to each of the three stories in this issue. These stories are about young children’s and their teachers’ use of literacy to identify strengths within themselves and others and to deepen their understanding of how literacy works and what it makes possible. While the children and their teachers learn to use and make explicit a flexible range of reading and writing strategies, they are engaged in much more than this. They use reading and writing to figure out who they are or who they wish to become (Harste, 2001). These children are not learning how to read and write and view and represent so that they can use these literacy skills and strategies to learn in higher grades or later life. Rather, these very young children are simultaneously learning literacy, learning about literacy, and learning through literacy—including its critical use to distance themselves from daily life events and position themselves differently (Halliday, 1982; Egawa and Harste, 2001). The children’s teachers offer them learning invitations, which enable them to draw upon what they already know, imagine, enjoy, and feel, and which challenge them to grow beyond their present experience and knowledge. These invitations never reduce literacy to its smallest parts. The complexity of literacy as an integrated language system and purposeful process is always kept intact.

As inquirers, the teachers and children in these stories come to value their individual and shared wondering. The children use what they have learned from one reading experience when they read again. As they “read like writers” (Smith, 1988), the craft of writing—learned from authors they love—finds its way into their own writing. Conversations, drawings, and dramatic play make it possible for the children to create and share a richer and broader range of meanings. Observing their teachers’ and other children’s demonstrations, they come to accept responsibility for being curious, asking new questions, finding and framing issues worth pursuing, making new connections, reflecting on their own learning and their learning with others, and keeping track of this process while planning thoughtful, new actions. For these teachers and children, learning never sits still.

—W.S.
The day I met six-year-old Jillian, to learn how I might help her with her reading, I discovered two very different girls. The first Jillian was a “damsel in distress”—a first-grade reader who described herself as trying to “get the words right”... but they always “goed out of my head.” She would come to a word she didn’t know, make an attempt to “sound it out,” then passively look up at me and ask for help. This Jillian also claimed not to have any friends at school: “Kids don’t like me,” she moped. She believed that because schoolwork was always too hard for her, she had become the object of her classmates’ ridicule. In stark contrast, the second Jillian was a “real princess” who romantically listened to Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Cinderella, I Am Really a Princess, and The Gypsy Princess stories read aloud by her mom or on tape, over and over again. She could effortlessly summon and confidently deliver the lines from any of these stories, as she played make-believe with her brother or felt called upon to use them in real-life family situations. She confided in me that she had been a princess her “whole life” and wished “with all my heart” that instead of going to her first-grade class she could make her own “school for princesses.” Until midway through first grade, the first Jillian had stayed at school. But lately she had taken over the Jillian at home. This worried Jillian’s mom, and it was this worry that brought us together.

**Choice, Independence, and Meaning-Making**

Jillian did not have a choice in the books she read at school. Each of the reading groups in her class read from small books that were part of a reading series, with controlled vocabulary and sentence structure and illustrations that served more of a decorative than functional purpose. The reading instruction Jillian received was focused on phonemic awareness and accurate word decoding.

Each time we met, Jillian made choices from the large baskets of predictable books (real stories) that I brought with me to our sessions. We thought together about how Jillian could make “just right” choices from this collection of fiction and nonfiction books about familiar topics that were of interest to her. These books had authentic-sounding language, which sometimes made use of a predictable story pattern, repetition, rhythm, or rhyme; only one or two lines of text per page; and illustrations that could support Jillian’s meaning-making.

In the beginning, I read with Jillian and faded out when she felt comfortable making predictions on her own. I refused to be just a “word-provider.” I expected her to ask herself if what she read made sense and sounded right and encouraged her to only self-correct when her approximations did not fit these criteria. Reluctantly but gradually, with many demonstrations and lots of encouragement and support, Jillian began to search the illustrations for helpful information, return to the beginning of a sentence and re-read, read beyond the words she didn’t know, try a meaningful substitution for a word she couldn’t figure out, put words together as if she were talking, use the beginnings and endings of words to figure out the middles, and recognize onset and rime patterns we were tracking together. During all of our meetings, we talked about her attempts to understand what she was reading and the connections she was making within each book, to other books, and to experiences in her own life. Slowly the focus of Jillian’s reading shifted from “getting the words right” to making sense of increasingly larger chunks of print. Reading as a linguistic performance gave way to reading as doing—reading that mattered to Jillian (Lindfors, 1999).

**The Power of Imagination to Transcend Reality**

The real news for me, however, was how Jillian’s imaginary, literary “princess play” restored her confidence in what she knew and controlled intellectually and how she used this home literacy resource to address her real-life problems.

After we had finished reading predictable books in each of our sessions, I would read aloud—or the two of us would read together—from the more sophisticated princess books Jillian was passionate about. Her engagement in these stories was all-consuming. She was unable to contain her excitement, for example, as I read The Secret Princess Handbook: Or How to Be a Little Princess to her, while she adorned herself in a princess mask for the ball, glittery Rapunzel hair clips,

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**Jillian the princess**

by Wayne Serebrin, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg

She confided in me that she had been a princess her “whole life” and wished “with all my heart” that instead of going to her first-grade class she could make her own “school for princesses.”

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Strategies

Reading

“I Really Am a Princess!”
pink bows for her Cinderella slippers, crystal earrings, beaded ring, bracelet, and the crowning fairy tale princess tiara.

As a real princess herself, fairy tale and princess stories were her stories. It was as if the characters were real people Jillian knew, and the twists and turns of plot were adventures she had lived through herself. I wanted her to appreciate that this home literacy resource played a major role in her self-definition as “Jillian the Princess.” I invited her to use the pictures to retell these stories, which she did eloquently with exhaustive detail. Later she dramatically replayed them with finger puppets and a puppet theater. As a performer, this previously passive child took the liberty of re-authoring fairy tales she knew so well: She had Snow White awakening in the bed of one of the seven dwarfs, comically asking if today was “rock-and-roll-day,” and she chuckled to herself when she had the evil Queen (in disguise) call out, “Kentucky Fried Chicken for sale! Will you try some tender Kentucky Fried Chicken, my dear?”

While I helped her with spelling and punctuation, Jillian wrote the story of a princess who used her ingenuity to make a park in her backyard for kids who didn’t like her, so that they would become nice kids who wanted to play with her and have fun. To her delight, Jillian discovered that she could use writing for her own purposes (at least momentarily) to transform the painful situation of having no friends. She revisited this story—this imaginary, reconstructed reality—again and again, as if by doing so she was rehearsing words and actions she planned to use.

We read and talked about a “text set” of alternative princess stories that helped Jillian think more critically about how she might choose to live her princess life as a modern-day, proactive, and friendship-worthy girl.

Opening Up the Potentials of Poetry to Young Children

by Claire Sutton,
Robertson School, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Is it possible for young children to write poetry? After listening to Georgia Heard’s passionate words about poetry and reading her books about teaching young poets (Heard, 1989, 1999), I was eager to try poetry writing with my grade-one students. From the beginning of the year, I had read poetry aloud to the children and displayed numerous chart poems around the classroom. We had learned these poems by heart and recited them together. But now I was searching for something with greater depth, something more meaningful than the light-hearted wordplay we had been sharing. I was curious to know what the young writers in my class could create if I invited them to write poems of their own.

I began by filling several large plastic crates with poetry books for young children. I organized and displayed these books and talked briefly about them with the children, and we read some aloud.

A few days later one of the children announced that the previous night he had written a poem. I was terribly impressed with David’s news and asked him to bring it to school. The next day he brought his poem and presented it to the class (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. David’s poem

The words, scribed by his mother, were richly illustrated with David’s drawings. While I could not get very excited about these two lines, David had called this a poem, and by naming it such, he had brought new excitement to the class. Later at our class meeting, we discussed what a poem was and how it differed from a story. Some children offered “a poem is only one page” and “a poem should rhyme.” We sat together that afternoon and I read the children poetry. None of it rhymed. Many of the poems were just for fun. As I came to the end of a poem about the sea, David commented, “I’ve been to the ocean.” Some of the poems in one of the anthologies were gathered under a section titled “lists.” The children seemed to particularly enjoy this kind of poem.

At the beginning of writer’s workshop that same day, I invited the children to write poems of their own. I was somewhat doubtful that anyone would, since we really had not spent much time with this new genre. But to my surprise, many of the children chose to explore poetry writing. Frances came up to me with a page filled with an assortment of random letters. She began to “read” her poem to me, and when I looked a little closer at her writing, I noticed that the letters were not random; many were from her name. Anna had drawn a series of different colored hearts and recited a poem to go with them; it was a variation of the “roses are red” rhyme we had read in a book the day before. I wrote down the words she said, and off she skipped to read them to a friend. Karla had also written a poem:

SUNDAY. MONDAY.
DO I KNOW ANOTHER?
YES I DO. NEXT COMES TODAY.
I AM COR.
AV TH.


I asked Karla if she planned to continue, but she said, “I don’t know any other days.” She was creating the kind of “list” poem the children had especially enjoyed at our class meeting.

Ben was hard at work with a rather small piece of paper. He had written the beginning of a poem (see Figure 2).

Continued on next page
Opening Up the Potentials of Poetry to Young Children (Continued)

been able to name his hurt and write thoughtfully beyond it. Was this not reason enough for teaching and writing poetry? For Ben, poetry had become a way to express his feelings and think through a problem as a means of self-discovery. His poem enabled him to reposition himself: he was no longer a dork; he had friends, and he was happy.

Georgia Heard says that poetry is inside all of us. Observing how reading, writing, and sharing poetry encouraged and enlightened my grade-one students, I am sure she is right.

I hate being a dork.
I was being a dork.
When I stop

He had used arrows as a convention to “back his words up” the crowded right side of the page, so I suggested he needed a bigger sheet of paper. When I came back to his table again, he had stapled a second piece of paper to the bottom and added an ending to his poem (see Figure 3).

But when I stopped
I had friends. I was happy. I love happy.

I hardly knew what to say to Ben. Here was a six-year-old baring his soul on paper. I gave him a hug. “You’re not a dork,” I stumbled. With a serious face he responded, “Someone outside yesterday said I was.” The sting was still fresh in his mind. Obviously he had been carrying this insult around with him, and it had preoccupied his thinking. But with this opportunity to write a poem, he had been able to name his hurt and write thoughtfully beyond it. Was this not reason enough for teaching and writing poetry? For Ben, poetry had become a way to express his feelings and think through a problem as a means of self-discovery. His poem enabled him to reposition himself: he was no longer a dork; he had friends, and he was happy.

Georgia Heard says that poetry is inside all of us. Observing how reading, writing, and sharing poetry encouraged and enlightened my grade-one students, I am sure she is right.

Collaborative Spelling Inquiry

by Tannis Nishibata-Chan,
Montrose School, Winnipeg, Manitoba

My own professional inquiry into spelling began with uneasiness about the “fit” between my current spelling instructional practices and my beliefs about collaborative inquiry. In theory, I believed spelling was inseparable from the reading, writing, and problem solving we did. But while I had always tried to make room for student choice and ownership in our process reading and writing curriculum, spelling instruction had tended to be more teacher-directed. In practice, I had not followed the same social process of shared decision-making when it came to spelling instruction and learning experiences. Rarely had I taken the time to help children find their own spelling questions or invited them to draw upon their personal spelling experiences to initiate and pursue individual or collaborative spelling inquiries.

Soon after I acknowledged the dissonance between my beliefs and practice, two children in our class helped shift my thinking in the direction of collaborative spelling inquiry. These two children were writing responses to their reading of The Bear by Raymond Briggs. Amelia was puzzled by the spelling of a word she had written in a letter to the author. She wrote,

I thought the first page was neat because the bear was coming in. It started small and got bigger.

After finishing this sentence, Amelia looked at “biger” carefully and shook her head. She asked me cautiously, “Is this the way to spell bigger?” I assume she anticipated my response—“Hmm . . . does it look right to you?” — because she smiled and quickly said, “No, but . . . I want to try to ‘have a go’ (Routman, 1991). . . If I can think of a word that rhymes with it, maybe that will help me.” I nodded and asked her to come back in a couple of minutes to share

Continued on next page
Collaborative Spelling Inquiry

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with me what she had discovered.

“So, what did you find?” I asked her. “Well, I’ve tried it a number of ways and it still doesn’t look right. I did find a word that rhymes with bigger,” she said. “It’s Tigger.” I grinned, and we looked at each other knowingly. “Hm... I wonder who is an expert on Winnie the Pooh in this class?” I said. It came as no surprise that Amelia instantly exclaimed, “Bryn!” Bryn was our resident Winnie the Pooh expert. His writer’s notebook featured Tigger on the cover, he wore Tigger Disney clothing, and his bedroom walls were papered with Winnie the Pooh characters. After three years together in our multi-age classroom, I knew Amelia would make this connection to one of her close friends. She hurried over to Bryn.

When she returned she told me, “I’ve got it now. Bryn knew.” I asked her to bring Bryn along so the two of them could explain how they had made this discovery:

T: Why did you decide that you didn’t know how to spell ‘bigger’?
A: Well, because I didn’t know there were two g’s.
T: Okay... so how did you come to know that? You “had a go”; then what?
A: And then... umm... I went to Bryn and asked him how he would spell Tigger.
T: What did you say, Bryn?
B: It’s spelled T, I, double /G/ [guh], ER.
T: Where have you heard that before?
B: When Tigger says his name a lot in the movies.
T: So, what does he say? T, I, double /G/, ER. Now, how did you remember that?
B: Well, it’s so easy to remember because I usually watch Winnie the Pooh movies on... umm... I have a lot of Winnie the Pooh videos, and in the first movie, he does that.

During writers’ workshop, Amelia had drawn upon Bryn’s background knowledge to answer a personal spelling question she had. Their conversation demonstrated the importance of their relationship—knowing one another as learners with unique interests and strengths. Bryn shared his Winnie the Pooh expertise in a new context to help Amelia. And I suspect that his teaching was so personally meaningful and relevant to her that she came to own this spelling knowledge herself.

This language story inspired me to invite all members of our class community to become “language researchers” focused on spelling. With the children, I began to explore what “language researching” might look like in a primary, multi-age classroom. We transformed our spelling minilessons, reading and writing conferences, and strategy-sharing sessions into collaborative inquiries.

I began by asking Amelia and Bryn to share their spelling discovery with the rest of the class. They recorded their discovery on a piece of card paper, taking time to carefully illustrate the card so that the younger children who might not be able to read the word on their own would notice the tiger-striped letters. Inquiring into spelling and making spelling discoveries public seemed to intrigue the other first, second, and third graders.

A couple of days later, Amelia and Bryn brought a child from another classroom to our door and asked if they could take a snapshot of her Tigger t-shirt as a reminder to the class of their first spelling “discovery.”

The Tigger card and photograph (Figure 4) were displayed on what came to be called our “WOW” wall—a transformation of a “word wall” into something that was a better fit with my belief in collaborative inquiry. The WOW wall preserved the spelling and writing relationships we were uncovering as a class. It displayed the children’s personal and shared experiments and knowledge, to which we added spelling ideas (current hypotheses), and immediate and future inquiry plans. As the WOW wall evolved, the children took greater initiative and responsibility for bringing their spelling inquiries to the wall.

The WOW wall helped me rethink spelling as a collaborative inquiry. The children’s and my investigations—rather than a predetermined set or sequence of spelling skills and strategies—became the source of our spelling curriculum. Collaborative inquiry enabled the children to participate in teaching and learning, which addressed their personal and shared spelling questions. We became a community of learners excited about the language research and learning we were doing together.

The WOW wall helped me rethink spelling as a collaborative inquiry. The children’s and my investigations—rather than a predetermined set or sequence of spelling skills and strategies—became the source of our spelling curriculum.
Resource Bibliography

Works Cited


Additional Resources


Next Issue: The April issue of School Talk will focus on information technology in the primary classroom.

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