

Literacy Co-teacher: A Self-Study

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### Abstract

The purpose of this self-study was to discover how the researcher's professional learning in reading instruction and teacher collaboration and her praxis as a Literacy Co-teacher would support student literacy learning; especially ensuring students experienced the joy and love of reading. In seeking to inform the study and her practice, the researcher examined the literature in the areas of reading instruction and collaboration through the lens of her own internal questions in these areas. The researcher's sources of data were her researcher's journal in which reflections were regularly recorded and a questionnaire completed by colleagues at the end of the research period. The result was four umbrella themes of Relationships, Collaboration, Literacy, and Joy. Ultimately the researcher concluded there were four lessons to be learned for both herself and other educators: in order to support student literacy learning, especially ensuring that they experience the joy and love of reading, one must provide balanced, individualized reading instruction, invest in building relationships, be a servant leader and promote joy.

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Literacy Co-teacher: A Self-Study**Chapter 1: Introduction**

“If we’re going to learn to soar we have to know ourselves as well as we know our craft.”  
(Jones, 2001)

**Background/ Problem to be Investigated**

Imagine if every child came to school having had many joyful experiences with books. Imagine if every child had immediate answers for the question, “What is your favourite book or story?” Imagine if every child had a rich store of vocabulary and experiences they could draw on to make sense of what they read. Unfortunately, these imaginings are currently dreams at the school where I teach. At the end of grade three there are always children not yet meeting or minimally meeting the widely held expectations for grade level competency in reading. They enter school with few literacy experiences and continue to struggle to catch up. As the Literacy Co-teacher for students in kindergarten to grade three I hope to ensure all the children are at least fully meeting the widely-held expectations for grade level competency by the end of grade three. I would also like them to enjoy reading and to see it as something that is as necessary to their lives as breathing.

The purpose of this study is for me to learn more about effective reading instruction of primary students and ways to collaborate and co-teach with my colleagues to support the literacy learning of students in kindergarten to grade three. Throughout this process I will reflect on my new learning and my experiences both with the students and my colleagues. I hope to seek information from my colleagues to determine the efficacy of my performance as Literacy Co-teacher and the value of the role at our school. Ultimately I will analyze the themes arising from

my researcher's journal and compare them to the relevant literature as well as to the responses of my colleagues.

### **Justification of the Study**

**Reading instruction.** I believe that seeing the value in reading and being able to experience the joy of reading are integral parts of one's life. They certainly have been for me. I do not remember when I learned to read. It seemed to just happen. Looking back and knowing what I now know about how children acquire reading skills I see that the reading my parents did with me as a child, the talking, exploring and questioning they encouraged, their example as readers all contributed to my reading development.

My mom tells a story of when I was two years old and we were moving to Prince Rupert, BC from Saskatoon, Sask. My dad had gone ahead with the moving van and all our belongings and mom and I were flying out a month later. The flight was free for children two years of age and under. My mom says that on the flight I was being my usual talkative self and was singing the alphabet over and over. She says she was worried that the flight attendants might think she had lied about how old I was. I am sure the time and attention from both my parents as well as their patience, praise and encouragement to take risks in learning were determining factors in my confidence and ability in early language skills.

A favourite memory of mine is sitting beside my dad as he read me stories. I would cuddle up at his side or on his lap and he would put his arm around me and read whatever story I had chosen. I felt safe, loved and I was entertained. He did the voices. To this day I can still hear him ask, "Are you my mother?" (Eastman, 1960) and I am transported back to that loving environment once again.

My sense is that many of the children in our school do not have these same experiences. From previous conversations with both children and their parents it is clear that the children have

not had as much of a chance to play with language, hear the language of books or share in the characters' escapades and to wonder what will happen next. When these children come to school the structure of our setting is foreign to them and is not the same nurturing, comfortable environment I experienced as a child at home. It is actually quite foreign to most of the kids. This is not because the teachers are not caring but because there are pressures of curriculum, pressures of time and limited availability of adults to spend that one on one time with the children. In addition, the students within the classroom have a wide range of reading abilities already and students may feel unable to take risks to learn for fear of appearing less capable.

I have always searched for the elusive 'how to' in the teaching of reading. When I first started teaching in the early 1990's 'Whole Language' was thought to be the way to teach reading. I worked on immersing my students in literature through stories and poems according to my understanding of the Whole Language approach. Over time I found that some of my students just were not getting it. I tried the reading instruction methods of Repeated Reading, Language Experience and Guided Reading but there were always some children who made little to no progress in learning to read.

When faced with a student's lack of progress in reading I felt extremely frustrated and was at a loss as to what I could do to help. At one point I had a student for three years in my grade 1-3 class. In grade one she only moved from level one (according to the PM Benchmark© book levels) to level two because we ran out of level one books. The expectation for grade one is for children to be reading in the range of levels fourteen to seventeen by the end of the year. When this student was in grade two she progressed to level five. Then I learned about a phonics-based program called Read Well© and began implementing that. When I combined that program with individual reading conferences and provided time for children to practice their reading as

recommended by Sharon Taberski (2000) in her book *On Solid Ground* I started to see more success. In her grade three year my student made a year and a half worth of progress. This was a testament to the power of her effort and to my finding a combination of activities that worked for her. I was finally beginning to figure out how to help.

Since then my reading instruction has included a number of different components but varies from year to year according to the needs of my students and my new professional learning. When working as a classroom teacher the reading instruction in my class typically includes small group lessons from the Read Well© program, reading practice of “just-right” books, shared reading of poems, phonological skill building, reading of books of their own choice and sharing the love of reading through reading aloud to the children.

Read Well© is a reading program with a strong phonics base and emphasis on fluency. It is organized so that the children learn skills in a gradual way (in small groups) to ensure maximum success. When the program is implemented as designed, the groups are not static; the children are assessed often and the groups are adjusted to accommodate their needs. The children also have practice stories from the small group lessons that they are able to read independently. There are options within the Read Well© program to allow for children to learn at their own speed. There is a worksheet component of Read Well© but I choose to forego this aspect of the program in favour of having the children practice reading. It has been my experience that children experience success when the Read Well© lessons are daily. A drawback of the program is the time it takes and the personnel needed to do it well.

As with any skill, in order to get better one must practice. In addition to those small group Read Well© lessons the children in my class practice five “just-right” books (not too easy, not too hard but just right) until they can read all the words in the story and can read the story

fluently. This practice time is at least thirty minutes per day. They practice the books according to the “Read to Self” and “Read to Someone” criteria as outlined in *The Daily 5* (Boushey & Moser, 2006). The children know that if they come to a word they cannot figure out, they can use their classmates as a resource as well as the teacher. When they think they are ready for new books I listen to them read and if I agree they are ready I have the children choose five new books to read.

Explicit instruction in phonological awareness skills like rhyming, blending and segmenting are also parts of my reading instruction. The amount of time we spent on these skills depends on the needs of the children. I have also been working on developing reading comprehension skills by using *Reading Power* by Adrienne Gear (2006). We focus on making connections, visualizing, questioning and making sense of non-fiction features (eg. captions, close-ups, labels, etc.). Other important aspects of my reading instruction include reading picture books and novels to the children and reading weekly poems with the children. By the end of the year each child has a duotang folder of at least twenty poems they can read.

The student I mentioned previously who made so much progress in a year was able to do so, in part, because I was able to give her additional time to work on and practice her reading with the help of Educational Assistants (EAs). Unfortunately, in the last number of years the amount of classroom support has decreased substantially. As a result of less support and my own increased knowledge I have stopped relying on the Read Well© program. I am learning/hoping to provide more comprehensive instruction that does a better job of meeting students’ diverse needs and is workable given the limitations of staffing and resources at our school.

**Collaboration.** One of the ways to compensate for limited staffing and to ensure sharing of expertise for the benefit of student learning is for teachers to collaborate. Two years ago I became involved in a province-wide initiative called Changing Results for Young Readers

(CR4YR). I am involved both as a teacher participant as well as the District Early Reading Advocate. As the Early Reading Advocate I have organizational and some facilitation responsibilities. As a teacher participant I work with one of my students as a case study on what will make a difference for that child's reading. We have CR4YR meetings seven times a year. When we meet we share what we have tried, our results and what we might do next. Other teachers involved share their insights and ideas about what might make a difference for our students. The collaboration has been extremely valuable to us all especially given the geographic dispersion of our school district. We have a chance to discuss teaching with colleagues whose classes have a similar demographic profile as ours. This sharing of ideas, experiences and expertise has been exciting and motivating and it has made our teaching richer.

It was through the Changing Results initiative that I became involved in one of the biggest opportunities for professional learning of my career. Our facilitators for four of our meetings were Dr. Paige Fisher from Vancouver Island University and Kristin Mimick from the libraries division of the Ministry of Education. Paige told us about the Certificate in Innovative Educational Leadership (CIEL) program at the university which could lead into the Masters in Innovative Educational Leadership program. Both Paige and Kristin encouraged me to enrol; they assured me that I could be successful. I enrolled. My year in the CIEL program was filled with professional learning experiences that enabled me to learn more about myself, to challenge some of my beliefs in teaching, to experience the value of collaboration and to do a great deal of learning about education. My experience prepared me to say 'yes' to new challenges I would have rejected previously. One such challenge is accepting the position of Literacy Co-teacher in our school.

Over this past year learning support teachers and primary teachers at my school participated in three two-day literacy in-service sessions led by Dr. Janet Mort. We connected

with her through a Vulnerable Readers Summit she organized for educators of primary-aged children. Most of us attended the conference and agreed to become part of a pilot program she was creating to address the issue of how to meet the learning needs of vulnerable readers. The sessions we had with Dr. Mort were based on the findings from the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) Report (2009) which examines literacy research to determine if there are key precursor skills for reading. My colleagues and I have started to collaborate in a more focused way due to the shared learning and discussions resulting from these in-service sessions. Also as a result of our shared learning we now have a new role of Literacy Co-teacher to work with primary teachers and I am filling that role. In this role it will be important for me to have a stronger background in literacy research and to collaborate well with my colleagues for the benefit of our students.

I always thought that I was good at collaborating. When I engaged with other people to accomplish some kind of task it got done. I felt good about it. Other people told me they appreciated my organization and the way I kept bringing them back to the task. Whenever there was difficulty it arose because the person I was working with was not compromising, was not negotiating, was not good at collaborating (or at least that is what I thought). Now I am thinking that perhaps I am not as good at collaborating as I originally thought.

Prior to enrolling in the Master's program I had judged my colleagues and had labelled them as either good collaborators (or even good teachers) or not. Looking ahead to when I would begin my job a Literacy Co-teacher there was a particular person I was concerned about working with due to our tense history. I was guilty of letting other people's perceptions colour my own perceptions of this colleague. Then, as Dewitt Jones (2001) said in his video "Celebrate What's Right with the World", I saw many instances where my poor perceptions were confirmed. As a result I wrote that colleague off as an educator, maybe even as a person. It even got to the point

where I would barely acknowledge him in the hallways. This behaviour was not all one-sided but I can now see that I was part of the problem. In the last two years I have been able to see some areas of commonality and it has been the foundation for me to rethink my judgement of him. It has also highlighted for me the necessity of suspending judgement of all my colleagues and seeking to understand who they are as people and as teachers.

I am excited to see what might be the results of my new attitude toward others in my collaborative role. I know that in the past some people have interpreted the way I speak passionately about what I believe in as me trying to drown out their ideas or bully them into my way of thought. That hasn't been my intention. I think that as I suspend judgement I will appear to my colleagues as being more open to listening and more accepting of their ideas as we collaborate which will, in turn, help create a more cohesive primary teaching team focused on the needs of the students.

### **Research Question and Hypothesis**

In this study I am seeking to explore: *How will my professional learning in reading instruction and teacher collaboration and my praxis as a Literacy Co-teacher enable me to support student literacy learning, especially ensuring that they experience the joy and love of reading?*

I expect that through this process I will not only learn more about reading instruction but I will learn more about myself as a teacher and collaborator. I am relatively confident in my teaching skills and am always seeking to learn more to meet the needs of my students. I am not as confident about my ability to collaborate, especially with colleagues that appear to have differing philosophies of teaching. I expect there will be surprises from the challenges and successes of the year ahead.

**Context Note**

Due to a prolonged strike of the province's teachers and lockout by our employer the school year did not start as scheduled on September 2. Teachers had been striking since May. This affected the role of Literacy Co-teacher proposed by the principal in that he was unable to meet with the K-3 teachers to discuss the idea and gain input. He has since moved on from our school. The 2014-2015 school year began on September 22. While I have some ideas about how the role of Literacy Co-teacher will unfold it is a work in progress. There is no official job description. Since the new principal of our school said I am free to develop the role as I wish, it will be important to do so in collaboration with my primary colleagues.

**Definition of Terms**

**Literacy:** When I talk about literacy I am talking about reading, writing, speaking, and listening. I know that literacy can refer to a person's knowledge of a certain field such as mathematical literacy or having certain skills (e.g. being computer literate) but that is not how I am using the word in this paper.

**Oral Language:** Oral language includes the vocabulary and concepts one can understand and speak about in a grammatically correct manner – receptive and expressive language.

**Background Knowledge:** When I refer to background knowledge I mean the concepts one acquires (vocabulary, categorization, subject matter knowledge) and experiences one has that form the entirety of what one knows. This would include oral language.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review****Reading Instruction**

Improving the literacy of students in our province has been a goal for a long time. Boards of Education have been directed to address literacy in some form in their accountability contracts (or student achievement contracts) by the British Columbia Ministry of Education. As a result all of them have some form of a literacy goal (BC Ministry of Education, 2014/2015). In our district a lot of attention has been focused on early literacy both through the Changing Results for Young Readers initiative and through literacy in-service sessions with Dr. Janet Mort stemming from a Vulnerable Readers Summit she organized. This focus has culminated in the creation of the Literacy Co-teacher position at our elementary school in Gold River. The idea was that the Literacy Co-teacher would collaborate with the classroom teachers of students in kindergarten to grade three to co-assess, co-plan, co-teach and co-report. An effective Literacy Co-teacher would need to have up-to-date knowledge in the area of literacy, to actively seek out more information, strategies and experiences to meet the needs of diverse learners and to collaborate well with colleagues.

Given the nature of the Literacy Co-teacher role it is obvious that a review of the literature for each aspect of the position would be prohibitive. The literature available for the area of reading alone is staggering. Therefore I plan to examine the literature using the lens of my own internal questions with regard to reading instruction as I engage in this new position, such as: Should the emphasis be on teaching code-based skills or are background knowledge and oral language more important in building a foundation for comprehension? Do we need a balance and, if so, what does that mean? How do we promote the joy of reading? I also plan to study what the literature says about collaborating effectively by building trusting relationships and building “adaptive expertise” (Timperley, 2012) through shared leadership and servant leadership. I believe addressing these aspects of the Literacy Co-teacher role will be the most valuable in informing my work.

**Who are the experts I look to and why?** As I address these questions I need to consider which people in the field would be the experts to look to when seeking answers. Richard Allington, Marie Clay and Susan B. Neumann are names that come up time and again in the field of reading instruction.

Richard Allington (2001, 2002, 2014) has conducted much research in the area of reading addressing, in particular, the issue of helping readers who struggle. He has many published articles and books based on his research, and is a much-recognized and respected name in his field. He is currently working as a Professor of Education at the University of Tennessee. A number of years ago I participated in a school-wide book study on one of his books, *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers* (2001). This book study was instrumental in helping our school staff come to some common understandings about how to help the children struggling to read in our school. The book was grounded in research and presented logical, practical information.

Dame Marie Clay (2005a, 2005b) was a New Zealand educator and researcher and is most known for developing the Reading Recovery © reading intervention system. Reading Recovery© is an approach that has a very high effect size and has been used internationally with great success. It seems as though anyone who had read something about teaching reading has heard of Marie Clay or Reading Recovery. Her work is highly respected and highly valued.

Susan B. Neumann is an educator, researcher and author and she has been a policy-maker in the role of U.S. Assistant Secretary of Elementary and Secondary Education from 2001-2003. Her studies and publications focus on early childhood education, literacy and ameliorating the effects of poverty on children's education. I came across her article about "The Knowledge Gap" in the *Handbook of Early Literacy Research* (2006) and it resonated with me.

**Why literacy?** Focusing on literacy in schools may seem to be a given within the context of school. Of course we are going to work on literacy. Isn't that what schools are for? However, it is easy to think of literacy as just the mechanics of reading and writing – a set of skills to be mastered. Literacy is much more. According to Marie Clay (2005a) “Literacy learning provides the tools the child will need to underpin his future progress in education, and they are critical for success in the new information age (p.8). Literacy learning is also important for another, more compelling reason. Rasinski and Padak (2004) pinpoint its value:

when we nurture lifelong reading and writing in students we help them see that reading and writing is more than a set of skills to be mastered in order to make it through school; rather, we help students see that reading is a way to enrich one's life – a means to earning a better living, to be sure, but also a means to participate in and appreciate some of the more aesthetic aspects of life. (p. 95)

Therefore when we talk about focusing on literacy in school we need to consider the larger goal, the higher purpose. I believe that rather than just trying to make sure the students can read we want to ensure that by reading they have the means and motivation to enrich their lives through appreciation of and participation in the world's beauty and complexities.

**Why early intervention?** As we endeavour to meet the goal of creating lifelong readers and writers we encounter children who struggle with learning to read. (They struggle with writing too but my focus here is reading.) There are many reasons for their difficulty but the important issues are what do we do about helping them with their struggles and when do we intervene? I will explore the first question later but here I want to address the latter. When do we intervene? In my experience intervention often did not happen in a concerted way until the child reached grade three or four. In rare instances the intervention began in grade two. However, early intervention has become more common as educators search for how to decrease the gap

between high-achieving students and lower-achieving students. I agree with Clay when she says that “if we want children to catch up with their classmates who are racing ahead of them we cannot wait too long because it becomes increasingly difficult to bring children to effective classroom performance with their age group” (2005a, p.12). The longer we wait, the more time the children have to solidify any misunderstandings through inaccurate practice. The longer we wait the more likely frustration and discouragement will get in the way of attempts to help. “The longer we leave children without supplementary help after the first year of school [kindergarten], the longer they will have to spend on supplementary instruction higher up in the school” (2005a, p.12). The cost of not intervening early is too high – both for the district and, more importantly, for the children.

**Should the emphasis be on teaching code-based skills?** When we are helping children learn to read, whether they are struggling readers or not, what should we teach? Should the emphasis be on teaching code-based skills? In her book *Joyful Literacy Interventions Early Learning Classroom Essentials* and in the literacy in-service sessions I attended, Mort (2014) advocates daily assessment, teaching and practicing of the literacy skills of alphabet knowledge (AK) and phonemic awareness (PA) in a play environment beginning in kindergarten until the children achieve mastery. She also encourages shared reading and writing and play with rapid automatic naming (RAN) of pictures, letters and sight words. According to her these are “stepping stones to the grade 2 milestone” (p. x) of ensuring at least ninety percent of children are reading successfully at the end of grade two. As the research basis for these recommendations she primarily points to the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) Report (2009). I thought it would be important to find out for myself what the NELP Report says.

The National Early Literacy Panel in the United States was tasked with reviewing the research “to determine what instructional practices promote the development of children’s early

literacy skills” (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010, p. 279). As part of their meta-analysis they sought to determine the answers to four questions. The question most relevant here is “What are the skills and abilities of young children (birth through five years or kindergarten) that predict later reading, writing or spelling outcomes?” (p. 279). In determining which studies would be included in their meta-analysis the Panel employed a similar process to that followed by the National Reading Panel in their report, *Teaching Children to Read* (2000) that subsequently became the research base for educational policy in the United States. There was a strict screening process of studies “to determine their relevance and consistency with the panel’s selection criteria” (p. 280) for inclusion into the NELP Report. The result was 500 studies that were included for review and synthesis.

The authors of the NELP Report identified six skills that were predictive of reading, writing or spelling ability. The skills of alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming of letters and numbers, rapid automatic naming of colours or objects, writing or writing name and phonological memory (the ability to remember spoken information for a short period of time) have a “medium to large predictive relationship with later measures of literacy development” (NELP, 2009, p. vii). Importantly, “these six variables not only correlated with later literacy...but also maintained their predictive power even when the role of other variables, such as IQ or socio-economic status (SES) were accounted for” (NELP, 2009, p. vii). Therefore, as McGill-Franzen (2010)(researcher and educator focusing on helping readers who struggle) stated in her introduction to the special issue of *Educational Researcher* on the NELP Report, “the findings of the NELP may be interpreted as a mandate to teach primarily code-based skills” (p. 276).

**What about the importance of background knowledge and oral language in building a foundation for comprehension?** If teaching primarily code-based skills is the interpretation of

the NELP Report, should it be? Neuman (2006) says that learning the skills is not enough. She points to the lack of conceptual knowledge as significantly impacting comprehension. She states, “early literacy has become associated with a rather small set of skills” (p.38) and “skill development apart from meaningful content has limited usefulness or staying power for the child” (p.30). In even stronger language Marie Clay (2005b) says, “The child cannot afford to waste time on letter-learning activities or games when he could be reading well-chosen books” (p. 121). The NELP Report (2009) itself includes a vital section that must be considered.

The value of these variables for predicting later literacy success is without question...there is less certainty that teaching these variables early on will result in later achievement improvement. This is because these studies provide correlational data, and such data are not sufficient for determining a causal connection between these factors and later learning. (p.79)

Although these skills may predict later literacy success they have not been proven to be the reason for it. Added to that is the consideration of what the National Early Literacy Panel did not consider as part of their review but what might be important for literacy success. One such aspect of reading is background knowledge.

Much has been written about the importance of background knowledge in reading. According to Mills (2009) “Students’ reading comprehension ability often has more to do with their relevant prior experiences and knowledge of the topic, genre or vocabulary than their cognitive ability” (p. 325). Neuman, Kaefor and Pinkham (2014) provided further evidence through their study. They found “when we held background knowledge constant by introducing an unknown topic, there were no significant differences between SES groups in children’s word learning, comprehension or ability to make inferences” (p.146). Given this information it seems like there is a huge gap in the NELP Report. As McGill-Franzen (2010) states, “the panel did not

examine learners' background knowledge or conceptual knowledge – domains that arguably influence literacy development and within which literacy practice is deeply embedded" (p.276). This was also the concern of Neuman (2010) in her article "Lessons From My Mother: Reflections on the National Early Literacy Panel Report". Children need to have many experiences and to interact with adults and other children through talk to make sense of those experiences. These "interesting and challenging opportunities develop their brains" (Clay, 2005a, p.6). Then, when the children encounter words or events that they can connect to, they are better able to make meaning from the text they are reading. This is highlighted by Neuman (2006): "limited content knowledge might ultimately account for what might appear to be comprehension difficulties or higher order thinking difficulties in older children" (p.30). It is apparent that when teaching reading, instruction must include more than skills and yet, given the compelling evidence, skills must be taught. "Both skill development and conceptual knowledge need to occur simultaneously. **At risk children cannot afford to attend to one without the other** [emphasis mine]" (Neuman, 2006, p.38).

**Maybe it is about balance. But what does that mean?** It seems that we need to approach the teaching of reading in a balanced way rather than choosing one approach or another. Cunningham and Allington (1999) confirm this viewpoint: "The search for any "one best way" to teach children is doomed to fail because it is the search for the impossible " (p.22). It is the impossible because children's reading develops as individually as their fingerprints. Therefore "advocates of a balanced approach to literacy have been saying – we need to try to provide students with a comprehensive approach to reading instruction, one that is more than authentic and holistic and more than skills-based" (Rasinski & Padak, 2004, p.92). What kind of reading instruction fits that description? In Allington's (2002) perspective: "Exemplary teaching is...*responsive* to children's needs" (p. 747). Thus, reading instruction that addresses children's

individual learning needs whether it is teaching skills, conceptual knowledge, or other ways of making sense of text, with a changing emphasis as necessary for each child, constitutes a comprehensive reading program.

**What components are necessary for a balanced or comprehensive reading program?**

As the teacher endeavours to be responsive to the needs of her students in the teaching of reading she needs to, among other things, explicitly teach strategies and provide many opportunities for the children to improve their oral language and develop thoughtful literacy.

Whether it is decoding or comprehension strategies, children, especially those who find learning to read a challenge, need to be taught explicitly with the teacher modelling the strategies for the whole class, for small groups and one-on-one (Allington, 2002, p. 744). However, explicit teaching is not enough. The teacher must also find ways to “foster transfer of the strategies from the structured practice activities to students’ independent use of them while engaged in reading” (p.744). Once the child knows what to do the teacher needs to allow him to practice, taking care to provide *appropriate guidance*.

What is appropriate guidance? Both Allington and Clay reference how teachers treat good readers differently from those who struggle. They allow good readers who read silently to read much more text than slower readers by insisting the struggling readers read aloud (Allington, 2014; Clay, 2005a). Reading silently is faster than reading aloud so children reading silently read more text in the same time period as those who read aloud. Additionally, based on research he conducted in the 1980’s, Allington claims that teachers create two types of readers through their different instruction when listening to children read aloud. They focus on meaning with good readers and on decoding skills with struggling readers. “My current observations have found that reading instruction is continuing to separate students into two groups – good readers who self-regulate, and struggling readers who stop after almost every word and look up at their teacher for

a cue (Allington, 2014, p.18). It seems clear that appropriate guidance would be that which encourages all students to self-regulate, to focus on meaning and to read plenty.

Oral language is another extremely important component of any reading program. “Many prominent literacy researchers...have argued that oral language competency underpins comprehensive literacy development” (McGill-Franzen, 2010, p. 276). It is therefore, interesting that in the NELP meta- analysis, oral language ability is shown to have a weak predictive relationship with later literacy skills especially when other factors were accounted for (SES for example). The Panel went on to address this anomaly; “oral language was found to play a bigger role in later literacy achievement when it was measured using more complex measures that included grammar, the ability to define words and listening comprehension than when measured using only simple vocabulary knowledge (NELP, 2009, p. viii). Talk must be part of any literacy program: student-to-student talk – purposeful and conversational (Allington, 2002). Indeed, as popularized by James Britton, all literacy learning must “float on a sea of talk” (as cited in Mills, 2009).

Finally, as the teacher endeavours to be responsive to student needs she must guide the children into thoughtful literacy through higher-order questioning and by facilitating literate conversations (Allington, 2014; Brownlie, 2015). Literate conversations are real-life, meaningful discussions about text as opposed to the interrogational discussions that often happen in classrooms. Allington really brings the point home by saying, “known-answer [recall] questions are largely unique to school. They are not legal in out of school conversations (2001, p. 88). To add to the urgency of building thoughtful literacy Wilhelm (1997) states,

if we focus children’s attention almost exclusively on remembering after reading,

I worry that they will confuse recall with understanding...if we fail to provide students with models and demonstrations of thoughtful literacy and lessons on

how to develop these proficiencies I fear that we will continue to develop students who don't even know that thoughtful literacy is the reason for reading. (as cited in Allington, 2001, p.93)

Experience in answering higher-order questions and in engaging in literate conversations will not only help children understand better what they are reading but it can also help build joy around reading as they share their book experiences, their personal connections and build relationships through the process.

**What about the joy?** I believe that a child's interest in reading, the joy they experience when reading, has a large effect on reading ability and on motivation to read. There seems to be a reciprocal relationship. According to Wigfield (1997), "When our motivation is high, we will typically persist with difficult reading" (as cited in Allington, 2001, p.70). Conversely, "motivation for reading was dramatically influenced by reading success" (Allington, 2002, p.743). It is necessary that teaching reading in a balanced way is the primary focus because that is what makes the most difference in reading ability. However, this should happen while "maintaining children's positive interest in reading" (Kirby, Ball, Geier, Parrila, & Wade-Woolley, 2011, p.277). The question that arises is how to maintain that positive interest. How can teachers motivate children to read? According to Cole (2002), from her action research into what motivates students to read, each of her case study students were motivated by different aspects of her reading instruction. She described her students as having their own "distinctive literacy personalities" (p.330), which required her to be responsive and to personalize instruction. It is vital the teacher gets to know each child and ensures the reading instruction is personalized in terms of interests, reading ability and what motivates each child to read.

**Conclusion.** From examining the research it is apparent that when creating lifelong readers teachers must create a balanced reading program where there are lots of opportunities for

talk as they explicitly teach code-based strategies, comprehension strategies and build conceptual knowledge. They will foster thoughtful literacy through higher-order questioning and literate conversations. In addition teachers will be responsive to their students' individual learning needs and to their interests and motivations to read. It is a lofty goal but one for which it is imperative to strive.

### **Collaborating with Colleagues**

As a Literacy Co-teacher it is vital that I collaborate effectively with my colleagues if I am to do my job well and support students' literacy needs. As in the area of reading instruction there is a vast amount of literature dealing with aspects of effective collaboration. The aspects I am focusing on center around building trusting relationships, shared leadership arising from a professional learning community model and servant leadership to develop the adaptive expertise of everyone involved.

**Who are the experts I look to and why?** In the area of collaboration I am particularly drawn to the work of Margaret Wheatley, Helen Timperley and Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser. Margaret Wheatley is an award-winning author. Her books and other publications mostly center on building healthy, dynamic organizations that enable people to “develop the confidence and strength necessary to persevere in the work that is ours to do” (Wheatley, n.d.).

Helen Timperley is an educator, author and researcher currently working at the University of Auckland in their Department of Education. I first heard about her as a co-author of *A Framework for Transforming Learning in Schools: Innovation and the Spiral of Inquiry* (2014) with Halbert and Kaser. Then a colleague pointed me to another article *Learning to Practise in Initial Teacher Education* (2012) that had much to inform my work as Literacy Co-teacher. Her notion of “adaptive expertise” comes from this paper.

Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser were my instructors in the CIEL program. I found them both to be knowledgeable, inspiring, trustworthy educators whose actions match the ideas they teach. They founded the Network of Performance-based Schools and the Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network in British Columbia and have authored many books and articles on leadership, inquiry and school change. Halbert and Kaser have worked with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on innovative learning environments and they have a positive international reputation in the field of education.

**What is adaptive expertise?** Traditionally the journey one takes as a professional has been described as moving from the position of a novice to one of a routine expert (Timperley, 2012). As the beginning teacher acquires experience she is more able to accomplish the transmission of information with greater ease and efficacy. However Timperley claims the real goal is for teachers to become adaptive experts as opposed to routine experts. “For adaptive experts it is not a matter of efficacy so much as accepting agency for developing the kinds of relationships and teaching strategies that will achieve...valued outcomes” (p. 9). This involves quite a bit more than transmission of information.

To achieve these outcomes, adaptive experts know they must recognize assumptions (including cultural positioning) that underpin their practice, when these assumptions are getting in their way, and when to let them go. Adaptive experts actively seek in-depth knowledge about the content of learning and how to teach it effectively, given their particular students and context. (p. 5)

I agree with Timperley that this is the goal. Success would mean more focus on individual student needs and ultimately greater student learning.

**Trust is key for collaboration.** In order to collaborate effectively to develop adaptive expertise there must be a trusting relationship between my colleagues and myself. In *Leadership*

*Mindsets* Halbert and Kaser (2009) say, “strong levels of trust and respectful relationships are preconditions for successful school improvement initiatives” (p. 43). Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002), and Lencioni (2007) also highlight this fact. All of the successful, collaborative ventures I have been involved in enjoyed mutually trusting and respectful relationships.

Unsuccessful endeavours were usually characterized by a lack of trust leading to micromanagement of both the task and the individuals involved. Distrust and disrespect resulted from those situations. A difficulty when trying to implement an initiative at school is that we cannot always choose who we work with; often we need to work with people with whom we do not have a strong, trusting relationship. However this can be an opportunity to work on and build the trusting relationships needed to bring the school forward. This can be accomplished by starting small. According to Halbert and Kaser (2009), “Working together on small, easily accomplished projects is one of the identified strategies in building trust. Shared work allows for a sense of success and provides an initial experience of mutual respect and regard” (p. 59). Being willing to show vulnerability and to express uncertainty is another way to strengthen trust. In his Meditation XVII John Donne (1624) said, “No man is an island”. That is especially true in a school full of diverse people all tasked with helping children learn. In order to accomplish any goal, building and maintaining trusting relationships is key.

**Shared/ distributed leadership arising from a professional learning community model.** Socio-economic status and class size and composition are factors that have been touted as crucial in determining student success in school. Others believe that the only way to increase student achievement is to improve instruction (Schmoker, 2006; Wagner et al., 2010; Wiliam, 2011). Rather than arguing over which one is the true determinant for student achievement it makes sense to focus on the one factor over which schools have control and that is classroom instruction. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are a way to focus on improving

instruction and to have a real and lasting impact on student learning. They tend to operate on a shared or distributed leadership model. As my colleagues and I work together to improve student literacy learning we will be working in many ways as an informal professional learning community and shared leadership will be critical for our success.

In order for the PLCs to be successful, shared leadership practices are required and relational trust needs to exist. In her doctoral study to determine what factors determined the sustainability of Learning Communities (or PLCs) Janet Laumann's (2011) conclusion was:

shared and supportive leadership, shared vision and values, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, supportive relational and structural conditions and the ability to operate within the British Columbia (BC) educational context in a healthy way...led to enhanced learning and growth within these school communities for students and teachers alike. (p. iii)

Laumann identifies shared and supportive leadership first in her list of determining factors for sustainable learning communities. It is important to understand what is meant by the term "shared leadership" if one hopes to emulate it. Fletcher and Kaufer (2003) describe shared leadership as "distributed and interdependent", "embedded in social interaction", and "leadership as learning" (p. 21). The team's success becomes the focus rather than the success of a heroic leader. No one person remains the leader. Instead the leadership role changes from person to person depending on the task and the knowledge and skills an individual may bring to the group. The interactions between the members of the group are "differentiated from other, less positive social interactions by virtue of their outcomes: mutual learning, greater shared understanding, and eventually, positive action (p. 23).

Spillane and Diamond (2007a) distinguish distributed leadership from shared leadership. They say that distributed leadership is not a model. Rather, it is a lens through which to view the

leaders and their practice. In the school context distributed leadership involves more than what the administrators do, it includes formal and informal leaders, their followers and their situation (the school, community, district and province). Distributed leadership is an “influence relationship” whereby “leaders influence followers by motivating actions, enhancing knowledge and potentially shaping the practice of followers [and in return the] followers decide which...messages should be heeded and which should not (p. 9).

Spillane and Diamond (2007b) debunk four myths of distributed leadership, which helps to further clarify their meaning. These myths are:

1. *It is a “blueprint for leadership and management”* (p. 150)

Distributed leadership is about interactions in a given situation or context. Therefore it cannot be used as a “one size fits all” model.

2. *In distributed leadership principals are obsolete; not needed.*

Spillane and Diamond distinguish between the management work of the principal and the leadership work. While the principal can be a leader-learner she still maintains the responsibility for the management of the school.

3. *Everyone is a leader.*

When considering leadership as interactions there will always be leaders and followers.

Followers are a necessary part of leadership. As Spillane and Diamond say, “too many cooks spoil the broth.” (p. 151)

4. *Distributed leadership is only for collaborative situations.*

“A distributed perspective applies to situations where leaders have different or contrary goals as easily as it does where leaders are striving for the same goal” (p. 152).

So how does a leader ensure that everyone is striving for that same goal? Trust is a foundational piece for any successful educational change (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002;

Kaser & Halbert, 2009; Lencioni, 2007). Without a strong foundation any initiative or other educational change will be shaky and eventually collapse. With a strong foundation of trust the leader can be assured that everyone will be working together.

**Servant Leadership.** “Servant leadership starts as a desire to serve others that then moves into practice, taking on the courageous task of serving others” (Wheatley, 2013, p. 12). I became a teacher out of a simple desire to help children learn. Since then there have arisen many other reasons for being a teacher but the initial call was from a desire to serve. I believe this is true for many educators. In my new role that desire to help has expanded to include my colleagues (although I have always been happy to help others). Wheatley explains servant leadership from an ideological point of view while Nichols (2010) approaches it from a more practical point of view as servant teachers.

Wheatley (2002) talks about the spiritual aspect of servant leadership as being based in the “tradition of spiritual leaders or Jesus” (p. 1). This intrigued me and compelled me to find out more. She states, “Leadership through command and control is doomed to fail. No one can create sufficient stability and equilibrium for people to feel secure and safe. Instead, as leaders we must help people move into a relationship with uncertainty and chaos” (p. 2). How do we help others be comfortable with the unknown? There are eight principles that can help guide those we serve (and, of course, ourselves): “life is uncertain...life is cyclical...meaning is what motivates people...service brings joy...courage comes from our hearts...we are interconnected to all life... we can rely on human goodness...[and] we need peace of mind” (p. 2-4).

The practicality of servant leadership can be seen by how the teacher works within the school. The servant teacher is comfortable in asking questions and bringing forward concerns. She takes responsibility for any mistakes, is consistent and follows through on commitments she has made (Nichols, 2010; Halbert & Kaser, 2009). These are necessary elements for everyone on

a collaborative team but certainly for someone in a leadership role. Added to these is the primary quality of respect for others. Nichols (2010) summarizes the servant teacher role by saying:

A willingness to serve, even when small disagreements exist, requires a humble attitude, a demeanor of service, and perhaps an even smaller ego, but remains part of the essential elements of creating a positive working and learning environment where we serve and support those in authority (administrators) and those we share authority with (colleagues), with the ultimate objective of creating an environment where everyone can feel empowered to contribute and to do their best work.

(p.78)

I believe that is what our ultimate goal is...a school where everyone – principals, teachers, support staff and, most of all, students feels valued and empowered to do their best work. What a vibrant, energizing, inspiring place that would be!

Wheatley and Nichols present different yet similar points of view on servant leadership. I think it is important to keep both in mind when collaborating with colleagues to work practically with them and to remain inspired.

**Conclusion.** From examining the literature my interpretation is that in order for the Literacy Co-teacher to be effective she must strive to be an adaptive expert, embrace the ideals of shared and servant leadership and, most importantly, build trusting relationships with students and her colleagues.

### **Chapter 3: Procedures and Methods**

In the film, *What's Right with the World*, Dewitt Jones (2001) states: "If we're going to learn to soar we have to know ourselves as well as we know our craft". I want to learn to soar. Therefore, my research is a qualitative self-study. I chose this methodology because I am

examining my own actions and professional learning in primary reading instruction and in teacher collaboration with the goal of surfacing my beliefs and improving my practice in both areas.

### **Self-study**

Self-study has its roots in “a long tradition of research carried out by teachers” (Lunenberg, Zwart & Korthagen, 2010, p.1280) that “begins with something that captures and needs attention in one’s work context” (Lunenberg & Samaras, 2011, p.844). In my case the driver of my focus was the new non-enrolling role of Literacy Co-teacher. According to Samaras and Freese (2009) self-study “mean[s] critical examination of one’s actions and the context of those actions in order to achieve a more conscious mode of professional activity, in contrast to action based on habit, tradition or impulse” (p.10). I think it is imperative that teachers’ actions are intentional and that they know why they do what they do, however often teachers act without knowing why. I certainly have. I want to be more intentional in my teaching and in my collaborative work with my colleagues. Loughran (2007) encapsulates this goal in his statement; “an important aspect of self-study that is crucial in understanding this methodology is embedded in the desire of ...educators to better align their teaching intents with their teaching actions” (p.12). Thus a self-study is the perfect method of research for me as I embark on my new role as Literacy Co-teacher.

Another important facet of self-study is that it includes a level of scholarship to prevent it from descending into justification or rationalization of one’s actions (Loughran, 2007). Just because it is a self-study does not mean that it is selfish. Self-study “empowers professionals to examine, and be accountable for, their own practice as they articulate and generate knowledge useful to others...[and] requires that the study is informed by literature and open for critical and

collaborative reflection” (Lunenberg & Samaras, 2011, p.841). Being grounded in literature and being open to critique is what can make the process valuable for others besides the researcher.

### **Data collection**

This study was based on two main sources of data – a personal researcher’s journal and a questionnaire. Over the course of my research period I wrote in my researcher's journal reflecting on my experiences and observations in my role as Literacy Co-teacher, on my professional reading and on other professional interactions and experiences in the areas of reading and collaboration. Reflection is an important aspect of this study because, as Loughran (2002) says, “reflection continually emerges as a suggested way of helping practitioners better understand what they know... as they develop their knowledge of practice through reconsidering what they learn in practice” (p.34). It is a way of critically examining my habits and “taken-for-granted assumptions” (p.33). When I write down my reflections it helps me to get clearer about what it is I am really thinking. Also, as I write, other questions arise that help me to go deeper. Originally my goal was to write three times a week but I found that once a week was much more reasonable.

At the end of my research period I asked for feedback on both the value of the position of Literacy Co-teacher and on my work in the role through a questionnaire. The questions I asked were:

- In what ways has the Literacy Co-teacher supported student literacy learning this year, especially in the areas of reading and experiencing the joy of reading? If possible, please provide an example.
- In your opinion, what do you feel we (as a primary team and/or as a school team) could be doing to improve student literacy learning?
- In what ways has the collaboration with the Literacy Co-teacher helped or hindered

student literacy learning?

- In what ways has the collaboration with the Literacy Co-teacher helped or hindered your own professional learning about literacy?
- Is there anything else you wish to tell the researcher?

The colleagues I hoped to recruit were male and female educators ranging in age from 30-65 years old: the three primary teachers I co-teach with, the District Principal of Literacy, Special Education and Technology, our principal and our vice-principal/Learning Assistance Resource Teacher. This made a total of six potential participants. Out of the six questionnaires I handed out I received five completed questionnaires back.

### **Data analysis**

At the end of my research period I transcribed both my researcher's journal and the questionnaire responses into separate documents on my computer. This made it easier to work with the data. I imported the documents into a software program called NVivo© and proceeded to code them. After working through both documents several times I ended up with fifteen categories and sub-categories from the questionnaires and twenty-eight categories and sub-categories from my journal. I analyzed them for themes using inductive coding and then analyzed the themes in relation to the relevant literature. NVivo© allows the researcher to manipulate the data to create word clouds and to use coding strips to see interconnections between data that has been coded. I found these tools to be very valuable. I ended up with four umbrella themes of Relationships, Collaboration, Literacy and Joy.

## Chapter 4: Findings and Results

In this study I was seeking to discover how my professional learning in reading instruction and teacher collaboration and my praxis as a Literacy Co-teacher would enable me to support student literacy learning. I particularly wanted to focus on how to ensure students experienced the joy and love of reading. My two sources of data were my researcher's journal in which I regularly recorded my reflections and a questionnaire completed by colleagues at the end of my research period. When my research period was over I coded both sources and analyzed them for themes. After coding both the questionnaire and my researcher's journal the number of themes arising from each source was unwieldy. However, many of the themes were inter-related and occurred in both sources. I consolidated these many themes into four umbrella themes. Predictably, these are: Relationships, Collaboration, Literacy, and Joy.

### Relationships

As Literacy Co-teacher working with three primary teaching colleagues collaboration is a necessity and I found that the level of collaboration with my colleagues really depended on the relationship I had with each of them. This is illustrated by the following excerpts from my journal:

- *I really feel closer to being a co-teacher with her than anyone else*
- *I have been surprised at how receptive \_\_ has been. I wonder how much of the barriers have been my own doing?*
- *I thought I was helping but later when I asked her she said she felt like there was an administrator in the room. Yikes! Certainly not my intent.*
- *The most difficult part of this job is trying to collaborate with people. Will I forever be in a 'helping' position instead of a co-teaching one until a relationship is strong?*

My experience as Literacy Co-teacher confirmed Kaser and Halbert's (2009) assertion that trusting relationships are key for any improvement or change.

**With students.** Building relationships both with the students and my colleagues were strong themes arising from the questionnaire and my researcher's journal. Many of the children I was working with I had taught when they were in grade one. I was able to reconnect with them and build on our previous relationship. I began a new relationship with the other children. As I was able to take the time to get to know them I was able to learn more about their interests, about any challenges they had and they were more comfortable in taking learning risks. It also helped the classroom teacher and I personalize instruction for the children. This is supported in my journal

- *This focused attention benefited \_\_\_ in the following ways: he became more interested in books and reading (he chose to listen to four books during centers one day and he began echo reading as I read Fly Guy), he talked with me much more than before we started. This shows the power of relationship*

and by a colleague's response in the questionnaire

- *"This provides an important chance to get to know the students' experiences and the things they're interested in and so doing further trying to provide meaningful links to literature. Another equally important point is the student relationship piece. The Literacy Co-teacher would have unique knowledge of each student moving from year to year to support relationship growth."*

**With colleagues.** Relationships with my colleagues focused on two main areas: supporting colleagues and how to handle seeing differences in teaching practice that were in conflict with my own. I tried (not always successfully) to support my colleagues both personally

and professionally. I found that each of us had many cares and concerns we were dealing with on a daily basis and having an empathetic ear was important. As one teacher said,

*“Sometimes I think my mind may not always be on the same page when discussing an idea or suggestion. I have been frazzled and inattentive at times due to budgeting classroom management, planning, family issues and other things on my plate.”*

Sometimes it was important to just listen and other times I made suggestions. It depended on the situation and the colleague with whom I was working. My colleagues appreciated this:

- *“[The co-teacher] has provided helpful feedback and encouragement to the teacher in finding ways to assist students who find reading a challenge.”*
- *“The co-teacher has been able to focus on some of the problem areas or situations that a single teacher in the classroom often find sometimes overwhelming to attend to properly on his/her own. (For example more opportunity to read one to one, especially to students who are not read to outside of school.)”*
- *“Someone to talk with and share ideas, who knows the students too and understands the needs required for an effective literacy program.”*

Another aspect of my relationships with my colleagues that came up over and over again was how to handle seeing differences in teaching practice that were in conflict with my own. I struggled with whether I should say something directly either to my colleague or to my principal.

- *I see practice not considered best practice, no differentiation of instruction. What to do? How to approach in a nonjudgmental way? How do I share opposing views without seeming like I want to direct or take over?*

- *Today after my teaching session I began to wonder whether \_\_ does any follow up, any teaching or whether me teaching these lessons allow \_\_ to abdicate responsibility.*
- *I wonder, if the colleague isn't open or receptive to change, where is the line where I have a duty to report bad practice (not abusive... just not good). Is there a line? What is the ethical thing to do? ... For my colleague... For the students?*

This internal conflict lessened over the year as I reflected on the issue and learned more about collaboration. My own learning began with this journal entry:

*... as a colleague, there is no line. I am not a supervisor or a manager. I need to focus on building and maintaining a trusting relationship with my colleague. It's the only way in. Reporting anything would ruin any relationship and would probably have repercussions for my relationships with other colleagues. I know that. Why do I keep struggling with it? I think it is a heart/mind conflict. My heart wants good things for the kids and is impatient. I want things to be happening right now! My mind knows this is a journey. It will take time.*

Then, as the issue kept coming up, I had to keep reminding myself of the goal of building relationships and to trust that working toward that goal would eventually make a difference. With this resolve I was mostly able to suspend judgment and focus on building relationships. The results are illustrated by the following journal entries:

- *While we were making stuff \_\_ was joking around with me. That never would've happened a year ago. Our relationship is changing – for the better. That can only bode well for positive changes for our students.*

- *A couple of days after I emailed paragraphs to \_\_\_ for ... report cards \_\_\_ said ... the paragraphs I did were good. I was surprised. Maybe the work in building a trusting relationship is starting to work.*
- *Thankfully these negative, resentful, judgmental thoughts happen less often than at the beginning of the year. I wonder if that's because... I'm teaching more or if things really are changing.*
- *All seem to be positive signs that \_\_\_ is trusting me and beginning to appreciate what I have to offer professionally.*

I began to see more and more positive results from my new attitude.

### **Collaboration**

It was clear from my data that collaboration and the time earmarked to engage in collaboration was valued. This is highlighted in questionnaire responses

- *“Obvious benefits from collaboration: teachers learning from each other, supporting each other's learning, two or more perspectives on student support, risks are shared/reflections and thinking shared”*

and in my journal

- *I appreciate how \_\_\_ always comes to our collaboration time. \_\_\_ comes prepared and often has something... to talk about. If we have nothing specific to talk about we chat and I try to be a sounding board*
- *\_\_\_ has said that she loves when I come in and talk with her about what I've been noticing so far in the assessments. She says it gets her mind going to how we can address student needs. She's excited and is appreciating my work in this world so far. \_\_\_ is also appreciative. She has said how valuable the collaboration time is.*

However within the umbrella of collaboration most of the comments centred on the themes of improving our adaptive teaching expertise and servant leadership.

**Adaptive expertise.** My colleagues and I are all at various points on our journey to becoming adaptive experts (Timperley, 2012) - in particular, “seek[ing] in-depth knowledge about the content of learning and how to teach it effectively, given [our] particular students and context” (p. 5). My colleagues expressed how I helped them along their journey.

- *“I have appreciated how conversations with the Literacy Co-teacher force deeper thinking and examination of my own thoughts/ opinions/ ideas about student literacy development. By bringing new (or “new to me”) ideas, this has expanded my repertoire and understanding of literacy development. I have particularly appreciated the focus on developing joy of reading in students, as that has not been an area that I have focused on in the past.”*
- *“I think that collaboration with the co-teacher helps mutually build teacher expertise, as ideas are discussed, shared, and modelled between colleagues.”*
- *“helped me think more about literacy interventions and how important it is for the students to have different teacher styles guiding their learning”*
- *“provided new ideas and strategies to instruct literacy to students”*

Unfortunately in my researcher’s journal I mostly focused on my new learning from what I was reading and my reflections and praxis as Literacy Co-teacher so I didn’t write much about what I was learning from my colleagues. I had one reflection in my journal about my new learning from a colleague:

*I often think of me helping \_\_\_ rather than thinking of how I might learn from \_\_\_.  
However we talked one day about assessing using Benchmark. \_\_\_ has the kids read silently first before doing a running record and asking comprehension*

*questions. I just have the kids read aloud for the running record from the beginning. In light of what Allington says about how silent reading is very different from reading aloud and how it's often better, made me stop and think. I guess I should do it \_\_\_'s way.*

My colleagues are a valuable source of learning and I think I missed an important opportunity here. I am now more attuned to this and more open to recognizing what I can learn from them as opposed to always focusing on what I can teach them.

**Servant leadership.** According to Nichols' (2010) practical perspective a servant leader is exemplified by “a willingness to serve, even when small disagreements exist, requires a humble attitude, a demeanour of service, and perhaps and even smaller ego” (p. 78). My journal shows that I demonstrated some of these qualities:

- *I want to be helpful to teachers and students and to build trusting relationships*
- *I have been working hard at not pushing my agenda and instead taking my cue from all the teachers I am working with. Overall I think it is working.*

I noticed that at the beginning of the year I often used language that did not reflect these qualities. I would say, I told...*I told \_\_\_ I was going to concentrate on assessments. I told... of the idea that my schedule would be for two or three months.* That gradually changed to “we agreed” or “I suggested”. I think this change in language is significant because it reflects a more collaborative attitude and one more in line with servant leadership.

Wheatley (2013) determined there are eight principles by which a servant leader can guide those with whom she is serving. Two of these principles were highlighted in my data: life is uncertain and we are all interconnected.

**Uncertainty.** Wheatley (2013) says a servant leader helps others by helping them understand and deal with the fact that life is uncertain. I have always been someone who values certainty and stability. It makes me feel safe. Uncertainty makes me nervous and even, at times, afraid. I cannot help others be comfortable with uncertainty if I am not. This has been a huge area of learning and growth for me (although I acknowledge I still have a long way to go). The uncertainty has existed in many areas:

1. My new job and lack of a job description

- *Such a weird feeling to be without my own class.*
- *...everything is so new and fluid.*
- *I'm finding the lack of a formal job description a bit difficult*
- *It's funny how one week, things seem to be going smoothly and the next I'm feeling like there's no direction and I am unsatisfied.*

2. My schedule

- *I don't really know what to do today.*
- *I am still feeling uncertain about a few things. Right now there's really no daybook to do. What would I write - assessment? So in that way I feel like I'm not working hard enough.*
- *Also, there's not much (or any) prep work to do. It makes me feel guilty – as if someone might think I'm slacking off. Even now as I write this in my prep time, I feel like I'm sneaking it because my prep time is my choice and not 'set in stone' on the master schedule.*
- *I am getting a bit impatient about having something to focus on and getting a plan.*

3. Learning how to work with different people

As Literacy Co-teacher I found I was forced to be ‘in the moment’ because so much of what I did depended on collaborating with other people. As I said previously, this is not a strength of mine. The uncertainty of being ‘in the moment’ is scary. I expressed my frustration by saying: *I have a really hard time waiting and/or watching. I want to be doing!* Despite this I found:

*One day after school I was walking around smiling at everyone and I was struck with the realization that these were true smiles not duty smiles. I felt happy. I was pleased to see the people and smile at them. I was in the moment. Usually before this job I was either stressed from the day or my mind was racing with the myriad of things to do!*

This reminds me of a story from the bible about two sisters, Mary and Martha. Jesus came to their house and Martha was running around the house preparing and making things ready, preparing food etc. She was the planner, the one who did things. Instead Mary sat at Jesus’ feet to listen to his teaching. She was in the moment. When Martha was inevitably resentful of Mary and complained to Jesus he gently told her that Mary had it right. This was a time to be in the moment. Usually I am like Martha – completely. In the role of Literacy Co-teacher I was experiencing what it was like to be Mary.

- *It was a freeing experience enabling me to go with the flow.*
- *It was great to be able to focus on helping those kids and to ignore everything else that was going on with the other kids (AND I DID PRETTY WELL).*
- *During our staff meeting we were talking about when to have an assembly – what time of day. I had no opinion on that. What a revelation! I always have an opinion!*

While I am still not entirely comfortable with being in the moment I am learning to appreciate it when it happens.

**Connections.** Another way a servant leader serves others is by helping them understand that we are interconnected (Wheatley, 2013). This connectedness is highlighted by my colleagues' responses:

- *Collaboration has allowed me to realize that I'm not alone in my joys and frustrations when faced with a variety of learners in the classroom.*
- *We experience the same frustrations and concerns together as we try to find effective, successful ways to help encourage the reader who struggles. An understanding colleague, who not only knows about primary literacy through academia, but also directly knows the students in the classroom.*

In addition to the connections with my primary teaching colleagues I was surprised at the number of connections I was able to make as more opportunities came my way as Literacy Co-teacher. It seemed that as the year progressed I made more and more connections.

- *On Thursday I attended the inaugural POPEI (Provincial Outreach Program for Early Intervention) meeting.*
- *I attended an Island Literacy meeting. It was here I felt I was among more people of like mind*
- *Changing Results for Young Readers is another way I am connected to others in the area of literacy.*
- *At our last Island Literacy meeting \_\_\_ again told us about the series of webinars they are doing after school with Katie Keier (one of the authors of *Catching Reader Before They Fall*). I asked if some of us*

*from our PD book study group could go. \_\_\_ and I were able to go even though it was really short notice. ...I reconnected with \_\_\_, \_\_\_ and \_\_\_ all of whom I met at one of the Island Literacy meetings. I also reconnected with \_\_\_, someone I met at a CR4YR meeting. \_\_\_ offered for me to come to Campbell River to talk with her about being a support teacher.*

- *I have joined a group of interested people in our district focusing on supporting diverse learners. A team from VIU is leading us in an inquiry process. There were four questions identified and each of us chose which we wanted to work on. I chose to work on the question focused on literacy: How can we build a collaborative model of literacy practices to support diverse groups of learners? As one of our first actions we decided to hold a session for all interested people on literacy. Our team will meet to determine which questions will guide the evening, the date of the session as well as the time and format.*
- *It will be great to make some connections between the high school teachers (and practice) and our school. It was through these diversity meetings we began to make a connection with \_\_\_. Wanting to build on this connection we extended an invitation to all our RWES/GRSS teachers and EA's to come to our next book study session. \_\_\_ came and joined us for a very good session on chapter 3. Maybe other teachers will come for the next one. By making stronger connections and sharing our ideas, experiences and expertise perhaps we can get rid of the blame cycle and work together.*

- *Connections have happened in other ways too. Two teachers... asked to be in a mentorship partnership with me.*

These connections benefitted more than just me. They help to lessen the isolation that is so much a part of working in the smaller district and brings us into the collective provincial (or at least regional) wisdom.

### **Literacy**

Given that this paper is a self-study of my role as Literacy Co-teacher it is not surprising that literacy would be one of the themes arising from the data. It is also not a surprise that the data mostly concerns reading instruction. Reading assessment, skills, balanced personalized instruction, and next steps were the main ideas.

**Assessment.** I began the year by completing reading and writing assessments for each primary student. For assessing reading I used assessments from the Central Okanagan School District and PM Benchmark©. The Central Okanagan assessments focused on (among other things) phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge and sight word knowledge. I recorded the results on the Circle Charts© we received from Janet Mort. PM Benchmark© was used to find each student's instructional reading level (94-98% accuracy with understanding). This work had both positive and negative outcomes. Teachers appreciated the help and liked the idea of consistent assessment across the primary grades: *"helped with informed/accurate assessments early on (and for the end of the year, I'm excited for that)"* and *"consistent assessment K to three and presentation"*. However, the time to administer the tests and time to debrief were negative aspects of the Literacy Co-teacher doing all the assessments.

- *"hindered me taking ownership of the assessments done on the students. To be honest, it has been a HUGE relief having the help and having*

*someone oversee the assessment process. I definitely feel comfortable letting Dana oversee the assessments because I know how thorough she is, I just think I should inform myself more on the process.”*

- *“more time and opportunity for the co-teacher and the teacher to work one-to-one with students to... increase knowledge, awareness and understanding of a student’s reading ability through careful assessment that is unhampered by the demands of a busy classroom”*
- *“I have realized how challenging it is for the classroom teacher to do thorough, informative assessment on their own and continue to manage and teach in a classroom without sufficient assistance.”*

Another aspect of the assessment I found was that much of it was focused on decoding skills. Even the benchmark testing only addressed a narrow band of the British Columbia Reading Performance Standards. I began to search for something to help us address this gap. I found out about the Early Primary Reading Assessment (EPRA)©.

*I found out more about the Early Primary Reading Assessment (EPRA). I really think this fits us in our school better than the PM Benchmark assessment. It seems as if the students encounter real difficulty when they do DART in grade 4. Where they may be assessed at meeting (even exceeding) expectations in grade 3 this does not match up with their DART performance in grade 4. Also, if we are using EPRA teachers will be better able to teach and plan according to the reading performance standards as a whole rather than just one strand.*

We are hoping to get some training this spring and implement EPRA© in the fall.

**Skills.** Throughout the year I struggled with the tension between teaching decoding skills (mostly in isolation) and focusing more on meaning by teaching thinking strategies and building background knowledge and oral language.

- *resist the urge to give skills before meaning*
- *I have started working with the grade 1/2 class as a whole on thinking strategies – ways to think about the story before, during and after reading. I'm starting with Adrienne Gear's Reading Power – connections*
- *\_\_\_ and I agreed ...oral language support/ enhancement would be the key.*
- *build oral language through peer talk*

After completing the assessments and filling out the Circle Charts© it was easy to see where the needs were. However questions arose for me even as I was assessing the children on their skills:

- *when I was assessing kids on their phonological awareness there was one skill that many kids had difficulty with – and yet some of them are already good readers. The skill is segmenting phonemes c-l-a-p or especially s-ea-sh-e-ll. Is this really an important skill? It doesn't seem so.*
- *I think that's why the circle charts and other skill-based assessments can be so alluring and so dangerous. While they provide important information it is what the teacher does with that information that is so important. Because the circle charts identify missing skills that are easily identifiable one is drawn into teaching those skills for a large percentage of the day so we can colour in more circles and be affirmed that we are successfully teaching and our students are*

*learning. Students not progressing? Or at least not fast enough? Spend more time! Find more activities! But at what cost? The cost of reflection time because the teacher reflects/thinks more on the activities rather than the student. The cost of experiences, knowledge building activities and joy.*

While I understand that skills are necessary I wondered about what seemed to be an over-emphasis on teaching them. I was talking with my colleagues and others to try to find a way to resolve this tension:

- *\_\_\_ and I have agreed that at our next collaborative meeting we will talk about her feelings/instincts about so much focus on skills (Dolch words, etc.) and the pressure (from whom?) to have her students be reading by the end of kindergarten.*
- *At one point we [at our Island Literacy Network meeting] discussed the tension between the “Janet Mort/ Allington/ Franzen” agenda and the Changing Results for Young Readers/ Primary Program agenda (as I’ll call them here). With regard to the pressure to have children read sight words etc. they are clearly on the side of PLAY!*
- *So it seems to me these factors are useful for assessment but should not be the sole basis for instruction. Rather, it seems to me that the pendulum shift from the extremes of phonics-based instruction and whole language instruction to the middle ground of a balanced literacy approach makes sense. A balanced literacy approach needs to include decoding instruction, comprehension instruction, fluency practice, shared writing, shared reading, explicit active instruction...*

Another issue I had with teaching decoding skills in isolation was the difficulty readers who struggle have with transferring the skills to other reading situations. I identified this problem in my journal, “*From what I was beginning to see last year and now into this year transfer of information and retention is an issue*”. Later, in my reading, I found confirmation of what I was seeing. In *Catching Readers Before They Fall* Johnson and Keier (2010) say “Struggling readers are often children who have stockpiled some item information (letters, sounds, sight vocabulary and phonics rules), but they don’t know how to apply that information when reading continuous text” (p. 17).

Individually and as a member of the primary team at our school this tension is still not resolved, perhaps because the balance between skills and meaning will always shift according to the needs of the children we teach. However, it is good to be constantly aware and on guard so I don’t fall into complacency and convenience. At a Changing Results for Young Readers network meeting I attended Faye Brownlie (2015) said, “Where we spend our time shows what we value.” I think it is important that the real purpose of reading for understanding and joy isn’t lost as we help our children master decoding skills.

**Balanced personalized instruction.** As Richard Allington (2002) says, “one-size-fits-all contradicts virtually everything we have learned about effective teaching” (p.743). My reading and my experiences confirmed this fact. In one instance, I was leading a group of teachers through a book study of *Catching Readers Before They Fall* (Johnson & Keier, 2010). We engaged in one of the suggested activities where we all read the same poem while paying attention to the meaning we were making from our reading and to the strategies we used as we read. I wrote about the insight I gained from that session in my journal:

- *When it came time to discuss I was amazed! Every single one of us took something different away from the poem. There were also some*

*common understandings. This really highlighted for me how each of us brings our background knowledge and experiences to bear when we are reading. If that wasn't the case, our interpretations would've all been the same.*

- *When we were talking about the reading strategies we used we found that we all used many different strategies throughout the poem and while some were the same, some were not. Again this highlights the complexity of reading because each reader approaches reading in an individual way.*

Not only did each teacher approach reading differently, I realized that the same is true for the children I teach. I found that in each class there were students for whom the regular reading instruction was not working. They struggled to learn. Their teachers and I struggled to find something that would work.

- *There are a few students for whom our regular approaches to teaching reading are not working. I'm just searching for something that will work!*
- *I am working with J and A on Edmark©*
- *I decided to try a language experience approach to try and help J learn to read with [the teacher's] approval.*

This led me to the conclusion that we should focus more on reading instruction that is personalized, tailored to meet individual needs.

## **Joy**

During the year I never specifically planned out actions that I thought would bring or develop students' joy and love of reading. I acted on my own beliefs about reading and when I

saw that it was working, I spoke to my colleagues and we did more of it. Mostly what I did was take the time to listen to what the children were saying and, when they weren't saying much I asked questions to discover what they thought about reading. I was learning about their "literacy personality" (Cole, 2002). I found that my passion for reading, the effort I took to match books to readers and other joyful actions like Relax and Read, Art/Literature Connection and "couch time" worked together to build enthusiasm and joy for reading. I also found that where I would typically say no to a child's request (for what I felt was some good professional reason) when I looked at the request through the lens of promoting joy I would often find some way to say yes.

**Passion for reading.** When I was learning to be a teacher I was told that enthusiasm for the subject we were teaching was important in helping to motivate students to be interested in learning. My data confirmed this. My passion for reading was instrumental in helping others be enthusiastic about reading. My colleagues highlighted this point in their responses:

- *"And the Literacy Co-teacher's own excitement about reading and joy in discovering some of these books can be contagious, both for children and adults."*
- *"Miss Plett has shared her treasure of books (literally a treasure chest), with the students. As she shares the books and reads she is animated and enthusiastic about her favourite treasures. This enthusiasm is transferred to the students. I can see and hear their excitement and enjoyment in their response to the literature shared. She shares her experiences and connections to the stories read and encourages students to share their own connections to the stories read."*

I also wrote about my enthusiasm and passion for reading in my journal, *“I love to talk about literacy – especially the challenge of helping a child learn to read or helping to improve reading”*.

**Matching books to readers.** A while ago I found a poster on Twitter™ that said, “There’s no such thing as a kid who hates reading. There are kids who love reading and kids who are reading the wrong books” (James Patterson). It became my mission to find the ‘right books’. I had a number of entries in my journal focusing on trying to find the right book for kids:

- *It has become my mission to find books kids are interested in and excited to read. I am also hoping they will be so excited they will read at home more too.*
- *One of the kids I’m spending one-on-one time reading to is J. He didn’t seem too keen the last few times so I am trying to see what books he may be more interested in.*
- *The only person I’ve yet to reach is J. He has all his defenses in place. Not much causes him to show any animation. I was talking to him about what books he’d like me to read. I told him Mr. \_\_\_ said he was interested in hunting. He added “and fishing” so I was determined to find books he’d be interested in. I bought three titles: “The Journey of Dog Salmon”, “Bigfoot Boy – Into the Woods” and a magazine “Outdoor Canada – Fishing”. In the end he wanted me to read the Zac Power book we had already started – even though I know there’s much he’s missing due to the language and lack of background knowledge. It made me wonder why he picked it. Because another boy in the same grade who sits beside him reads Zac Power? Face-saving? Someone from our Island Literacy meeting talked about how important psychology is*

*when dealing with children who struggle in grades 4 to 7 and beyond. It's just as important in primary.*

- *A week ago I bought some new books. I did a book talk about them for the grade 2/3s. They were excited and eager to read many of the books. I recorded their names on the post-it. I was surprised that boys expressed interest in what I thought were 'girl books' and vice versa. It was a very good lesson/reminder to me to suspend judgment. What was I thinking?!? I like all kinds of books. Why wouldn't they?*
- *When I was assessing the kids I took some time to ask them if they read at home, what they like to read and what they are interested in. Based on their answers I began recommending books to them. I gave them books to take to their class to read. They seem to appreciate this. One girl took the book home and brought it back the next day done! One day one boy came in for an assessment (he's a very proficient reader) and asked, "Why are all the kids coming back with books to read?" I told him I was trying to match kids with books they'd like to read. Then I asked him if he would like a book. The answer was a quick "yes"! We found a book for him.*

My colleagues saw the positive results of this as well, as I saw in their responses:

- *"She is also able to find resources, like engaging children's books that students love."*
- *"Finding books that get children excited about reading helps the joy of reading develop."*

**Joyful actions. Art/literature connection.** In our district we operate on a nine-day fortnight model, which means there is no school on every second Friday. On the Fridays we are in session we decided to put all the children together, K-3, and explore an art/literature

connection. Our goals for these days are to enjoy books together, to have fun through art as the children respond in some way to a story, to build connections for a cohesive primary group through multi age groupings and to build oral language through peer talk. Each primary teacher takes a turn to choose a story and then we all plan the session together. Other than meeting to determine my schedule it is the one event that has all four of us working together.

- *“The co-teacher has encouraged the collaboration of primary teachers to provide exciting creative activities to explore literature linking art and literature together by incorporating all of the primary classes K-3. Therefore providing multi-level, multi-aged groups and opportunity to share their ideas.”*

I would like us to expand this model into other areas in the future.

***Relax and read.*** Relax and Read has been a great initiative to promote joy in reading. We line the hallway and school foyer with mats, a couch, rocking chairs, beanbags etc. for children and adults to sit together and read together. There is a busy hum as the reading occurs. It is such a joy-filled event and one that helps the children to see that other people value reading too. This is best explained through an entry in my journal:

*Relax and Read is an event we began last year and continued into this year. Last year and the first time we did it this year only the primary classes took part. The kids loved it! The kids whose parents came really enjoyed themselves but others did too. Throughout the year Relax and Read has grown to include all classes in our school. We have had new adults/community members join us the last couple of times. These have included our mayor, members of the Gold River Literacy Society and someone from one of our local churches. Some new parents/grandparents have shown up as well. At our last Relax and Read it was*

*fabulous to see intermediate children with large pointers reading from a K-1 class book. It was also great seeing two tough-acting grade seven boys reading together. At each session there are more special moments. The kids look forward to whenever we have Relax and Read. Kids have said either to me or in my hearing how much they enjoy it. We hold one per month.*

This is an activity we will continue into next year. We hope to include more and more community members in this joyful time of reading together.

**‘Couch time’.** Many of the kids who struggle with reading have missed out on the important one-to-one lap time reading that some children get as toddlers. This loss of language learning through relationship has had a big impact on their reading because their exposure to language is so much less than their peers. I wanted to see if there was a way I could provide this time for some of the children who struggle with learning to read. I was never able to do this as a classroom teacher but luckily I could as a non-enrolling teacher. I started reading to one student, side by side on the couch, for fifteen minutes a day. After a few weeks his teacher and I started to see some positive changes so, after discussion with the three other teachers I expanded this ‘couch time’ to one student from each class for 6 week periods. My colleagues recognized the value of this ‘couch time’:

- *The students are given the opportunity to choose a book and share the story with the co-teacher. This provides an important chance to get to know the students’ experiences and the things they’re interested in and so doing further trying to provide meaningful links to literature. “Why do we read books?” – “To learn more about ourselves and the things we are interested in.”*

- *“couch time reading has provided one on one quiet reading opportunities. I believe it has helped some students with their own reading behaviours during class time reading.”*

I think ‘couch time’ is showing success for two reasons, the power of relationship and the one-on-one support of a professional teacher. This time together allows me to chat in an informal way with the students and relax about achieving particular curricular outcomes. I can get to know each child more deeply. Typically these are children who rarely talk in a whole class setting so in this one-on-one setting all attention can be focused on the child and what they have to say. Also, ‘couch time’ is risk free because I do the reading. I use my professional judgment to determine when or how to extend our reading. It is affirming to have a child ask to read with me even when his/her six week session is over and to see children more motivated to read themselves.

*Using the lens of joy to say ‘yes’.* The more I began thinking about promoting the joy and love of reading the more I began examining my reasons for what I was doing and saying through that lens. I wrote about a number of examples in my journal, highlighting my internal thought process as I changed my mind.

- *I struggle as children come up to me to get a new book – one of the ones I did a book talk on. They ask for books that are too hard for them – but that they see in their classmates read. Do I give the book to them? Or what?*
- *I really want to find some way to encourage E. Perhaps by reading to him? Today I was trying to help him find a book. I read him the back. He seems interested in finding out what’s going to happen but doesn’t want to do the work of reading. I wonder why? Too much work to*

*concentrate? He asked me if I would read it to him. I said no because I wanted him to read. Maybe I was wrong. If my goal is for him to discover joy and reading maybe the way in is to read to him.*

- *I asked him today if he wanted me to read him a Zac Power, Bad Kitty or Geronimo Stilton. He saw the Minecraft book and asked for that. I started to say no because it wasn't really a story but then I remembered... if it's about the joy why not? So I said yes. I read parts to him and asked him questions about it. It's a chance for him to be more of a teacher (build up his oral language) as he has way more experience than I do. Perhaps this will also help his self-esteem and, I hope, help him to see the variety of things he could read when he improves his reading ability.*
- *One day when I was checking kids knowledge of the words I overheard one boy saying, "I wish I had those" (meaning the flags). Other kids asked for them outright. I had said not yet because they have lots of Dolch words to learn. Thinking about it later I began to wonder, why not? Why can't they have some words on their ring that are their own personal words? Wouldn't that be motivating? Joyful? After spring break I think I will.*

My reflections helped me realize that considering what might motivate students and bring them joy is an important and necessary step toward helping them become capable, confident, passionate readers.

## Next Steps

I think it is important to mention the next steps towards improving primary literacy learning suggested by my colleagues, should we be able to maintain this non-enrolling position for another year. The following are the suggestions they made:

- 1) *“Recommending different resources with other teachers that provide a variety of ways to enhance literacy in the classroom”*
- 2) *“Seeking to find books or stories that interest the students to encourage them to find connections and meaning in literature that further enhances exploration and inquiry”*
- 3) *“Increase home reading and home literacy practices.”*
- 4) *“Continued co-teaching and collaborating on literacy interventions.”*
- 5) *“Continued joined classes for literacy times. Art/Literature connection. Creating more “family-like” literacy opportunities such as Relax and Read, Couch time, involving community programs like the public library and literacy center”*
- 6) *I think that the school team should continue to develop a common vision for student literacy learning at the school. What is it that we want for children, and how do we collectively work together to help them achieve that? I think that the primary team has started down this path, and should continue to develop more cohesion and consistency between classrooms. The Literacy Co-teacher will play an important role in helping to develop this vision.*

The suggestions for a continuation of what has occurred this year are ones that I will continue: recommending resources, finding books to interest the children and collaborating and co-teaching. I found some of the other suggestions intriguing and was excited to see them as avenues to address in the future. These other suggestions I consider in greater depth in chapter 6: developing a vision, home reading and involving the wider community in our

literacy activities.

### **Chapter 5: A Little Side Step**

This year I have been grappling with the moral issue of how to handle seeing differences in teaching practice that were in conflict with my own. In fact, this has been an issue for much of my teaching career as, I suspect, it has for other teachers. In chapter four I talk about the new learning I gained as I sought a resolution to my dilemma. This chapter outlines some of that new learning.

As a non-enrolling teacher working in my colleagues' classrooms I see a wide range of teaching practices related to the teaching of literacy. If I am to continue in this role, I could be working in a wide variety of classrooms, with a wide variety of teachers. In this kind of situation I think it is easy for one to make judgements about what is effective and what is not. It is easy to label teaching that is in conflict with our own as 'poor'. It has caused me to wonder what I should do if I were to encounter what I consider to be 'poor' teaching? Where is the line between what must be reported and what does not have to be reported? What is the ethical thing to do if one sees what they consider to be poor teaching? What might be the repercussions? Should one say anything outright or are there other ways to address this issue? Is it ethical to stay silent? At what point would poor teaching cross the line into becoming harmful to the children leaving one with no choice but to report it?

In considering whether to say anything outright if I were to encounter such a situation, there are a number of factors to examine. Firstly, what is the state of the relationship between the teacher(s) and myself? If we have only a superficially polite professional relationship then saying something would, I suspect, negate any attempts toward building trust. Without that trust any chance to help make the classroom situation better for the students is lost. Secondly, would

the colleague(s) take it seriously and be open to change? I cannot think how I would be able to phrase my concerns in such a way that my colleague(s) would not feel judged and would, instead, be willing to take a risk to try something new. Finally, if I said something what effect might that have on my relationships with other colleagues and the efficacy of my role as Literacy Co-teacher? I think that if I did say something my colleague(s) would feel judged and any trust would be lost. Other colleagues would probably find out as talk abounds in schools. They in turn may feel wary about having me in their classes for fear of me judging their work as well. This would create a very distrustful atmosphere which would ruin any chance of me making a difference in supporting students' literacy learning. Therefore, saying something outright to a colleague would not work.

The reasons listed above for not saying anything make sense to me but I remain conflicted because I want each child to get the best educational experience possible. The best way for me to describe it is a conflict between my mind and my heart. I think the tension between mind and heart is a fact of life in teaching. Where the tension would be resolved is where it is very clear that harmful teaching is happening which would compel me to report the teacher.

When I think about what constitutes harmful teaching I think there are some practices that are clearly harmful and others that are a bit more obscure. I turned to the Standards section of the British Columbia Teacher Regulation Branch (TRB) (2015b) for guidance. There is a document titled "Understanding Your Duty to Report" which says the following:

Section 38 of the Teachers Act states that a certificate holder must promptly provide to the Commissioner a written and signed report if he/she has reason to believe that another certificate holder has engaged in conduct that involves any of the following:

(a) physical harm to a student;

- (b) sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a student;
- (c) significant emotional harm to a student

The document goes on to say that this conduct can occur intentionally or otherwise both of which require reporting.

Looking at the list provided it seems pretty clear what physical harm, sexual abuse or exploitation mean and that these kinds of conduct would be harmful. I remember a case where a teacher was accused of restraining a child by tying or taping that child to the desk. If that is indeed what happened that kind of conduct is clearly harmful. Where it gets murkier is in the area of significant emotional harm. I think there are behaviours that would cause significant emotional harm like humiliating a student or acting in a racist way toward them. However, I suspect that what constitutes significant emotional harm could also depend on the point of view of the person judging the conduct and would also need to take the child's context into account. Some children are fragile due to circumstances outside the school and would be harmed more easily and perhaps to a greater depth than others by disrespectful conduct from a teacher.

While not included in the list of conduct by a teacher that must be reported I wonder about neglect. It is expected that an educator "value and care for all students and act in their best interests" (British Columbia Teacher Regulation Branch, 2015a). A colleague's lack of personalized instruction (for example) might be considered a form of neglect but not, I think, severe enough to warrant reporting. However, I think this depends on how much a colleague is willing to change and grow in order to more closely meet the standard.

I think the factors that prevent poor teaching from crossing the line into harmful teaching are the willingness to reflect, to learn and to improve teaching practice. I started thinking about teachers just entering the profession. They are on a steep learning curve as they endeavour to put theory into practice. I wonder about some of the practices I exhibited in my first year of

teaching. Were there examples of poor or harmful teaching? I wasn't neglectful of my students; if anything I concerned myself with everything they did at school. I often pushed too hard. I had not yet reached a point where I could "understand and apply knowledge of student growth and development" (TRB, "Standards for the Education, Competence and Professional Conduct of Educators in BC", standard 3). As I gained more experience it became easier to know what was an appropriate goal for each student. Also in my first year of teaching I am sorry to say that yelling was a classroom management tool I used often. This certainly was not appropriate and a convincing argument could be made that it was harmful to the children. However to my knowledge no one made any kind of report to the principal about my teaching. In both these instances I was learning to be a teacher and gaining experience along the way. I was lucky to have encouraging, supportive colleagues who helped me learn and grow in a formative way.

Given the above reasons for not addressing the issue directly with colleagues and given the fact that the 'poor teaching practices' haven't crossed the line into being harmful I think there are three ways of addressing this problem in an ethical manner. These are through modelling, co-planning and co-teaching and by building trust with colleagues. Modelling appropriate teaching practices in balanced, personalized reading instruction are ways I can help the students and I have hope that my colleagues would take notice and perhaps try some of these practices themselves. After pinpointing the needs of the children through assessment (which I have already done) my colleagues and I can plan together how best to address these needs. Then I could do some teaching and perhaps we could get to the point where we would teach together. Finally, the point that I find myself being reminded of again and again is that in any collaborative working relationship trust is key. I must continue to do what I can to build trust with my colleagues and to learn to trust them as well. I need to put away the judgement and adopt a curious attitude to examine what might really be going on in these instances instead of assigning motives that are

probably false. By doing this we may eventually come to a point where we could have a frank discussion about teaching practices – theirs and mine.

Thus the ethical thing to do in resolving my dilemma of whether to say something to a colleague when I observe poor teaching is to suspend judgement and be curious, to be alert to harmful teaching and to find ways of helping my colleagues improve their teaching in a supportive, encouraging way.

## **Chapter 6: Discussion**

### **Self-study as a research methodology**

I found that my choice of research methodology, a self-study, was well-suited to helping me explore how my professional learning in reading instruction and teacher collaboration and my praxis as a Literacy Co-teacher would enable me to support student literacy learning, especially ensuring that they experience the joy and love of reading. As a practicing teacher this methodology corresponds with my normal habit of reflecting on my teaching, reflecting on my interactions with colleagues and students' and reflecting on students' learning needs. However, this methodology extends this habit by informing my actions (Loughran, 2007; Samaras & Freese, 2009) through relevant literature (Lunenberg & Samaras, 2011, p. 841) and by providing a structure for reflection and analysis of those actions. The process of writing my reflections in my researcher's journal was important in helping me clarify my thinking and it was a permanent record on which I could go back and reflect in greater depth. This is quite different from my usual somewhat fleeting reflections. I also found that the process of conducting a self-study enabled me to examine some of my "taken-for-granted assumptions" (Loughran, 2002, p. 33) and to either confirm those beliefs or to change them. I most often changed them.

While I liked the responsive nature of self-study as a research methodology I think it is important to be aware of a limitation with this method; the fact that as the majority of my data came from my researcher's journal it represented my perspective only. This limitation was alleviated in part through my use of a questionnaire completed by my colleagues. I found that when I read some of my colleagues comments on the questionnaire I was surprised by what they had to say and sometimes I wished I could ask them to explain what they meant so this points to a limitation even with the questionnaire format. If I were to conduct another self-study I think I would try to balance the singular perspective of my researcher's journal with an interview of colleagues as opposed to a questionnaire. However, overall I thought that the combination of my journal and the questionnaire provided a good source of information for my research purpose.

I think it is important for other researchers considering self-study to know that this methodology is a valid and accepted methodology and has its roots in “ a long tradition of research carried out by teachers” (Lunenberg, Zwart & Korthagen, 2010, p.1280). When I told other people I was engaging in a self-study I sometimes felt like I had to defend it as a valid research methodology and that I was not being egocentric. Being grounded in literature and being open to critique is what can make the process valuable for others besides the researcher. Having gone through the process I cannot imagine another methodology more suited to examining my role as Literacy Co-teacher.

### **Lessons from my journey**

My journey as Literacy Co-teacher has been one full of lessons. Sometimes it seemed as if the lessons were happening daily. I found the most important lessons, the ones that have made the biggest impact on me, are:

- 1) Invest in building relationships,
- 2) Be a servant leader,

- 3) Reading instruction must be balanced, responsive and personalized according to student needs, and
- 4) Promoting joy is necessary.

These lessons have been deeply personal to me but I think that they are lessons that are also important for other educators. They speak to the heart of who we are or wish to become.

**Lesson #1: Invest in building relationships.** If I hope to ensure student success I must invest in building relationships with the people with whom I am working. In my study I focused on students and my colleagues but I think this lesson would apply to anyone I have contact with in the course of doing my job (parents, community members, etc). Both my reading and my experience as Literacy Co-teacher validate Halbert and Kaser's (2009) assertion that trust is crucial for "successful school improvement initiatives" (p.43) . Two ways of investing in building trusting relationships are making people the priority over tasks and suspending judgement of them.

***People before tasks.*** I like being busy. I feel confident in planning, organizing and executing my teaching plans. This is comfortable for me because I feel capable and worthwhile. However, I learned that it is vital when building relationships to put people before tasks. Because my role as Literacy Co-teacher depended so much on other people I was forced to focus more on those people and less on the tasks I would typically be engaged in as a classroom teacher. I needed to be in the moment with them because, whether they are children or adults, a person can tell when another person is wholly engaging with them or not. This level of engagement affects their relationship. It was apparent to me that the level of collaboration I was able to assume with my colleagues depended on the status of my relationship with them. The same was true of the level of engagement and risk-taking I saw from students. It depended on relationship.

It is easy to build a relationship with someone of like mind. It is not as easy with people who think or interact differently from me. There is nothing I like more than to jump into a discussion, passionately sharing my point of view and listening to others do the same. It is hard for me to communicate with a colleague who shows little passion or says nothing at all. Nevertheless I need to make sure I take the time to daily touch base with all my primary-teaching colleagues (at least) regardless of the status of our relationship or how easily we communicate with each other. I need to make sure I don't always just talk with those with whom I feel most comfortable. It is only through taking the time, through listening and responding with empathy that these relationships will become stronger. I think it is also important to note that responding with empathy does not necessarily mean agreement. Nichols (2010) talks about servant teachers being willing to serve "even when small disagreements exist" (p.78). I do not believe this means becoming a doormat. Rather, this kind of humble attitude paves the way for the necessary trust to grow thereby ensuring long-term, successful collaboration.

***Suspending judgement.*** Throughout my research period I found myself struggling with how to handle seeing differences in my colleagues' teaching practice that were in conflict with what I believed to be best practice. I considered whether or not I should say anything and if so, to whom. This was and is an ongoing internal struggle. I am finding that where my previous poor perceptions were confirmed (Jones, 2001), with my new mindset I am beginning to see evidence my positive perceptions are substantiated. I learned that unless the teaching practice is harmful (according to the standards of the British Columbia Teacher Regulation Branch) it is imperative to suspend judgment and work on building my relationship with my colleagues. As our relationship gets stronger we are able to work together to improve our teaching in a supportive, encouraging way.

**Lesson #2: Be a servant leader.** I believe that when working with others it is important to be a servant leader. A servant leader is humble and doesn't let ego get in the way (Nichols, 2010). Accepting uncertainty and helping others to do the same are also important aspects of what it means to be a servant leader (Wheatley, 2002). Finally a servant leader needs to be open to learning from others.

**Humility.** Before embarking on this study I thought collaboration meant coming prepared with ideas and negotiating which idea would be implemented. I had my own agenda and, for the most part, expected others to fall in line, perhaps because they usually did. In my masters courses I had some experiences where colleagues shared with me their perceptions of how I collaborated. These perceptions were as varied as my colleagues. Some of them thought I collaborated well. They liked my passion, my organization, my commitment and my initiative. Others felt I took too much control and didn't really consider their perspectives. As Literacy Co-teacher I was determined to operate in a different way; a way where I could still maintain my passion, commitment and initiative but be more willing to listen to others and to collaborate more than control. As can be seen by my results I focused more on what the classroom teacher wanted to do. Even the language I was using in my reflections changed from the more controlling "told" to the more collaborative "agreed" or "suggested". I am learning to be more humble but I realize that this will be an ongoing process.

Another lesson in humility came when I was analyzing my data. I realized that I had been focused so much on what I could teach my colleagues that I never really thought about what I could and was learning from them. This was a missed opportunity. Looking back I see that there were assumptions I had made about the best way to teach and, when challenged by my colleagues, they were not as important as I originally thought. I think this happens to many teachers. We get comfortable and confident that our way is the way. If our aim is to be adaptive

experts (Timperley, 2012) then it is vital that we discuss our teaching beliefs, challenge each other's assumptions, and learn from each other.

*Expect uncertainty.* When assumptions are questioned uncertainty abounds. Wheatley (2002) says uncertainty is a necessary part of being a servant leader; we must help others to realize and accept that uncertainty will always exist and to accept that fact. I agree. I also think that in order to help others come to this understanding we must be able to accept uncertainty ourselves. This has been another area of great learning for me. I usually spend a great deal of energy ensuring that I have planned for any contingencies that might arise so I will not be in the feared position of dealing with uncertainty. Of course there are always some new situations or questions that arise that I haven't thought of and I manage. As this year progressed I found myself dealing with uncertainty more than ever before. Both my new job and my colleagues pushed me out of my comfort zone forcing me to be more in the moment. As a result I am learning to embrace Cwelelep - a term from the Lil'wat language referring to "being in a place of dissonance and uncertainty in anticipation of new learning" (Halbert & Kaser, 2013, p.14). While it is an uncomfortable state to be in I found that with each new instance of uncertainty came the treasured new learning.

**Lesson #3: Balanced, personalized reading instruction.** In examining the literature as well as my own experiences I have found that balanced, personalized instruction in reading is the path toward ensuring children learn how to read. There needs to be a balance between teaching skills and those that promote understanding of text like oral language and background knowledge. Neuman (2006) says, "at risk children cannot afford to attend to one without the other" (p. 38). I think that all children need both.

*Skills.* Learning skills is important because they become tools for figuring out unknown words. Without these tools beginning readers are lost. They can make guesses depending on the

level of support from pictures or other people but they will never be able to read any text independently. The skills advocated by Mort (2015) and outlined in the NELP Report (2009) as those predictive for success in reading, writing and spelling are a great place to start (alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming of letters, number, colours and objects). However, skills are not enough to ensure a child can read (Clay, 2005a; Neuman, 2006).

***Background knowledge.*** Conceptual or background knowledge is important for making educated guesses about unknown words using context clues as well as for understanding of the text as a whole (Clay, 2005a; Mills, 2009; McGill-Franzen, 2010; Neuman, 2006; Neuman, Kaefor & Pinkham, 2014). Throughout this year as I engaged in my research this fact was continually confirmed by the literature I was reading and by the experiences I was having with colleagues and children. In my journal I wrote about two instances where the importance of building background knowledge was emphasized. The first was at a Changing Results for Young Readers Network Meeting where Faye Brownlie spoke about the necessity to resist teaching skills before meaning and the second was at an Island Literacy meeting when we talked about teaching skills versus providing experiences to build background knowledge through play. The consensus was that building knowledge through play was the priority.

I also wrote about a professional development experience that seemed to prove the value of background knowledge. When three colleagues and I read the same poem we each derived a different meaning of the poem due to our unique experiences and knowledge (our differences in background knowledge). In addition to my journal entries and the literature, the importance of background knowledge has been substantiated by my experiences of reading with children who could say all the words in a text but had no understanding of it. They were ‘word-calling’ or ‘barking at print’ as opposed to reading. Conversely, I have also read with children who had

extreme difficulty decoding text but were able to understand it well due to their background knowledge. Given all of this information I realized that background knowledge is a key component of reading ability.

***Personalized reading instruction.*** Reading instruction that addresses children's individual learning needs whether it is teaching skills, conceptual knowledge, or other ways of making sense of text, with a changing emphasis as necessary for each child, constitutes a comprehensive reading program. As teachers we are looking for the answer to help children become readers. Even though we know there isn't one it seems as if, in the back of our minds, we are compelled to seek it. In reality, besides providing a balance between teaching skills and understanding of text it is important that reading instruction is personalized. Reading is a complex process. The ability to read is developed and utilized in individual ways. While some features of reading may be the same between people, how and when they use them are not. In addition, everyone has a unique store of background knowledge. As I found when I engaged in a professional development activity with colleagues, four people reading the same poem can have four different interpretations. Therefore, it is critical that reading instruction is responsive to each child's needs (Allington, 2002).

***Assessment.*** Finally, appropriate and useful assessment is essential when creating a balanced, personalized reading approach. Because the goal is to use assessment to inform instruction it is important that we assess (and teach) in a balanced way. I found that the Circle Chart© records of skill assessment could be dangerous. Because the Circle Charts© identify missing skills that are easily identifiable, teachers are drawn into focusing on those skills for a large percentage of the day so we can colour in more circles and be affirmed that we are successfully teaching and our students are learning. However, by doing this our attention is diverted from those aspects of reading instruction that are more difficult to measure and

ultimately, teach – experiences to build background knowledge, thinking strategies to improve understanding of text and joy in reading.

**Lesson #4: Promote joy.** Reading allows people to “participate in and appreciate the more aesthetic aspects of life” (Rasinski & Padak, 2004, p.95). It enriches their lives.

Experiencing the flavour of life through reading brings joy and when one experiences joy in reading the motivation to read is high. In this study I found that promoting joy is fundamental to helping children read, especially those who struggle with reading. I believe there are many ways of promoting the joy of reading with students but matching books to readers, using the lens of joy to say yes and engaging in joyful actions around reading are three important ones that I discovered.

***Matching books to readers.*** According to Cole (2002), motivation to read is individual and arises from each student’s literacy personality. My experiences confirm this idea. One way I sought to address students’ literacy personalities was by trying to match books to readers – especially those readers who struggle. I tried to find books the students would be interested in reading but that would be at a level they could read and understand. This required many conversations with individual children so I could get a sense of their interests and whether they liked to read (why or why not). Once I had a greater understanding of the children and what might interest them I began seeking suggestions from other colleagues and reading possible books to recommend to children. The children responded with eagerness and enthusiasm. It is affirming when they come to me outside of class time to ask for another book.

Not only did I learn the importance of matching books to readers there were other related lessons I had to consider. The first of these was to have no pre-conceived notions about what children might like to read. At one point I was looking for books to motivate some grade three boys. It was suggested to me the Zac Power series of books might work. I was surprised to find

that many girls were interested in reading these books too. I don't know why I was surprised. Certainly, I enjoy reading all kinds of books, why wouldn't they?

The second related lesson was that matching books to readers takes a lot of time: time for conversation and time to find and read new books. The time spent is worthwhile. The increased level of enthusiasm and engagement in reading is worth it. I plan to include reading of children's books as a larger part of my personal reading so I have a greater store of books I can recommend.

Finally, in matching books to readers I think it is important to work with our students' parents and our school librarian. Parents are a valuable source of information about their child's interests and if I draw them in to the book search that may have an impact at home too. Working with the school librarian to search for books for children will help me to know more about what is available in our library and will help him to know more about the interests of the children so he can make recommendations to them too. The more people involved in helping children find books that interest them and motivate them to read the better.

*Using the lens of joy to say 'yes'.* As I have discussed earlier in this paper, my focus as a teacher has often been on the task to be completed or the skill to be learned. As a result, when students asked me if they could do something different from what I had in mind for them I would often say no. What I discovered through this study was that with the idea of promoting joy in my mind I would rethink the 'no' and often change it to 'yes'. This was exciting for me because I was challenging my assumptions and coming to new learning. I think it was exciting for the students because it gave them more freedom to direct their own learning in reading and as a consequence, experience more joy. Considering students' requests through the lens of joy also helped my relationships with students. They were less likely to feel resentful and closed off when I said yes to their requests or even when I negotiated an alternative with them. This

discovery has been a good lesson for me. It showed me that when joy is a goal in reading instruction there are many benefits both for the students and for myself.

**Joyful actions.** Promoting joy in reading can happen through a number of different activities. Three activities we tried with success were Relax and Read, Art/Literature Connection and ‘Couch time’. I believe these actions were and are successful because they all have elements of relationship, they encourage literate conversations (Allington, 2014; Brownlie, 2015) and they encourage response to literature in a risk-free way. In addition, everyone can participate no matter what level of skill in reading.

### **Next Steps**

In considering what the next steps will be in terms of my role as Literacy Co-teacher I know I want to continue what I have started. Sharing my passion for reading as I collaborate with my colleagues to deliver balanced, responsive reading instruction while promoting the joy of reading is my goal. However, there are aspects of this goal I did not consider during this process and I think they could be important next steps. These possibilities for next steps were suggested by colleagues and deserve contemplation: developing a vision, implementing a home reading program and recruiting the wider community.

**Developing a vision.** I think it is important that as the team of primary teachers at our school we develop a common vision. We need to be clear about, as one colleague said, “*What is it that we want for children, and how do we collectively work together to help them achieve that?*” Having an explicit, common vision about what we are trying to accomplish in the area of primary literacy learning will help everyone involved keep our focus on the goal. When there are areas of disagreement the common vision will help guide us in our collaboration. The more specific we are about what we hope to accomplish the easier it will be to communicate with

students, parents and other colleagues. I plan to suggest to my colleagues that this is an essential step in our planning for next year.

**Home reading.** Another idea suggested by a colleague as important for improving student literacy learning is to have a home reading program. When I first read this suggestion I thought it was a good idea. Then I started thinking about a number of issues and experiences I encountered in the past with home reading programs. These were issues related to parent involvement, accountability and program management. Regardless of what I might see as potential problems with having a home reading program I think it is important for our primary team (and maybe the whole school teaching team) to discuss whether or not we want to have a home reading program and, if so, what that would look like. If we decide not to do it maybe there are other ways of accomplishing the same goal of getting children to read outside of class time. This will be a good collaborative opportunity.

**Recruiting the Wider Community.** Most of the work I did this year involved the three other primary teachers, myself and, of course, our students. One of my colleagues suggested that we create “*more “family-like” literacy opportunities such as Relax and Read, Couch time, involving community programs like the public library and literacy center*”. This suggestion captured my imagination in thinking about the great resource we have in our community to help our students with their reading...the people. We have made a start by inviting community members from both Gold River and Tsaxana (the Mowachaht/ Muchalaht First Nations Reserve) to join us for Relax and Read and we are starting to get some involvement. It is exciting to think of other ways we might be able to use this resource too. I look forward to talking with my colleagues to see what other ways we can involve others.

It is yet unknown whether the non-enrolling role of Literacy Co-teacher will exist at our school next year. District budget constraints may mean that it doesn't. If that is the case then I

will return to being a classroom teacher. However, the lessons I have learned from this study still apply.

### **Conclusion**

In this study I set out to discover how my professional learning in reading instruction and teacher collaboration and my praxis as a Literacy Co-teacher will enable me to support student literacy learning, especially ensuring that they experience the joy and love of reading? The answer has come through an incredible and sometimes difficult process of learning about reading and learning about myself as a teacher and collaborator. All of this new information has led me to the following conclusion; in order to support student literacy learning, especially ensuring that they experience the joy and love of reading, one must provide balanced, personalized reading instruction, invest in building relationships, be a servant leader and promote joy. Each facet is a cornerstone for student success in literacy.

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