

12-1-2000

"Why We Do This Is Important": An Inner- City Girl's Attitudes Toward Reading and Writing in the Classroom

Carol Leroy Ph.D.
University of Alberta

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons



Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Leroy, C. (2000). "Why We Do This Is Important": An Inner- City Girl's Attitudes Toward Reading and Writing in the Classroom. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 41 (2). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol41/iss2/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



“Why We Do This Is Important”: An Inner-City Girl’s Attitudes Toward Reading and Writing in the Classroom

Carol Leroy, Ph.D.
University of Alberta

ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explored an inner-city girl’s views on school-based literacy activities in relation to several factors identified in the literature as important to children’s attitudes toward reading and writing. They include: intrinsic satisfaction the child gains from the activities, the child’s beliefs about the importance of schooling, and her relationship with her teacher. The author/researcher’s purpose was to further understanding about ways to enhance children’s attitudes toward reading and writing.

Generally speaking, young children arrive at their first grade of school eager to read and write, but their attitudes grow increasingly negative from first through sixth grade (e.g., Kush & Watkins, 1996; Ley, Schaer, & Dismukes, 1994; McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995). This change in attitude is a source of concern for two reasons. First, children with negative attitudes toward literacy are less likely to engage in reading and writing and thus are less likely to develop strong abilities in these areas. Second, even though some children develop good literacy abilities in spite of spending relatively little time reading, if they view reading negatively they will not engage in it frequently and thus will not make use of the opportunities for lifelong learning that regular reading affords (Baker & Wigfield, 1999). In order to know how to improve children’s attitudes toward the literacy learning activities in their

classrooms, it is important first to gain an in-depth understanding of what these attitudes entail.

The following study attempted to explore multiple facets of a fifth grade inner-city child's reading and writing attitudes in relation to several factors that have been identified in the literature as important to children's willingness to engage in school-based literacy. These include the intrinsic satisfaction the child gains from reading (Gambrell & Marinak, 1997), the teaching strategies and materials used in the classroom (Barnett & Irwin, 1994; Guthrie, Schafer, Wang, & Afflerbach, 1991), the child's relationship with the teacher (Au & Mason, 1981; Erickson, 1993), and the child's beliefs about the role played by schooling in her future success in life (Labov, 1983; Ogbu, 1993; Willis, 1978). The study is important because in spite of extensive previous research on each of these factors, many controversies remain with respect to their relative importance and the nature of the relationships between them. A case study approach can be useful in this regard because the inquiry is open ended, it accommodates multiple and diverse aspects of a phenomenon, and it lends itself to a focus on the participant's perspective within a specific concrete context (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1994).

Cathy's case is what Stake (1994) called an instrumental case within an intrinsic case study of her classroom. The larger study is termed intrinsic because it was driven by the classic open-ended question, "What is going on here?" I conducted this study in a fifth grade classroom in the inner city of a mid-sized Western city. The conditions in the surrounding neighborhood were similar to those described by Maynes (1990) as characterizing urban poor environments: a median income that was far below the national poverty line, a high crime rate, a high rate of transience, and a prevalence of open drug and alcohol abuse, as well as street prostitution. There were 24 children in the fifth grade classroom. Six of them had been formally identified as having special needs, three had been victims of documented sexual abuse, and two were formally identified as having a behavior disorder. Data were collected through classroom observations and interviews with the children and their teacher. Observations of the language arts period were made twice weekly over a period of six months. Four interviews were held

individually with each child, usually for one hour at a time, and were scheduled at regular intervals over the six-month period. The interviews were informal and open ended, focusing first on the children's perspectives on the work they did on a daily basis in the classroom and then on other aspects of life inside and outside of the classroom. Informal interviews were also held on a regular basis with the teacher. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

Data analysis was carried out in accordance with procedures commonly used in qualitative research. The transcripts and fieldnotes were analyzed for recurring patterns, which then formed the basis for identifying the themes. This procedure was carried out while data collection was in progress so that questions arising from the preliminary analysis could guide further observations and interviews. In Cathy's case, research questions about her attitudes toward school-based literacy activities arose from observations that she often seemed to be avoiding them even though she sometimes appeared to enjoy reading and writing. According to her teacher, this avoidance led to a marked difference between her performance and her actual ability and was due to simple "laziness." From a research perspective, it seemed that exploring Cathy's literacy attitudes further would shed light on how a complex set of factors come together either to promote or to impede a child's involvement in reading and writing at school. Because Cathy's case was driven by specific research questions, it is considered instrumental (Stake, 1994).

Results

Background Information

Cathy was a Euro-Canadian girl of Dutch and German ancestry. Her parents had divorced when she was four years old. After the divorce she moved with her mother and older brother from a working-class neighborhood to an inner-city location which she described as "the worst place in the world to live." Her mother subsequently remarried, and Cathy was then living with her mother, stepfather, and older brother in a neighborhood not far from the school where the study was conducted. She stayed with her father and his parents every second weekend. Cathy

saw her parents as more supportive and stricter than those of many other children who lived in her neighborhood. As an example, she referred to a time when she and her parents were in a fast-food restaurant watching girls her age who were misbehaving. She quoted her stepfather saying, "Cathy, if you ever act like that in public, I'll whip your butt so hard that you won't even know what hit you." She laughed when she recounted her reply: an emphatic, "Don't worry! I won't!"

Cathy had attended her current school since third grade. Data from the observations and interviews with her teacher and classmates indicated that she was well liked because she was bright, funny, and generally easy going. On one occasion, while she and a friend were quarrelling in the classroom, a classmate seated made rude comments and urged them to escalate their insults. When the teacher caught the boy and disciplined him, Cathy quipped that his crime was "interfering with our right to fight." Her joke diffused the tension and resulted in laughter all around.

Views on Schooling and the Future

Cathy made several spontaneous comments about the importance of schooling during the interviews. When asked about the schoolwork the children did in the morning, she talked about arithmetic and said that it was important for getting a job. She then added, "My mom does math at work all day." Another time, when we talked about her home life, she said that her parents often helped her with homework and were sometimes annoyed with the quality of her efforts, such as when her mother said, "Oh, you're never going to get a job with spelling like this!" From Cathy's perspective, the importance of schooling was closely related to a work ethic that she viewed as essential for advancement. This was evident in the following response to a question about why some people are poor:

Well, some people, they don't feel like earning their money. They just sit back and let everyone else do it. And they're poor. They don't know how to do anything. They, like, they don't want to work for their money. But other people, they work for their money, and they get it. They try and try and try, and even at

their baddest stages they keep on working. They keep on trying and still--so they get their money. So I think that's what makes the difference.

Cathy's accounts of conversations with her parents indicate the source of her strength in the preceding belief. Her mother had dropped out of college, neither her father nor her stepfather had completed high school, and her stepfather had struggled to enter college so that he could learn a trade. Cathy related several anecdotes regarding the problems all three parents had encountered in the workplace: being laid off, having to "beg" for employment, working night shifts, doing unpleasant and filthy labor, working in demeaning conditions, and being harassed by the employer. On one occasion she told me of seeing her father cry when the only work he could find was at a fast-food counter. She used a metaphor of "going up the steps" to describe her future completion of high school, college, and then university. She linked this progression very specifically to her parents' goal for her to escape the problems they themselves had faced: "They want me to go to university, 'cause college is one step lower than university. That's what they say." Although she thought the process of completing higher levels of education through university was "gonna kill me," she believed it to be essential for a "good life" and explained what this meant:

A good life is where you have no problems, which is hardly ever. But you have hardly ever problems. You go to work regularly. . . . A good life is where you can choose your opportunities. I mean some people, they can't. They're just stuck with one opportunity 'cause they don't have a good education.

Relationship With the Teacher

Cathy received very little attention from Mrs. T. during whole-class lessons and discussions. She appeared to be actively interested in everything her teacher said and would occasionally raise her hand to ask a question or give an answer but was usually ignored. Whenever this happened, she would simply lower her hand and continue listening. A similar pattern was evident when the children were engaged in independent work, making the classroom a hive of activity with many of

the children vying for the teacher's attention. Cathy rarely approached the teacher, was often ignored when she did so, and never showed overt signs of disappointment or anger as a result. When I asked her if this lack of attention bothered her, she stated that Mrs. T. gave attention to "the ones that need it," such as the children with special needs or with poor attendance. She also said that in her allocation of attention the teacher treated the children "very fairly." To support this idea she quoted her teacher as saying, "Being fair is not giving everyone the same things. Being fair is giving everyone what they need."

Indeed, throughout the study Cathy consistently referred to her teacher favorably, describing her as "nice," "fair," "understanding," and "the best teacher I've had, actually." She said she started forming these opinions in September, when she used her journal to tell her teacher that her parents were divorced. The teacher subsequently took Cathy aside privately and told her that her own parents had also been divorced. Cathy expressed regret to me that she was not able to talk to Mrs. T. as much as she would like to. However, she was confident that she could get her teacher's attention if it was necessary. She said that whenever she wanted to have a talk with Mrs. T., she would watch carefully and approach her only "if she's smiling and if she's happy." Cathy also said that when she needed advice about a serious matter, she would wait until there were no other children around and say, "Mrs. T.," in a "serious, kind of quiet, lonely voice." One day, after the teacher lost her temper with the whole class, Cathy spoke about her in a forgiving manner: "No big deal. I mean, she was sorry. . . . I know that teachers lose it. I know that happens...Mrs. T. needs a holiday, I can tell." For the most part, she felt that she and her classmates were responsible for the teacher's moods, because "we're a bad class. We're always doing bad things." In other words, Cathy's attitude toward her teacher was extremely positive.

Between Cathy and Mrs. T. there seemed to be a tacit agreement that if Cathy met minimal requirements for work completion and if she did not cause problems with classroom management, then she could have more freedom than was otherwise allowed. Thus, when Cathy was supposed to be working on individual reading and writing assignments, she often stopped to gossip, joke around, watch others, or daydream. She was always very quiet when she was off task. When the teacher's

attention was drawn to her part of the room, often because of a loud remark made by another child in the vicinity, Cathy would quickly cast her eyes down at her work as if she had been engaged in it all along. The teacher frequently overlooked the fact that Cathy had not been working, but when she did check her work and found it incomplete, she would scold Cathy, who would lower her head, looking shamefaced until the teacher seemed satisfied. Then the teacher would turn her attention to another child, and Cathy would return only briefly to her work before drifting off into another digression. Sometimes, however, the teacher would scold her loudly and threaten to contact her mother. This almost always resulted in Cathy's rushing to complete the reading and writing that had been assigned.

Reading and Writing

Reading Stories

Cathy told me that she enjoyed reading at home and in school and that she preferred stories that were "funny" or "mysterious." Her stated preference is consistent with prior research indicating that girls tend to prefer narrative over nonfiction (Cherland, 1994) and that humor and mystery, and adventure are the types of literature most commonly identified by children at this age level as being their reading interests (Fischer & Ayers, 1990). Cathy reported that her family and teachers influenced her choice of books. When explaining how she came to read Nancy Drew books, her current favorites, she said that she had complained to her father about being bored while staying at his house, so he took her upstairs and showed her his sister's old collection of Nancy Drew books. Cathy started to read one and liked it, so her mother bought her another Nancy Drew book for Christmas. She said that she enjoyed reading additional books in the series because "they're all connected." Another example was her selection of Go Jump in the Pool (Korman, 1979), which was one of the humorous books she liked: "It looked funny. And Mrs. T. was reading us all these Bruno and Boots books. And she was reading all those kinds of books and so I thought it would be neat to read another one."

Cathy's reading record indicated that she had read many books involving humor and/or mystery over the course of the term, including Bunnicula and The Celery Stalks at Midnight. When telling me about books that she liked, she frequently described them with words such as "hilarious," "hysterical," and "really funny." She also recounted humorous episodes from these books and sometimes giggled when she retold them. Overall, the tone of her accounts was consistent with her belief that the purpose of reading was "to have fun." When recounting mysteries she had read, Cathy indicated that she manipulated the reading process in order to maximize the sensations she got from it:

Like, you read one chapter. And then at the end of this one chapter she got a note in her car. It said, "The clock is ticking, Nancy Drew, but not for long. Time's up." I stopped reading right there 'cause I wanted the suspense.

Cathy's replies were invariably negative when I asked her whether particular stories reminded her of problems that occur in real life. She said that sometimes characters reminded her of herself or people she knew. But when asked to elaborate, she described only relatively superficial character traits rather than the ways that people encounter and deal with life's dilemmas. As an example, she said one character from a book reminded her of her friend Ashley because "she's so weird and made this boy laugh." She also noted that Nancy Drew's friend, Bess, was like her grandmother because "she likes to shop." Additionally, when I asked her whether she had ever read stories about divorce, which was a personal event with which she was still trying to cope, she replied:

No, I try to stay away from that because if I do read books like that, it'll make me cry and everything. And I get like that. It'll make me cry. So my mom told me not to read that kind of book.

Cathy almost always chose to read books which were more lighthearted and did not deal with the dilemmas and realities of everyday life. In the six months of the study, the one exception was her reading of I Won't Let Them Hurt You (Barr, 1989) for her home reading program. In her response journal she wrote that the book was "about a babysitter that is babysitting a child that she thinks is being abused." She also stated

that it was “a great book” and that she “learned a lot about child abuse and what to do.” However, Cathy did not write about the book again; nor did she read another work of realistic fiction about a serious topic during the study. Although the teacher did not discourage the children from reading such books, she did not encourage them either.

Writing Responses to Reading

Following an increasingly common teaching practice (e.g., Bainbridge & Malicky, 1996), Cathy’s teacher had the children write regular “reactions” to the novels as they were being read. She introduced the children to the process by reading The Sign of the Beaver (Speare, 1994) aloud to the class and discussing questions with them, such as “What do you think will happen next? Why?” Later, she posted the questions around the room and told the students that they were responsible for selecting their own books from the ones available in the classroom. They were also given the task of writing entries in their journals at the end of every chapter and showing the entries to her regularly so that they could be checked.

Cathy’s written responses to her reading were comprised of brief summaries, short comments on the characters and the parts of the books that she liked, and some speculation on what would happen next. The general tone was conversational, as if she were writing personal letters to a friend. Sometimes her entries began with “Dear Mrs. T,” and ended with “Sincerely, Cathy.” When Mrs. T. felt that Cathy’s written reaction was adequate, she put a checkmark, a stamp of a happy face, or a sticker beside it. When she thought it was inadequate, she wrote reminders for Cathy to proofread and edit her work. She also made written comments, such as “You also need to tell me more detail about the story and your reactions to it,” and “Tell me about the characters. What are your impressions of the story so far? You need to read and respond more.” These comments were motivated by the teacher’s belief that her role was to encourage the students to develop their own responses independently.

For Cathy, however, the addition of a writing assignment to her novel reading transformed a pleasurable activity into one of meaningless work. She did not see that writing about what she had read might help her develop her own thoughts and feelings about it:

Cathy: I can never, you know, express my feelings. I just write down what I read.

Researcher: And she says that's not good enough?

Cathy: Yeah.

Researcher: Why would she ask you to do that?

Cathy: I think she just wants proof that you read it.

The requirement to write these responses inspired the only rebellion Cathy demonstrated over the six-month period. The rebellion occurred when the teacher implemented a reading program in which students had to read at home and write responses, much as they did for the novel study at school. Cathy complained to her teacher by writing the following passage in her journal:

Dear Mrs. T.,

I don't like the reading program that you have made up. Because not that I hate reading, its just that you have us reading all the time and we have a life too. Like, say I went out for supper and I was busy the rest of the week and I had to stay in [to complete the assignment]. I don't think its very fair.

The teacher read Cathy's complaint and subsequently met with her to remind her of the importance of reading for her future success in school and later in life. But in a follow-up interview, when Cathy was asked about her resistance, she indicated that the importance of reading was not the point:

[The novel study] was boring, and she makes another thing just like it for this home reading program. I mean, let us do what we want at home. That's what I think about this home reading program. It's just, like, when we go home, we can read if we want to, okay? Don't have to read [because] you say so, 'cause when we go home it's not her life; it's ours. She can't control it,

and that's what she's trying to do, control our life, 'cause I stay up almost all the night reading and trying to do that stupid report. All night. Since I got home I read, ate supper. I read, and then from 8:30 to 10:00, I was writing.

Further, in her explanation, Cathy pointed out that the writing requirement was inconsistent with the teacher's stated purpose for the home reading program, which was for the children to engage in recreational reading outside of school.

I hate [the home reading program]. . . . I can't read and write. I mean, if you read a book you have fun with it. You don't write. If you read a book and have to write all about it and write your feelings. And I just told you [earlier in the interview] I can't do that. . . . I read for recreation, not to write about it.

In the end, Cathy's teacher ceased arguing with her about the home reading program and started filling out a form to notify her mother of her daughter's refusal to do her homework. Cathy then tearfully pleaded with her to give her one more chance to complete the home reading program. She promised that if she were given the chance, she would live up to all the expectations for completing the assignment. Her teacher grudgingly agreed to let Cathy try again.

Reading for Information

As was noted previously, Cathy firmly believed that what she was learning in school was important for her job prospects later in life. Consequently, whenever she was asked about the specific purposes for which she had to read for information in her language arts class, she attempted to link what she was doing to the demands of the workplace. However, she tended to fall back on pat answers when trying to describe these links, possibly repeating what she had been told by others. When asked why the children in her classroom were required to read and write about dinosaurs, which was the theme around which most of the language arts instruction was oriented during the first part of the study, she replied:

Why we do this is important. If you don't know how to read you can't live, basically. Just can't. If I couldn't read, I'd be nowhere in life. You can't go anywhere if you can't read. Say you were a construction worker, okay? And you didn't know how to read, so you didn't read these danger signs. So you just walk into a pit and fall down. Others see the danger sign, so they walk away. And here you are knocked out in this pit 'cause you couldn't read.

In her classroom a collection of reading and writing activities was set up on cards and worksheets with a display of books on dinosaurs at the "Dinosaur Center" at the back of the room. The purpose of the activities was to build a variety of reading skills, such as finding the main idea in an expository passage. Cathy was rarely on task with the dinosaur activities and fell drastically behind with respect to the timeline the teacher established for completing them. When I asked her about this, she replied that the reading comprehension exercises were not only boring but also unproductive for her learning: "All you do was read and write. Read and write. It was easy. You had to read a card 'cause it had next to nothing on it. It just asks you questions and they were really easy questions."

Because she experienced the reading and writing as boring, Cathy simply did the minimum work necessary to satisfy her teacher and her parents. In a written response to a question about whether birds were related to dinosaurs, for example, she wrote, "I think birds did develop from reptiles because they are sort of the same thing."

Essentially, Cathy believed that there could be links between schooling, the possibilities for "a good life," and the demands of the classroom Dinosaur Center. However, this belief was not sufficient, or perhaps not specific enough, to engage her consistently and actively in those activities that she did not find immediately enjoyable. Even though the threat of sanctions served to get her on task, her work was carried out quickly and somewhat haphazardly, and as soon as one assignment was complete, she reverted to her avoidance tactics for the next.

Cathy's response to the next thematic unit, "Food," illustrates the importance of the immediate pleasure derived from reading. In contrast to the dinosaur activities, the Food Center was comprised completely of "authentic" articles on food that the teacher had collected over the years from a variety of children's and adults' magazines, which often contained accompanying instructions for hands-on activities. Cathy could relate to the topic of food quite easily and, at one point in the interviews, joked that her biggest complaint was that the readings "make me hungry." As well, she enjoyed the hands-on activities, which sparked her curiosity. In the following example, I asked her to describe her favorite reading activity at the Food Center and to explain what the purpose was. At the end of the response below, her voice rose noticeably when she told me about the origin of the word salt, suggesting that she was still fascinated by this discovery:

Cathy: Have to do this experiment [for the activity she was completing]. And have to put this water and salt in the water. And you have to put it by the window and let the water evaporate. And see what the crystals look like.

Researcher: What do you think of doing this kind of thing?

Cathy: It's kind of neat, but the water's not evaporating.

Researcher: Do you know Mrs. T's reasoning behind asking you to do those kinds of things?

Cathy: I think she just wants to learn more about it, and kind of become--like--kind of like she wants us to know all about it.

Researcher: All about what?

Cathy: Salt and stuff. Just in case we want to do that when we get older or something. If you work in a salt factory.

Researcher: Do you feel you're learning interesting things?

Cathy: [Excitedly] Yeah. Did you know celery is actually a Latin word for salt?

Creative Writing

Cathy found it much more motivating to write stories and poems in this classroom than to write responses to what she had read, in part because the teacher usually provided the whole class with formulas for the topics and/or genres for each writing assignment. Cathy said that having to work with the teacher's ideas sometimes made it more difficult to write. However, she preferred it when the teacher provided this guidance because "sometimes you feel lazy and you want someone to give you something like, kind of like, the answer." Additionally, there was always scope for each child to write about what was important to him or her within each formula. An example of this was the writing of the "name poem," in which the children wrote descriptions of themselves using words that began with each of the letters in their first names. Cathy enjoyed this activity and described it as "cool" because "you had to write about yourself." In a similar vein, in the following account of how she wrote a Halloween poem, Cathy indicated her awareness of the teacher's structure and of the openings she could take to draw on her personal experiences to make the writing her own:

Cathy: She told us to write this kind of poem, which is this kind [referring to the sample]. And we--it was Halloween so we could pick any kind of Halloween monster or anything we wanted and write about it. So I kind of thought of Frankenstein 'cause that's what my brother's being for Christmas [sic]. Well, actually he was Mr. Munster and I was Mrs. Munster.

Researcher: How did you make a poem like this?

Cathy: Actually, okay, you put two words that describe--you put one word. Title. You put two words that describe your title. Three words in kinda like a sentence, but describing the word. And then you write a sentence about it. And then put another word for the monster.

Researcher: That's a good poem.

Cathy: 'Cause, you know, his name is Victor Frankenstein.

The following is another example of how she synthesized ideas for writing. In this instance, the ideas were for a story she had to write to fit an assigned picture and title, "The Other Side of the Fence":

Cathy: The teacher gave us an opportunity for a couple [of different stories]. The fence was there, and there was something about a school. But I kind of put two of them together, the fence and the school one, 'cause mine was a school kind of thing behind the fence.

Researcher: Were you thinking of something from your life or from your story?

Cathy: Well, actually, I was kind of daydreaming while the teacher was talking. So I didn't have any ideas. So I was just daydreaming and then she said--and I was picturing in my mind a graveyard. I don't know why. And then I go, "Hey! That's it! That's what I'll do!" I was just daydreaming.

What also made this writing motivating for Cathy was the nature of the audience and the purpose of creative writing in this classroom. The reader-response journals were read only by the teacher and were graded, but stories and poems were always posted in the classroom or in the hallway to be read by other children. Cathy felt that the main purpose of this writing was to entertain her readers in the same way that professional authors entertained her. When she told me why she liked particular pieces she had written, she used the same criteria that she applied to the fiction she read. For example, she said that she liked one of her stories because "it's funny. It's hilarious. It's really good." A more specific example is from her description of why she liked her essay, "The Grossest Edible Sandwich":

The grossest edible sandwich. I put everything on it. Everything I could think of. Absolutely everything I could think of. All the

meat in the world and everything but--and so I named it The Grossest Edible Sandwich 'cause it had everything on it. That'd be kind of gross, wouldn't it? The grossest edible sandwich. Had mayonnaise, ham, mustard. Everything.

As with some of her reading, Cathy thought the purpose for her writing was recreational, as opposed to exploring the nature of human experiences. This was most evident when she criticized one of her own stories, a reworking of "Cinderella," because it did not have a problem in it. When asked to explain why characters in stories have problems, Cathy referred to the problem as being central to the entertainment value of the plot.

Cathy: 'Cause, like Little Red Riding Hood, Three Bears, you know. It's always something bad. If there's nothing bad, nothing happens.

Researcher: Can you say that again?

Cathy: Nothing happened. Everything's just--nobody's bad. It just seemed kind of weird.

Researcher: So if no one's bad, nothing ever really happens in a story?

Cathy: Not really. At least that's what I think.

Researcher: What could you do if you were writing that story again?

Cathy: I could make Cinderella bad and the three stepsisters good and the mom good [because] that's kind of weird.

Journal Writing

In addition to the creative writing assigned by the teacher on a frequent basis, the children were expected to write in their journals daily. Cathy's entries were like a series of disjointed friendly letters in which

she reported a variety of events and details about herself but did not explore any of them in depth. The following is her first entry of the school year:

My summer was great! Well, okay, there were some bad moments. First I went to my dad's house. You see my mom and dad are divorced. But anyway, I also went to my tuntu's house (it's Dutch for aunty's). She lives in Smithers. Oh, and a bad thing happened. My bunny died.

Later entries contained brief announcements of a variety of her activities outside of school, such as camping trips, a trip to another city with her family, and a sleepover. In response to these entries the teacher wrote comments such as "I'm glad you had fun," and usually asked for more detail about events that Cathy reported. For example, when Cathy wrote that her uncle had a birthday, the teacher asked, "Did you go to their place for a party?" When Cathy replied to this type of question, she gave a brief factual answer before writing a new entry. At no point did she use follow-up writing to elaborate on her experiences.

One day Mrs. T. told the children that if they could not think of what to write in their journals, they could write a wish. This is what Cathy wrote:

Dear Mrs. T.

I am going to tell you three wishes and why I want them. Number one wish, I want my dad to get remarried so that I can live with him instead of my mom. Number two wish, I wish Ashley was my sister 'cause Ashley's mom is nicer than my mom. Wish number three, I wish that my mom and dad were back together.

As usual, Mrs. T. responded in writing, asking for a detail, "When did your parents get divorced?" However, as discussed previously, she subsequently told Cathy that she understood how she felt because her own parents were divorced too. In new journal entries, Cathy explained that her parents had divorced when she was four. Then she added, "Dear Mrs. T. I love your class."

The rest of the journal continued with bits and pieces of personal news interspersed with the occasionally more serious message, such as the complaint about the home reading program. The journal was a way for Cathy to share some problems with her teacher. However, the expectation was that problems were best resolved through oral discussion and face-to-face interaction--not through writing:

Researcher: Some kids write about personal things in their journal. Sometimes you mention personal things [in yours], but you don't go on about it. Did you ever think of writing things down like that in your journal?

Cathy: I do, but I don't feel comfortable talking about it, like, writing it down. I feel like talking with a person. And looking at them. And talking like that. I just can't write down my feelings.

Researcher: Can you put into words how it feels different when you write it down?

Cathy: You just can't explain everything. I mean, I get into something. Get into it, you know? Like with my mom. Me and my mom talk about private things. We just go on for hours. It's just different when you write it down. You can't, you can't get it all, you know. 'Cause I don't want to. I'd mention it, but that's all.

Summary and Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore one girl's attitudes toward reading and writing in her inner-city classroom. As a qualitative case study, the inquiry was open ended, with particular attention given to how the girl's attitudes were embedded in her views of the reading and writing activities themselves, her beliefs about the value of schooling, and her relationship with her teacher. The following is a summary of the findings and a discussion of their implications for teaching.

With respect to intrinsic reasons for reading, I found that an important factor in Cathy's attitudes toward reading and writing was the

entertainment value of particular texts. She was most highly motivated to read books or other materials that evoked an element of surprise or novelty, as was seen in her preference for humor and mystery. The importance of novelty in reading was also apparent in the interest she showed in the reading associated with the food experiment and in her interest in learning interesting facts related to food. This finding is consistent with Fisher and Ayers' (1990) contention that "humor and excitement are an incentive to read" (p. 114). In Cathy's case, this applied to writing as well. She had very positive attitudes toward writing the short, imaginative stories and poems in which she could provide a twist to the plot, suspense, or, in the case of the Frankenstein poem, an image to entertain the reader.

The preceding purpose for reading and writing was consistent with the teacher's stated belief that literacy activities should be "fun" for children. It was also consistent with Cathy's more negative attitudes toward the response journal, in which she associated writing with accountability rather than with entertainment and with her disdain for the dinosaur activities, which she found uninteresting. This finding raises questions about the extent to which we can rely on entertainment to hold children's attention when the child does not sense deeper purposes for reading and writing, such as learning about the world and exploring the nature of one's experience. The sense of having learned something important could have been motivating for Cathy, as was indicated by her complaint that she was not learning anything from the dinosaur activities. As well, it seemed that she would have had a more positive attitude towards reading and writing if she had felt that she was engaged in authentic communication. This possibility is evident in the way she used her journal to open conversations with her teacher and the way she tentatively used reading as an opportunity to learn about issues such as child abuse. Cathy was eager to use oral language with her mother, her teacher, and me to learn and reflect on her experiences. When she did not experience this in her reading and writing, she became frustrated and was developing some negative attitudes as a result.

Another finding relates to the prior literature indicating that children's beliefs about the value of school for their futures may play a powerful role in supporting their motivation to participate in school-

based reading and writing, particularly when the children are from low socioeconomic or cultural minority backgrounds (Labov, 1983; Ogbu, 1993; Willis, 1978). Cathy was not only repeatedly reminded by her parents of the importance of schooling, but also seemed to have a vivid understanding of the kinds of problems that success in school might help to avert. Furthermore, her parents did not simply tell her about the importance of schooling, but also supported their beliefs in specific ways, such as by helping Cathy with her homework and providing discipline, which she understood to be in her interests, when she lapsed in her schoolwork.

If Cathy had not believed in the importance of schooling, the level of her participation in reading and writing might have been lower than what was observed in this study. However, it is important to note that this belief was not sufficient to ensure her ongoing involvement in school-based literacy activities. This is likely because she saw only vague connections between some of these activities and what she might do later in life. Perhaps if children are assisted to see specific connections between their school-based literacy and what people do in various jobs, their attitudes toward reading and writing will be more positive and their motivation stronger. If, for example, her teacher had related the dinosaur theme to the work of scientists, artists, museum directors, or even filmmakers, Cathy might have been able to see the significance of the topic in relation to a career. Alternatively, the teacher might also consider providing more explicit discussion with children with respect to how specific skills, such as recognizing the main idea in a piece of writing, are used in the workplace. Further research on children's beliefs about schooling would be necessary to discern whether it is this specificity that makes the difference between children who sustain their motivation for reading in the upper elementary years and those who do not.

The final finding is related to the literature which indicates that the child's relationship with the teacher may make a strong difference in the child's attitudes toward literacy events in the classroom. Drawing on Vygotskian theory, Erickson (1993) suggested that this is because all learning takes place in the zone of proximal development, where the child is unable to complete a task or solve a problem on his or her own

and thus is dependent on the support of others. Children who do not trust others, particularly their teacher, will be hesitant to enter this zone of uncertainty. Conversely, when children trust their teachers, they are more willing to take on the new challenges that are essential to learning. Cathy's case provides an example of a child who had a great deal of trust in her teacher. She was willing to share her personal problems with her, to seek her advice, and to comply with the rules of behavior the teacher set forth in the classroom. This relationship likely contributed to Cathy's positive attitudes toward school. Additionally, it was evident that the teacher had an influence on the books that Cathy chose to read and perhaps the enthusiasm with which she approached them.

The teacher-student relationship did not, however, seem to compensate for Cathy's experience of particular activities as boring or pointless. The teacher's influence was likely weaker than it could have been due to her lack of involvement with Cathy's reading and writing while it was in progress. As Vygotsky (1978) suggested, the process of scaffolding is a dynamic process in which one must always stay in tune with the child to provide assistance as necessary while the child is actively involved in a task. This does not mean that teachers need to engage in one-to-one teaching with all children. But they do need to arrange for social support in small-group and whole-class activities, as well as to interact with individuals during literacy events. As Cathy's case shows, interacting with the children before and after they do their reading and writing is insufficient for maintaining their active interest in it.

As case studies often do, this study served to illustrate the complexity of the phenomenon of concern; in this case, children's attitudes toward school-based reading and writing in the upper elementary grades. It is perhaps because of this complexity of children's attitudes that teachers find it so difficult to sustain their motivation. It seems that in order to address this problem, a multifaceted approach must be used. Providing choices for children enables them to choose these texts and activities they enjoy. Linking reading and writing to life goals outside of school will heighten their interest in literacy activities that are not otherwise gratifying. As well, teachers may need to become more aware of their potential influence on children--not just through the use of particular methods or resources, but also through the relationships they

establish with them. In Cathy's case, her teacher could respond in writing, rather than simply orally, to Cathy's communication about events in her life. She might also share her own responses to literature with Cathy and the other children and engage them in a more meaningful dialogue about what they read. This would extend the scaffolding process beyond introducing children to good books and providing structures for their writing. It would have involved scaffolding particular attitudes toward both reading and writing through enabling them to accommodate multiple and rich purposes for literacy.

Furthermore, educators and researchers need to consider that the "whole may be greater than the parts" when it comes to attitudes toward reading and writing. As discussed earlier in this paper, viewing literacy as "fun" may undermine the possibility that it can also be hard work. Alternatively, an overemphasis on the practical purposes for learning to read and write may undermine the message that reading and writing can be recreational. The point is not to isolate aspects of children's attitudes but to see how various aspects of those attitudes are in dynamic interaction. It is only when we broaden our vision in this regard that we can help children retain the excitement they bring when they start school.

REFERENCES

- Au, K.H., & Mason, J.M. (1981). Social organizational factors in learning to read: The balance of rights hypothesis. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 17(1), 115-152.
- Bainbridge, J.E. & Malicky, G. (1996). *Constructing meaning*. Nelson: Scarborough, ON
- Baker, L., & Wigfield, A. (1999). Dimensions of children's motivation for reading and their relations to reading activity and reading achievement. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 34(1), 452-477.
- Barr, L. (1989). *I won't let them hurt you*. Riverwood Press.
- Barnett, J.E. & Irwin, L. (1994). The effects of classroom activities on elementary students' reading attitudes. *Reading Improvement*, 31, 113-120.

- Bogdan, R.C., & Biklen, S.K. (1998). *Qualitative research in education: An introduction to theory and methods*. (3rd ed.). Needham Heights: MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Cherland, M. (1994, Fall). Untangling gender: Children, fiction, and useful theory. *Concepts & Themes*, 7(4), 253-264.
- Erickson, F. (1993). Transformation and school success: The politics and culture of educational achievement. In E. Jacob & C. Jordan (Eds.), *Minority education: Anthropological perspectives*. Norwood: Ablex Publishing Corp.
- Fisher, P.J., & Ayres, G. (1990). A comparison of the reading interests of children in England and the United States. *Reading Improvement*, 27(2), 111-115.
- Gambrell, L. B., & Marinak, B. (1997). Incentive and intrinsic motivation to read. In J. T. Guthrie & A. Wigfield (Eds.), *Reading engagement: Motivating readers through integrated instruction* (pp. 205-217). Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association.
- Guthrie, J.T., Schafer, W., Wang, Y.Y., & Afflerback, P. (1993). *Influences of instruction on the amount of reading: An empirical exploration of social, cognitive, and instructional indicators*. (National Reading Research Center Report No. 3). College Park, MD: University of Maryland.
- Korman, G. (1979). *Bruno and Boots: Go jump in the pool*. Toronto: Scholastic Book Services.
- Kush, J.C. & Watkins, M.W. Long-term stability of children's attitudes toward Reading. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 89 (5), 315-319.
- Labov, W. (1983). Competing value systems in inner-city schools. In P. Gilmore and A. Glatthorn (Eds.), *Ethnography and education*. Center for Applied Linguistics: Harcourt Brace Johanovich, Inc.
- Ley, T.C., Schaer, B.B., & Dismukes, B.W. (1994). Longitudinal study of the reading attitudes and behaviors of middle students. *Reading Psychology Quarterly*, 15, 11-38.
- Maynes, W.G. (1990). *The education of Edmonton's urban poor: A policy perspective*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Alberta, Edmonton.
- McKenna, M. C., Kear, D. J., & Ellsworth, R. A. (1995). Children's attitude toward reading: A national survey. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 30(4), 934-956.

- Merriam, S.B. (1998). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach* (2nd ed.). San Fransisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Ogbu, J. (1993). Frameworks: Variability in minority school education: A problem in search of an explanation. In E. Jacobs & C. Jordan (Eds.) *Minority education: Anthropological perspectives*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing.
- Speare, E.G. (1994). *The sign of the beaver*. Yearling Books.
- Stake, R.E. (1994). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. London, UK: Harvard University Press.
- Willis, L. S. (1978). *Learning to labour: How working-class kids get working-class jobs*. Westmead: Saxon House Teakfield Ltd.

Dr. Carol Leroy is an Assistant Professor at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.