The Power of the Word: Literacy in Middle School and High School

As children move from elementary school to middle or junior high schools and then to high school, what should be happening to their literacy learning? What should they be able to do by the time they graduate from high school? What should be happening in their schools and classrooms?

Becoming literate means tapping the power of words and stories: We want students to develop the skills to tell their own stories effectively to all kinds of audiences; we want them to find meaning in the stories that other people tell; we want them to learn to forge connections between their own stories and those told in other times, other places, and other cultures.

Connecting With Multiple Audiences

In most secondary English classes, only two people — the student and the teacher — ever see most of what each student writes. Many of the educators who have, over the last decade, called for reforms in the teaching of reading and writing want teachers to find ways to change this situation — to make sure that their students get as many opportunities as possible to share their writing with others and to hear what these other people make of it.

Broadening the audiences for students’ writing can serve several purposes. To begin with, it often stimulates hard work and new thinking: Many adolescents who will put forth only a perfunctory effort in order to please their teacher or raise their grade from a C to a B will work for hours to polish a project that they are presenting to classmates, schoolmates, or other adults.

But when school reformers like Lucy Calkins, Nancy Atwell, and Theodore Sizer recommend expanding audiences for students’ writing, they are not thinking only about ways to motivate hard work. They are focusing on the uses of literacy: Writing is, among other things, a tool for communicating with other people. When students in Cambridge, Massachusetts, write articles about the work they are doing as aides in elementary school classrooms (see “A Children’s Toy Can Be a Text”) for a newsletter distributed throughout the high school and community, they must think about what people they have never met know — and do not know — about the contexts in which they work.

In writing tasks like these, secondary students are experimenting with unfamiliar discourses, doing the hard intellectual work of imagining the perspective of an unknown reader in order to figure out what they can assume and what they must explain. When a tenth grader from Northport High School prepares to share what she has written about the ecosystem of a threatened wetland with members of the Leelanau Conservancy (see “Writing Well About Well Water”) she begins to learn about what counts as evidence in a public debate on land development.

Real literacy is about “reasoning within multiple discourses” and communicating with multiple audiences; students cannot learn the languages and customs of these other conversations if they write only for their teachers.

Thinking Hard about Hard Texts

Most comprehensive high schools try to expose students who appear to be headed for liberal arts colleges to at least a few difficult works of literature (often drawn from a “canon” that has come increasingly under fire because it leaves women and people of color virtually unrepresented). Studies of prevailing practice suggest, however, that few students in general and vocational classes are expected to read and discuss literary works with difficult vocabulary and complex sentence structure.

Yet all young people, if they are to participate on equal terms in a literary culture, need to learn to look for and think about the meanings of difficult texts. As we watch sixth graders at the Dewey Center for Urban Education in Detroit (“I Just Called It Teaching”) read and talk about an article from Harper’s Magazine, we see the multiple challenges that such a text can present to eleven-year-olds—who is Walt Whitman, for example, and what does he mean when he writes, “I dot on myself”? We see how a teacher finding ways to scaffold students’ efforts to make sense of a difficult work of non-fiction.

Halfway across the continent, Rob Riordan reads a poem from Edgar Lee Masters’ Spoon River Anthology with seventeen and eighteen-year-olds in the Cambridge-Lesley Careers in Education Program. The poem is in the idiom of another era and another cultural group—most of these students are people of color and many were born outside of the United States—and students find it puzzling. After one of their classmates talks about her reading of these lines, however, these juniors and seniors are intrigued. The poem becomes a touchstone, a way to connect with a new interpretation of their own lives and a new way to look at their potential impact on elementary school children.

None of the classes described in this issue of Changing Minds are designed only for “honors” students. All include some young people with special needs. All ask all these students to read and make sense of complex texts and support their efforts in a variety of ways.

Learning to Look for Alternate Perspectives

Every text—whether written or spoken—represents a particular perspective on reality; none of these perspectives ought to be held above question. Yet this point is by no means obvious to children—who often startle their parents by reverently quoting television advertise-

ments as fact—or even teenagers. Indeed, most of today’s adults were taught in school to see the stories in their history textbooks as chronicles of objective fact. Recent debates over the meaning of Columbus’s historic voyage have vividly demonstrated that in a multicultural nation, different groups interpret particular events quite differently. In “Points of View,” Laura Schiller of Birney Middle School in Southfield describes some of the ways in which she encouraged boys and girls in her culturally diverse sixth grade to look for alternate perspectives on events and issues.

Classrooms where students work together to make sense of literature offer daily lessons on point of view. Students in Beth Lawrence’s Contemporary Literature course (“It’s About a Tick, But, Then, It’s About Something More Than a Tick”), as they work in groups on an interpretation of the metaphor of the tick, must take account of their classmates’ ideas even when they disagree with them. When Lawrence asks the boys in the class to listen silently while the girls talk about “the ticks that burrow andloat for young women in the nineties” she focuses explicit attention on the issue of perspective: The girls and the boys in the class view the “ticks” of their culture from very different angles.

Time Runs Out

A sense of urgency impels most teachers much of the time. The pressure intensifies for high school teachers whose students do not expect to go to college. High school may be a last chance for students enrolled in vocational education programs to participate in a community of learners focused on literacy, a last chance to think with friends and sensitive adults about difficult texts. Only a limited number of young adults will find this sort of social circle outside of school.

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And so it is especially important that we create opportunities for young people—and especially those with limited hopes for the future—to find their voices as writers, to experience the power and pleasure of making sense of difficult texts, to learn to read critically and to search for alternative perspectives on public and private issues, and to use writing and talk as tools for sense making. Such opportunities exist in the classrooms described in this issue of Changing Minds, but because of the vastly constraining circumstances under which high school teachers and their students work, it is hard to see how they could exist in most high school classrooms.

Ted Sizer and members of the Coalition for Essential Schools argue that the teacher who attempts to challenge and respond to 130 students in five English classes each day—a typical load—faces a nearly impossible challenge. As Sizer points out, the teacher who assigns writing to all of her classes every week and undertakes to spend even five minutes responding to each student condemns herself to more than ten hours a week of such work—on top of five full days of teaching, committee work, lunch duty, class preparation, and the like. Teachers and administrators in Coalition schools try to find ways to create units that are smaller and more personal than most comprehensive high schools (see "A Curious Party") and to combine subjects so that teachers meet with no more than 80 students a week.

**Literate Communities**

If young people are to learn to tell their stories, teachers must have time to listen. They must be able to create communities in which students can know one another and be known. Laura Schiller ("We Hit Pay Dirt!") talks very concretely about the connection between community and literacy in her middle school classroom:

I really think that what goes on in the classroom in terms of community and in terms of interpersonal relations sets the stage for any kind of literacy. If you haven't got that community in place, you won't have literacy. You'll have something else and it's not going to be pleasant.

We have it now. I brought a new book in the other day and I showed it to the students and asked, "Now, who do you think this is going to be for?" And they all shouted, "Michael!" Because everyone knows what he likes to read. It's that little recognition that others know a little about you as a person. Kids often refer back to things that others have written. They say, "So and so, when I heard that, it reminded me of what you wrote before." Kids feel very connected to one another.

**Teachers Need Communities, Too**

Just as students need a range of social and intellectual supports as they struggle to extend their mastery over written texts, teachers want many different kinds of help as they work on new approaches to literacy teaching. The National Writing Project tries to create supportive communities of teachers in summer institutes around the country—one of which Michael Michell describes in "Teachers Teaching Teachers." In such groups teachers write, read, and talk about the teaching of writing, working simultaneously on their own writing and on the craft of teaching writing.

To experience the power of your own words in such a setting, and to re-imagine yourself as a writer and a teacher can be magical. Excited by the work she had done in the Oakland Writing Project in the summer of 1992, Laura Schiller and colleagues in Southfield last year started a support group for teachers in Southfield who wanted to explore new approaches to the teaching of literacy. The group invited poet Laura Roop to become their teacher; this fall the teachers and Roop will create a course that will explore some of the questions the teachers are now asking.

When teachers re-imagine classrooms and literacy, when they discover their own power as writers and readers, they raise many more questions than they answer. More questions than anyone can answer alone. For this reason, our best hopes of powerful literacy for all students lie in communities of teachers who address these questions together.
Two minutes after Nina Moore has declared Current Events over, a thin boy wearing a purple and black sweatshirt approaches the visitor to his classroom and introduces himself: "I'm James. This is a story I've been working on for a long time." He hands her a thick sheaf of paper. "Would you like to read it? It's six chapters." He opens to the table of contents:

**Hell Fire**

Chapter 1......... The Psycho, He's Back
Chapter 2......... Death Trap
Chapter 3......... Hell on Vacation
Chapter 4......... The Revenge
Chapter 5......... Chaos in the Amazon

"See, the characters shift here, at the beginning of the fourth chapter." James flips to page 47. "Since the Hell Fire Crystal was in London, Iron Man and Rico moved to Europe after Regina was buried..." He looks up, "The psycho finally gets Iron Man here, and then his son Rico has to get revenge."

After noting that Stephen King is his favorite author, James, an eighth grader at the Dewey Center for Urban Education in Detroit, returns to the round table in the center of the room to revise his final chapter. Meanwhile, at a table by the window, Moore confiscates five bottles of nail polish from Lucenne, pointing out good humorously, "You know that if I won't let you chew gum, I'm not going to let you do your nails."

"When will I get them back?" Lucenne asks.

"On June 23," Moore grins.

"June 23?" The manicurist appears outraged, but after a rather perfunctory protest she opens her notebook and begins work on the third chapter of a novel about what happens in the Roadhouse Cafe in Tennessee after several patrons eat fruit previously inhabited by radioactive worms from Chernobyl.

As the visitor settles down with Lucenne's first chapter, James returns to check her reaction to *Hell Fire* and to show her Lisa's *Mystery Romance* and Leroy's *High School Football II*. "She's a good writer, too," adds James, nodding towards a girl who has been bent over the computer for the last 20 minutes. The works of fiction that James has collected for the visitor's perusal are all neatly handwritten but the "I-Searches" on which many are now at work must ultimately be typed.

**What is 'Gestation'?**

At a small table near the computer, Aleia reads her report on dolphins aloud to her teacher.

"If someone asked you, 'What is gestation? what would you say?" Moore interrupts to ask.

"Why would anyone ask that?" Aleia giggles.

"Well, I'm asking," Moore points out.

"Well, it's when the baby is developing inside the mother."

"Oh, what's happening?" Moore persists.

"Well, the brain is developing, and the heart is pumping blood."

"Are those the only organs?"

"No, but they are the main ones," Aleia responds with an enormous grin.

A list of different kinds of dolphins follows the paragraph on gestation. Moore urges Aleia to include pictures of some of the varieties she has mentioned.

"I can do that," replies the girl confidently, making a note in the margin of the draft they are editing. Red pen held aloft, she continues, "They can stay under water for seven minutes; humans can stay under for one minute..."

Across from James, at a round table in the center of the room, Lisa, the author of *Mystery Romance* is highlighting passages in her essay on Malcolm X. Several weeks ago, three of the eighth grade girls asked their teacher to organize a class program about the African-American leader. Telling them that she was too busy to take this on, Moore urged the girls to write a proposal for a school assembly and submit it to Ms. Parker, the principal. Ms. Parker helped the group to set a date and time; the girls recruited assistance from four classmates and began to plan the event. One of the eighth graders will read the highlighted portions of Lisa's essay as part of the introduction.

Lucenne, her nails apparently forgotten, is editing Crystal's report on Frederick Douglass: "In here it says he was handicapped. Was he handicapped by having been a slave, or was he actually physically handicapped?" When a student at the next table giggles, Moore looks up from the dolphin report to warn, "No comments."

Finding that Crystal cannot answer Lucenne's question, Moore suggests that she may need to do more research. "It's good that she asked that question — she's not giving you a hard time."

Crystal looks skeptical, so Moore revises, "Well, she is giving you a hard time, but she is also helping you." Lucenne, Crystal, and Moore all grin. Moore hands Crystal's draft back to Lucenne, who raises a question about spelling. Before
marking the offending word with her red pen she asks, "Is this a rough draft?" Getting no answer she comments conciliatingly, "It is a very neatly written paper."

"When she is finished," Moore reminds Crystal, "you edit hers."

"Revenge!" comments the eavesdropper at the next table, sotto voce.

"Yes, revenge," chuckles Moore. "But you are also helping her." She asks Lucenne whether she has any other questions for Crystal.

Encyclopedias and Rubber Cement

A crash from the round table obliterates Lucenne’s response. Moore calmly inspect the broken glue bottle and print material — a kids version of Money Magazine, a dictionary, volume 1 of the World Book Encyclopedia, a manila folder labeled "Cuban-American Controversy," and a history text — now spread around James’s seat, and collects paper towels to place over the mess. "Let me," she waves James away from the ooze as he leans over to help. "I don’t want you to get cut on the glass. We’ll put paper over the spill; it’s rubber cement, so when it dries we can peel it off the floor." In less than two minutes the glass is gone, the glue is peeled in paper towels, and James is piling the books back on the table.

Leroy and Michael, meanwhile, are searching for Egypt. They find it relatively readily on the globe, but in the atlas it proves more elusive. "We are better off looking at Africa," Michael urges as Leroy searches the two-page map of the world.

"Oh, okay. This is Asia." Together they leaf through the enormous book, pausing at maps of east Africa and south Africa. Finally, on a map of the whole continent, they spot "The United Arab Republic (Egypt)," and then, on a larger scale one of the region they delightedly locate the Nile. "All right!" they exclaim together.

"Ladies and gentlemen," announces Ms. Moore, "it is nine minutes until lunch. We will need to get ready to go, so it is time for you to clean up your area."

Aleia, who is typing the next draft of her dolphin report on the computer, hits the save button. Lucenne tells Crystal, "He was handicapped by slavery because he could not do anything." Crystal writes this sentence neatly on her draft, reads it back to her editor, and gathers her papers into a folder with a satisfied flourish.

“When whole language came in,” Moore recalls, “I was anxious to learn more about it. I found that I was already doing some of it in my health classes, but I wasn’t calling it ‘whole language’!”

“I Just Called it Teaching”

Nina Moore went to school and college in Tennessee. In 1964 she came to Detroit with her husband and took a job as a teacher of health and physical education at Jefferson Junior High School. Boarded up and badly vandalized now, Jefferson lies across an abandoned playing field from the Dewey Center. Moore remembers it as a school with 2 swimming pools, shops, and a host of other programs.

In 1982, when the junior high closed, Moore and five other teachers transferred to the nearby Cozzens School which served kindergarten through eighth grade; here Moore taught P. E. two days a week and health for the other three.

Declining enrollment soon hit Cozzens as hard as it had hit Jefferson, however. In the late 1980s, noting that a school designed for 1000 children now enrolled only 200, the Detroit School Board announced plans to close the Cozzens School.

They reckoned without Hattie Montague, a grandmother whose children had once attended the K through 8 school and who was determined to keep it open for neighborhood children. Montague heard that a group of teachers from Burton International, one of the Detroit’s magnet schools, were looking for a place to start a “whole language” magnet school. Montague called a parent at Burton to check out the rumor and got the phone number of teacher Toby Curry. Many meetings and phone calls later, after a year of staff development, the Cozzens School became the Dewey Center for Urban Education. “Whole language was the salvation of this school,” says Moore. “It enrolled 200 in 1989. Now we have more than 500 students.”

Although Moore liked the proposal that Curry and her fellow teachers had written, she wasn’t familiar with the term whole language or the rhetoric behind it. “When whole language came in,” she recalls, “I was anxious to learn more about it. I found that I was already doing some of it in my health classes, but I wasn’t calling it ‘whole language’. I just called it teaching: I started where the kids were.”

Moore remembers that when she asked for guidance in reworking her teaching around a whole language philosophy, "They told me, 'Do what you’ve been doing, but do it in the areas of reading and social studies. You can have centers if you want, but don't separate things.'"

Moore now teaches English — reading, spelling, and literature — and civics. Textbooks are in the classroom as a resource — "If I make an editing mark on something they
have written, they are supposed to look it up in the English book" — but much of the curriculum comes from the students. Planning the assembly on Malcolm X took students to reference books and the autobiography, for example. When students approached her about creating an "African-American Wall of Fame" on the bulletin board outside the classroom, Moore asked them, "Okay, how does this relate to the theme of governing ourselves?" She applauded their ideas but told the students, "It's not enough to just draw a picture. You need to know something about the people." The interested students are now at work on essays and biographies.

"You'd have to be crazy to teach this way," smiles Moore. "I sit up every evening at home with mountains and mountains of papers. But I enjoy it. They are doing an anthology now, so I'm reading their creations. And the more I read, the more I do."

The anthology recently created an unforeseen opportunity to teach civics in the context of the students' interests, notes Moore:

The other day they wanted to amend something that the whole group had agreed to: They had voted on a name for the anthology but then many of them decided that it wasn't a good name. They wanted to change it. They came to me and asked how they could change it. I said, "Well, here's how it's done in politics: Write a petition and you circulate it and if you can get enough signatures you can revote."

The students followed these procedures and were able to get a name that they liked better.

About half of the students at the Dewey Center come from outside the neighborhood. Most of their families have chosen the school because they share its commitment to whole language, but at any particular time between 50 and 75 children living in shelters for the homeless are assigned to the school. The rest of the children come from the neighborhood, many from the large housing project on the other side of the highway. Social class diversity is considerable. Whether they come from the neighborhood, a shelter, or from the other side of the city, nearly all of the students are African-American.

In her own classroom, Moore sees a dramatic difference between children who have just transferred into Dewey from another school and those who have come up through the lower grades. She thinks of Laila, who arrived at Dewey a few months earlier: "She was completely at a loss — what do I do with all this freedom? Where are the rows of desks?"

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### Teachers Create Their Dream School

When Toby Curry, Assistant Principal at the Dewey Center, tells the school's story, she starts with the Task Force of parents, teachers, and administrators which, in the mid-1980s, examined the performance of Detroit's alternative schools of choice. Curry, then a teacher at one of these schools, served on the Task Force and describes its findings as "very positive": Compared to neighborhood schools, the schools of choice, which enrolled students who applied to them from across the city, had "good attendance, high achievement, and students and parents who wanted to be there."

Curry felt that the Task Force Report created momentum for change. One afternoon, when she was picking up her own daughters at the home of Linda Coleman, a friend who taught at another Detroit magnet school, Coleman said, "We should write a proposal to start a whole language school." Curry was electrified. "Yes!" she remembers saying, "Yes, that is exactly what we should do!"

Curry went home and contacted Deborah Goodman, who taught with her at Burton International and shared her commitment to whole language. Coleman, Curry, and Goodman recruited two other colleagues from their schools: meeting monthly in living rooms and kitchens, the five teachers put together a proposal which, Curry recalls, "described the school of our dreams." As they prepared to deliver it to the appropriate office, "Someone said, 'Oh, what shall we call it?' And right away I said, 'the Dewey Center!'" — after John Dewey. Everyone else said, 'Oh, right, who's going to let us call it that?' but that is the way we sent it in."

After turning the proposal in — they had to rewrite it first, of course, using the school system-approved format — the teachers learned that they would have to find a place for their dream school before they could proceed further. The problem seemed all but insurmountable: "We were full-time teachers and parents; when would we have time to shop for a school?"

Fortunately, however, word of the proposal found the ear of Hattie Montague, who saw immediately that this proposal might create a way to save Cozzens School from closing. Curry delivered the proposal to Montague — she remembers that gunfire erupted as she walked from her car to Montague's front door and that Montague reproved her sharply for being outside under these cir-
cumstances—and talked to the principal of Cozzens. A week later, forty parents came to a meeting to discuss the plan for a “Dewey Center” and voted unanimously to petition the School Board to make Cozzens the site of this whole language magnet school.

When the Board raised no objections, teachers and school staff made plans to proceed. During the next academic year the authors of the proposal continued to teach at Burton and Golightly, but they conducted eleven inservice workshops for the Cozzens School teachers to introduce them to whole language. In September, 1989, Curry, Coleman, Goodman, and their two colleagues transferred to Cozzens and the school became the Dewey Center for Urban Education. By September, 1993, the Center enrolled over 600 students and had two classes at each grade level (averaging nearly 35 students per class).

Scores of studies testify to the difficulty of altering schools in ways that matter and endure over time. Curry and her collaborators knew that the eleven inservices in whole language could only be a beginning. A State of Michigan Restructuring grant helped the school to pay for some of the staff development they needed to do and to find ways to structure ongoing faculty work to support change. Since 1989 the school has run summer conferences and hosted a national conference on whole language. A few teachers from Cozzens transferred to other schools, but most of the staff stayed on and most of these teachers now teach very differently from the way they were taught. Says Curry, “All the teachers now do less direct teaching and more coaching. All use cooperative groups. I’ve seen growth and change in everyone who has stayed.”

In the Sixth Grade

As Nina Moore’s students return to their classroom from lunch, the thirty-five sixth graders in Room 205 are working their way towards the end of an article that their teacher, Kevin LaPlante, has copied from the most recent issue of Harper’s Magazine. The article, “A Weight that Women Carry,” uses author Sallie Tisdale’s own experience to examine the cultural pressures on women to obsess about their weight. Its literal references and its effort to step outside of the dominant culture and look critically at the messages from a variety of mass media mark it as a text written for university-educated adults; it is surely not a piece that many eleven year olds would select for themselves. Nonetheless, those who read aloud do so with fluency and expression, and their classmates listen with apparent interest as Tisdale describes the way her feelings about human shapes have changed in recent months:

When I look, really look, at the people I see everyday on the street, I see a jungle of bodies, a community of women and men growing every which way like lush plants . . . . Lately, everyone’s body interests me, every body is desirable in some way. I see how muscles and skin shift with movement; I sense a cornucopia of flesh in the world . . .

I repeat with Walt Whitman, “I do not on myself . . . there is that lot of me, and all so luscious.”

LaPlante reminds his students that Whitman wrote “Captain, My Captain” and at least one sixth grader remembers that this poem is about Lincoln.

“When he says, ‘I do on myself, what does he mean?’ asks the teacher. No one is sure so LaPlante rereads the quote from Whitman, urging his students to pay close attention to the language.

After noting that “there is little medical evidence that says that if you weigh a lot you can’t be healthy,” LaPlante acknowledges Malcolm’s waving hand.

“She says her mother was smoking and she didn’t want to stop. But it’s better to be not smoking than to be dead in a casket.”

“That’s a good lead into the questions I want you to write about for homework,” comments LaPlante. He begins to dictate: “One: What is your definition of a beautiful person?”

“Do you have to describe the perfect person?” inquires Leroy.

“No.”

“Can we name someone?” wonders Jerome.

“No,” LaPlante answers emphatically, “leave names out. Two: Why does our culture consider ultra-thin to be beautiful? And don’t say that it doesn’t, because you can just pick up any magazine and look at the ads. And all the Oprahs and Roseannes are all talked about in terms of their weight.”

Christopher raises a question: “How come it’s only women who get talked about that way?”

“I don’t think it’s fair that it should be just women, not men,” Lacey interjects.

“Three,” continues LaPlante. “Find one passage in this essay that really disturbs you. Write it down. Tell exactly what bothers you about it. One passage. Maybe it’s like Malcolm, about the cancer. That caught my eye, too.” He pauses, giving the students a moment to write, before finishing up, “Four: Free for all.”

A girl waves her hand; she has a story to tell about weight. LaPlante urges students to include these experiences in Part 4 of their homework paper. “Be sure that when you write about this, you see both sides,” he cautions. “Don’t just say, ‘Oh, I love all people.’ Be honest. Because if you are honest you can at least begin to see more. It’s a tough issue. You can’t argue with what you are attracted to.”
“It’s About a Tick, But, Then, It’s About Something More Than a Tick”

by Michael Michell
Michigan State University

It is early May, nearly the end of Beth Lawrence’s semester-long course in the literature, film, art, culture, and society of the nineteen fifties, sixties, and seventies. Every year East Lansing High School students of all backgrounds and temperaments are drawn to this class—valedictorians, single mothers, football players, students with learning disabilities.

“Would you talk to me for a few minutes about what you know about ticks?” asks Beth Lawrence of the 26 juniors and seniors.

“They’re bugs.”

“They dig their heads under the skin and suck.”

“You need to burn them out.”

Lawrence acknowledges each response; occasionally she probes students’ prior knowledge with a question. “What happens when you don’t get them out?”

“Infec tion.”

“Lyme disease.”

“Has anyone had a first-hand experience with a tick?” A young woman vaguely remembers something that happened when she was a little girl in North Carolina. As she tells about having ticks pulled out of her hair, several voices drawl, “Oooooh.”

“How do ticks survive?” asks Lawrence.

“They’re parasites.”

“They live off other creatures.”

This five-minute discussion prepares students to read a short story—“Tick,” by Joyce Carol Oates—out loud together. After mentioning some other titles by the same author, Lawrence draws attention to the word “assignation,” which she has written on the board: “Tick” comes from an etymology bearing this name. Lawrence emphasizes that all the stories in the collection are about “assignations” of some sort.

“We’re going to read the story out loud together and then, in groups, we’ll see if we can figure out what it may really be about. It’s about a tick,” she pauses, dramatically, “but, then, it’s about something more than a tick.”

“I’m going to start. Who would like to volunteer to read?” Several students call out and Lawrence looks in their direction: “Don, you follow me. Tim, you follow Don. Then Morgan, then Jan. Anybody else?”

Taking a place among the students, Lawrence begins to read. “Tick” by Joyce Carol Oates. “She said, I can’t live with you under these conditions, and her husband said, But these are the conditions. And moved out . . . .” As she finishes the second paragraph, Don picks up the reading without any break in the flow.

In less than ten minutes, the reading of the four-page story is complete. Lawrence asks the class to break up into groups of four or five to discuss what the tick symbolizes. Each group should prepare to explain their theories to the rest of the class.

What Does Everyone Think?

Five students at a table near the window begin flipping through the pages of the story, reading out loud lines and passages they feel are significant. As they brainstorm possibilities, a boy begins to write down the ideas he is hearing: The husband. The baby. Problems. Conditions. Then, when Paul asks, “What does everyone think it is?” his groupmates began to look at the evidence for these conjectures.

Jane: You mean like what it represents? It has got to have something to do with the underlying problems with her husband. I mean otherwise they wouldn’t have had all that in the beginning.

Sherry: Like in the beginning where she said she can’t live like that?

Jane: “I can’t live with you under these conditions.”

Paul: “These are the conditions.”

Jane: The tick kind of represents her husband, what the conditions are.

Smiling, Lawrence pulls a chair up to this group’s table and asks, “What do you think?”

Jane: I’m not real certain if it represents her husband, but the problems with her husband, the issues that need to be dealt with, the reasons that he left—

Lawrence: What are the reasons you think he left?

Jim: The way she acts.

Paul: Hysterical.

Jim: She’s crazy.

The students grow more an-
“We found that ‘assignment’ is like an appointment, a rendezvous, or something assigned.”

mated. They turn to the story and their notes to provide illustrations.
Paul: She says something about having adolescent feelings.
Jane: But then why would she say, “I can’t live under these conditions” and he would say, “These are the conditions”? I mean there’s got to be, like, something.
Aaron: Strange story.
Lawrence: What are the conditions you think he set?
The students turn back to the story and start searching the lines, again brainstorming possibilities. Lawrence contributes an observation here and a question there. As she stands to leave, she asks if they are ready to present their theory. They tell her they have two theories they can share: The tick is the husband and the tick is the baby. Lawrence moves on to another group.
Sherry: Maybe it’s both. Maybe it’s her husband who wants to have a child and she’s scared to. And she’s scared of him, like her husband and the position he’s putting her in, maybe like the conditions she’s living in now.
Jane: See, that’s what I think the tick represents. I agree with you. I don’t think it’s any individual, I think it’s the number of problems that belong to —
Aaron: The tick represents a situation?
Paul: That’s our thesis then, the tick represents a situation?
Sherry: That’s what I put. Before I put “the tick represents her husband,” I put “the problems that she lives with, the conditions she’s put under.”

Debating Theories

After a few more minutes, Lawrence brings the groups together to discuss their theories.
Alice: We decided the tick represented her pregnancy and that it was the baby because it would be dependent on her and it involved her husband. . . . It was like a part of her and she couldn’t get rid of it. And we decided on that a lot because of the last lines. “She foresees a reconciliation, lovemaking both anguished and tender. She foresees starting a child. It’s time.”
Gloria: She accepts it, is what we’re saying. Her husband leaves, they get into a fight, maybe because she is pregnant, but he leaves and she is like, “What am I going to do, I’m, like, a single parent, I can’t go to the next door neighbor, are they, like, going to judge me?” Because this is, like, in the seventies when being a single parent wasn’t really accepted. And in this last part I think she has calmed down and she’s realizing, “I can do this.” You know, she’s saying that lovemaking is tender but it’s terrible. She’s really accepting it, so she’s ready to start a child.
Lawrence: Don, do you concur?
Don: You think she’s already pregnant?
Alice: We were just talking about that.
Gloria: Yeah.
Don: We had pretty much the same idea, but we thought she wasn’t already pregnant. Because at the beginning the husband can’t live under the conditions because, like, he wanted the child and then the tick symbolizes her anticipation of the conditions under which she would have to live or, like, conditions she would have to go through if she were to have a child. And then, at the end, like what you just read when she says, “lovemaking both anguished and tender” and then, “she foresees starting a child.”
Alice: That’s kind of what I thought, but they said in the story, “This is already with her.” Maybe she just wasn’t aware of it.
Gloria: Because, you know, the tick, how it’s already imbedded in her head, what do you think that would be?
Don: I just thought in anticipation of what’s going to happen.
Lawrence: Don, did your group spin that theory out any further? Do I hear you saying that the argument was about whether to have a child?
Don: Right, she didn’t want to endure, like, all the stuff she goes through with the tick. That’s like her fear, I suppose.
Lawrence: Okay, so she would have said, “I’m not sure I want a baby” or “I don’t want a baby now”? And he would have said, “If we’re going to stay together these are the conditions”?
Jack: What she said in the beginning, about the tick, I think that’s what she was fearing in the beginning — having a child. It would be a pain and she would have to carry it around for nine months. Her life in her eyes was such a mess that she didn’t want to have to worry about a kid. I think that’s what they were arguing about in the beginning, and then when he calls in the end she decided, after running around with the tick, she can’t get rid of it so she wants to, she finally decides to have a kid.
Lawrence: She wanted to or decided to, Jack? Which?
Jack: I think its finally decided. I think she feels that she has to. I don’t know if she still wants it. You know, the tick was a pain. She couldn’t get rid of it.
Lawrence: Betsy, Deena, John’s, and Aaron’s group looked up “Assignment,” the title of the collection of these studies by Joyce Carol Oates. Tell the class what you’ve discovered over there.
John: We found that “assignment” is like an appointment, a rendezvous, or something assigned.
Lawrence: How would that tie into the theories you are hearing — or the one you came up with?
Mike: We felt that the parallel between the tick and her husband
"She Can’t Get Rid of the Tick"

Lawrence: So the tick is a metaphor for this female-male relationship? This tick has an odd property that I see you have on your list. Does she understand at this point what has been happening to her?

John: I don’t think so.

Lawrence: What does the tick secrete?

Choral: Venom, anesthesia.

Lawrence: So you don’t feel it being imbedded?

John: She was kind of unaware of this happening.

Lawrence: [nodding] Blinded by love?

Don: Wait, if you guys see the tick as the relationship, what does the end represent when she says it’s time to start a child?

Mike: I think, like Karin was saying, if you take the tick out it’s going to leave some pieces in you. She just found that she can’t get rid of the tick, she can’t really totally get rid of her husband—she wants him back, she wants to start a new life with him.

Don: I don’t know.

Emmett: I think the tick did kind of stand for her husband, but I think she went about ending their relationship in a wrong way. Because they said in the manual you couldn’t just pick the tick out, that it would leave something there and it would cause infection. And she just got fed up and she went off on her husband, but that still left pieces of him in her. She kind of said she’s gotten through the worst of it and she’s happy alone but she really wasn’t. I guess he was still in her.

Lawrence: Any other variations on this?

Sherry: I think we felt that it represented both the child and the husband and the conditions that she’s under.

Lawrence: I think I hear two things here. You think Joyce Carol Oates is setting up a metaphor for something about the expectations that a woman will have children and play that role and that it’s like a tick that burrows into female consciousness, expectations that they will be mothers and bearers of children and that’s causing some problems here. The other thing I think I hear you saying is there may be another metaphor here about the role of males and females inside a relationship, about some sort of standard like “head of the household” that he’s setting. Is that what you’re saying to me: That there’s this male-female-gender collision about whose decision this is going to be? Sherry?

Sherry: I think what you’re saying about standards that are set for her, that’s also what it could represent. And, like, when the phone is ringing, she didn’t hear it and then she stops picking at the tick and then she hears the phone and then she accepts the standard: she says, “It’s time.”

"If you take the tick out it’s going to leave some pieces in you. She found that she can’t get rid of the tick, she can’t really totally get rid of her husband.”

Lawrence: “It’s time,” that she’s going to buy in? Written in the 1970s, does this say anything to you about where Oates is looking or how she saw the Women’s Movement?

Rochelle: Maybe Oates is frustrated.

Ticks of the Nineties

The conversation turns to a variety of issues facing women in the seventies: group support, divorce, being alone, being a single parent, social acceptance. After a few moments, Lawrence moves the discussion in a new direction. “What I’d like to do is have the males in the class stay absolutely silent for two minutes while the girls talk about the ‘ticks’ for being female in the 1990s? What are the assignations, the assignments, the expectations, or the ticks that burrow and blot for young women in the nineties?”

“Be good looking.” “Make-up.” “Exercise,” respond a chorus of teenage voices.

Gloria: It seems like people are so obsessed with weight. I think it’s more girls. I can’t blame that on guys. I think it’s just girls are so obsessed with looking skinny and perfect, to the point of being bulimic or anorexic. It just gets way out of hand. It’s kind of scary because everybody is trying so hard to look good and perfect.

Lawrence: What else are the ticks?

Sherry: To be as mother and to hold a job...to be able to do both and be able to handle it.

Lawrence: What else?

Marilyn: I think we’re expected to do well in school, better than guys. There’s so much pressure to succeed and be liberated and do what you want to do without being dependent upon anyone.

Sarah: I think sometimes parents put more pressure on the daughter to be good and perfect because with the guys they’ve always been known to go wild, but the girl
has to be this little perfect child. Even that song that little girls are “sugar and spice and everything nice,” it’s just like the stereotypical thing.

Lawrence: So you have to be pretty, and smart, and good, and brave. Anything else? Are the rules still different in the nineties for girls and boys?

Nods and voices around the room answer affirmatively.

Gloria: I don’t know if that bothers me, though. I mean, there are a lot of situations that either boys or girls could get into. There are some situations, like if I were out later, if I were out late driving around by myself —

Lawrence: [nodding] What does society assume if a girl is walking around downtown East Lansing at 4:00 a.m.?

"Prostitute."

"Whore."

"Drunk."

Lawrence: Is that a tick?

Sarah: I think your boyfriend expects you to be respectable. He doesn’t want a slut walking around without him at nighttime. It’s almost like you have to justify him everything you do.

Lawrence: With the big push on male responsibility, and AIDS, and sexuality, is the pressure now off girls?

Choral: [laughter] No.

Are There Equal Ticks for Men?

Lawrence: Can the girls stay real quiet for a moment. Do the males have a response? Do you feel sympathy for this, or is this old hat for you? Are there equal ticks for men that the girls should hear? Don.

Don: I don’t care whether I eat a twinkie or I eat something fattening. I hate — I mean, never mind.

Lawrence: You’re saying it gets tiresome when girls whine about their weight?

Don: Yeah.

Gloria: At the same time, is a very attractive body important to you?

Don: Sure.

Gloria: Do you know what I’m saying?

Don: Like for me myself I would be upset if I were fat, but I could care less if I eat something with 38 grams of fat.

Gloria: No, I mean the girl you’re with?

Don: Well, I don’t want to walk around with somebody that’s like —. Never mind.

Gloria: Do you know what I’m saying?

Don: I understand what you’re saying. Yeah, you’re right.

Reverse Discrimination

George: I think it’s even tougher now for white males. I mean now that colleges are looking for Blacks, females, I mean even just minorities now. It’s so much more tough now to get into school and to succeed with, like, all the equal opportunity laws now.

Lawrence: There’s a term for that. We’re seeing it a lot in the news now; you know. What it’s called is “reverse discrimination” and that’s what white males are talking about, that they are the underclass.

Paul: It sort of bothers me that you said that, George, because it seems like white males have had a lot of advantages in this world as opposed to women and Black people. And now all of a sudden, when we’re trying to reverse things a little bit, not necessarily against white males but to help out other people who have been oppressed, white males all of a sudden also want to be “the minority,” they also want to be “oppressed.” Do you know what I’m saying?

George: Yeah, but treated equally, not giving, one people —. I mean, I can understand why you’re saying that, but it’s not like, my generation has, like, been socially against —. Uh, what am I trying to say?

Paul: What they are doing is trying to even things out. How that affects the individual isn’t—

George: Everyone should be at the same level, but hire someone because they can do the job, not because of their skin color, or because they are a minority or something, or because they are female. You know?

Lawrence: Is that a major tick of your generation, how to deal with these issues? Most decidedly it is. Really interesting and important issue for all of you to think about and talk about.

The class hour is almost over. Lawrence is smiling as she gathers up books and papers. “They were really on today. They were engaged across the board. A lot of voices were heard. It’s hard sometimes to make room for the females to have a voice, and not silence the males who are usually more aggressive in discussions. This is always an important goal for me.”

Several weeks later Lawrence

“...I think sometimes parents put more pressure on the daughter to be good and perfect because with the guys they’ve always been known to go wild, but the girl has to be this little perfect child.”

had an opportunity to view a video tape and read a transcript of the lesson. “I feel a little uncomfortable with the part when I say to the class ‘I think I hear two things here.’ I was trying to have the whole class hear
“And now, when we’re trying to reverse things a little bit, not necessarily against white males but to help out other people who have been oppressed, white males also want to be ‘the minority,’ they also want to be ‘oppressed.’”

the recurring ideas that came up in groups and the class discussion. But Sherry caught me. She counters my summary with ‘I think what you’re saying . . . ’ Sherry carries the discussion to the next level. They don’t miss much.”

Teachers Teaching Teachers:
Red Cedar Writing Project 1993 Summer Institute

by Michael Michell
Michigan State University

Under a tree behind Brody Hall at Michigan State University sit Janet Swenson, a teacher at the Genesee Area Skill Center, and Robert Smith, a doctoral student at Michigan State University. Trilby Plants, who teaches at the middle school in Sherman, strides toward them, swinging a brown paper bag in one hand. For the past four weeks — since June 28, 1993 — Swenson, Smith, and Plants have been spending six and a half hours a day, four days a week reading, writing, and thinking about the teaching of writing. Along with 18 other teachers, they are participants in the Red Cedar Writing Project 1993 Summer Institute.

“I brought them,” Trilby announces smiling. From the grocery bag she pulls a child’s cotton dress and a pair of old velvet shoes that look like they could have been worn by Glenda in The Wizard of Oz. Hand sewn, they have a small heel and are the size a young girl would wear.

Janet and Robert carefully touch the dress spread out on the grass in front of them. “Oh look at them,” exclaims Janet. “I can’t believe it. After reading about these so many times.”

The slippers are a link to a past that Trilby has written much about this summer. She has shared with her writing group — which includes Janet and Robert — several drafts of a poem that tells the story behind the velvet shoes. Her final version, “Always Moving,” appears in the anthology which culminates the work of the writing groups and, for some, the institute itself.

Always Moving
by Trilby Miller Plants

In the Christmas package my mother sent, I found a tiny flannel dress and red shoes covered with tarnished sequins. The shoes evoked vague wishes of homecomings but because I lived in many places, I never could decide where I should wish myself. But I remembered my mother’s stories. Lost memories live in her words: countless graves in Arlington and fence-deep snow in Michigan and California orange groves frosted with first-time snow; the Bakersfield Earthquake and another in Montana. She recounts our family’s milestones and our tragedies with verbatim conversations.

And because of her stories I remember Tripoli in 1949: My mother on the balcony of the building where we lived. She shades her eyes against the fierce Mediterranean sun and crosses herself and gazes north toward where my father flies his C-47 into Berlin. Mocked by the empty cries of gulls,
she searches the brittle sea of sky, and says he'll call when he lands in Benghazi.

And I run to the door to go to the beach and play with the English children who taught me how to sing "God Save the Queen." On the way we walk in the shadow of a statue of Romulus and Remus suckled by a wolf: two little boys who guard a city bisected by a wall and a clash of cultures.

The wall is ancient, rough stones laid, my mother says, by Roman soldiers. And there on the wall a hanged man with hooded face swings in the ghibli that sweeps the Sahara's hot breath into town.

"Don't look," my mother says and pulls my hand. "It's not for us." And those we pass avert their eyes and no one looks. But I see ropes that bind his hands and feet and the dirty cloth that covers up his face.

In the marketplace the Arab shoemaker says the man was not a thief or the justice of Islam would only take a hand. I hang on his clumsy English. "Bushwa," he says and shrugs. "It's nothing."

My mother asks for the sandals for my Halloween costume. But he didn't understand that I was to be a poor Arab child of the streets. The shoes are camel hide and red velvet covered with shiny red sequins. "Only child of sheik has shoes," he says. "So I make them for such a girl." I wore the shoes and the shabby dress, with a shawl over my head like the little Arab girls.

When I was older, I never lived in one place long enough to make good friends. I always wished for someplace I could say was home. I know now that home is in my mother's history.

Memories of Nevada

The scene under the tree strikes me with particular force because it awakens memories of my own encounters with a similar writing group six summers earlier. In the summer of 1987 I had just finished my second year as a high school English and Social Studies teacher in Reno, Nevada. At the time I was working on an MA in English. I always felt that I got very little from my undergraduate work in education. I did my student teaching in Social Studies and I had no "special methods" courses in English, so I was doing everything I could to become a better teacher of this subject. That summer, an opportunity to participate in the Northern Nevada Writing Project 1987 Summer Institute opened up for me.

The five-week experience was intensive professionally, intellectually, and emotionally; it transformed me as an educator. This was the first genuine professional learning community I had ever been a part of. The readings and demonstrations instructed me in the practice and theory of an integrated approach to teaching literature and writing. For the first time I used journal writing as a learner, and learned from the experience to be reflective.

More powerful than anything else was the fact that I felt like a writer myself for the first time. The writing groups supported my own personal and professional writing, nurturing my ideas and informing my craft. In fact, the piece I wrote for our Institute anthology—a trilogy of poems about my father who died when I was 13 years old—was more valuable to me than anything I had ever written. I finally understood what Donald Murray meant by "a writer teaches writing" and I saw that writers thrive when working within a community of writers.

The National Writing Project

The Red Cedar Writing Project 1993 Summer Institute launched the pilot year of a National Writing Project (NWP) site at Michigan State University. In 1973 James Gray of the University of California Berkeley created the National Writing Project in order to disseminate new developments in the teaching of writing and to prepare elementary and secondary teachers to teach writing. Since then, more than a million teachers, administrators, parents, and students have participated in summer institutes affiliated with the NWP and based in 164 universities; these Project alumni have changed the way writing is taught in many America schools.

Each year, Writing Project Staff identify successful teachers of writing working at all levels—elementary school through university—and invite them to participate in intensive five-week Summer Institutes.

This was the first genuine professional learning community I had ever been a part of.
According to their literature, these Institutes have four purposes:

- to provide teachers with a setting in which they can demonstrate their own best teaching practices;
- to help teachers broaden and make more conscious the grounds of their teaching through an examination of writing theory and research;
- to give teachers of writing an opportunity to commit themselves intensely and reflectively to the process of writing as members of a community of writers and as reviewers of each others' written pieces in small editing/response groups;
- and, finally, to identify and prepare a corps of writing teachers (NWP Teacher-Consultants) who can effectively teach successful approaches and processes of teaching writing to other teachers.¹


A Day on the Red Cedar

On an ordinary day, teachers in the Red Cedar Writing Project drift into Brody Hall between 8:45 and 9:00 a.m., turn on the fans, open windows, get the coffee brewing, and share bits and pieces from the reading and writing they have done since the day before. Some participants must drive an hour from their homes each day. Three who live even further away stay on campus.

Around 9:15, the first morning demonstrations get underway. The demonstrations embody one of the National Writing Project's key philosophies: teachers teaching teachers. Participants develop a piece of curriculum they use in their classroom to demonstrate to the group as a "dry-run workshop." During the planning stage of the demonstration, participants are coached by the co-directors and others. Demonstrations are 90-minute presentations. Following each demonstration, participants write a letter providing praise and constructive feedback on how to improve the demonstration.

"How you respond to a demonstration depends on where your individual needs are," says Janet Swenson. To illustrate what she means, she identifies one of the high points of her summer. It was the time when Diann Ross told a story about one of her preschool students walking up to an author visiting Allen Street School and telling him, "I'm an author too."

Food seems to be an integral element of any successful staff development. The morning snack follows the first demonstration, with responsibility for providing sustenance rotating among participants. Although fruit and bagels were the staples of the snack table, several participants embraced this new opportunity for creativity and appeared with their own specialties—sun-dried tomato and provolone bread, rhubarb tea bread, homos bhanni... *The Red Cedar Writing Project Cookbook* was born.

Reading of the "Daily Log" follows the morning snack. Written collaboratively—a different pair of participants each day—the logs provide a record of the Institute and a forum for public sharing of work. Using a wide variety of forms—memos, songs, poems, drama, parodies, newspapers—the writers try to recreate the atmosphere of the day before and to present highlights of demonstrations, key ideas, and questions.

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**The Creation of a More Literate Society**

*From the Red Cedar Writing Project (with admiration for James Weldon Johnson)*

And the RCWP Fellows stepped out on space,  
And they looked around and said:  
We're lonely—  
Let's transact with the world.

And as far as their eyes could see  
Traditional assessment lacked reflection and student input.  
Blacker than a hundred midnights  
Down in a Red Cedar swamp.

Then one RCWP Fellow smiled  
And the light of portfolios broke  
And the voice was heard and not just expressed.  
And the RCWP Fellow said: "That's good."

Then the RCWP Fellow reached out  
And took the light of portfolios in her own hands.  
And shared with the other Fellows her own journey about reflection and assessment  
Through a rubric which smacked of Atwell.
And she spat the Word from Terry D. Johnson, et al.,
Evaluating Literacy, A Perspective for Change.
And flung it against the darkness of norm-referenced testing,
Spangling the night with likes and wishes.

Then down between the darkness and the light
She hurled portfolios
And all of the Fellows said, “That’s good!”

Then the RCWP Fellow, herself, stepped down
And the sun was on her right hand,
And the moon was on her left,
And another RCWP Fellow stepped up
With his version of the Word
As it came forth from camp.
And the Fellows listened and responded
And their response was in song.
And the RCWP Fellows said, “That’s good!”

Then a poetic Fellow came forth
Dressed in a wrapped headdress
And she caught their attention
With her words.
And she said: “Involve them in writing poetry!
Involve them in writing verse!”
And quicker than this Poet could say her words
The RCWP Fellows were involved
And were writing their own verse
In words as modern as the stuff of today
And as old as the hills.
And all the the RCWP Fellows said: “That’s good!”

Then, she walked among the Fellows
And looked at all her words had wrought.
She looked at their metaphors, their couplets,
She smiled at their parodies
And passed out colored pages akin to Joseph’s coat.
The Fellows talked and shared,
And the Poet knew that it was good
Because the word would go forth in September
To the classrooms of Michigan
And the Fellows said: “That’s good!”

And the RCWP Fellows breathed life into writing,
And writing became the WORD
And the WORD went forth throughout all of
the Land known as Michigan.
And it was GOOD!

Parody by Dianne Ross and Ellen Wilkerson,
RCWP Fellows

The second demonstration of the day follows the reading/performing of the daily log. In the third week Mark Shaheen, a third year teacher at Waverly High School, presented “Interviewing as Performance: A Multi-Media Approach to Gathering and Sharing ‘How it Was’ and ‘How it Is’.”

“As teachers we are natural interviewers. It’s our thirst for knowledge that makes us ask questions. We don’t intend to interview, but when we hear things we start to ask questions.” Mark begins by reading what he calls a “found interview.” It is a story about a young man Mark met at a volleyball tournament and calls John.

I first saw him staggering around, someone obviously younger than the crowd he was milling with . . . He was severely intoxicated and at one point began mumbling that he thought he was going to die. And that he was cold. In the 90 degree heat I heard this as a warning so I brought him some water . . .

John continued dry-heaving and said he couldn’t breathe. He said he needed to get back in Al-teen immediately. This was not good, he said, he was killing himself . . .

“The ‘found interview’ is one that there is no way to record at the time, and usually they are the most candid of stories.” Mark describes how he went about writing this found interview and how he introduces his students to the art form.

Mark flips on the stereo that he has set up on the front table and the sound of his recorded voice fills the room. He has interviewed himself on the question, Is it morally correct to rewrite found interviews? “I use media with my students a lot,” he explains as he turns off the machine. “They are media oriented.” Through the self-interview, Mark teaches high school students interviewing techniques and helps them get accus-
tuned to using a tape recorder and hearing their own voices replayed.

Returning to his first example, Mark explains that while he listened to John talk at the volleyball tournament, he kept hearing in his head the Pink Floyd song _Comfortably Numb_. Again he pushes "play" on the stereo; now Pink Floyd's music fills the air, joined by Mark reading more of the found interview text. The combination of music and text carries the listener to the moment on the beach where Mark is listening to John. This is interview as performance.

In the remaining hour, Mark demonstrates the use of video in self-interviews, interview-based documentaries, and student-construction performance of interviews. He then invites the Summer Institute participants to interview each other. Mark ends by performing a monologue he wrote for his students.

After the second morning demonstration, the teachers break for lunch. Often informal discussions and educational videos are scheduled for this hour.

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**Reading and Writing Groups**

Alternating afternoons are set aside for Reading Groups or Writing Groups. On the first day of the Institute, participants chose reading groups that reflected their research interests: writing across the curriculum, computers and writing, literature and reading, evaluation and assessment, portfolios, reflective practice, etc. In these groups they discussed and annotated books and articles and shared reading response logs. Later one of the organizers collected, duplicated, and distributed all the annotations.

In the writing groups members shared their work and helped one another with any piece they chose to share. Beth Lawrence, Mark Shaheen, Renetha Rumph, and Joann Helsley formed one group. Beth wrote several drafts of two very different pieces. She struggled with "The Waiting Room," a one-woman drama. "I can't make it go... I'm not letting her speak... she's caged in," says Beth. At the end of the Institute Beth decides not to submit "The Waiting Room" for the group anthology. It's not ready. She chooses instead "The Long Jump," which she has revised significantly and now considers more or less "finished".

They gravitate to the grassy area around the long runway to the sandy pit. In little lumps of like-colored uniforms they sit, chat and pull toes back to heels, stretch their necks, extend their legs and reach hands to toes and pull, gently. One, a girl with a foil's thin legs and knobby knees, moves more quickly than the others. Methodically, she marks her pace with the measuring tape, places a piece of white adhesive on the edge of the runway. The others, following her lead, pace and measure and mark... .

Watching the process, the planning, the interaction, the judging of one's own progress against the meet before, the ability to break, return, compete, and encourage in these weekly track meets has taught me more about teaching writing and running a classroom than any workshop or any how-to book.

(from _The Long Jump_ by Beth Morley Lawrence)

Most writing groups support and nurture. Individuals have different needs. Beth, a seasoned writer, would have liked harder hitting criticism of her work. One afternoon she chastises herself, "I haven't pushed myself enough with my writing this summer... I used to keep lists floor to ceiling of ideas I needed to develop. I need a group to push me." Sitting across the table from Beth was Mark. His experience was different. "I needed to be affirmed," he declares.

**Wednesday July 28**

The morning on which I watch Robert and Janet touch the artifacts of 19th-century university and the artifacts of the present. On the first day of the Institute's final week, a day set aside for celebrating five weeks of intensive work. At a large rectangular table in the Writing Center, four teachers assemble and bind _Literacy Flows_, the anthology of poems, essays, and stories that participants have selected from their working portfolios—one piece from each participant.

From another table Jeanette Nassif distributes T-shirts especially designed to commemorate the Summer Institute.

Diana Mitchell, Beth Lawrence, and Mark Shaheen rush off to check the space that the University Club has made available for the evening's celebratory dinner. They need to make sure there is room both for the pianist and for a skit where all the group has put together in order to help their guests to see and feel the life of the Summer Institute.

At two Macintosh computer stations three teachers polish their "professional pieces"—in addition
“We Hit Pay Dirt!”

“When I first came back after the summer, people said, ‘Oh, you’ve had this course. Share it with us.’ And you can’t.” Laura Schiller leans across a table in her sixth grade classroom, intent on describing how she felt as she returned to school after spending a month at the Oakland Writing Project. “You just can’t: There’s too much; you don’t even know how to begin. Not only that, you really don’t know it yet yourself.”

“I had just spent 200 hours in the most intense study of my life. I was staying up to 1:00 in the morning every night reading and writing. I practically abandoned my family. And I wasn’t doing it because I had to, I was doing it because I wanted to. I had never been like that: I had always been a good student, but I had never had an experience like that. How could I inservice anyone on this? It isn’t possible; you have to live it.”

Schiller, who teaches at Birney Middle School in Southfield, went to her superintendent, explained how much she had gotten from the Writing Project, and said that she was considering starting a support group for teachers in Southfield who were interested in whole language approaches to literacy. She wanted to get administrative backing for the group at the outset and to make sure that all teachers in the system felt included.

Having gotten her principal’s and superintendent’s blessing, she invited ten colleagues from elementary, middle, and high school — some of whom had been involved in summer writing projects — to meet and talk about whole language and what they might want to learn about it.

One thing I’ve learned: You must keep asking people, ‘What do you want to learn?’ It is such a valuable tool and we don’t often stop to think about that. We focus on what we as teachers feel we need to teach. That is one big thing I learned last summer.

The teachers brought with them a wide variety of experiences and questions — “What’s whole language? What’s reading-writing workshop? Who’s Nancy Atwell?”

“Literacy is the glue that holds it all together.”

What are you talking about?” — but all agreed on a next step: They wanted Laura Roop, a published poet and writer who runs the Oakland Writing Project, to come to Southfield to talk to them.

After finding a date when Roop could join them, the teachers spread the word through Southfield’s elementary, middle, and high schools; much to Schiller’s delight, more that 50 teachers representing almost all of Southfield’s schools attended this January meeting. Together they identified two needs: They wanted to be able to visit classrooms where they could see a “whole language” philosophy at work; they wanted Roop to create a version of the Oakland Writing Project in Southfield, during the school year.

Roop explained that she could not duplicate the full-immersion environment of the summer Writing Project while school was in session. She agreed, however, to work with the teachers to create a course that would pull together the efforts that the district has been making in school improvement and outcomes-based education. This goal meshes well with her vision: “Literacy is the
"It makes a tremendous difference when teachers are shaping the change. It's very exciting, the idea of teachers teaching each other, becoming learners."

The Social Component

When Schiller sits down to describe the ways her teaching and her thinking have changed since she participated in the Writing Project in the summer of 1992, she turns first to the role of talk in her classroom:

When I think of the amount of talking we do now, that is one of the big changes. I've learned to really buy into the idea that we need to build on the social aspect of school and let it work for us. The more we do that, the more the kids get out of it and the more they take responsibility for what they are learning. That has been a really big change for me.

I don't worry about Nintendo or TV taking time away from my kids, because I have something here they cannot match: I have the social component. If you get that to work for you, wonderful things can happen. I think that we kind of got off track when we were talking about time on task. We stopped realizing that there is a process in learning: It's talking; it's thinking about something; it's bringing it to what you already know and hearing other people's ideas; it's writing it. A lot of it is sharing with others and bouncing ideas off them and having them come back at you and say, 'But I thought of it this way,' and all of a sudden you think of it another way. And everyone grows together.

The "social component" plays a complex role in Schiller's teaching and thinking. To begin with, it attracts children to the classroom and can make classroom life wonderful and exciting for them.

But the social aspect of classroom life serves as curriculum as well as magnet. Because reading and writing are intimately and vitally connected to speaking, listening and thinking, the talk of the classroom can help to develop literacy. We see this back and forth between reading, writing, talking, and thinking in the research project Schiller's students undertook last winter.

In 1991-92, Schiller and a colleague who teaches at Southfield High School decided that they would bring their students together for a project sometime during the following year. In January 1993, they invited the seniors in the two Advanced Placement English Classes to help the sixth graders do research on social issues. The teenagers agreed readily; some later received high school service credit for their after-school work.

In order to introduce the idea that social problems can affect the lives of children of their age, the teachers read the sixth graders Fly Away Home, a story about a homeless boy and his father. The middle schoolers then brainstormed a list of compelling social issues ranging across AIDS, racism, child abuse, and homelessness. After each sixth grader had chosen three problems that particularly interested him, Schiller created groups to work together on particular topics and assigned each group a high school mentor. The twelfth graders accompanied the middle schoolers to the library (sometimes meeting them after school or during further work) and helped them to find books and articles on their topics and to construct bibliographies. And once the sixth graders had written their reports, the twelfth graders typed them. The sixth graders shared their completed research with all of their classmates.

What Shall we do to Help?

On a chilly morning in early March, Schiller invites the sixth graders to join her on the floor at the front of the classroom to talk about next steps. "Do you remember that we said at the beginning of this project that it isn't enough to identify a problem, that you needed to identify a social action to address the problem you have been studying? Today we are going to think about what actions you might take."

To launch the brainstorming session, Schiller tells the sixth graders about a step she has just taken: "I talked to someone at the radio station that is run out of the high school, and explained what you have been doing. He said he would be willing to broadcast public service announcements about some of the problems you have been studying."

The moment Schiller opens the floor for the sixth graders' ideas, a dozen hands fly up. Tanya suggests that you could do an interview with someone who has the problem you studied — "someone who has AIDS or someone who almost committed
suicide.” Steve talks about making a home video. Schiller explores each idea, asking how the student might proceed, whether this suggestion could be applied to the problem he personally has been studying.

“You could put it on a t-shirt,” Ari suggests, “and then have a raffle for the t-shirt.”

“And what would you put on the t-shirt?” probes Schiller.

“On the front side I’d put, ‘Did you know . . . ?’” Ari explains confidently, “and then on the back side I’d put the fact.”

“What is your topic, Ari?”

“Drugs.”

“So how would the t-shirt help people?”

“It would tell them not to take drugs.” His t-shirt raffle could work in two ways, Ari and Schiller decide: The raffle would draw attention to the problem and then, when the winner wears his (or her) prize, he will further broadcast the message.

Rena, who has studied child abuse, plans to create a pamphlet about the problem and leave copies in doctors offices and the counseling center. Ben is thinking about making an audiocassette.

“Okay,” his teacher nods, “how would that help?”

“Like for blind people who couldn’t read a pamphlet,” Ben answers.

“Oh, good. Now what is your topic?”

“Racism.”

“So what would you do with the cassette?”

“I’d give it to, like, schools,” he explains. “Elementary schools and high schools?”

Schiller nods enthusiastically.

“It would be neat if we could send one over to the high school library. Doug?”

“You could do an article for the newspaper.”

“Great! We didn’t even think of that.”

Because reading and writing are intimately and vitally connected to speaking, listening, and thinking, the talk of the classroom can help to develop literacy.

An Encyclopedia of Social Issues

The suggestions come rapid fire: You could make a sign, you could put all the reports together into an encyclopedia of social issues. You could create a game with questions and answers about social issues. You could stage a debate. You could do a walkathon for your issue. You could write a letter to the president. Schiller takes a few moments to question each speaker, to remind the sixth graders that they need to identify their audience — “Think about who you want to educate, who you want to inform.”

“You could help someone who is taking drugs,” urges Malcolm.

“Someone you know?” inquires Schiller.

“Yes.”

“That would be a really great thing to do. That happened with someone in another class I taught: After studying alcoholism, he and his mom talked a relative into going to Alcoholics Anonymous and saved his life.” Schiller pauses meditatively. “Jeff?”

“You were talking about Alcoholics Anonymous. My grandfather used to drink and then he started going to Alcoholics Anonymous and he stopped drinking.”

“That’s exactly what we are trying to do.” Excitement animates Schiller’s voice. “We want to take action to change something.” She moves towards the overhead projector, signaling that the time has come for the sixth graders to take action.

“Now you are going to go back to your desk and write about the action you want to take. Write down what you want to do. Write down why you want to do it. And decide on your due date. Your due date has to be in March, but we have three weeks left in March. Think about your project. If you are writing the President, you can have that done by next week. But maybe you have a more complicated project. If you do, make a timeline, showing what you will do and
The writing in the sixth grade suggests that the social issues are becoming increasingly real for these eleven-year-olds. Schiller acknowledges Bryan's waving hand.

"I have another idea," Bryan volunteered. "You could get a speaker."

"Super idea," Schiller enthuses. "The year I had Todd's older brother, his dad came in and talked about the FBI. He was great. We can keep adding to our list of ideas. Now I'm going to set the timer for ten minutes and then we will see if you are ready to share your idea."

In less than two minutes sixth graders are bent over papers and Schiller is circulating among them, posing and answering questions. When the group convenes in a circle on the floor, Schiller asks, "Who would be willing to share their idea?"

After quizzing Sam, who plans to write the President, Schiller calls on Jacquese.

"I'm going to write a letter to the President, too," announces the girl confidently, "and I'm going to tell him that the homeless issue has faded from public attention. I'm going to give him some suggestions so he can help with the problem."

The sixth graders continue to describe their ideas for sharing what they have learned until the period ends a few minutes later. "This isn't just school," Schiller explains to the visitor, "everything has a wider audience." The sixth graders' manner communicates an enviable conviction that this wider audience will listen to their suggestions.

Perhaps this assurance comes partly from their own experience: The writing in the sixth grade suggests that the social issues are becoming increasingly real for these eleven-year-olds. Asked to write a fictional story focused around the social issue she has been working on, Colleen produces Anna, an epic about a girl who runs away from the adoptive father who is abusing her. Alyce tells a wrenching tale about a ten-year-old boy who contracts AIDS because his doctor gives him a shot with an unsterilized needle. The stories of Schiller's sixth graders reflect a wide range of skill, but each one brings a social problem to life.

Integration

Alyce's story is all the more moving because of the growth it represents: before this year she had experienced little success with reading and writing; her earliest efforts were hard to follow. In mid-September, for example, she wrote:

The day of the storm is it was very very when we were in fifth hour the storm came up in first hour it was raining and whill lising to a story in fifth hour . I was so skared when I bread the i jumed when I heard it . the was very very lowed and

Like four of her classmates, Alyce has learning disabilities and has spent much of her elementary school career in a special education classroom. In the last few years, however, teachers at Birney have been collaborating on efforts to include special education students in regular classrooms. Schiller has done a variety of projects with special needs teacher Kathleen Hayes-Parvin, starting in January 1991 when they created an opportunity for their eleven-year-olds to interview via conference phone a newspaperman in Kuwait who was covering the Gulf War.

In the summer of 1992, Hayes-Parvin and Schiller, having decided to team teach the following year, attended the Oakland Writing Project together. Hayes-Parvin has been thrilled by the results of the work they have done together this year; "I have seen enormous growth," she testifies. "I would never have been able to get this kind of work from [the students with special needs] in a separate setting." Few observers would disagree with her assessment. Alyce's May writings are worlds away from her September account of the storm. Spelling and punctuation still present some problems for her, (See "The Search", following page.) but her writing communicates thoughts and feelings with a simple eloquence that many more experienced writers might profitably emulate. She sustains her story of Michael's infection and death from AIDS through six pages, and includes along the way the kind of dialogue and detail that make tragedy come alive for a reader:

Michael reminded his mother that he didn't like shots. The doctor called Michael to come and get your shot. Michael was scared to go, but went anyway . . .

The Doctor said to Michael and his Mother, "Michael, you have a very bad disease. Michael, you have, how can I say this, Michael you have AIDS." Michael's Mother started to cry. Michael said, "Mom, don't cry. It will be all right." The doctor told Michael there is no cure and then Michael felt very sad . . .

Pretty soon Michael's birthday came. Nobody wanted to come.

Schiller believes that the students with special needs made even greater gains than the regular education students. "We built on their strengths. Literacy was everywhere, and they thrived on that."
"My Son Wasn’t Like This . . ."

As Schiller and her visitor eat their lunch and discuss the events of the past year, a tall sixth grader knocks on the classroom door and asks permission to show his mother his writing folder. Together parent and child bend over the folder. When a buzzer signals the end of the lunch period 15 minutes later, the woman’s eyes are brimming; she is staggered by what she has seen, she tells Schiller: “My son wasn’t like this before. He has changed a lot. I hope he stays like this. I am very proud of him.”

Mother and son have immigrated from the Middle East; the boy is one of the 200 students at Birney who receive ESL services; in addition, he has a learning disability.

When Schiller asks mother and son to evaluate the conference they have just had in writing, the young man writes, “I never knew I could right like a writer and I changed a lot and I learned a lot.”

One reason that these sixth graders read and write far better in June than they did in September is that they have spent so much time reading and writing. Partly this is because of the way in which Schiller and Hayes Parvin have approached literacy:

A lot of it is the kids are reading a lot more because they have a choice and because the whole classroom culture is “This is fun and this is something we enjoy sharing and doing.” If you aren’t reading and writing, you are out of it.

In all sorts of ways, Schiller and Hayes-Parvin supported the growth of a culture in which talk about books was the coin of the realm.

Kathleen and I got so excited. And she got me books for my birthday and the kids knew it and she writes me notes and we buy books for the room and we
lend them out and we don’t worry too much if not all of them come back. Our kids have never read so much. I don’t assign reading, I just say, “We expect you to read every night.” And if you don’t do it you are sort of left out of things.

We would bring in books that we read and liked — as long as they were appropriate — and share them. Kids would read them.

So many of us read Jurassic Park that we all ended up going to the movie together after school.

As the sixth graders began to see themselves and their teachers as fellow members of a community of readers, some forged another connection to the world of literate adults:

And that led some of them to begin reading things that their parents were reading. One girl who started the year reading at around a third grade level read Latoya Jackson’s autobiography after her mother read it. That was a tremendous achievement. Another student read Charles Johnson’s Middle Passage.

Learning and Doing

Two themes twine together in Laura Schiller’s ruminations about the past year: her own learning and that of her students.

My learning is continuing. I know that wherever I am now, I won’t be there next year.

Sometimes it seems trite, but it’s working this year: it’s the idea that we learn with kids. We know that. We call a lot of what we do research and we use it as research. And the kids understand that we are learning from it. We have changed so many things this year.

All year Schiller has been trying new strategies for involving children in reading and writing and reflecting on what she has observed happening. At the beginning, she adhered closely to what she had learned in the Writing Project from Nancy Atwell’s In the Middle, using dialogue journals to keep track of what students were reading. But after a few months she became dissatisfied with the dialogue journals. “The kids lost interest and momentum. Some kids were faking entries, you could tell they weren’t reading. And it took an enormous amount of time. I thought, ‘There’s got to be a better way.’”

After reflecting on the problems she observed, she decided to try having the students give a “book talk” after they finished a book: They would choose a passage — a page or less — to read aloud and talk about. Students and teachers would ask about things that puzzled or intrigued them. Schiller was delighted by the results. The talks were satisfying to children and teachers alike; they provided a way to support the culture of reading publicly and to spread the word about good books. Next year Schiller intends to establish “book clubs” in the middle of the year, an idea she got from Lucy Calkins.

My Growth as a Writer

Schiller uses the occasion of the end of the year to help students see their own growth. In May she tells them that for their “final exam” they are to choose two pieces of writing from their folders, one recent, one written early in the year, and analyze the differences between them in order to write a piece entitled, “My Growth as a Writer.” After brainstorming a list of things they might look for, she tells the sixth graders to discuss at least three aspects of their writing and to support their assertions with quotations from their papers.

The results are an impressive testimony to the year’s work. Nearly every student is able to show ways in which they have learned to “show, not tell”; see more dramatic beginnings and more thoughtful endings in their spring pieces. Kim points with pride to the first line of a recently completed story: “Down in L.A. where the sun don’t never shine and people only care about themselves, a boy named Robby was walking home from school,” and declares it a vast improvement on the lead of her September story: “It was a nice sunny day and I was just waking up from a nap.” Greg, unable to limit himself to two pieces and three contrasts, spends several days and 18 pages contrasting the writing he finds in two fall pieces and two spring ones.

And Colleen, comparing Anna to her September story, The Penny, sees a better beginning (“NO! NO! Stop it!” That line draws the reader right in and makes them wonder what is happening?) and a less rushed ending in her fictional account of child abuse. In addition, she notes, “The Penny is only 2 pages

3 This work had two audiences: Schiller put all the essays, together with the pieces on which they were based, into a notebook which each child took home for a night to show their parents; at the end of the school year she gave the essays to the seventh-grade teachers.
Nearly every student is able to show ways in which they have learned to "show-not-tell"; many see more dramatic beginnings and more thoughtful endings in their spring pieces.

long and is a memoir. Anna is 27 pages and is realistic fiction."

Learning from Learning

When Schiller talks about her experiences in the Oakland Writing Project, she returns often to the concept of modeling.

At the beginning you are so interested in the content that you don't realize that what's happening is that you are being immersed in a literate environment. I got a feel for how language is learned. Everything was modeled for us: Laura [Roop] is a published poet and that is her first identification. She modeled for us what a writer does.

Schiller goes on to talk about what it felt like to write for her peers and get a response from them, about the power of non-judgmental response, and about what she learned from her own efforts to write about a topic that was important to her.

Our teachers [co-directors Laura Roop and Heidi Wilkins] taught us how to conference. I wrote a poem about my grandmother and cried for two solid weeks.

I began to see what kids go through when they write, and that deadlines are not necessarily helpful. I saw my own writing improve. I had never written poetry before. I had never written anything personal before. What an enormous change!

I wanted the kids to feel like I felt. I went through an incredible change. I was reading and writing all the time. And because I was writing I was reading differently — I felt like I needed to read every book I had ever read over again.

I was hungry for this kind of experience. I cried. It was a gift. I wanted my kids to have that. And many did.

"We Hit the Mother Lode"

Inevitably, there were a couple of students who did not seem to catch the reading and writing bug, who seemed to have let the year wash over them, leaving them untouched. Talk about her own learning reminds Schiller of an incident involving one of these two students.

It was the end of the year. He had written his final piece and had it typed and published. It was a memoir. He was all done. But he came up to me in the morning and said, "Mrs. Schiller, I'm forgetting that piece, because something else has happened and I want to write about it."

He had accidentally smashed a neighbor's window with a ball, and then run away, too afraid to confess. He wrote about the accident and about how he wanted the courage to tell the neighbor what had happened.

He wanted to write that.

Schiller was astonished and moved by the boy's eagerness to write about this incident. "This was a child we thought we didn't reach — but we did! When that happened I thought, 'Wow, we hit pay dirt. The mother lode.'"

Sixth graders writing about social issues.
Points of View: A Parent/Child Collaboration

by Laura Schiller
Birney Middle School, Southfield

I have seen it hundreds of times since March 3, 1979. Yet each time there is an involuntary reaction. Sometimes a sudden emptiness as if I've missed every meal for a week. Once in a while it will even elicit a tear.

But most often just a fleeting image or two. Sparkling brown eyes with just a hint of mischief, shoulder length black hair, wild and frizzy one day, perfectly combed and styled the next.

Oh, the images come with sound as well as picture. A laugh heard often, a voice so distinctive.

And then a doctor's voice appears, Reyes-Syndrome, she says. No cure, she says. Very little time, she says. And then, it is too late, she says . . .

Reverend Ted Spencer

Sunday afternoon was the first time I'd visited her grave. I really wish I could have met her. If she were alive today, she would be 22 years old. She died at the age of nine. Her birthday would be October 31.

... All the time I talk to people and ask them questions about her, but they sometimes can't talk about her without crying . . . I really wish Vanessa were alive and that I could talk to her. We have a painting of her at home but that and other pictures is all there is.

Camille Spencer

Camille's paper was written in September. Our sixth grade class began the year by writing autobiographical pieces within a reading/writing workshop framework. Her father's paper reflecting the same event from his point of view followed in October. As pieces from other parents were included in a class book entitled Points of View.

Points of View was a collaborative effort from its inception. It began unexpectedly when our assistant principal, Mrs. Russell, whose son was in my class, stopped me one morning to add her insight to the story Marcus had written about his sister. Seeing how moved she was by their shared experience, I asked if she'd consider writing about it from her point of view.

At the start of third hour, I enthusiastically shared my encounter with Marcus' mom and as a class we began to brainstorm possibilities. What if other parents could write about our pieces from their point of view? Could we put together a class book? What if a parent wasn't involved in the event? Could a sister or brother write about it instead?

"I ran into a wall at school last year and got stitches? Corey saw it. Could he write about it?"

"What if no one saw it?"

"Could you rewrite your piece from a different character's point of view?"

"I can rewrite my ski trip from the ski's point of view!"

We sent a letter home inviting parents to contribute pieces for our book. We asked parents not to feel intimidated. We'd correct grammar and spelling and type final copies. We asked for their participation as a way to make writing meaningful and real. Writing is empowering. It can help us see things that might otherwise go unnoticed. It can help us understand one another and draw us closer together. We asked parents to become involved in our book to send a strong message to their children: Writing is important and valued.

For parents, the first year of middle school is very unsettling. Middle school is bigger than the neighborhood elementary school, it's less personal, there are more teachers to know and the adolescent's push towards independence and peers, away from parents, creates an even greater distance between school and home. Parents who want to know what's happening in the middle school classroom must often glean their information from monosyllabic answers and papers stuffed randomly in looseleafs.

Points of View was one way to open our reading/writing workshop classroom to our parents. At Curriculum Night we posted sign up sheets for parent volunteers. We asked for editors, typists, readers, or any other specialty a parent could offer.
Long before the eighth graders received our first drafts to type, we’d written, peer conferenced, revised, edited, and reconfereed our pieces. Some parent volunteers edited the first typed drafts and still others typed final copies for our book. Every student submitted a piece written about a personal experience from his/her point of view. Most either added a rewrite of their original piece from a different point of view or had a parent write a companion piece. We made several copies of each piece, organized them alphabetically, slipped each page into a protective see-through plastic cover, and placed the sheets in three-ring binders to be circulated among the students.

The parents who submitted pieces for Points of View were invited to read them to our class. We formed a sharing circle on the rug and our guest parent and child sat in chairs and read their pieces aloud to an accepting and appreciative audience.

When Reverend Spencer arrived to read his piece about the death of his daughter from Reyes Syndrome, we discovered that until then he had never heard Camille’s piece. Nor had they discussed her sister’s death at home. Our proximity to each other heightened the emotion in the classroom. Reverend Spencer’s mellifluous baritone never broke as he read his story, but his white, square handkerchief continuously mopped the perspiration from his neck as together we fought back tears.

The stories led to questions: “What is Reyes-Syndrome?” “How can you catch it?” “What can be done about it?”

The Reverend, composed and reassuring, answered every one.

He added that the deceased would not want us to stop living. We mourn, but then we must go on with life.

As Reverend Spencer and I shook hands at the classroom door, we agreed that the experience would not be forgotten. But the discussion did not end there. One student tearfully shared his pain at the loss of his best friend to leukemia just two weeks before. Another, almost incoherent, cried over the death of a baby brother at birth. Many had stories to tell about the death of a loved one.

Some parent volunteers edited the first typed drafts and still others typed final copies for our book.

Camille’s writing brought us closer together. She said it made her feel better to write about something she’d never been able to speak of before. We talked about personal experience as a source for writers’ ideas. The power of writing and sharing was self-evident and the parents who shared their own pieces with the class experienced that power first-hand.

Camille’s multicultural, middle-class, suburban classroom was an even mix of black, white, and Chaldean students. Because a number of the students had learning disabilities, a special education teacher co-taught the class. With such varied backgrounds, appreciation for and tolerance of different points of view was essential. We approached this in a number of ways simultaneously. At the time we were collecting pieces for Points of View, we were also studying Columbus to commemorate the 500th year of his voyage to the New World. This was an event that certainly can be interpreted in many ways, depending on one’s point of view.

For a year, I’d been collecting newspaper clippings, magazine articles, and books related to the subject and when the time came to introduce the unit, I began by reading Jane Yolen’s book, Encounter. It relates the landing of Columbus from a native Taino boy’s point of view.

In cooperative learning groups we developed lists of things we already knew about Columbus. Then we decided what else we wanted to know. We searched for that information in the sources I’d collected. This was the start of our research on a multitude of topics that carried us throughout the year. One thing was certain: point of view depended on the source. We needed to be aware of other people’s points of view both in interpreting history and in working cooperatively together.

We have reinforced this concept in countless ways over the course of the school year. Our study of Christopher Columbus overlapped with the creation of our class book, Points of View. The day Reverend Spencer came, our emotions spent and questions exhausted, we returned to cooperative groups to continue to search for information on Columbus.

Through this process, we became a community of learners. Through parental involvement, we expanded our school community and increased our understanding of one another. As I wrote in the introduction to Points of View,

I am very proud to be part of a community that is willing to become directly involved in the education of their children. This book says much more than what is on these pages. It says that writing is for all of us and can draw us closer together. It says that we can become a community of learners regardless of our age or ability. And it provides an audience for our earliest work.

In this can be found the seeds of literacy.
Writing Well About Well Water

Echoing real teachers all over the United States, one of Horace Smith's fictitious colleagues in Theodore Sizer's *Horace's School* complains that the culture of Franklin High School does not honor academic achievement—that, indeed, students deride as "nerds" classmates who succeed in school.

"Good schools," continues Sizer, "are places where one gets the stuff of knowledge—that is, crudely, 'the facts'—where one learns to use that stuff, and where one gets into the habit of such use." How can schools help students to develop such habits? Along with many other school reformers, Sizer urges that we sharpen up our focus and concentrate on a few "essential" ideas and skills: Less is more. In addition, we have to create lots of opportunities for teenagers to use what they are learning. In his writings, he calls readers' attention to the difference between using and simply displaying knowledge:

The difference here is more than semantic. Using knowledge assumes a student to be markedly active, inventive. Displaying knowledge can be done with relative ease by a passive student. Use requires the student to be a fundamental part of the process.

Over the past ten years the 200-plus high schools that have become involved with Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools have struggled with hard questions about what it means to use knowledge, and how teachers can help students to develop good intellectual habits instead of simply to accumulate facts and skills.

Another teacher replies that the difference between a nerd and a student who is respected both by faculty and by schoolmates is the habit of using knowledge rather than simply collecting it.¹


On the Tip of the Little Finger

Although this is their English period and Donna Stowe is their English teacher, the tenth graders in the computer room with Stowe at 9:40 on Wednesday, May 26 are writing about such things as algae levels in the mill pond, water quality in Traverse Bay, and the sensitivity of bacteria to anti-biotics. Each spring Stowe and biology teacher Tom Ford work together to help the sophomores in Northport High School to do a piece of original scientific research and to write a report that communicates the results of that work clearly.

For Ford this term-long project provides a chance for students to study a piece of the fragile ecosystem of the Leelanau Peninsula where they live. For Stowe it provides a chance to help students to use what they are learning about writing to communicate about a topic in which they have invested significant time. Too often students see what they learn about essay writing as relevant only to English papers; the science teacher is "supposed" to evaluate only the adequacy of their scientific knowledge and ignore the niceties of presentation and communication. The Northport teachers are sending a different message.

Nitrates in the Well Water

As the visitor enters the computer room, Nicholas is requesting an extension on his project—it is due tomorrow—because his partner has gone to the doctor, taking their computer disk with her. Stowe suggests that Nick walk over to the doc-
tor's office and retrieve the disk. Apparently startled by this suggestion, the boy points out that Adrienne, his partner, may have already seen the doctor and gone home.

Stowe sends Nicholas off to the office to track Adrienne down and turns to the rough draft of Ariel's report. As she hands the paper back, the English teacher points to a section near the end of the first paragraph, saying, “You said that later, so you don't need to say it here. It's redundant.”

“So I just erase it here?” asks Ariel.

“Yes,” Stowe nods. “And you should talk to Mr. Ford about your ‘results’ section. It seems thin to me, but he is the one who knows about the science.”

Lisa and André have been studying “point source” pollution: they have tested water samples gathered just upstream from a farm and are contrasting them with samples gathered downstream from the farm. They filtered the water and grew out the resulting bacteria in petri dishes; they also tested the samples for the nitrates that often leach out of fertilizer. On the computer they have created graphs to show the differences between the upstream and the downstream samples; they are now working to increase the visual contrast in these graphs.

Nicholas returns to report that Adrienne and the computer disk are now at home. He and his teacher head for the office where she will sign a permission slip allowing Nick to go to Adrienne’s house to pick up the disk and the notes.

“Does anyone know how to spell ‘manure’?” calls out Kenneth.

“M-A-N-U-R-E” replies a voice from the other side of the room.

Joshua and Maggie, who live on opposite sides of town, have compared the water from their wells, looking at levels of nitrates, iron, calcium, and fecal coliform. Joshua talked to a man in the water quality office in Traverse City 20 miles away. After their conversation, the official wrote out — in longhand — directions for sampling the well water and faxed them to Joshua; he explained that the high school students would need to run the water for a certain length of time which would depend on the distance from the well to the tap in order to assure that they were testing water that had come direct from the well; since water can pick up iron from sitting in the pipe, they would not learn about iron levels in the well water unless they cleared the pipe in this way before collecting their samples.

Joshua and Maggie have found an interesting difference between their samples: The nitrate level in her water is 8 — anything up to 10 is acceptable, according to the standards set by the State — while the level in Joshua’s water is 37! The boy is puzzled; he thought that the nitrates in his water might come from the fertilizer that his neighbor uses on his orchard — “I’m pretty sure it is manure-based, from the smell” — but the expert he talked to in Leland explained that farmers try to fertilize after the spring run-off in hopes of minimizing this sort of pollution. In his paper he notes that his dog urinates over the well. Perhaps the nitrates in the urine are infiltrating the well. This is unlikely, he explains to the visitor, since the well is 96 feet below ground level, “but I just put it in.”

All of these tenth graders will present their findings to interested community members outside of the school; for many the audience will be the Leelanau Conservancy, a privately-funded group that supplies townships on the Peninsula with information on water quality.

These presentations will be the first of three they must make before they graduate. Their eleventh grade projects will connect to American History; as seniors they will work with a faculty advisor, preparing a talk on any topic they wish.

Polymorphonuclear Leukocytes

At the end of their English period, the tenth graders head off to biology class. Tomorrow they will take a test on the human cardiovascular system (the MEAP, given at the beginning of eleventh grade, compels teacher and students to forge ahead on the regular biology curriculum even when work on the sophomore project is reaching a climax) and today Ford wants to fill out their notes on white blood cells: “The granulocytes are approximately two times the size of a red blood cell. There are three types developed in the bone marrow. The life span of a leukocyte is approximately 12 hours . . . .”

“The word for today is “polymorphonuclear leukocyte.” Ford invites the tenth graders to break the word into parts in order to get some insight into its meaning.

“Poly’ means many,” volunteers one girl.

“Morpho’ means change,” notes another. “I don’t know about ‘nuclear’.”

In fact, Ford explains, ‘morph’ refers to structure rather than change. Polymorphonuclear leukocytes have many structures in the nucleus.

Fifteen minutes later, after completing the taxonomy of cells in the blood stream, Ford announces that he will confer with students who need help on their project; he urges others to make sure their notes on the cardiovascular system are complete and to review them for tomorrow’s test. Six of the tenth graders follow him to the laboratory next door.
Ford pulls a stool up to the dissecting table and invites Lucia to show him the soil samples she has collected from a nearby wetland. In a large shoebox—the former home of a pair of Timberland boots—she has about twenty cylindrical packets of soil, each about a foot long and an inch and a half in diameter. Dug with a soil corer that Lucia managed to borrow from the local 4-H club, the packages of dirt become texts in geological history under Ford’s scrutiny.

Reading the Soil

When Lucia has undone the saran wrap which preserves the shape and integrity of the first sample, Ford asks her to compare the top and the bottom soil.

“The top is more decomposed.”

“Yeah. There’s lots of decomposed matter up here,” he gestures toward the top end of the sample before them, “but none down here. Why do you think that is?”

In the discussion that follows, Ford helps Lucia to read the story of this little spot of earth not far from the edge of Lake Michigan. The bottom of the sample is Kalkaska sand—like the bottom of the lake. The water used to cover this area and has receded. The decomposed layer is not homogeneous: the part closest to the sand is darker than that nearest the top; the matter here is more decomposed. There is, however, a clear break between layers, and Ford shows the tenth grader where and how to cut the sample for further analysis.

“Did you notice any smell where you dug it up?” Ford asks.

Lucia wriggles her nose. “It smelled like rotten eggs.”

“That’s the sulfur.” The wetlands, her teacher explains, create an anaerobic environment, and sulfur is a byproduct of anaerobic decay. He asks the other students waiting around the table if they remember what happened when they walked through a swamp earlier in the year.

“Bubbles came up,” Tristram answers promptly.

“Yeah. Gas.”

Lucia lays a second sample carefully on the table and then draws back. “Eeeew, there’s a worm in it!”

Ford identifies the worm matter-of-factly. After leading the young scientist through an exploration of what she might learn from the presence of this intruder, he pokes the top part of the sample with his finger. “Here are twigs and needles from a red pine. What’s this from?”

In the discussion that follows, Ford helps Lucia to read the story of this little spot of earth not far from the edge of Lake Michigan.

“Cedar,” Lucia answers promptly. She points out that in this sample, like the last one, the lower layer of organic matter is more decomposed than the surface level.

“There are more bacteria in this piece of soil,” Ford tells his students, “than there are people on earth.”

“The EPA and the DNR Can’t Agree”

As Lucia unwraps three more soil samples, a boy who is studying the ecosystem in land near the airport tells Ford that Stowe is urging him to interview older people “who remember what the forest was like before the airport was built.”

“Good idea,” responds the biology teacher.

“But I need more time,” protests the reluctant youth.

The next samples come from a marsh area with no trees in it. Ford has Lucia line them up so that they go from most to least wet. This layout reveals a clear pattern: the wettest soil has the most sand in it. “The wetter the soil,” Lucia conjectures, “the slower it takes to decompose.”

Ford congratulates her on the work done and urges her to get additional samples that include grasses, reminding her, “You are studying the ecosystem.”

When the period ends, Ford directs the other students gathered around him to return for the help they need after they have eaten lunch. Lucia replaces her soil samples in the Timberland boot box while answering the visitor’s questions: She is studying the ecology of a local wetland that a developer has targeted as a golf course. “Wetlands are important to water quality because they act as a natural filter,” she explains. “The problem is that the EPA and the DNR can’t agree on what is wetlands. So it’s not clear that this land is protected.”

As a teacher, Ford explains after the tenth graders leave, he often has to convert 15-year-olds’ zeal to take political or legal action in such causes to enthusiasm for a do-able research project.

A lot of them want to go and sue the chemical companies for dumping toxins. And that’s great, but when you are doing your first research project you have to start on a little smaller scale. So what I try to do is try to get an interest from them and then take a little piece of that interest that fits into their time frame and their background.

Lucia was already thinking about the wetlands and the golf course, but she just wanted to write an opinion paper. And I said, “You can’t write an opinion paper: It has to be a scientific paper.”
"Well, I don't want to."
"Well, too bad."
"It doesn't make sense."

"Well," I finally told her, "it has gotten to the point where it doesn't matter whether it makes sense or not. If you don't do it you will be in here next year doing it."

You don't want to do that. You want to intrinsically motivate them, but sometimes you have to just put the hammer down. But she got going on it, and at this point she is moving along faster than most of the others."

Ford is enthusiastic about the fruits of the collaboration between English and biology teacher. In the environmental science class that he teaches, the students also gather data on water quality, analyze it, and write reports. But Ford says that the papers for the sophomore project are of higher quality because there are two teachers helping the students.

Donna is really a stickler when it comes to structure and vocabulary. So it is really nice. She will come to me about scientific phrasing or terminology, methodology; we work real well together. We have a lot of respect for each other, because we know our own limitations. She's not afraid to admit, "Well, I don't know that," and I'll tell the kids, "You might want to check the structure of that sentence or the way you put that with Ms. Stowe." It's kind of neat to have teachers working together.

Nearly a thousand miles from the village of Northport, in the shadow of the urban freeway that connects Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts, Fenway Middle College (FMC) is lodged in a row of classrooms smack in the middle of Bunker Hill Community College. Like Northport High School, FMC is small; like Northport, it draws inspiration and guidance from Theodore Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools and from Sizer's books about high school reform.

In a city where most high schools enrolled a thousand or more adolescents, however, FMC's size — it served 108 students in 1992-93 — represents a hard-fought choice rather than an accident of geography. Started nine years ago as an alternative school within Boston English High School, it moved to its present location in 1990 and now draws students from all over Boston. Eileen Shakespear, who has taught for 22 years in Boston secondary schools, explains the advantages for students and teachers of Fenway's size and location:

It's very simple: You're in a college campus; you don't have very many high school kids. Just right there, that makes things better. Because kids aren't good for each other: The peer group is not the greatest teacher at this age. So when you have a building with one or two thousand teenagers in it, it just isn't a very healthy environment to begin with. So getting them away from each other is very important.

The Middle College faculty would like to create more opportunities for contact between the college and high school students, but even without structured interchanges, Shakespear feels that her students benefit from being on the college campus. For one thing, the junior college students come from backgrounds very much like their own — "they are real Boston kids" — and prove by their presence in the building that college is for working class and poor teenagers and people of color as well as for white suburbanites.

So the student body is very helpful. It sounds corny to say, but being among older people is magical. Having these models, you have to feel a little bit more stupid walking down the hall cussing, or writing something on the wall.

Kids don't want to act that way. They'd rather not do that, most of them.

In big high schools, Shakespear argues, the hallway actually puts pressure on the teenager to misbehave: He has to engage in anti-social activities to fit in. In addition, the rules and environment conspire to imprison students in the classroom.

In most high schools you can't send the kid out of the room for anything, because there is a security problem, either real or perceived, or because you are worried that they'll bother another teacher.

"When you have a building with one or two thousand teenagers in it, it just isn't a very healthy environment to begin with."
Or you are sending them to a library that doesn’t exist. I mean, if you are looking up McCarthyism, or Roy Cohn, most high school libraries aren’t going to be deep enough even to get there — at least not the ones I know. You can’t send them to do real research.

But here you can really send them and say “Find out about the Salem witch trials, make the connection to McCarthyism, figure out what the principle is and figure out what you think are today’s possible Salem Witch Trials.” You can really send them to the library with that as a project. And not only will they have the books here, they’ll have the computer technology and articles from magazines. And real librarians who know how to help them and are willing to.

“In most high schools you can’t send the student out of the room for anything, because there is a security problem, either real or perceived, or because you are worried that they’ll bother another teacher.”

A visit to the library makes Shakespeare’s points vivid: It looks and feels very different from an urban high school library. At the long solid library tables underneath the bank of windows, a Vietnamese youth studies a calculus text intently. Across the table an African-American man who appears to be in his late 20s takes notes from a book about the American Civil War. To his left he has stacked three journals and two other books he has already consulted. The magazine shelves on the other side of the large room are well stocked and orderly. Carpeting muffles the footfalls of students, faculty, and librarians. The room is quiet but not sepulchral: A young woman confers with the reference librarian; a boy asks his teacher for clarification on an assignment.

“It’s the atmosphere of the college itself that supervises them,” comments Shakespeare.

What Does It Mean to be Human?

Second period Shakespeare and Steve Cohen co-teach a Humanities class for ninth graders. FMC has not had a ninth grade before this year. However, this year they accepted a grant from a drugstore chain intent on recruiting more minority pharmacists and willing to support an innovative secondary program in order to do so. All but one of the students in this ninth grade class are members of minority groups.

The humanities course has been focused around what Ted Sizer calls “Essential questions”: What does it mean to be human? How do humans learn to live (together)? Do people need rules? How does society modify or control behavior? How does the law work? . . .

On June 9, with the end of the year less than a fortnight away, the ninth graders are preparing to give final “exhibitions” that pull together part of what they have learned this year. Their assignment:

Pick a character, real or fictional, who we met this year in Humanities (from any book or activity we did). By yourself, or with one or two other characters from different parts of the course, create a script that explores the question “What it means to be human” and examines some essential questions from this year. On exhibition day you will perform your script in costume.

Before the period begins, a boy approaches his teachers to wheedle permission to delay his exhibition for a day. Cohen urges him to argue his case — explain why the delay would be a good idea. Up to this point in the year Cohen and Shakespeare have stuck determinedly to all the deadlines they set “because,” Shakespeare explains, “with ninth graders, if you let them delay a day, they will want to delay three weeks.” Today, however, Cohen calls the class together and announces, “We are going to let you practice today, but in a rigorous way, in group with us. We are delaying partly because you are pulling together stuff from the full year.” He introduces a few visitors and urges students to utilize this human resource, pointing out that one is a philosopher who “spends his time thinking about questions like this.”

“Tomorrow,” Shakespeare reminds the ninth graders, “you will need costumes.” She urges them to spend the period rehearsing and polishing their scripts: “You have some good scripts, but you haven’t put them together. As you read them together you will find things you need to add, to smooth things out.” Most students applaud the chance to spend an extra day getting ready for their performance, but two groups volunteer to perform later in the same period: They would like to put the anxieties of the public performance behind them. Shakespeare announces that the class will reconvene in half an hour.

Two pairs leave to practice in the lounge. Those who remain in the room pull their chairs into groups and take scripts out of notebooks; Cohen moves from group to group, asking questions of some, telling others what they need to do before they will be ready to perform for their classmates.
“Do You Agree with ‘Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death?’”

“What’s happening?” he asks Sean and Michael as he pulls up a chair. After Sean explains that he is Jack from Lord of the Flies and that Michael is Napoleon from Animal Farm, Cohen focuses his questions around issues of power. “Why do you deserve power?” he asks “Jack.”

After a long moment of silence, Sean responds, “I can change people’s minds.”

“What else?”

“I have different skills,” Sean answers slowly. He pauses again and detaches himself a bit from the role he has assumed. “He can hunt.”

“Yes!” Cohen agrees emphatically, and turns to Michael: “How about you, Napoleon?”

“Well, I trained the dogs.”

“Why is that important?”

Across the table Brittany is making shackles out of tinfoil. She, Julian, and Leroy have produced a script inspired by “Harrison Bergeron,” a Kurt Vonnegut short story. One character in their skit, she explains to the visitor, forgets all events a few seconds after they happen. This woman saw her son die on television but when her husband returned home she could only say, “I saw something sad, but I don’t remember what it was.”

Cohen moves to two girls who have scripted a conversation between Patrick Henry and Willie Oté, a convicted murderer who has spent 15 years on death row. “So why did Patrick Henry say, ‘Give me liberty or give me death? Who did he say it to?’ He encourages them to talk to one another – in character. As the teacher moves on, Patrick Henry writes a sentence onto Willie Oté’s script: “Being locked up for 15 years, I learned to appreciate freedom.”

“Do you think he agrees with, ‘Give me liberty or give me death’?” Oté asks her partner. Puzzled, they call Cohen back. After explaining the question to Cohen, Oté decides, “No, because what I want is freedom. I’ve been thinking about death for 15 years.”

“And I’m not ready to die,” Patrick Henry adds. Together the girls add these lines to their scripts.

“In any sort of experimental thing, you need to be willing to fail, over and over.”

A Meeting on a Bus

Shakepear returns from D Lounge where she has been helping two girls ready themselves for their exhibition. Surveying the activity in the room she comments on the distance these ninth graders have traveled since September. “At the beginning of the year they would have done nothing if we had given this sort of assignment. They would have just sat there. They hadn’t had any experience of being asked to take responsibility for their own learning. They had to learn this.”

Shakepear has no fail-safe plan for teaching students to take responsibility. She looks the pain and difficulty of this process squarely in the eye and insists that visitors to her classroom do the same:

In any sort of experimental thing, you need to be willing to fail, over and over. You have to be willing to go to the library with 35 kids, and a third of them are just yakkling. You have to be able to come back and talk to them, not punitively, about what worked and what didn’t, and then the next time two more will be working. And then, the time after, two more.

Others will still be doing nothing . . . . You are moving responsibility from your shoulders to theirs. You can see it, almost physically.

The two pairs who have prepared their exhibitions for today return to the room in costume. Cohen distributes paper on which the ninth graders will write comments and questions on each exhibition. As her classmates fall silent, one of the exhibitors whispers panic stricken to her teacher, “Ms. Shakespeare, what if my notecards aren’t in order?”

“It will be okay,” Shakespeare reassures her as she steps forward to introduce this first pair: Rukmani from Nectar in a Sieve and Celie from The Color Purple. Playing the role of narrator, Shakespeare explains that the two women are meeting on a city bus. Celie asks Rukmani about the beautiful sari she is wearing (Shakespeare has helped her to borrow it for the occasion).

“I am from India and it is something that all women in India wear. How about you?”

“I am African-American and I can wear whatever.”

With warmth and dignity the two young women describe to one another lives which have been lived against the very different backdrops of India and the rural South. Their conversation manages to communicate both polite astonishment at unfamiliar customs and surprise at how much their stories echo one another. As the bus arrives at Celie’s stop, they exchange farewells and part.

The other ninth graders have no questions. “They are very quiet during exhibitions because they are scared to death themselves,” Shakespeare comments later. “They are still at the stage where they think that being good is being quiet. As they get older and more into our philosophy, they start challenging one another. But not in a mean way.”

For now, however, the fourteen-year-olds leave the challenging to the adults. “Did you two women have more in common or less than you thought?” asks one of the visitors.
“Less,” answers Rukmani. “Because my husband didn’t beat me.”
“Was that important to Celie?”
“Yes,” responds Celie instantly.
“Of course.”
Cohen presses the two girls to look for the similarities between these two lives.
“We were both poor,” offers Rukmani.
“And we were both married at a young age,” adds her partner.
He asks them about the issue of arranged marriage: “Celie, how would you have liked that?”
“I wouldn’t have liked it at all. Because I’m the one who has to live with him.”
“But did Celie actually have a free choice?” asks Shakespear.
“Well... no.”

They don’t feel like intellectuals.
And you can’t make them feel like intellectuals by making them feel that any kind of product is okay.

Getting From There to Here

Shakespear’s feelings about the morning’s exhibitions are mixed: She is pleased that Rukmani answered the questions of the adults—In the past she almost always dropped her eyes and said she didn’t know when challenged—But she does not feel that the students got very deeply into the texts they were working from. Still new to the idea of exhibitions, these ninth graders do not always see beyond the superficial requirements of the task—the need to dress up in costume, for example. “They don’t get yet that you have to understand the text, that you have to add something to what others already understand about the character.” These understandings grow with time, however: Shakespear sees clear differences between these exhibitions and those of her tenth and eleventh graders.

Later, at lunch, Shakespear talks about what is involved in getting students to actually take responsibility for their learning and make good use of time that hasn’t been structured for them.
That's the critical point. It's not setting the standard—figuring out what the student should be able to do. And it's not teaching them the standard. It's the execution, for the kid, of that task. That's the critical point for all kids. We know what a literate person is. We don't need to spend another 10 years figuring out a test for that. You can figure out in 10 minutes, being with a kid, whether he is a competent reader and a competent writer.

But how do you take a kid who can't do these things and have them do them? Steve [Cohen] and I spend a lot of time talking about this. It's not exactly pedagogy because there’s a lot of psychological stuff mixed in. It's like, how do you get kids to have faith in a task that has no perceptible meaning for them? They have to have faith that meaning will come out of that task, that in the process of doing it they will learn something valuable about Life. Not about that character, or whatever, but about Life. So that's one thing, just to get the kids to make that leap of faith, suspend their disbelief, to just do it.

Getting students to suspend their disbelief and actually put effort into tasks that seem silly and unfamiliar is something Shakespear does partly through force of personality.

“Partly it is just you—you persuade, you say, just do it for me.’ Once they do it for you and get something out of it, they’ll do it for themselves. Even though, the way they have grown up, it looks really stupid to them.”

As teachers, Shakespear and Cohen have to get these fourteen year olds to buy in—to believe in the tasks of the course enough to do them. Then they have to come to terms with their students’ very limited skills.

We accept these early steps—the paper that only has two lines on it. We don’t say, “What! You’re 16 years old and you’re only writing two stinking lines?”

But the ninth grader who writes two lines needs two things that may seem contradictory: She needs to have her efforts accepted and appreciated, but she also needs to be pushed toward a higher standard. How does Shakespear get the students to move beyond the two lines?

We try to turn it back to the kids. I say, “Read this over. Does this say what you want to say? Are you interested in this? Is this really all you think about this mock trial? I really liked it. I liked the clothes that she wore! Is that really all that you think?”

And it is key that you are a curious party, not a punishing party, that you really do want to know what they think. And I do! I do want to know.

Otherwise it is too condescending. And with our kids, so many of them are so marginal it is very dangerous to be condescending.

They don’t feel like intellectuals. And you can’t make them feel like intellectuals by making them feel that any kind of product is okay.
"A Children’s Toy can Be a Text"

More than a third of American high school students are enrolled in vocational programs which were originally designed to prepare them for a trade rather than for college or other post-secondary schooling. Teenagers who choose these programs are supposed to spend close to half of their school day in "shops," doing hands-on work like welding, baking, or repairing a car, and the rest in academic classes.

Today many of these programs present a kind of paradox. On the one hand, even though many of the students who are working in the shops have experienced little success in elementary and junior high school, as a group they often look more engaged than more academically successful contemporaries who are spending a full day in academic classes. In many shops, both their hands and minds are at work on challenging projects. They feel competent and are proud of their developing skills. On the other hand, shops often prepare students for jobs that no longer exist. Many educators and social policy analysts argue that modern economies change so fast that a high school program that only equips its graduates for one sort of work — baking, sheet metal work, cosmetology — serves neither its students nor its community well.

Some communities have responded to the accusation that vocational programs cost a lot and prepare students for jobs in a now vanished economy by abolishing the vocational option. They argue that if all of tomorrow’s workers will need to read, write, and work cooperatively on complex intellectual problems, then all high school students should take a full load of academic classes.

Few would disagree with the goal of high literacy for all, but many doubt its feasibility. They wonder whether high schools can really teach academic skills to students who have never enjoyed reading and writing and have often dropped out emotionally by ninth grade. Administrators of the vocational programs at Cambridge Rindge and Latin School (CRLS) in Massachusetts suggest that programs that integrate academics with an apprenticeship in a real work setting can provide a path to intellectual engagement and high literacy for all students. Such an integration recognizes both that eleventh and twelfth graders are almost adult (and can handle real responsibilities) and that they will need flexible knowledge and academic skills in order to get and keep satisfying jobs.

**Integrated Studies**

Since becoming director of vocational programs at Cambridge Rindge and Latin School in 1990, Larry Rosenstock, working collaboratively with Academic Dean Adria Steinberg and with teachers, has reorganized programs in such a way as to integrate much that used to be separate — academics and vocational skills, literacy and social studies, science and mathematics.

Just as they do not wish to separate academics from vocational training, doing from thinking, or social studies from literacy, Rosenstock and Steinberg look for ways to bring together students in vocational programs and those who expect to go to college. They have had some success with "apprenticeship" programs which pair teenagers with adults who do interesting work. “These apprenticeship programs are very attractive to kids throughout the high School," explains Steinberg, "not just the ones who happen to have ended up in a vocational program."

Partly for this reason, Rosenstock, Steinberg, and English teacher Rob Riordan responded enthusiastically when the president of nearby Lesley College approached them several years ago about the possibility of creating an apprenticeship for high school students who wanted to explore careers in elementary education.

“I’ve been thinking for a long time about the need to bring young people into the profession,” explains Riordan, “especially students of color.” Because so many of the teachers who joined the profession in the 1950s and 60s will retire in the next few years, American schools will need 2.5 million new teachers over the next decade. Unless we reverse present recruitment trends, an in-
Increasingly diverse student population will be taught by an increasingly homogeneous — and white — cohort of teachers.

I knew we had to intervene sooner than college. We have to recruit more students of color to teaching and we need to go to the high schools in order to do this.

Riordan, who is a writer himself and has taught writing to students of every age and description, already had a model for what he wanted to do: in 1991 he had started a program that placed high school students in paid internships at Polaroid and offered them academic courses at their work site. The program drew students from the regular academic programs at Cambridge High School as well as those who had taken other vocational courses. The adolescents had revealed in the experience of being treated as equals by their mentors at Polaroid; they had also done impressive academic work related to their apprenticeship.

A Cambridge-Lesley Careers in Education program offered high school students a chance to see themselves in new settings and new roles. Riordan explains that the apprenticeship model means teaching academics at the work site. For students working at Polaroid that meant holding classes in a company office. “But for those who want to be teachers, it meant moving it to a college classroom, since they must see themselves as college students” in order to take the next steps and become teachers. Accordingly, he and Vivian Carlo of Lesley planned to hold the seminar that accompanied the students work in elementary and preschool classrooms a few blocks away from the High School, at Lesley College.

As Riordan anticipated, taking the role of college student affected some teenagers quite powerfully. Early in the year Annette wrote:

The first day I went to Lesley College I felt really good about myself. I kept saying to myself, “Wow, I’m actually sitting in a college room.”

Reimagining the Future

For a number of the students who have enrolled in the program since it started on September, 1991, thinking about a four-year college has meant reimagining the future. Several of the girls in the first cohort were planning careers in cosmetology. A few were headed for secretarial school, and, says Riordan, “a couple of others had no notion of going to college at all.”

Combining eight hours a week of work as a teacher’s aide in a real elementary school classroom with nine periods of seminar time creates an opportunity for eleventh and twelfth graders to reflect critically on an institution that they know intimately. Having spent thousands of hours in schools, they bring a rich background of personal experiences to the task of reading, writing, and thinking about education.

Leaning over a table at a sandwich shop near the High School, Rosenstock observes:

The program provides kids a chance to do reflection on a culture and an institution that they have a lot to say about. But they haven’t had this kind of critical opportunity to say it before.

Like the Polaroid program, the teaching apprenticeship casts the teenagers — most of them African-American and Hispanic — in roles very different from those they have played before in school. Rosenstock continues:

Debby Meier [founder and principal of Central Park East Secondary School in New York City] says that adolescents have an unseen need to nurture. This program taps that. And that’s what I find that kids in the Lesley program talk about the most: Having this responsibility.

Riordan expands Rosenstock’s point:

They are all changing, but they feel that this change isn’t recognized: They are treated the
same way all the way through school. And many of our kids are treated as an annoyance.

What happens when they go into the elementary schools in this program is that they get into a context where they are treated as someone who has changed or is changing and they begin to believe that change is possible.

**Reading and Writing about Schooling**

The reading and writing that students do in the seminar grows out of the issues they confront in the classroom. "It's a journal-based experience," Riordan explains. "They have to keep site logs and submit them every week. At the beginning I type them up every week, reproduce them and distribute them." In class students discuss the issues their classmates raise in log entries. At the beginning of the year many focus on management of behavior, on their own efforts to feel comfortable in the classroom, and on their evolving relationships with cooperating teachers.

Their feelings about themselves thread through all of these issues, Riordan finds. "Who am I? What are my achievements, what are my strengths?" Some of them have not done well in school up to this time and we try to help them to appreciate their strengths, such as they are."

In addition, Riordan tries to give the students some tools for dealing with children's misbehavior, some things to say and do that will respect both their own feelings and those of the child. "Some of them might be apt to fly off the handle or to remain silent. We are trying to give them some middle ground."

Students write—and revise several times—a two-page paper about their school site. They also write multiple autobiographical snippets which they ultimately turn into an autobiography, discarding some

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**Combating Racism**

In the late winter, the Cambridge-Lesley apprentices designed and taught units in their elementary classrooms. Their own teachers, Vivian Carlo and Rob Riordan, urged them to pick topics that would allow them to integrate several subject areas and to involve the children actively. The eleventh and twelfth graders approached this assignment in ways that reflected their own interests, the constraints of their classrooms, and the ages and skills of their students. Dierdre decided to study the effects of reading aloud one-on-one to children who did not seem to have had this experience at home. Two girls who were working in the same school put together a project that involved reading *Blueberries for Sal* and making blueberry muffins. Michelle took on racism.

Michelle's project grew out of work Carlo had done with the eleventh and twelfth graders in an effort to raise their awareness of the issue. In these seminar meetings, Michelle wrote later,

I learned that many things that my friends and I say may seem funny to us but in reality they are a form of prejudicial remarks and can really hurt someone if taken the wrong way. So now I try to watch what I say to avoid that situation.

I learned a lot in Vivian's class those couple of days. I felt that kids shouldn't wait until they reach high school to learn about racism, but should start learning about it the very first days that they enter elementary school, beginning with preschool.

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**What's Up With Racism?**

Michelle wrote a report on her work with fourth graders. She also presented her work to her classmates and others.

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Combating Racism continued from page 35

After reading a book that Riordan lent her, Michelle selected four fourth graders, talked to them about racism, and did some activities that Carlo helped her to find. She then invited the younger to design a format for presenting their ideas about racism, stereotyping, and prejudice to the rest of the fourth grade and to her classmates in the Cambridge-Lesley Program. Michelle explained, she wrote later, that she "wanted them to try and help others and teach them about racism so their friends can pass it on and so on and so on." Over the next few weeks, the younger to put together a performance which included defining terms; reading aloud passages that they themselves wrote about racism, and performing skits about Rodney King, Rosa Parks, and housing discrimination.

Her report on this project reflects careful observation of the students, and pride and pleasure in their work:

As I would watch them as they were acting out the little plays, I noticed that Tony would be taking more of a leadership role than any of the other kids I had. I also saw a change in him from the art classroom to doing this project. In the classroom he would be a terror, not listening to anyone, acting out. When I chose him, I was kind of naive. He is one of the most serious kids I have and he basically had the foundation for the skits. I would watch him move the kids around to make it just right, and he would argue with kids if they weren't serious enough. It's good to have someone to help me out. I'm glad I chose him.

As you keep watching you will also see that if a kid messes up the scene they will automatically do it over from the beginning, which I thought was good. As they do the Rosa Parks skit, it's great to see their facial expressions like being tired, sad, mad, demanding. The kids really got it together.

pieces and expanding others until they have created an entity which represents their lives in a way that satisfies them. This year students read The Autobiography of Malcolm X while they worked on their own life stories; they also watched Spike Lee's Malcolm X and grappled with differences between book and movie.

As the teenagers discussed readings, worked on their own autobiographies, and settled into roles as teacher aides, labeling and stereotyping emerged as a major theme for discussion. "Many of them have been labeled," Riordan explains, "And of course they immediately began to label the kids in their classrooms — "Jose, he's a trouble maker," and so on." In order to nudge the young educators into thinking more about the ways in which a label can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, he played a theater game which involved pasting labels onto the students' foreheads and asking them to respond to one another according to these labels. He also brought in a poem from Edgar Lee Masters' Spoon River Anthology — the reflections of the prostitute Aner Clute from beyond the grave:

ANER CLUTE

Over and over they used to ask me,
While buying wine or beer,
In Peoria first, and later in Chicago,
Denver, Frisco, New York,
wherever I lived,
How I happened to lead the life,
And what was the start of it.
Well, I told them a silk dress,
And a promise of marriage
from a rich man—
(It was Lucius Atherton).
But that was not really it at all.
Suppose a boy steals an apple
From the grocery store,
And they all begin to call him a thief,
The editor, minister, judge,
and all the people—
"a thief," "a thief," "a thief,"
wherever he goes.
And he can't get work, and
he can't get bread
Without stealing it, why
the boy will steal.
It's the way the people regard
the theft of the apple
That makes the boy what
he is.

Many of the students had difficulty making sense of the poem, but one girl, Diedre, got the message immediately and explained it to her classmates in such a clear and compelling way that the poem became a permanent part of the ongoing conversation about labeling. Riordan recalls:

I didn't realize until about a month or more later that that poem had become a kind of touchstone. The kids kept referring back to it — "You know, it's like that poem—"
A belief that people do not change has powerful negative implications for these teenagers as well as for their present and future students: Many have experienced little success in school and have a low regard for themselves.

That introduction of text in response to an issue, that is the way things have worked in regard to text.

Riordan often duplicated newspaper articles on educational issues for reading and discussion. Media coverage of several murders — where students from the High School were accused of stabbing college students — prompted not only discussion of the ways in which the media can manipulate public perceptions of an event but also debate on violence in the wider culture.

We discussed whether anything could be done in schools to make this a less violent culture. And they tended to think not.

Riordan invited Lesley professor Nancy Carlsson Paige to visit the class and talk about violence in children’s toys. She showed the eleventh and twelfth graders the ways in which the packaging of these toys promoted racist stereotyping and violent fantasies. Then the class viewed “Ethnic Notions”, a film about the ways in which African-Americans have been portrayed in print and in pictures since before the Civil War. “It kind of opened their eyes to the idea that schools can matter. And they can be different.”

“So that’s what’s text for us,” concludes Riordan. “A children’s toy can be a text.”

Is Change Possible?

All year long, says Riordan, the Cambridge-Lesley students struggled with questions about whether people can change. Most were pessimistic about the possibilities for improvement: Some kids are good, some are bad; some are smart while others are dumb. Such an attitude sets warning bells ringing in Riordan’s ears: As teacher’s aides and potential future teachers they need to see that roles, expectations, and settings shape behavior; that children will act differently when the adults, their classmates and the setting changes. But a belief that people do not change has powerful negative implications for themselves as well as for their present and future students: Many have experienced little success in school and have a low regard for themselves.

Sometimes experiences in the elementary classrooms can nudge students toward a more optimistic stance. Almost from the beginning of the year, Annette had been having a difficult time with her cooperating teacher. She felt that the teacher was picky, and she resented the way she interfered when Annette tried to help youngsters find solutions to problems. Finally, after the teacher barged into a negotiation that Annette was conducting between two small boys, Annette confronted her, saying, “I would really rather you would speak to me afterwards rather than when I am talking with the children.”

The relationship between the teenager and the teacher changed immediately. “And now,” Riordan reports, “they are like this!” With a smile he holds out two fingers that are pressed so close together that not one photon could get between them.

Late in the year, when the class returned to the question of whether people can change, Annette spoke up: “They can. Because my cooperating teacher changed.”

Riordan challenged her to look even closer to home: “Well, Annette, in September would you have confronted her as you did?”

“No!” Annette shook her head emphatically. “Definitely not.”

“So you’ve changed, too?”

A look of astonishment lit Annette’s face. “Yes, I guess I have.”

What is the Ideal Classroom?

May 27 marks the last day of class for the CRLS seniors. After a brief informal ceremony celebrating their individual and collective achievements, Carlo asks the teenagers to consider the following question: “From what you have learned, from what you have experienced, what is the ideal classroom?

“The ideal classroom would be multicultural, so people could learn about each other. Like I learned about people here.”

What would the ideal classroom have in it?”

Around the circle hands fly up, but before giving the students the floor, Riordan connects Carlo’s question to an assignment they had completed several months earlier “when we asked you to write about what your classroom would be like.” Now they have more experience and can revisit the question. After suggesting that they think about their
Through Child’s Eyes
By Leslie Greenidge

As you enter the room you see so much stuff—the kids cubbies, the mats, and the stairway upstairs has you wondering if you could go up and try to take a look. But the white rope tells you it is off limits. Oh well, curiosity killed the cat, and I don’t feel like risking it today. I go and sit in the chair in the dress up corner. A big trunk—just think of all the things I could be: a mother, a business woman, or even a movie star. The possibilities are endless. If I get bored over there, I can go to the next section which has two couches, two chairs, and a table in the middle. And look at all these books! I could sit here and read for hours and still have not read all the books.

Look at the little tables with six chairs (that are just my size). You see the name papers, the name papers are fun, they teach you how to write your whole name. Then you have more worksheets, and when you finish them, the teacher puts a star on your paper.

When you look at the ceiling you see so many mobiles, it puts you in a trance for a while. When you go sit on the rug, you see a calendar which tells you the month. Then you see a chart with all the numbers on it. So far it goes up to forty, because we’ve been in school for forty days. We add a new number every day we are in school.

Well, it is time for me to leave now. As I leave the room I turn to take one more look and I see a sign that says “Welcome to our room,” which means everyone is welcome to this room. All I can say is, I cannot wait to come back.

A Typical Slice
By Stephanie Hudson

Everyone is at choice. Linda is playing in the block corner with Derick. Aron, Teresa, Joey, Beverly (teacher’s aide) are playing in the sand corner. They are filtering sand through a funnel. Meredith is singing “Oh where oh where are the goopy children,” a song that Teresa, Fransis and Aron make up yesterday. She’s singing to a small group of kids fingerpainting. The group includes Josh, Andy, Carie and Brian. They are trying to make orange with yellow and red paint. Joey’s mom is helping make orange soup with Iris, Nancy, Teresa, Amy, Jason, Fransis, and Brian. They’re cutting carrots. Last but not least, I’m sitting on the couch writing and observing. And that’s just ten minutes in my busy day.

A Favorite Subject
By Santiago Pinto

The subject I think the kids enjoy the most is music—in there, the kids have a lot of fun singing and dancing to the songs. One of the things they do is dance to songs the teacher (Ms. Silverberg) plays on the piano or the tape deck. An example would be a book named “Tingaleo.” This book the kids enjoy singing and dancing to. This book the kids had already sung with the regular teacher, Ms. Castro, so they had no problems following along. In this music class I am in there with half the students because we combine them with another teacher’s class, so I participate with the class and do all the things they do. A lot of the things the kids do have to do with the seasons and the holidays so the teacher brings in books and songs the kids can have a lot of fun with. When the class is over the kids are fired up and they don’t seem to be tired so I think this is the class they enjoy the most.
own experiences in the seminar as well as what they have seen in elementary and preschool classes, Riordan acknowledges Charlene's raised hand.

"I don't know if this is answering the question, but this is something I learned in the classroom: When I was over in the high school — you know, I was in the bilingual program—I used to always feel scared to talk. Like, if the teacher asked a question, I would know the answer but I wouldn't say it. But when I came here, I got comfortable with everybody here and I could talk any time I wanted."

Carlo nods enthusiastically, "So, that's the ideal classroom? One in which everyone feels comfortable?" She notes Charlene's point on the blackboard.

"The ideal classroom would be multicultural," adds Eugenia, "so people could learn about each other. Like I learned about people here." Her eyes travel around the room: One classmate comes from the Bahamas; three have emigrated from Haiti; other students hail from Portugal, from El Salvador, and from Puerto Rico, via New York City. Addresses on the classlist range across all of the neighborhoods of a city that is as diverse economically as it is ethnically.

Carlo writes "multicultural" on the board and calls on Annette.

"In the ideal classroom there is communication," Annette asserts. Her voice softens almost to inaudibility as she adds, "So you can talk about problems."

Carlo writes "communication" on the board and then turns to Annette, "To develop solutions? Is that what you said?" Following a nod from the teenager, she chalks up another phrase.

Again nudging the teenagers to tie their own experience as students to what, as teachers, they want for children, Riordan probes, "Is that a connection with what you saw here?"

As Annette nods, Carlo points out, "And also that's what happened for Annette. She found that if you communicated with the teacher, you could solve the problem."

Sandra speaks next: "When you are talking about a subject, be able to relate the students and the content. You know what I mean?"

"The content is relevant to the students?" Carlo checks to make sure she has understood. "I love that you learned that! I really love it. That is so important." Beaming, she solicits help in spelling "relevant."

There's a wide range of students: from good to bad, and also in the colors of their skins," adds Diedre.

"A wide range of learners?" Carlo nods vigorously as she writes. "Don't ever lose that. Don't ever let anyone convince you that you should have one group that does just the basics, and another group doing more advanced work..."

"Do you think we have a wide range of students here?" asks Riordan.

"Yes," Diedre nods. "I don't like leveled classes. I like normal classes and this seems like a normal class."

"And we've talked about that among ourselves," adds Carlo. "Okay, what were the other hands I saw? Okay, it'll be Karen, Tracy, then Sandra again. Karen?" The contributions come quickly; Carlo records each on the chalkboard.

"Like, when we have problems with each other, we give each other feedback."

A variety of subjects, and like at science time we can go outside and learn — not just go by the book. And also, don't judge people."

The seating arrangement: not in rows, but in a way you can see everyone and everyone can see you."

"In a circle, in a circle," chant several merry voices. Laughter and applause follow.

"It's kind of organized, so everyone knows where everything is," suggests Tracy.

Diedre qualifies Tracy's point: "Organized, yes, but there is lots of stuff. Everywhere."

In the remaining minutes Carlo asks the students to consider rules: What rules will govern the ideal classroom? How will they be made, and how will they be phrased? The students discuss having the children themselves make the rules, the need for respect, the importance of phrasing rules in a positive way. It is time for the group to adjourn, but before it does, Antonia requests permission to speak.

"I want to say a last thing: That children are very special. That they are their own people."

Editor: Helen Featherstone

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Changing Minds is published by the Educational Extension Service, a component of the Michigan Partnership for New Education. The Partnership brings together schools, families and communities, business and industry, universities, government, and other concerned citizens to discover and demonstrate new educational approaches that enable both students and educators to thrive in a complex democracy and a global economy. Partnership member institutions work intensively with a growing number of Michigan schools and communities to improve learning, both in school and out, for young people and for the educators and other professionals who nurture their growth. These Professional Development Schools (see list) and the emerging Local Area Partnerships that will support them develop new insights, ideas, know-how, and tools for potential use by other Michigan schools and communities.

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The EES also creates products for dissemination through the network of networks, including Changing Minds. Each issue of Changing Minds focuses in some depth on a difficult problem or topic in the renewal of teaching, learning, and the organizations that support these functions. Changing Minds includes both summaries or distillations of research and descriptions of ongoing innovation efforts, principally within Michigan but also in other parts of the country. Our goal is to blend research with thoughtful innovative practice, thus contributing to the continuous renewal of education in Michigan.

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   Detroit
   Katherine B. White Elementary
   School

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   Michigan State University
   Muskegon Heights
   Muskegon Heights High School
   Michigan State University/
   Grand Valley State University
   Muskegon
   Nelson Elementary School

Lake Superior State University/
   Michigan State University
   Brimley
   Brimley K-12 School

Michigan State University
   East Lansing
   Spartan Village Elementary School
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   Pontiac
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