

Sparks, Celebrations, and Kids: An Ethnographic Study of Writers Club

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Abstract

This descriptive study was designed to be an in-depth, ethnographic study of an after-school Writers Club that had been part of the fabric of a metropolitan area elementary school's culture for 12 years. The purpose of this research was to learn more about meaning-based pedagogy by examining Writers Club and the activities conducted within it with a focus on reading aloud. As the narrowing focus on skill and drill practices that are a by product of high stakes testing continues to grab time, attention, and headlines, educators and policymakers deserve access to examples of more meaning-based pedagogy in school contexts. This research was focused on the activities that occurred during club meetings as well as on the meanings that participants of the club made concerning those activities, particularly as they related to the embedded read alouds. Revealed through the voices of selected participants, Writers Club proved to be a venue for read aloud events that built upon the reading/writing connection and served to allow children to develop as writers amongst a community that included adults as well as peers.

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CHAPTER I

RATIONALE

Reading is key to a child's success in school (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). The ability to read impacts every academic area. Read alouds allow listeners access to the realm of the written word and help to pave the way for school literacy. Read alouds may serve as *windows* into worlds and experiences that are different from one's own. They may instead serve as *mirrors* and reflect the world the listener knows (Bishop, 1992). Either way, read alouds can be powerful.

As the narrator, Maleeka, the protagonist in *The Skin I'm In*, a 1998 novel written by Sharon G. Flake, is a child who found an avenue into school literacy through her father's practice of reading aloud to her when she was young. The language her father shared with her during read alouds "stuck" (p. 27) and provided her with the ability to move beyond her everyday literacy.

In this novel, Miss Saunders, a new teacher at McClenton Middle School who has learned how to live with a disfiguring skin condition, asks her students, "What does your face say to the world?" (Flake, 1998, p. 16). Maleeka, a tough talking, dark skinned black girl knows that her own face says, "*Don't go mess with me*" loud and clear, but she knows, even the first time she meets Miss Saunders, that she had best be wary. Miss Saunders pairs her up with Desda for their first class assignment: write a diary entry as if you were a teenager living in the seventeenth century. Unlike her usual street talk, the letter from Akeelma she produces and shares with Desda is written in a fluent, literary style. This makes Desda curious:

I read the diary letter to Desda. She asks how I came up with the girl's name, Akeelma? It's close to my name spelled backward, I tell her.

"How come you don't talk proper, like Akeelma talks in her diary?" she asks.

"Don't nobody talk like that for real, only people in old movies and books." Then I tell her how, before he died, my father read me books where people spoke like that.

"Some of it stuck, I guess" (Flake, 1998, p. 27).

Rationale for the Study

As children grow and develop, they are constantly making connections and building bridges amongst and between the four cornerstones of literacy: reading, writing, speaking and listening. The levels of complexity children are exposed to in each of these foundational pillars impact greatly on children's ability to move adroitly on their journey to develop as literate beings. While all four have words as their common denominator and share a natural relationship, they are not the same (Heller, 1999).

Children's first experiences with literacy are as listeners. As listeners, they develop a receptive knowledge and understanding of what words mean and what sounds are important in their language. Hearing is their first window into the world of words. Babies play with sounds and babble before they are able to reproduce sounds that begin to approximate words at about 10 months of age (Guenther, 1995). Their receptive vocabulary is far more sophisticated than what they are able to reproduce (Jusczyk & Hohne, 1997).

Children's vocabularies are sculpted by the language they hear. In their 1996 study, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*, Hart and Risley reveal differences between the amount and complexity of language heard at home by infants and toddlers. Words said in front of the child over a two and a half year period were recorded and analyzed. Their research indicated that children from professional families would hear 45 million words, children from working class families would hear 26 million words, and children from families of poverty would only hear 13 million words. Trelease (2001) refers to this discrepancy as the *vocabulary gap*, a gap that correlates with children's success with school-based literacy (Gee & Clinton, 2000).

When children do begin to speak, their language reflects what is spoken around them (Clark, 2001). Children for whom that language varies from Standard English add another layer of difficulty to developing school literacy. Ways of speaking serve to define groups of people, provide an identity, and allow membership in a group (Gee, 1996; Gumperez, 1982). Hart and Risley's (1996) study centered on the spoken, ambient vocabulary very young children encounter. It clearly demonstrates an unsettling discrepancy delineated by economics that undoubtedly influences children's ability to be

successful with school literacy. Their study focused on everyday speech which represents only the tip of the iceberg of potential vocabulary in a language. Approximately 5,000 words make up what is known as the Basic Lexicon, yet there were over 500,000 words listed in the 1986 Oxford English Dictionary according to McCrum, Cran, and Macneil's (1986) book *The Story of English*. Even at the time the book was published, more than a half million additional and mostly scientific and technical words were not even included in the collection. Where are these extra words that children are not likely to encounter in their everyday worlds? They live and breathe in the written form of the English language.

Reading and writing are as entwined as listening and speaking (Adler & Van Doren, 1972), and like listening and speaking they develop as part of social practice (Street, 1993). In the case of reading and writing, social practice requires specific tools. That is, reading requires some kind of text to read. Writing requires both something to write on and something to write with. Children who have access to these tools prior to entering school may emulate reading and writing behaviors spontaneously. Children without such familiarity will most likely have further to go on the road to school literacy.

Beginning writing resembles the babbling that precedes actual speech. It may be scribbling, but for the children who recognize that thoughts can be communicated by marks on paper, a foundation for reading has begun. Interpreting marks on paper is reading. Children learn this by being read to and observing others demonstrating reading behaviors (Fox, 2001; Trelease, 2001). A disquieting fact is that children of parents at the lower ends of the socio-economic scale are less likely to be read aloud to than children of more affluent families (Primamore, 1994). While there are often very legitimate reasons for this difference, it remains true that for our children without resources, schools have been unable to provide the appropriate scaffolding to make success in school-based literacy a reality (Auerbach, 1995).

Reading is essential for school success. It is therefore not surprising that research focused on reading is extensive. More than 1200 reading research projects are conducted annually (Trelease, 2001). Recognizing that this is so, a national committee funded by the U.S. Department of Education was created in 1983 to try to determine what could be done to address the purported reading crisis by systematically studying the burgeoning research. After two years of intensive study of more than 10,000 research projects then

available based on studies of human cognition, environmental influences of reading development, and investigations of classroom practice, their landmark report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, was published. The bottom-line message was simple. The commission found that:

Reading is a basic life skill. It is a cornerstone for a child's success in school and, indeed throughout life. Without the ability to read well, opportunities for personal fulfillment and job success inevitably will be lost. (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 1)

The commission emphasized that not only was reading important for individuals, it was also a crucial component in the framework of a society that is demanding increasing levels of literacy. As is true in most societies in our global economy, the ability for citizens of the United States to navigate written language is increasingly more necessary and demanding.

Anderson et al. (1985) stated that an appropriate goal for reading instruction should be to increase the number of children who read for pleasure. It is widely recognized that those who choose to read for pleasure read more, read better, and perform better in school and on standardized tests. Further, Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) acknowledge that the amount and breadth of children's reading contributes to their wide-ranging knowledge. This, in turn, impacts their facility in multiple curriculum areas. Wigfield and Guthrie also report that motivation is key to the amount and breadth of student reading. It is not that frequent readers become motivated, but rather that those who report that they are motivated to read are more likely to read more both in the present and in the future. Because reading is an acquired skill that demands extensive practice to become proficient (Allington & Cunningham, 1999), those who avoid reading often fail to achieve success in school-based literacy. As a true testament to the adage "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer," in reading it translates to "the more you read, the better reader you become," and conversely, "the less you read, the less likely you are to become a reader."

Developing children's desire to read is tantamount to helping them as they navigate school based literacy. Gambrell (1996) agrees, "I have long been convinced that the central and most important goal of reading instruction is to foster the love of reading" (p. 14). Her research indicates that one of the key ways that teachers can facilitate a love of reading is to explicitly model reading aloud and share their own love of reading with

the children in their classes. Donovan (2003) echoes this: “Children learn about reading by seeing adults read words in a variety of settings and text formats” (p. 30). Donovan’s study showed that children were more likely to read books that were familiar. Children often select books that have been read aloud to them to read on their own.

A powerful way to motivate children and to help them develop as readers is to read aloud to them (Carter & Abrahamson, 1991). Among the Commission on Reading’s findings were potent conclusions about the effects of reading aloud to children. “The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children” (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 23). In addition, their synthesis of the research concluded:

Nor should oral reading be discarded altogether once children are fairly skilled readers. Opportunities to read aloud are features of the literate environment, whatever the reader’s level. There is no substitute for a teacher who reads children good stories. It whets the appetite of children for reading, and provides a model of skillful oral reading. It is a practice that should continue throughout the grades. (Anderson et al., 1985), p. 51)

Reading aloud is a social event that also serves as a scaffold for unfamiliar text and helps to develop a positive attitude towards reading (Alvermann, 1996; Fox, 2001; Laminack & Wadsworth, 2006). Requiring only a text to be read and an audience, it is simple, inexpensive, and can be compelling. Read alouds do far more than entertain their listeners. Among the benefits of read alouds are the following: they help children enjoy reading, become informed, introduce literary language, boost comprehension, learn conventional syntax, become writers, tap into the imagination, open discussion, and in their most compelling sense, they entice and lure their listeners into the realm of the written word (Blessing, 2005; Manning, 2005; Routman, 1999). Huck (1992) believes that all children should hear stories read aloud every day and that in the primary grades children should be hearing stories read aloud three or four times a day.

There is no “exact right way” (Fox, 2001, p. 40) to read aloud. Reading aloud can vary from the very personal, one-on-one experience of a parent reading to a child from a picture book to the professionally staged reading of an important work for a paying audience. In schools, read alouds take many forms. Among those forms could be the elementary classroom teacher reading aloud to the class from a chapter book every day

after lunch or sharing a picture book at the beginning of a unit of study. It could be a middle school teacher reading poetry each day to his children. It could be a high school teacher “who so loved the sound of language that she ‘took valuable time’ from each period to share a short piece only to comment on the artful writing” (Laminack & Wadsworth, 2006, p. xiii). Read alouds could be children buddy reading aloud to each other or in small groups. Read alouds could be guest speakers who are invited into schools and classrooms on the National Education Association’s *Read Across America Day* on Theodore Geisel’s birthday on March 2 each year to celebrate Dr. Seuss’s love of sharing language with others. Read alouds need not, nor indeed should they be limited to fiction, particularly in a school setting. Newspapers, magazines, and non-fiction texts reflect the types of reading most adults encounter in their everyday worlds (Donovan, 2003). Read alouds transport reading from a private, internal event to a shared, social experience (Adler & Van Doren, 1972).

In the primary years, read alouds serve many purposes. For children with minimal prior exposure to print, read alouds are necessary to help these children recognize that print conveys meaning and to build a desire to read. Without such experience, children are far more likely to have spent time in front of a television set where the ability to interact with language is largely restricted to passive listening and the experience with complex language is limited (Huck, 1992).

Some children enter school with many years of being read to. They have had the opportunity to develop “book sense” even before they know how to read the words that pull them into the story and bring them back to demand repeated reading of familiar favorites (Fox, 2001). For children accustomed to being read to, read alouds compliment their previous comfortable experiences with reading and serve as a bridge from home to school. As aural learners, young children are primed to absorb curriculum that is read to them. Until they have the necessary skills to read to themselves, read alouds and class discussions are crucial to learning.

Children in upper elementary classrooms often demonstrate a wide range of reading interests and abilities. For those who find school reading challenging, as in primary classrooms, read alouds provide access to curriculum that may be too difficult for children to read for themselves. With chapter book read alouds, Laminack and

Wadsworth (2006) suggest that we “are obligated to seize the opportunity to grow our listeners into the kinds of students who believe themselves capable of ‘living through’ an entire novel on their own” (p. 182). Reading aloud to children even after they have mastered the ability to read to themselves continues to encourage their development as literate beings (Laminack & Wadsworth).

In the *National Assessment of Educational Progress 1999 Trends in Academic Progress: Three Decades of Student Performance*, Campbell, Hombo, and Mazzeo (2000) note that despite the continued intense focus on reading research in the decades since *Becoming a Nation of Readers* was published, reading scores on standardized tests have changed very little. Another disturbing undercurrent in the research indicates that although the vast majority of citizens are literate, as adults they are functionally alliterate; that is they do not choose to read for pleasure. According to Reutzell and Cooter (2000) “Although many statistics declare that 23 to 25 million Americans cannot read at a functional level, the greater tragedy lies in the fact that many Americans can read but choose not to do so” (p. 15).

Beers (1996) conducted a yearlong study of alliterate seventh graders. She identified three categories of alliterates among these middle schoolers: dormant, uncommitted, and unmotivated. Dormant alliterates liked to read but did not make time to do so. Uncommitted alliterates did not choose to read at present, but may choose to do so in the future. Unmotivated alliterates did not like to read and did not expect to change their minds about reading in the future. Dormant readers, along with those children who identified themselves as avid readers, shared pleasurable early memories of being read aloud to and connecting with characters and stories. Children identified as either uncommitted or unmotivated either did not have these experiences at all or experienced them inconsistently. They did not develop a positive attitude towards reading, or what Early (1960) called an “unconscious enjoyment of literature” (p. 111). Alliterate readers wanted their teachers to read entire books aloud to them, “but not because they don’t want to read it themselves. Instead, they described how the reader’s inflections, hand movements, and explanations of what was happening helped them understand the story” (Beers, 1996, p. 112). Read alouds allowed these middle schoolers the opportunity to experience text vicariously in the way successful readers do.

However children enter classrooms, helping them become literate individuals is one of a teacher's primary responsibilities (Laminack & Wadsworth, 2006). Taking the time to read aloud even to middle school and high school children communicates to children that reading is both valuable and valued (Alvermann, 1996; Blessing, 2005; Carter & Abrahamson, 1991; Serafini, 2003).

Reading aloud though, does something even more powerful. It serves to build a classroom community of readers (Carter & Abrahamson, 1991; Giorgis, Johnson, Forsburg, & Dejong, 2005; Serafini, 2001). Washburn (1977) contends that in order to develop motivated readers teachers must actively seek ways to promote reading and definitely go beyond what is "commonly referred to as 'teaching reading'" (p. 4). Promoting reading means encouraging children to read many different types of text for pleasure and a wide variety of human purposes. Many teachers are aware of this need. O'Flahaven, Gambrell, Guthrie, Stahl, and Alvermann (1992) noted that a national survey of teachers "revealed that 'creating interest in reading' was rated as the most important area for future research" (p. 12).

Katherine Paterson (1995), author of *Bridge to Terabithia* and many other texts says, "'Let me hear you read it;' is a test. 'Let me read it to you' is a gift" (pp. 282-283). "Let me read it to you" is an invitation to the literacy club (Smith, 1988). By its nature, it is inclusive. Just as young children can understand words before they are able to use those same words as part of their useful vocabulary, so too can listeners comprehend words that they cannot yet read for themselves. Carefully chosen, masterfully shared read alouds bring reading to life. For the less able readers, listening to read alouds can provide a glimpse into what Csikszentmihalyi (1978) describes as the flow experience that avid readers and others experience as they "lose track of time and self-awareness when becoming completely involved in...reading a book" (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997, p. 4). If readers have never experienced this; if they are too caught up in the focused work it takes to decode words to revel in the experience; they need to know that there is a payoff for becoming skilled enough to enter the *flow* under their own power.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the abundance of evidence that read alouds are profitable on many levels, they do demand what is quickly becoming an ever more elusive classroom commodity, especially due to the current fixation on high stakes testing: time. At present, we are in a contest of very demanding curricula with a constant eye on the bottom line: test scores. The impact of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) on public education is far reaching (Bracey, 2004; Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Meier & Wood, 2004). It affects both what is tested and what is not tested. “Under NCLB, teachers feel great pressure to focus their energies solely on preparing students to excel on standardized tests” (Guilfoyle, 2006, p. 9) by doing skill and drill activities. Schools have been forced to divert resources away from teaching and learning in order to meet sanctioned mandates for failure to make annual yearly progress (Sizer, 2004). Many educators have been forced to shy away from child-focused instruction (Dewey, 1990) to more fact-based instruction.

Reading First, the portion of NCLB that focuses on beginning reading, comes with the mandate that all children be reading at or above grade level by the end of grade three. It provides monies to public schools for implementation of reading programs that meet criteria in five aspects of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, fluency and comprehension (Hudelson, 2005). These programs are often highly scripted, time intensive, and limited to skill and drill. Thus opportunities for sustained reading and writing are disappearing from classroom practice (Calkins & Harwayne, 1991). Hudelson reported that many of the teachers in Arizona she worked with have faced narrowing curriculum as well as mandatory district training on following the scripted curricula. Consequently, she shares that “many educators report that they are doing just as they are told, and that they do not have time for read aloud or for independent reading” (p. 10). As a participant in a series of meetings sponsored by the National Commission on Writing in America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges, Hudelson has heard these concerns echoed by literacy teachers and advocates across the country. Teachers lament that Reading First’s approved scripted reading programs negatively affect both reading and writing programs in their schools.

The real pay-offs for read alouds are cumulative and not always readily apparent (Laminack & Wadsworth, 2006; Trelease, 2001). Jennifer Morris, a middle school teacher in Staunton, VA reported that an official from the Department of Education who was on a site visit questioned the instructional model at her school because it continued to focus on teaching children reading and writing strategies. “He said that few of the schools he oversees use this ‘literacy approach,’ because it doesn’t easily translate to raising test scores” (Beers & Morris, 2006, p. 4). The implication that her school should cease and desist with what their teachers recognize as best practice was clear.

Teachers bombarded with escalating curricular demands that impact how they decide to use their time are often rushed and hurry to cover tested material. Consequently, they are disinclined to spend precious minutes reading aloud with children. Educators and policymakers need examples of strong literacy pedagogy that continue to integrate reading aloud and other meaning-based literacy practices.

Reading is a complex activity that requires a large number of separate acts to act in concert for meaning and comprehension to occur (Adler and Van Doren, 1972). Read alouds shared by fluent models help propel children towards becoming better readers themselves. Because the evidence is clear that read alouds are beneficial for children of all ages, it makes sense to examine contexts where reading aloud occurs as a routine part of the instructional environment. Such an examination should provide insight into subtleties of such literacy pedagogy that would be valuable to teachers, administrators, and policy makers (Stanley, 1992).

Purpose of the Study

This descriptive study was designed to be an in-depth, ethnographic study of an after-school Writers Club that had been part of the fabric of a metropolitan area elementary school’s culture for the past 12 years. The purpose of this research was to learn more about meaning-based pedagogy by examining Writers Club and the activities conducted within it with a focus on reading aloud. As the narrowing focus on skill and drill practices that are a by product of high stakes testing continues to grab time, attention, and headlines, educators and policymakers deserve access to examples of more

meaning-based pedagogy in actual contexts. This work has the potential to illuminate one such pedagogy that embeds read aloud in a program to encourage writing and cross curricula connections by elementary children in an environment designed for literacy learning (Johnston, 2004). This research was focused on the activities that occurred during club meetings as well as on the meanings that participants of the club made concerning those activities, particularly as they related to the embedded read alouds.

Guiding the Inquiry

In a descriptive ethnography, it is appropriate to document an activity of interest such as Writers Club. Research questions for this form of ethnography are related to the important behaviors, events, attitudes, processes, and/or structures that occur within the community under study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). My interest was in understanding the culture of Writers Club and the function of read aloud within the culture. I wanted to examine what members did and said, and the materials they used as these related to Writers Club. In the interpretivist tradition (Patton, 2002), I wanted to understand the meanings Writers Club members made of all of those things.

When I began my early fieldwork in Writers Club, my initial plan was to focus on the orienting read aloud event, or “spark”, that began most meetings. My fieldwork was a complete pilot study. I attended all of the Writers Club sessions in 2007, made observations and notes, conducted interviews, and did preliminary data analysis. After the first few sessions, I realized that trying to focus solely on one aspect of the activity was not appropriate because it limited understanding of what was going on. Writers Club was an entity with several read alouds entwined within its structure. I realized that regarding the spark as **the** read aloud event overlooked another read aloud event that occurred during the sharing sessions when all of the assembled writers had the opportunity to read aloud what they had written that day in their small writing groups. In addition, it overlooked the Writers Celebration which was a third read aloud event where each of the young writers read aloud a selected piece to relatives, staff members, and friends.

Ethnographers take a holistic perspective (Mertler & Charles, 2005) requiring that “observations and interpretations are made within the context of the *totality* of human

interaction” (pp. 225-226). In ethnography, research questions and hypotheses may emerge during data collection and help to shape the research. Early fieldwork for my dissertation research on Writers Club did just that. It reshaped and stretched the lens on read aloud I had intended to use. I realized that I needed to regard the spark and the small group sharing at the end of each Writers Club session and the public sharing at the culminating Celebration as read aloud events and study them as they were embedded and functioned within the culture of Writers Club.

I had many questions of interest related to Writers Club as I began my research. As is typical in ethnographic research (Chambers, 2000; Eisner, 1998; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Spradley, 1979) I refined my research questions as the research progressed. The research questions were inspired by my desire to understand the Writers Club experience and the read alouds within them from the perspectives of its members. Observations of the activities of Writers Club and the voices of its members continued to shape and refine the research questions throughout the study.

I was particularly interested in the read aloud events connected with Writers Club. I wondered how important these events were to the Writers Club members and if they were considered pivotal or peripheral to the experience. I wanted to know about spark selection. Who chose them? Were they deliberately chosen for specific purposes or was their selection less intentional? Did both the adults and children consider them to be important? How did the adult members respond to the spark? How did the children respond to the spark? Were the sparks remembered? Did the sparks influence children’s writing? What was sharing their writing like in small groups? Did members like sharing? What did members think about sharing their own writing? Did the children enjoy sharing their writing during the Writers Celebration? Do children think the adults should share their writing at this event?

As I continued my research, questions of interest emerged about other aspects of Writers Club. Why did members choose to participate? How did the leaders view Writers Club? How did the children view Writers Club? Was Writers Club important to the Seaside Elementary School community? What was it like to organize a program like Writers Club? Were the meetings well attended? What was the Celebration like for members and the community? What was writing like in Writers Club? How did children

view the differences between writing in school and writing in Writers Club? Did the leaders enjoy the writing? How did members view themselves as writers?

The question of time was an undercurrent throughout much of the research, particularly for the adults in Writers Club. The bottom line question—Was Writers Club worth the effort put forth to make it happen?—needed consideration.

Writers Club was a multi-faceted environment for literacy learning with many members. My research questions helped to guide my quest to make sense (Wolcott, 1994) of it all.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section I provide a relevant review of the literature for the following topics: Culture Viewed Through the Lens of Ethnography, Reading/Writing Connection, and Literacy as Social Practice.

Culture Viewed Through the Lens of Ethnography

Ethnographers approach the design and implementation of their research studies through the core concept of culture, “the single most important concept underlying ethnographic research” (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999, p. 63). Consider the following definitions for ethnography:

- “Ethnography (*ethno-* refers to human cultures; *-graphy* means description of) is a research process used in the scientific study of human interactions in social settings” (Mertler & Charles, 2005, p. 225).
- “Ethnography, or written descriptions of culture, also opened our eye to other meanings for ‘culture’” (Frank, 1999, p. 2).
- “Ethnography refers to a systematic description of a culture that is based on direct observation of a culture” (Lichtman, 2006, p. 63).
- Ethnography is “those varieties of inquiry that aim to describe or interpret the place of culture in human affairs” (Chambers, 2000, p. 852).
- “Ethnography is the study of the culture of a group, usually as that culture is revealed, again, through the course of ongoing events. What makes ethnography separate from other participant observation studies is the emphasis on culture” (Preissle & Grant, 2004).

Goodenough (1971) identifies culture as being a collection of behavior patterns and beliefs that establish patterns for standards of what is, can be, how one feels about it, and how to go about doing it within a group of people. This aligns with one of the sub definitions for culture in *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, *i.e.* “the concepts, habits, skills, arts, instruments, institutions, etc. of a given people in a given period” (p. 359).

Because the concept of culture so deeply embedded in ethnography is somewhat ambiguous, there is a need to be thorough when defining the parameters of culture in research (Chambers, 2000).

Davis (2006) offers this overarching definition of culture (1999): “Culture is *the totality of ideas, beliefs, values, activities, and knowledge of a group or individuals who share historical, geographical, religious, racial, linguistic, ethnic, or social traditions, and who transmit, reinforce, and modify those traditions*” (p. 4). Culture is about ‘groupness’ and belonging. Clayton (2003, pp. 15-18) identifies six implicit aspects of culture:

- *Culture is pervasive* – all areas of life are influenced or shaped by cultural forces
- *Culture is shared* – it is not idiosyncratic; culture is not only transmitted from generation to generation but is also shared widely among people of that large (e.g. nation) or small (e.g. family) community
- *Culture is learned* – it is not genetic
- *Our own culture is often unknown to us* – despite the fact that it is pervasive, shared, and learned, culture does not warrant much discussion in casual conversations with people of the same cultural group
- *Culture is dynamic* – it changes over time
- *Culture is the root of our identity* - closely allied with all that makes us who we are and what we believe

Holliday (1999) claims that there are actually two realms of culture that need to be teased apart and recognized as distinct entities. He identifies these realms as large cultures and small cultures. Among both academics and non-academics, the default notion of culture is usually described as having ethnic, national, or international characteristics, or what Holliday refers to as large culture. He cautions that this leads to overgeneralizations that emphasize cultural differences, oversimplify, and possibly stereotype groups of people. An implication inherent in acceptance of the concept of large cultures is that there are smaller cultures contained within and subordinate to the larger culture. Holliday classifies these subcultures as having an “onion-skin

relationship” (p. 241) with the large culture which indicates that these subcultures exist both within and because of the large culture. In other words, without the underlying essential features of the large culture, the subculture would not exist. Research implications for this type of subcultural analysis according to Holliday are prescriptive and normative and include looking for origins of what happens within the subcultures in their overlying large culture.

As the definitions of ethnography at the beginning of this section indicate, the large culture view is not the customary vantage stance of ethnographic researchers. Ethnographic research usually focuses on clearly defined groupings of individuals. Small cultures relate to “cohesive behaviour in activities within any social grouping” (Holliday, 1999, p. 241). Many small cultures exist independently of large cultures and require explanation, observation, and description without the overlaying constructs of a larger entity. In other words, study of a particular social group can be undertaken without presuming that it is a subset of a larger culture.

Research for small cultures, according to Holliday (1999), calls for an interpretivist orientation. Small cultures take a multiplicity of forms from neighborhood groups, to classrooms, to workplace settings, or other groups of people who come together in social groupings or activities. Because most people live multifaceted lives, they operate amongst and between many different small cultures that exercise distinctive social mores and socialization as well as being members of the large culture realms of ethnicity, national, and international groups. To further complicate understanding nuances of culture, Clayton (2003), Davis (2006), and Rogoff and Morelli (1989), remind us that the invisible aspects of culture such as attitudes, assumptions, and values of its members must be considered along with the more obvious visible aspects of a culture.

Cross-cultural investigations of child development impact notions of universality of research. Children ‘live culturally’ (Moll, 2000), not in isolation or in research labs. Rogoff and Morelli (1989) note “that human functioning cannot be separated from the contexts of their activities” (p. 344). This body of research strongly supports the theory that cultural context is an important factor in both children’s behavior and development. What a child can do and is likely to do may vary depending on the cultural context in which observations of the behaviors take place (Larson & Marsh, 2005).

Lawrence (1983) examines the relationships between individuals and institutions. She reminds us that inhabitants of a culture are both shaped by the culture even as their interactions with it help to shape and redefine the culture. Her work examines what she perceives as the often conflicting cultures of the home and the school, particularly for those students from other than the majority culture. The child must navigate each of these cultures mitigated by the adults in each. Lawrence (2003) calls for teachers and parents or caretakers to engage in what she calls “the essential conversation” to help bridge the differences and lead to greater understanding.

Pryor (2004) states that it is impossible to define culture absolutely because by its nature it is dynamic and ever changing. It recreates itself continuously through interactions between and amongst individuals. However culture is defined or examined, it cannot be ignored either individually or collectively. Ethnographers, then, face a complex challenge. They must employ a variety of lenses to capture a panoramic view of the cultures they study in order to reveal their characteristics and complexities from the perspectives of the members.

Reading/Writing Connection

Reading and writing have not always been viewed as integrated processes. Prior to the 1970s, theory and research regarded these two as different realms that while they may have overlapped, the overlap did not present as “a topic of either theoretical or pragmatic concern” (Langer and Flihan, 2000, p. 1). Tompkins (1997) notes that rather than overlapping, reading and writing were often viewed as opposites with the explanation that reading involves decoding and deciphering while writing requires encoding and production of written text. The traditional skills approach to teaching reading and writing follows this concept presenting them as separate subjects with reading regarded as receptive and writing regarded as productive and expressive (Olson, 2007).

Longitudinal research conducted by Loban (1963) suggest a strong relationship between reading and writing. His work involved studying students’ test scores across time in reading and writing at 4th, 6th, and 9th grades. His results demonstrate that students

who write well, read well and students who write well tended to read more. These relationships between reading and writing increased over time meaning that the correlation was strongest among the 9th graders in the study.

The 1970s and early 1980s brought more correlational studies and a renewal of interest in Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading (Musthafa, 1996). In Rosenblatt's (1978) theory, reading shifts from being a product oriented event to a process of creating meaning through a two-way transaction between the mind of the reader and the language of the text. Meaning does not exist as a ready-made product within the lines of the text; it is dependent upon the structure and content of the writer's message and the prior experiences and knowledge the reader brings to the text. Meaning must be allowed to vary then, since readers bring different histories and perspectives to the text. Rosenblatt suggests that this need not surprise us: "We speak of Barrymore's Hamlet, Gielgud's Hamlet, Nicholson's Hamlet. We accept the fact that the actor infuses his own voice, his own body, his own gestures...into the words of the text" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 13). Readers of text also infuse it with personal interpretations. It should not surprise us that a rereading of the text will likely produce a different or deeper response because the first reading itself adds to the experience of the reader, providing the reader with a greater depth of resources to bring meaning to the text.

Two hypotheses of the reading/writing connection explored in the 1980s concerned themselves with directionality (Musthafa, 1996). These were the reading-to-writing model and the writing-to-reading model, both implying that learning in one modality can be applied in the other. Schema theory developed from research in a number of disciplines that surmised the meaning making aspects of reading and writing linked them cognitively "suggesting that both reading and writing represent a process of interactive and dynamic activations and refinement of schemata" (pp. 5-6).

Tierney and Shanahan (1991) note that research on the study of the reading/writing relationship was still in its infancy in the early 1990s despite the plethora of research on both reading and writing as separate entities. However, they state that available research on the reading/writing connection strongly supported continued efforts in that direction. "Research is clear that writing and reading together engage learners in a greater variety of reasoning activities than when writing or reading are apart" (p. 272). In

addition, combined instruction led to improvement in both. “One major theoretical construct here is that, as a process, reading and writing mutually condition each other, and in transaction, each of the transacting elements conditions and is conditioned by the other” (Musthafa, 1996, pp. 8-9).

Reading and writing are inextricably linked (Ellis, 2000) and, according to Ellis share a “symbiotic relationship” (p. 13). Readers read what writers write. The reader and writer may be one and the same, but more often the reader and writer are different individuals. Even when the writer and reader are the same, it is still a transactional, meaning making process. Clay (1991) documented that the skills needed for reading occur naturally during the earliest stages of writing. Early writing helps students develop concepts of print that transfer to early reading. Clay believed that reading and writing should be treated as reciprocal processes for both beginning readers and writers and less competent readers and writers. When students create their own text to use as reading material it establishes a clear link to their reciprocity (Smith, 1994). When students create their own text they are reading from a position of power. Elbow (2004) professes that writing should be taught before reading and credits educators like Graves (1991) and Calkins (1983) for discovering: “Very young children can write before they can read, can write more than they can read, and can write more easily than they can read—because they can write anything they can say” Elbow (2004, p. 9). The process of writing prepares children to understand concepts for reading including directionality of text, that letters form words, and those words chunked together with purpose can create meaning. Children begin to realize that the books they read or are read aloud to them are products other people have created to communicate with other people like themselves.

The reciprocal nature of reading and writing impacted classroom based reading and writing instruction in the 1990s and continues to affect reading and writing instruction in the present. Many educators began to implement a workshop approach to reading and writing where shared literacy experiences could occur in a natural and ongoing way (Calkins, 1983; Cohle & Towle, 2001; Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998; Hansen, 2001; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). In a workshop approach, teachers and students work together to create a supportive learning community where children share and build their experiences as readers and writers.

Children become better writers by analyzing and critiquing both the work of professional authors and their own work. Using professional authors' works as models or springboards for their own writing is very similar to artists developing their own skills by copying art works created by established artists. Deliberately focusing instruction on a variety of writing styles such as folklore, biography, informational brochures, or mystery invites the learner to grapple with and experience choices faced by "real" authors. This practice of genre studies focusing on authors' craft is currently undergoing resurgence (Wyatt, 2008). In genre studies, the works are carefully studied so that each genre's purpose, audience, structure, and vocabulary are revealed (Hornoff, 2008). These then become tools for young writers to access as they venture into writing targeted genres.

Graves (1991) calls for teachers to surround children in literature all through the day. Graves says, "All children need literature. Children who are authors need it even more" (p. 67). When writing as a reader, children draw from their reading experiences as they create their own works. When children are immersed in the types of literature they are emulating in their own writing, it facilitates and deepens their development as writers.

Rosenblatt (1978) recognized that the lines between work done by readers and work done by writers cross. "Any reading—no matter how rigidly classic and 'readerly,' any text—no matter whether potentially a work of art or not—requires some degree of 'writerly' activities from a reader" (p. 171). When reading as a writer, students examine text both for the story and the craft. When writing as a reader, students acknowledge the unseen reader and recognize their responsibility to choose words carefully to convey their intent.

Sometimes described as parallel processes, activities of readers and writers often mirror and/or complement each other (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991). Preparing either for reading or for writing requires an appropriate physical environment, an established purpose, activation of prior knowledge, and construction of mental images. While creating meaning from text readers question, predict, and verify content. Writers provide answers and verification by writing coherently. Both readers and writers think logically, react to ideas, and construct images and meaning. Readers and writers actively engage in constructing meaning and approach their tasks strategically (Olson, 2007).

Research emphasis on connections between reading and writing continue today (Olson, 2007). Tierney and Shanahan (1991) report that writing used as a learning tool to support reading instruction results in improved reading achievement, and that using reading as a resource to elaborate ideas and broaden background knowledge leads to better writing performance. They propose that in the future students can be taught “to use reading and writing together in an intentional strategic fashion, based on the thinking operations required by the learner’s goals” (p. 274).

Literacy as Social Practice

Literacy is a complex term that is growing ever more complex as new technologies continue to expand, challenge, and extend what it means to be literate today (Larson & Marsh, 2005). Literacy does not develop in a vacuum. Indeed, many would argue that literacy requires social interaction even to exist. Rogoff (2003) ascribes to a sociocultural-historical theory in which learning settings can either be formal or informal. This theory identifies the child as an “active member of a constantly changing community of learners in which knowledge constructs and is constructed by larger cultural systems” (Larson & Marsh, 2005, p. 100).

Vygotsky (1978) holds that interpersonal situations are essential in guiding and developing children’s skills and behaviors that are valued in a particular culture. Children learn by working with a more accomplished other in what Vygotsky referred to as the “zone of proximal development” or *ZPD*. Because of the support they receive, children can accomplish tasks that they could not accomplish independently. They stretch and develop skills and behaviors that become within their independent reach. Then, they are ready to progress through to the next stage of learning supported in a newly defined *ZPD*. Vygotsky’s theory of human development stresses the inseparability of human social and cultural activities (Larson & Marsh, 2005).

In considering literacy as social practice, “the social nature of learning is emphasized and learning is recognized as changing participation” (Larson & Marsh, 2005, p. 8). Lave and Wenger (1991) propose the concept that learning occurs through a process of participation in communities of practice. Such participation is initially

legitimately peripheral as the learner first enters the community and begins to participate as a member of the group, supported by more experienced others in the community. From the onset, the learner is a member of the group even as she/he is learning what it means to be part of a community of practice. Lave and Wenger strongly support the social character inherent within this framework for learning.

Much as an apprentice to a blacksmith may begin his training by keeping the fire burning hot enough for the work of the blacksmith to be accomplished, as the apprentice acquires expertise, tasks become more and more central to the end product eventually ending with the apprentice becoming a blacksmith in his own right. From the onset the apprentice has engaged in tasks that are part of the skills set of a blacksmith, and has legitimately worked at the periphery of the anvil until such time he is able to work alongside the blacksmith as an equal.

Sociocultural-historical theory regards literacy as a tool for interpreting behavior based on what people in a specific community actually do. This theory does not support using an arbitrary standard usually set by the dominant group (Larson & Marsh, 2005). because it subscribes to the belief that generalized standards are not useful in gauging success in other situations. What it means to be literate varies depending on what is important within communities. Rogoff (2003) calls for researchers to keep this perspective on what community members do while they are conducting research. She argues that highlighting arbitrary standards can mislead and create the impression of arbitrary deficiency.

Gee (1991) termed a new field of study of literacy “New Literacy Studies” (NLS) to describe a shift towards the concept of multiple literacies and away from the acquisition of skills model that previously dominated much literacy research. NLS represents a new paradigm in considering the nature of literacy as social practice that occurs not just in formal or informal settings, but also in everyday interactions (Street, 2003).

Street (2003) makes a distinction between autonomous and ideological literacy models. The autonomous model assumes that literacy itself will affect other social and cognitive practices and tends to look at illiteracy as a deficit model. The assumption in the autonomous model is that if you supplant illiteracy with literacy among populations

of poor or otherwise disadvantaged people, that it will enhance their cognitive skills and improve their economic prospects regardless of the conditions that originally led to their illiterate status.

The ideological literacy model, often associated with NLS, argues that standards exist within communities of practice. Research in NLS challenges the assumptions of the autonomous model and instead builds from the belief that literacy varies by context and cultures. Street (2003) claims that literacy is always rooted in social practice and offers the ideological model of literacy; a more culturally sensitive model that recognizes literacy practices differ according to context. According to Street, an ideological model of literacy

posits...that literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being. It is also embedded in social practice, such as those of a particular job market or particular educational context and the effects of learning that particular literacy will be dependent on those particular contexts. Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always “ideological,” they are always rooted in a particular worldview and a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalize others. (Street, 2003, pp. 77-78)

NLS is the theoretical underpinnings for research conducted as a joint undertaking by higher education groups in the United Kingdom: the University of Stirling, Lancaster University, Lancaster Morecambe College, Preston College, Anniesland College, and Perth College. Under the umbrella of the Literacies for Learning in Further Education (LlLFE) a variety of research projects are being carried out to investigate the depth and breadth of students’ vernacular literacy activities. Ivanic, Edwards, Satchwell, and Smith (2007) recruited students to become co-researchers to investigate the variety and types of literacy they used in their everyday lives in phase one of the research.

The 4 researchers and 16 practitioner researchers (teachers of the courses) worked with students involved in 30 further education courses participating in the project. They conducted a series of informal conversations and more directed interview activities in phase two of the research. Smith’s (2005) analysis of two case studies during the second phase of this research found that both the practitioner researchers and the students

involved in the program were surprised at the amount of literacy activities students engaged in during their vernacular lives. For example, neither of the students in the case studies previously regarded interactions on the internet as connected to literacy practices. Martin, one of the practitioner researchers commented:

I just can't believe how much they do at home. Before becoming involved in this project, I thought most of them [students] maybe skimmed through a magazine occasionally or texted their friends, but no more than that. Smith (2005, p. 319)

The goal for the researchers in this study is ultimately to harness the literacies prevalent in students' everyday lives to enhance students' proficiency with the literacies required in their upper level courses. Prior to their involvement in the LfLFE project, "most of the college-based researchers would not have given much consideration to literacy in their classrooms, other than at the level of discussion of students' skills or lack of them" (Ivanic et al., 2007, p. 719). Participation in the study brought them new insight into regarding literacy as a social practice. The next step, or phase three, will be utilizing that knowledge to transform their classroom practices to leverage students' expertise with everyday literacies to improve their ability to be successful with higher education. While the researchers acknowledge that the basis for their conclusions arise from investigation of just 30 specific higher education classes, they believe that the "insights emerging from it are applicable...to literacies for learning in all sectors of educational provision" (p. 719).

Gee (2000) reminds us that "reading and writing only make sense when studied in the context of social and cultural (and we can add historical, political, and economic) practices of which they are but a part" (p. 180). The reader always brings his or her social history and cultural background along with the requisite decoding skills to interact with text. The writer does the same in the process of creating the text. Meaning, or "comprehension occurs in the transaction between a reader and a text within a sociocultural context" (Pardo, 2004, p. 8).

Adding to the challenge of effectively studying literacy practices embedded in social practice is that the terms literacy, reading, and writing vary across cultures (Barton, 2001). Oldfather and Thomas (1998) note "that literacy is a dynamic process of becoming that takes place throughout one's life, from the time of birth" (p. 649). To help address

some of those issues, Street (2003) has developed a working distinction between literacy events and literacy practices. Heath (1983), an early researcher in the realm of NLS, identified literacy events as those in which written pieces are essential in the interactions and interpretations of the participants. For Heath, literacy events combined written text, speech, and social relationships including the family and the larger culture. Street expands the concept to literacy practices which refers “to the broader cultural conception of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts” (p. 79). For Street, literacy events are embedded within larger literacy practices. An example of this distinction is the specific literacy event of writing a shopping list is only one of multiple literacy events possible when participating in literacy practices related to shopping such as reading signs or labels (Larson & Marsh, 2005).

Larson and Marsh (2005) identify the following set of NLS principles:

1. Literacy practices and events are always situated in social, cultural, historical, and political relationships and are embedded in structure of power.
2. Being literate involves being communicatively competent across multiple discourse communities. Literacy practices and events are embedded in discourses and are integrated into people’s everyday lived practices on multiple levels.
3. Social inequalities based on race, class, gender, ability, sexual orientation, and so on structure access to participation in literacy events and practices.
4. Literacy practices involve the social regulation of text, that is who has access to them and who can produce them.
5. The impact of new information and communication technologies changes the nature of literacy and thus what needs to be learned.
6. The changing nature of work also demands a new view of language that is multimodal and more complex than traditional conceptions. The notion of multiliteracies emerges. In other words, people use different kinds of literacy across domains of life (discourse communities).
7. Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.
8. Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense-making. p. 23

NLS clearly extends the more limited base of school-based literacy (the autonomous model rejected by Street and others), to literacy that is grounded in authentic practices with individuals interfacing in multiple literacy contexts. NLS honors the literacies students bring with them from home and their communities and suggests

embracing and entwining these literacies with those developed and nurtured in school cultures.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

In this chapter, I describe the design of the study, as well as the methods I used. In the section entitled “Researcher’s Relevant History with Writers Club,” I explain my previous experience with Writers Club. In the section entitled “The Setting,” I describe the site for the research and demographics of the site. In the “Participants” section, I briefly describe the Writer’s Club participants and provide background information on myself as the researcher. In the “Shaping the Direction of the Inquiry” section, I explain my research interest, how I gained entry and acceptance into the current Writers Club, the process of completing the IRB forms with the participants, and I provide a timeframe for the research. In the section entitled “Data Collection,” I identify and explain the instruments and procedures I used to collect data. In the section entitled “Data Analysis” I explain how I used the information to address the questions this investigation explored. I end the chapter with a brief summary.

For this method chapter, instead of writing a strictly technical report, I chose to write a personal narrative of what I did. This approach offered a more life-like record of my experience of doing this project and will, I believe, allow other researchers greater access to my process. Both critics and novice researchers should benefit from this approach.

The entire process was an unfolding design. Though I had a plan, I kept testing it in the real world and making methodological choices based on my assessment of on-going events in keeping with ethnographical research literature. Because I wrote this description after the research was completed, on occasion I resort to interpretation and draw conclusions that would appear on face value to belong more appropriately in the data analysis chapter. However, particularly because this study is an interpretivist ethnography, and analysis was on-going throughout the process, when interpretation shaped on-going method choices, I believe that it was essential to include it in this chapter. My inclusion of these interpretations also allows this chapter to provide a basis for further writing projects about methodological issues dealing with, for example, the

moral and ethical issues embedded in my interactions with informants such as Dana, the Writers Club organizer, throughout the process.

Research Design

Ethnographic models of research have framed the design of this research. Mertler and Charles (2005) describe ethnography as a type of research used for studying social groups in natural settings. Ethnographers approach the design and implementation of their research studies through the core concept of culture, “the single most important concept underlying ethnographic research” (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999, p. 63). Writers Club, a social group that is the focus of this research, is embedded in the culture of Seaside Elementary School. It is included on the school’s website as a special feature of the school and is incorporated into their school plan. The group of sixth graders in 2008 who entered Seaside Elementary School as five and six year olds have had the opportunity to be members of Writers Club since they were in first grade. Many children and staff choose to participate in Writers Club for multiple years. Because the concept of culture permeates ethnography, it is appropriate to explore the culture of Writers Club through the methodology known as ethnography.

As stated in Chapter I, the purpose of this study was to examine the use of the literacy event known as read aloud in a school setting and to analyze the lived experience of both adult and child participants. My objective was to identify and study the culture of Writers Club and how reading aloud is understood within it. Consistent with the philosophy of ethnographic research, my goal was not to seek generalizations, but to investigate and analyze a specific educational experience; namely the practice of read aloud in a particular school setting. My primary aim was to fully describe Writers Club so that the human activities it entails are revealed.

Researcher’s Relevant History with Writers Club

The ethnographic researcher has an obligation both to the research community and to the group under study to reveal her ideological tenets (Wu, 1994). Preissle and

Grant (2004) called for ethnographers to demonstrate “rigorous honesty and integrity” (p.179) as they conduct their work and report their results. With these guidelines in mind, I need to clarify my connection with Seaside Elementary School and disclose my connection with Writers Club.

Built in 1986, Seaside Elementary School became the designated elementary school for my own two children to attend. My daughter was a member of the first group of children to attend Seaside Elementary School from kindergarten through sixth grade. I joined the staff of Seaside Elementary School as a sixth grade teacher in 1988. I taught sixth grade for four years and then taught third grade until I left the school in 2000 to become a third grade teacher in a center for gifted and talented education in the same school division.

In 1994, a second grade colleague and I decided to pursue a master’s degree in curriculum and instruction that would prepare us to become reading specialists, a position that I currently hold. As part of our course work, we conducted teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Edie, my colleague, and I focused our research on how to improve children’s writing. At the time, the read aloud aspects of Writers Club were incidental to our research. The focus of our research was on children’s writing and revision. We designed Writers Club under six tenets:

- Use multiple approaches as the spark to help children generate writing ideas such as physical objects, art, music, or quality children’s literature as the model
- Adult leaders (ourselves) write as members of the writing community along with the children
- Writers spend at least the first half of the writing period writing to the spark
- Writers can choose their own topic or continue with the spark for the second half of the writing session
- Writers share their writing orally in small groups at the end of each session
- Writers select one piece from their portfolio to refine and revise to share publicly at a Writers Celebration to formally close the sessions

Edie and I struggled with the logistics of trying to make Writers Club a success. We thought that we needed at least a one and a half hour block to ensure time for quality thought and responses. We wanted to blend children from both classes, but because they were in different grades, their schedules were dissimilar. The more challenging obstacle,

however, was carving out an hour and a half time block from our already over packed days. Ultimately we resolved our dilemmas by deciding to run Writers Club as an after school program. That solution turned out to be quite freeing. Because we were “on our own time,” we did not feel compelled to look at all of our choices in terms of the prevalent school-based curricular mind set. We focused on writing for writing’s sake. Nine children from each of our classes chose to participate. That made our sharing groups larger than we liked, but we felt it was important to be inclusive. We planned and explored a wide variety of writing styles including poetry, memoir, dialog, and narratives. Wednesday afternoons during January, February, and March were purposeful interludes with quiet music playing and twenty authors at work. Our Writers Club meetings did not pass unnoticed in the school at large. Many of our colleagues stepped in to see what was going on or asked us questions about Writers Club later in the week. Families of all of the participants and many interested teachers attended the Writers Celebration that we held in March.

Interest among the staff generated an expansion of Writers Club the following year. Four teachers joined Edie and me as small group leaders. Six children from each of the participating teachers’ classes attended so there were child participants from first, second, third, fourth, and sixth grades. Among the discoveries Edie and I made from our research the previous year was that the sharing of each writer’s work at the end of each session was a powerful motivator for our young writers. Because of both time and children’s attention spans, we believed that six children was the optimum size group we could accommodate. The other teacher leaders agreed. Again, Writers Club proved to be enjoyable and productive for all those who participated. The down side was that more than six children from each class wanted to join. In an attempt at fairness we used a lottery system to determine membership. Even so, we regretted having to turn any interested child away.

Even more teachers joined us the following year. Our third and final year of running Writers Club as an after school program involved 54 children and 9 teachers. Again, we judged it to be very successful. Edie and I, along with two other colleagues, presented our findings from our research project at the Virginia State Reading Association in 1997. Shelley, a sixth grade teacher and fellow presenter wrote:

It's 3:15 on a Wednesday afternoon. The kids have all left. I'm exhausted. I can't wait to go home. Wait, oh, no! Today is Writers Club? I have to go downstairs and face 36 more kids! Why, oh why, did I ever volunteer for this????

...It happened every week. The peaceful feeling always came over me, no matter how tired I was, how bad a day I'd had, or what other thoughts were on my mind. I started looking forward to Writers Club as the best part of my week. Apparently, a lot of the children did too! (Archival document written by Shelley, 1997)

The success of Writers Club was also instrumental in its downfall. Seemingly, many parents loved the program and began lobbying to have their children placed in classrooms of "Writers Club teachers." This proved problematic for the principal. Both adult participants and space were limited. The principal decided not to offer Writers Club the following year.

I began to incorporate Writers Club into my normal classroom routine during our third year of the after-school program. From the beginning, Edie and I were surprised that children we thought of as our "reluctant writers" wanted to participate in Writers Club. Even more surprising was that when these "reluctant writers" were in Writers Club, they wrote! I wanted all of my children to have the Writers Club experience and reconfigured it as part of my classroom practice for the next nine years. I taught parent volunteers how to serve as small group leaders. Usually between four and six parents joined our community of writers on Writers Club days.

Two years after I left Seaside Elementary School (Edie left two years earlier for a reading specialist position at another county school); Shelley approached the new principal with a proposal to revamp Writers Club in such a way that it would be all inclusive and eliminate earlier issues. That is, she suggested opening up Writers Club to all children in first through sixth grades regardless of whether their teacher participated as a group leader. By then, Seaside Elementary School had a well-established partnership with a local business. Among the benefits the partnership brought to the school was a pool of volunteers who were willing and able to work with children individually and in small groups. Shelley reasoned that with the volunteers from the business partnership, interested teachers, and non-classroom staff members including specialists, instructional assistants, and office staff who agreed to participate as small group leaders and/or spark sharers, that any child who wanted to participate would be able to do so. The principal

agreed and Writers Club at Seaside Elementary School was reborn in 2002 with 45 children, 9 staff members, and 3 volunteers from the business partnership.

Shelley managed the administrative details of Writers Club and served as its organizer and one of the small group leaders until she retired from the county in 2005. At that point, Writers Club was firmly established in the school and the community as an important aspect of the school culture. In 2005, there were 83 students, 10 staff members, and 5 business partnership volunteers participating in Writers Club. Dana, a former third grade colleague of mine, stepped forward to take over the role of Writers Club organizer. She served in that capacity throughout the dissertation research.

The Setting

Seaside Elementary School – Site Selection

Site selection is an important consideration in any research. “Ethnography is the study of the culture of a group, usually as that culture is revealed, again, through the course of ongoing events” (Preissle & Grant, 2004, p. 164). Patton (2002) asserts that groups of people who interact over time will evolve a unique culture. An ethnographer immerses him or herself in the group under study to such a degree that he or she is indistinguishable from the group. Ethnography usually requires immersion at the site for an extended period of time (Preissle & Grant, 2004; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999); therefore, the site selected must be willing to accommodate the need for extended contact with the researcher. A guiding principle among ethnographers is that the researcher needs to remain in the field for at least one complete cycle of events in order to reveal the range and variations of activities in any group (Preissle & Grant, 2004).

Writers Club has a definite cycle. It begins in January each year and ends in March. With its three-month cycle, Writers Club offered me the opportunity to approach the study through an ethnographic stance. I observed one complete cycle of Writers Club in 2007 during my early fieldwork. The 2008 session of Writers Club was the second complete cycle I observed and was the source of data for this research.

Seaside Elementary School – Demographics

Seaside Elementary School is a public elementary school in the suburbs of a large metropolitan area. The demographics of the school are in transition with decreasing enrollment due to the aging of the neighborhood it serves and increasing numbers of children in other than mainstream categories. In 2008, there were 527 children with 54% classified as white, 17% as Asian, 11% as Hispanic, 8% as black, and 10% as other.

In 2008, Seaside Elementary School offered specialized programs for pre-school in addition to traditional programs for kindergarten through grade six. The school offered an on-site before and after school day care program. Approximately 13% of the children qualified for free and reduced lunch. About 16% of the children were designated as Limited English Proficiency learners.

Seaside Elementary School – Physical Description

When you walk in through the main entrance of Seaside Elementary School, you immediately step into a towering two-story lobby with three sets of double glass doors at both ends of the area. The entry faces the bus circle and the main road. Except for during morning and afternoon school bus traffic, this is the main entry where parents drop off or pick up children as well. This entry has a double row of glass doors creating an eight foot by twenty-four foot atrium and air lock with benches at each of the narrow ends where people can sit.

The lobby itself is quite large and effectively divides the building in two, separating a two story section with the library and classrooms (to the left) from the office, gymnasium and cafeteria (to the right). Glass walls separate the office from the lobby. This allows the secretaries a clear view of anyone entering or leaving the school.

A two-story brick wall faces the glass wall of the office. Five carpeted steps lead up to a small stage area flanked on both sides by ramps leading back to the floor level. Large triangular planters fill the area between the ramps and the steps with a variety of flowers and small bushes.

To enter the cafeteria you need to make a u-shaped turn to the right from the lobby when you enter through the main doors. The cafeteria has one angled wall with windows along the front of the building. Centered on the longest wall are a series of four

carpeted steps approximately 24 feet long. This area has movable walls that open up to reveal a music classroom. When used in this manner for performances, the cafeteria becomes a cafetorium, with the music classroom serving as a stage. The cafeteria feels like a large, light and airy area. It holds 24 round cafeteria tables in 4 rows of 6 tables, each with ten attached low round stools for seating. For performances, the cafeteria tables are folded and pushed out of the way and folding chairs are brought in. Used in this manner, the cafetorium accommodates approximately 500 people.

The library serves as the hub of the building. It is open and inviting with a beamed, light wood ceiling. The vaulted library ceiling soars over 30 feet high at its peak. When you enter the library through the set of double doors closest to the main entrance of the school, you turn to the right and walk past the magazine racks to arrive at the circulation desk. The circulation desk separates the library workroom and storage areas from the public areas of the library. There is room for two adults to sit comfortably behind the desk to check books in and out with the computer system and help with questions. All of the counter surfaces in the library are dark red. A two foot by five-foot counter angles off from the check out area and has a deep rolling bin underneath for returned books. To the right of the check out area, another section of counter runs perpendicular to the back wall and connects with the computer catalog shelf.

Directly opposite the circulation desk is the story pit. The back wall bumps out with short window walls coming back at a slight angle to form a lowered floor area about fifteen feet across at its longest point and about ten feet wide. Five tiered carpeted steps rise to the floor level of the rest of the library. Opposite the steps against the jutting out brick wall are waist high book display shelves filled with picture books. Armchairs at either end of the shelves invite readers to sit and browse through the display.

Two four-foot diameter round tables occupy the space between the top step of the story pit and the circulation desk with plenty of room to walk around them easily. Three other tables fit on each side of the library filling the areas between the book stacks and the doors. Each of the tables has four armless lightly upholstered chairs that snug up to the tables. Additional chairs are located at the ends of each of the book stacks and at the computer stations. Book stacks line the end walls of the library with free-standing four-foot high stacks filling in about one fourth of the total library floor area.

Flanking either end of the library are two story classroom wings. Both the upper and lower levels of each wing contain classroom areas that have eight classrooms opening into a large shared open space referred to as a pod.

The double doors on each side of the library work area open into the hallways that lead to the first floor classroom pods. On the first floor, they provide the most direct route from classrooms off the front of the building to the classrooms off the back of the building. Teachers and children often walk through the library to get to the other side of the building.

Upstairs an eight-foot wide hallway connects the upper level classroom areas. All along this hallway on one side, waist-to-ceiling high windows overlook the library below. From the top of these windows, the large expanse of the library roof slants downward until it is only one story high at the wall facing the library doors.

Seaside Elementary School – Writers Club

Writers Club has been in place at Seaside Elementary School for most of the past twelve years. It has an established cycle and pattern. For all of the children at Seaside Elementary School in 2008, Writers Club has been part of the school culture for their entire time at the school. Teachers, business partner participants, and staff members volunteer each year to serve as adult leaders for the club.

Writers Club Participants

The participants for the study included the Writers Club organizer, Writers Club leaders, self-selected second through sixth grade children from the school, and myself. In all, 14 adults and 73 children served as participants. In the paragraphs that follow, I describe participants in greater detail.

Writers Club Organizer

The Writers Club organizer, Dana, had been a teacher at Seaside Elementary School for 18 years. Dana earned her undergraduate degree in Elementary Education from Longwood College. She completed her graduate work in education at the University

of Virginia earning a Master's in Education. Dana was a third grade colleague of mine when a second grade teacher and I began Writers Club in 1994. She did not participate in the after school Writers Club in its first years at Seaside Elementary School, but did participate as a teacher leader when the principal reestablished it in 2002. When Shelley, the Writers Club organizer, retired from teaching in 2005, Dana took on the organizational responsibilities of Writers Club while remaining a teacher leader of a small group. Dana continued to serve as the organizer of Writers Club until 2009, attending to the myriad details that such an endeavor requires. She did not serve as a small group leader in 2007 or 2008.

Writers Club Leaders

Teachers. Six of the nineteen classroom teachers at Seaside Elementary School in 2008 chose to participate as Writers Club leaders. These included two kindergarten teachers, two second grade teachers, and two fifth grade teachers. Three teachers with “specialist” designations also served as Writers Club Leaders. These included the art specialist, the English as a Second Language (ESOL) specialist, and the school librarian. All of these individuals had served as Writers Club leaders in prior years.

Staff. Three additional Seaside Elementary School staff members, the library assistant, and two instructional assistants (IAs) served as Writers Club leaders in 2008. Although she had served as a leader substitute for multiple years, 2008 was the first year the library assistant led her “own” group. One of the IAs was a first time Writers Club leader. The other IA had led groups for several years.

Non-staff. Writers Club had three volunteers during 2008 who were not employees of Seaside Elementary School. Two of these volunteers, one man and one woman, worked for Seaside Elementary School's business partner (BPS). Their employer supported participation in multiple programs at Seaside Elementary and allowed employees to schedule time to volunteer during the workday. Both of these volunteers were new to Writers Club in 2008. Because of known schedule conflicts for Seaside Elementary School's ESOL teacher and the woman from the business partnership, these

two individuals shared leadership responsibilities for a single group. Twice during the sessions, they served as co-leaders.

The man from BPS was unable to continue as a volunteer with Writers Club after the first week due to an unanticipated meeting time change in his division. The school librarian's assistant stepped in and served as leader for his group during the remaining sessions.

The other non-staff volunteer had been a former pupil and enthusiastic Writers Club participant at Seaside Elementary School. In 2008, she was a sophomore at a neighboring high school. This was her second year serving as leader for one of the Writers Club groups.

Writers Club Kids

In December 2007, all second through sixth grade children enrolled in Seaside Elementary School for the 2007-2008 school year were invited to participate in Writers Club. Dana and Karen, the school principal, were faced with the problem of logistics because of the popularity of Writers Club. Up through 2006, Dana made considerable effort to include every child who wanted to participate. In 2007, for the first time, 12 children who completed the necessary forms, but did not turn them in on time, were not permitted to participate. Even while turning away some children, Writers Club ran with 81 student members and 15 leaders. Everyone squeezed into the library for the spark and the writing groups went to four different locations for the small group time.

In an attempt to limit the number of applicants, and eliminate the need to turn some applicants away, Dana and Karen decided to offer Writers Club only to children in grades two through six for 2008. Fliers advertising Writers Club went home with children early in November. Additionally, parent notification about registration for the program took place through the parent newsletters, classroom newsletters, the school website, and classroom teachers' Blackboard sites (e-sites maintained by individual classroom teachers to inform parents and share items of interest about their children's classrooms with them). Classroom teachers kept children informed of the application deadline via the in-house school morning news show and announcements.

Ultimately, 31 boys and 41 girls joined Writers Club in 2008. There were 14 second graders, 16 third graders, 17 fourth graders, 12 fifth graders, and 13 sixth graders. There were student participants from each of the 13 second through sixth grade classrooms. Thirteen of the children were Asian, six were black, one was Hispanic, two were listed as “other,” and 50 were white. While the percentages for Asian and black children who chose to participate in Writers Club closely reflect the demographic make-up of Seaside Elementary School, Hispanic children are underrepresented and white children are slightly overrepresented. Fourteen children were turned away either because they missed the application deadline or because Dana and their classroom teacher determined that they were not a good fit for Writers Club.

Researcher

As the sole researcher in this qualitative study, I felt sufficiently prepared to investigate the issues related to my research. My prior experiences through early fieldwork gave me a view of Writers Club that helped to shape this study and gave me the confidence to begin to identify what was needed in terms of data collection. My past was both an advantage and a disadvantage. My past as a teacher allowed me to understand things that I saw, but it also presented a possible barrier to understanding potential problems or issues that may have arisen without bias or preconceived ideas. As an ethnographic researcher, my work was to examine carefully and honestly, and to find out how participants experienced Writers Club and the read alouds within it.

As a teacher for over 20 years, I was comfortable in a school setting and familiar with the norms of school programs. I spoke the language of teachers and understood the language of children. I worked with volunteers on a regular basis both in my classroom and as a reading specialist. Therefore, I felt that I possessed the requisite background and interpretive skills to portray what I observed accurately, realistically, sensitively, and informatively (Wolcott, 1994).

I am currently the reading specialist at a county magnet school about eleven miles away from Seaside Elementary School. In this position, I am able to focus my attention on both reading and writing instruction for children of all grade levels, kindergarten through sixth. Studying a program such as Writers Club offered me opportunities for

professional growth and expanded my repertoire of techniques to use when working with children and teachers.

Shaping the Direction of Inquiry

Research Interest

My research interest for my dissertation originally focused on school reading practices. I had already decided to look specifically at reading aloud with children when a chance encounter with Dana led me to realize that Writers Club was up and running again at Seaside Elementary School. For my dissertation, I decided to study the read aloud event as it occurred within Writers Club. In particular I wanted to attempt to understand how this literacy event was experienced by club participants and how it was enacted within the literacy practice of Writers Club.

Entry to Seaside Elementary School

My county requires that persons conducting research in any of the county schools must have a sponsor and recommends that in the case of school-based research, the school assumes that role. Consequently, I contacted the school principal of Seaside Elementary School and arranged to meet her to discuss my research proposal (although there are current staff members who were colleagues of mine when I worked at Seaside, neither of the two school administrators were at the school during my tenure there). After my conversation with the principal, she enthusiastically agreed to serve as my sponsor both for the early fieldwork and for my dissertation research.

Before carrying out the early fieldwork, I sought and obtained permission from both the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the school division level and the Institutional Review Board at the university to conduct research involving human subjects and to participate and observe at the setting. To begin the dissertation phase of fieldwork, I sent my request to the school division IRB office in early October with minor changes to the plan I followed the previous year. I expected a relatively quick turn around time since the changes were minor. However, that was not to be. I made multiple unsuccessful attempts to connect with people at the county office and finally heard from

them at the end of October that I should expect to wait four to six more weeks before any decision regarding my proposal would be forthcoming. This was problematic. My university required that I have a letter of approval from the county IRB before I would be permitted to submit a request for IRB approval through them. Four to six weeks meant that I might not hear back from the county until the middle of December. I still needed to request and receive approval from the university before Writers Club began on January 9. The semester at the university ended in early December and did not begin again until mid January. The timing was unnerving.

Although I explained my problem to the county officials and reiterated the point that essentially the same proposal was accepted the year before, the new head of the department insisted that my proposal be thoroughly scrutinized. Near the end of November, I finally received permission from the county IRB and the long-awaited approval letter. I immediately submitted my proposal to the university. I received notification in mid December that my proposal was approved.

Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) contend that gaining access to a site depends on more than merely gaining permission to enter. Access to the information sought in ethnographic research also rests on the relationships established between the researcher and the group under study. An ethnographer renders the *etic* or outsider's view (Patton, 2002). The ethnographer's perspective is different from those of the culture under study. My previous experience as a former teacher at the school as well as my fieldwork in 2007 were, I believe, instrumental in establishing rapport and credibility with the participants of Writers Club. Most of the adult participants appeared able to relate to me as a colleague and offered me the *emic*, or insider's perspective (Patton). This deepened my research and facilitated "an exploration of how study participants perceive the meaning of an event" (Jawhar, 2000, p. 53).

The presence of a researcher in a setting is problematic (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Patton, 2002). Writers Club with a researcher present was not the same as Writers Club without a researcher present. Qualitative research takes place in real world settings where the researcher does not aim to manipulate the phenomena of interest. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) acknowledge that the researcher's familiarity with a site may either increase or decrease potential

threats to a study. The researcher's familiarity with the setting and participants may serve to lessen the risk for study participants because they may have already established a level of comfort with the researcher. However, familiarity may instead cause study participants apprehension. These issues were salient for me throughout the research process.

With respect to this study, I believe that the threats from my familiarity with the setting and several of the adult participants were minimal. My experiences working in a school setting heightened my efforts to be a sensitive, unobtrusive observer. I attempted to remain peripheral to the actions and interactions of the participants so that I did not interrupt the normal flow of Writers Club activities. During Writers Club sessions, I observed and took field notes most of the time. From my early fieldwork, I learned that I might need to assist in an emergency, such as escorting an ill child to the Writers Club organizer. In fact, I did assist with small details such as distributing materials and looking up locations of specific groups when called upon, but I did avoid significant intrusions such as taking over as a leader for a small group when substitutes were needed. My role was to understand what was going on; my actions as a researcher supported this role.

As an interpretivist, it was important that I understood meanings people made of their setting (Erickson, 1986; Lincoln, 1997). Consequently, Dana invited the children and adult leaders to talk with me during the sessions. I also held informal conversations with participants throughout the process (Zwiers & Morrissette, 1999). I interacted with Writers Club members more formally at predetermined times outside of Writers Club sessions when I conducted interviews and focus groups (Patton, 2002).

Parent Meeting and the IRB Forms

My experience with IRB forms during early fieldwork alerted me to the fact that for my study, at least, completing them was a very challenging process. The forms were lengthy, filled with formal language, and, for the parents of children in my study, apparently extremely confusing. Because my study included work with children, both a child assent form and a parent consent form were required for each child.

Complicating matters further, my study had an additional choice embedded within the form. Children and their parents were required to indicate whether they were simply

volunteering to participate in the study, or if they were willing for the child to be in the volunteer pool for possible selection as a focus group member or individual interview.

Many parents had more than one child enrolled in Writers Club. In the forms from my early fieldwork, I noted that some parents attempted to circumvent signing multiple parent permission forms by adding multiple names to one form. This was not acceptable to the IRB because each child needed to make his or her own choice about whether they wished to be included in the interview pool. Another problem I ran into with the IRB forms in my early fieldwork was that many of the parents had illegible handwriting. The sample IRB forms I examined before I made my own requested the participant's signature only; not their printed name. I modeled my form after the ones I had seen without realizing this approach could pose problems for me later on. It took quite a bit of time and effort to match those forms with the correct child. In some cases, I needed to work with classroom teachers to identify parent handwriting.

I took several proactive measures to help prevent these issues from plaguing the IRB forms for this study (see Appendices A & B). I ran the child assent forms on white paper and the parent consent forms on yellow paper to distinguish them and emphasize the need for two different forms to be completed. I highlighted the signature and date lines in pink in the section indicating that the child could participate in all parts of the study. I highlighted the signature and date lines in green in the section indicating that the child could participate in the study but did not want to be in a focus group or individual interview. On the child assent forms, I also highlighted the "Witness" signature line because that is required for children. I paired each child assent form with a parent consent form, wrote the child's first and last name in the top left hand corner of each, and paper clipped the two forms together prior to distribution.

I made two large posters to display the step-by-step directions and examples of completed forms. I included an example of "Yes, I want (my child) to participate in the study, and yes, I want (my child) to be considered for a focus group and/or an individual interview" signed on the pink highlighted lines. I also posted an example of "Yes, I want (my child) to participate in the study, but no, I do not want (my child) to be considered for a focus group and/or an individual interview" signed on the green highlighted lines.

I made a check-off sheet of Writers Club participants so that I could easily track who picked up and completed forms, and what their choices were. I tested over fifty pens to ensure they were working and placed them strategically so that they were easily accessible.

Writers Club members were not required to participate in the study. Choosing to participate required the extra step of meeting with me and completing the IRB forms in addition to completing the permission forms required by the school. I purposely tried to streamline the sign-up process for my research. I tried to anticipate glitches and provide solutions before they became reasons to bypass completing the forms.

I informed parents about my research at several points throughout registration for Writers Club. I wrote a letter introducing myself and my research that accompanied the Writers Club interest survey Dana distributed to all second through sixth grade children in November (see Appendix C). The letter included information about the IRB process and the parent meeting that would be held in the school cafeteria on January 9, 2008, the first day of Writers Club. I provided both email and phone contact information and encouraged parents to contact me if they had questions or concerns. Parents were again advised of the time and date for the parent meeting when their children received acceptance letters to Writers Club.

Only two parents contacted me before the parent meeting, one by email and one by phone. Both of them asked essentially the same question, “If I came and heard what you said last year, do I need to come to the information session again this year?” I encouraged them to attend the meeting although I did explain that the only difference between last year’s early fieldwork and this year’s study was the addition of focus group interviews for children and leaders. I also reminded them that they and their children would need to sign new IRB forms.

I prepared a letter (see Appendix D) to accompany the reminder “ticket” that Dana sent home the day before Writers Club began to children and their families. In this letter, I reassured parents and their children that my research would not interfere with the day-to-day operation of Writers Club. I also included simple step-by-step directions on the back of my letter for completing the IRB forms. I thought that since many of the parents were somewhat familiar with the forms, having completed them the previous year for my

early fieldwork study, that reading through the directions in advance would help to expedite the process the at the parent meeting.

The weather was bright and practically balmy at almost 70° when I arrived at Seaside Elementary School on January 9, 2008. It seemed to promote a festive atmosphere, a something-is-about-to-happen feeling in the lobby when I walked in. In less than an hour, more than 20% of the eligible student body, 32% of the classroom teachers, and eight additional leaders would assemble in the library to stay after school for Writers Club. I arrived at 2:15 pm to complete set up for my meeting with the parents in the cafeteria during the last part of the first Writers Club session. Children were to join us at the end of the session for an explanation and an opportunity to sign the child assent forms.

I went into the cafeteria to get my materials ready. To avoid a bottleneck at the doorway to the cafeteria I decided to set up at the table three rows back from the door next to the windows. From this vantage point, I would be able to see parents as they entered and beckon them over. I placed one of the posters with simplified instructions for completing the IRB forms in the window closest to the door to the lobby and the other on an easel off to the right of my materials table. I placed the forms on the table in five rows in alphabetical order staggered so that the names were easily seen in the upper left hand corner. I placed index card tents labeled “Last names A –H” and so on at the top and bottom of each row of forms. I reviewed what I was going to say to the parents and the children. When I was satisfied that everything was in order, I went into the library where all of the children and the leaders would gather for the first part of Writers Club.

Before beginning the session with a read aloud known as the “spark,” Dana let me know that she had decided to use the cafeteria as a working space for half of the Writers Club groups. I knew then that we could not use the cafeteria to meet with parents. I headed back to the cafeteria and carefully gathered up my materials and moved them to an empty cart in the library. I placed the easel with the posters just outside the library door. By the time I returned to the library, the first children had arrived.

After the children and their leaders were settled in their writing locations, I worked quickly to set up my new meeting site in the lobby of the building. A custodian brought out a rectangular table for me to spread out the IRB forms. Dana and I placed the table at

the end of the planter facing the front door. I again spread the forms out in five rows in alphabetical order with pens in between the rows. I put the easel with the poster at the end of the table. I hung the other poster near a seating area just outside the cafeteria doors.

Although this was an unexpected and quickly assembled change, I think that it ultimately worked in my favor. All of the parents had to enter the lobby to pick up their children whereas entering the cafeteria was a choice. When they entered the lobby, they automatically saw my sign and table and most seemed drawn to it. By 3:25 pm, the lobby was beginning to fill. Dana was engaging parents in conversation and steering them towards my table. Many of the parents entered saying, “My kid participated in this last year. I don’t need to hear your introduction again, just tell me where to sign yes to everything!”

By 3:30 pm, the lobby was getting crowded with parents and siblings. Dana introduced me to the group and gave a brief overview of my study. I explained the study in more detail and answered questions from the group. Most of the questions were procedural such as, “Should we leave this with you now or turn it in to the teacher?” Parents came over to the table, collected their forms, and took a pen to wait for their children to come out of Writers Club to complete the paperwork. Late arrivers were directed to the table by the other parents saying, “Look for the forms with your name on it and read the directions on the sign.” One parent, directed over to my table by a friend of hers said, “Well, I wasn’t going to bother with this, but since you already have a paper with my kid’s name on it, I guess I’ll read it and talk to my kid about it.”

Highlighting the response choices in different colors was a definite asset. Many parents commented on this. One parent said, “Thank god for the red and green lines! That’s way too much to read to figure out which one is yes for everything.” I was able to direct parents to the posters if they had questions about completing the forms, which freed me to address other questions about my research.

Color coding the child assent and parent consent forms simplified explanations and made it easier for parents to realize that both an adult and a child form were required for each child participants. Parents with multiple children in the program still lamented the fact that they had to sign a separate form for each child.

By the time children finished Writers Club and joined their parents in the lobby, about half of the forms were already distributed. It appeared that most of the families had already discussed and made decisions about their options regarding the study. They asked any questions they had, signed the chosen option, and turned the forms in quickly. Other families debated the choices on the spot before making a decision. Several asked if they could take the forms home to read them thoroughly before making a decision. I told them that was fine and pointed out that both my phone number and email address were on the forms so they could contact me easily if they had any further questions.

I continued to answer questions and help people with their forms until 4:00 pm. Just about all of the children and parents were gone by then except for the few who decided to stay and chat with each other. Dana and I gathered up the remaining twenty-one forms and put them in manila envelopes addressed to parents along with a duplicate copy of my letter that accompanied the children's "ticket" to Writers Club. We placed the envelopes in teachers' mailboxes with a note explaining that they needed to send them home with children the next day.

I did not circumvent all of the prior problems regarding form completion, but more of the forms were completed correctly and, even more importantly, more of the forms were completed and turned in. All but three of the parents who came to hear what I had to say ultimately chose to have their children participate. Of the 71 children originally enrolled in Writers Club, 31 agreed to participate in focus groups and individual interviews. Twelve children agreed to be part of the study but did not want to be in a focus group or in an individual interview. Despite my precautions, an additional eight students and their parents signed in both the pink and green highlighted sections of the IRB forms. With 31 full participants, I had more than enough volunteers to complete the study. Rather than going back to the families to ask which choice they meant, I made the decision to count those children among the group that agreed to participate in the study, but not in interviews or focus groups. This meant that of the 72 children ultimately enrolled in Writers Club, 51 (or almost 72%) completed IRB forms agreeing to participate in the study.

Writers Club Leaders and the IRB Forms

I met with the Writers Club leaders briefly in the library after the second meeting of Writers Club to complete their IRB forms (see Appendix E) because I knew that some would have already have left the building by the time I was finished with parents and children on the first day of Writers Club. All of the leaders agreed to participate in the study and be in the pool of volunteers for the focus group interview and individual interviews. Because Lily was under eighteen years old, she completed a child assent form and her mother completed a parental consent form for her.

Study Timeline

The bulk of data collection for this research took place during four months—January to April 2008. I attended and made observations of all Writers Club sessions on Wednesdays from 2:30 – 4:00 beginning January 9, and ending on March 12 with the Writers Celebration. I conducted interviews and focus groups in February, March and April. I began a reflective journal in October 2007 and continued it through the data analysis and writing process of the dissertation. Data analysis commenced in January 2008, was on-going throughout the Writers Club sessions, and continued until the dissertation was complete in the fall of 2009 (See table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Study Timeline

Data Collection	2007			2008					2009
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May-Dec	Jan-Oct
Permission for the Study	X	X	X						
Observations				X	X	X			
Note taking				X	X	X	X		
Reflective journal	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Informal conversation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Interviews					X	X	X		
Focus groups						X	X		
Audio taping				X	X	X	X		
Documents		X	X	X	X	X			
Questionnaire						X			
Data analysis				X	X	X	X	X	X
Archival records	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Data Collection

I used three principal sources of data collection for this study: (1) observations, (2) verbal exchanges, and (3) documents. Data sources frequently employed by researchers in the ethnographic tradition emerge from fieldwork, interviews, and observation (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000; Lichtman, 2006; Mertler & Charles, 2005; Patton, 2002; Preissle & Grant, 2004). Fieldwork refers to “being in or around an on-going social setting for the purpose of making a qualitative analysis of that setting” (Lofland, 1971, p. 93). Interviewing involves asking relevant questions on a topic of interest (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000) and is “the most common form of data collection in qualitative research” (Lichtman, 2006, p. 116). Observation requires paying attention to what is going on in a setting so that you can “see what there is to see, and hear what there is [to] hear” (Patton, 2002, p. 260).

As is true in other aspects of research, the boundaries between these data collection sources are not distinct. Fieldwork involves observation; interviews take place in the field; observation of the informant is important in interviews; and interviews may alert the researcher to observe certain elements of the field more closely. Fieldwork, interviews, and observations are not limited to ethnography, nor do they represent the totality of tools available for the ethnographer. However, I determined that they were appropriate tools for this study.

Wolcott (1994) identifies “three major modes through which qualitative researchers gather their data: participant observation (experiencing), interviewing (enquiring), and studying materials prepared by others (examining)” (p. 10). The research design for this study used all three of these modes.

Observations

Observations are typically associated with ethnographic studies (Lichtman, 2006). I considered the four roles that Fraenkel and Wallen (2000) used in their description of the researcher-as-observer. They contend that the role of the researcher in ethnographic research ranges along a continuum from *complete participant* to *complete observer*. In the *complete participant* scenario, individuals in the group under study do not know the

identity of the researcher. The researcher interacts as naturally as possible and is a member of the group. The element of deception involved in this approach is often critiqued. The *participant-as-observer* participates fully in the activities of the group, but also makes it clear that he/she is conducting research. The *observer-as-participant* identifies as a researcher from the outset and makes no pretense of actually being a member of the group. Lastly, in the *complete observer* model, the researcher is strictly an observer of the group.

During the early fieldwork in 2007, I maintained the *observer-as-participant* stance. I was introduced to the participants as a researcher, first in the “Welcome to Writers Club” packet sent out by the school and then in person at the first Writers Club session when I met with parents, children, and adult group leaders to explain and collect informed consent and assent forms. I was present during all of the Writers Club sessions, but I deliberately limited my conversational interactions and maintained a distance from the participants.

For the dissertation research, according to Fraenkel & Wallen’s (2000) continuum, I maintained a stance somewhere in the middle between the *observer-as-participant* and *participant-as-observer*. I requested that Dana introduce me as a researcher and an interested person who would participate in a variety of ways including taking notes, observing, and asking questions about what was going on. This role positioned me to learn and understand more about how participants experienced Writers Club.

Ethnographic observers often begin without preconceptions and hypotheses. Ethnographers build their hypotheses based on their observations and reshape them when they are found to be inconsistent with the evidence (Best & Kahn, 2003). My role was to record observations accurately and fully so that patterns could be noted and analyzed. Watson-Gegeo and Ullchny (1988) call for the ethnographic researcher to provide “thick explanation” of behavior and the context by including both in-depth description and explanation of observations.

Among the important tasks for the observer are taking notes, keeping records, and tracking data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Lichtman, 2006; Patton, 2002). Field notes can serve as a medium for reflection and further inquiry (Jawhar, 2000). Field notes should reflect the research environment and provide an honest picture of the noted events.

Hammersley & Atkinson contend that researchers should record all relevant features. For this study, the research questions determined what was relevant. The types of notes I took during this research included field notes and a reflective journal. My purposes and the context in which I worked determined the types of notes I took.

I made field notes during each of the Writers Club sessions and during the Writers Celebration on the Observation Instrument for Writers Club Meetings (see Appendix F). I used my laptop to record field notes continuously during the sessions. These included descriptions of the surroundings, groupings, and activities as well as words spoken to and amongst members. Many of my notes were brief jottings or otherwise incomplete. I elaborated these and added detail to my field notes immediately after each Writers Club session. Typically, the observation guide, a document I used to record times and observations using my laptop at each Writers Club session, was two to three pages long single-spaced. After I completed elaborating them, they averaged four to five pages each single-spaced. I fleshed out abbreviated jottings to add vignettes that I wanted to remember. This helped to ensure that the data revealed the “thick explanation” called for by Watson-Gegeo and Ullchny (1988).

From January through March 2008, I read and reread the observations of the Writers Club sessions to identify possible happenings that warranted more careful observation in subsequent sessions. In this way, my observations shaped future observations. I began keeping a reflective journal for this dissertation study in October of 2007 and continued with it through the fall of 2009. This journal provided me with an on-going means of synthesizing and making sense of the process and the data. I recorded my reflections on the field notes, problems that arose, and questions that I had. These helped to shape the research and guide observations. The journal served as a monitor of my research. Systematic reflection and introspection, such as can be achieved through a reflective journal, are important elements of ethnographic research (Patton, 2002).

I wrote in the journal three to four times a week from January through April 2008 to document my actions and thought processes as I reflected on topics related to Writers Club. Although I wrote in my journal less frequently after the data collection phase of the research was complete, I continued the practice throughout the data analysis and synthesis of the research.

Verbal Exchanges

Interviews are an appropriate tool for gathering information and perspectives of older children and adults (Clarke, 2005). Ethnographers understand that their own observations of a culture are incomplete (Wolcott, 1994). They need other eyes and ears to round out an experience. Ethnographers augment their understandings by including evidence from actions and talk of members of the group being studied (Frank, Arroyo, & Land, 2004). Interviews can provide the interviewer with an opportunity to check the accuracy of the researcher's impressions gained through observation and provide new direction or redirection for the research. Patton (2002) identifies three types of qualitative interviews: the informal conversational interview, the general interview guide, and the standardized open-ended interview. These three differ in the ways questions are determined and standardized before the interview begins.

The informal conversational interview is an unstructured interview that will likely yield different data for each person interviewed. The researcher may return to the same informant multiple times using this approach. A general interview guide ensures that "the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed" (Patton, 2002, p. 343). This approach helps to make interviewing more systematic and comprehensive than the informal conversational interview. The general interview guide provides a framework for interviews that remains flexible enough to allow the interviewer to pursue relevant topics as they are elicited from the informant. The standardized open-ended interview must be carefully thought out before the interview and strictly adhered to as the interview unfolds. This type of interview is highly focused and minimizes variation among different interviewers. The standardized open-ended interview limits the options of the interviewer and may also limit exploration of important topics or issues.

For this study I utilized informal conversations with Writers Club participants, a general interview guide with five adult and five child members of Writers Club (see Appendices G & H), and a general interview guide for three focus groups with child participants and one focus group with adult participants in Writers Club (see Appendices I & J).

I often had informal conversations with Writers Club leaders during set-up for Writers Club or after each session ended. I usually arrived at the site about ten minutes

early, signed in at the office, and went to the library where I placed my things in the library workroom. This routine gave me access for informal conversations with the librarian and the library assistant both before the sessions began each week, and at the close of sessions as they restored order and set up the library for the next day. On occasion, I spoke with the three other group leaders who tended to arrive early—the high school student, one of the instructional assistants, and the volunteer from the business partnership.

It was very difficult to connect with any of the classroom teachers either before or after the sessions because they tended to arrive after the session started and to leave immediately upon release of their children at the end of each session. On rare occasions, I did speak with a few teachers at the end of sessions. I intended to try to speak with the leader responsible for the opening spark at each session, but that proved to be problematic. Instead, I addressed the topic of the spark with the sparkers during individual and focus group interviews.

I sought out incidental verbal exchanges with children during the sessions to clarify and illuminate my observations (Nespor, 1998). As children assembled in the library for Writers Club, they often came up to me to ask questions or tell me something. When I joined small writing groups after the spark to listen in, I often quietly asked children questions or had children speak to me spontaneously. I jotted down brief notes on conversations that were pertinent to my research in my field notes and elaborated them when the session was over.

I chose not to conduct a formal interview with Dana because our ongoing interactions were both frequent and sustained throughout the study. I spoke with Dana informally at each of the Writers Club sessions and was in telephone and/or email contact with her two to three times a week from the beginning of the research through the data analysis and writing phase.

As I wrote in my journal or otherwise reflected on Writers Club, questions I had for Dana frequently emerged. These included questions to clarify, explain, support, and inform my understanding of Dana's lived experience with Writers Club. I addressed these questions to Dana as they arose, and recorded her responses in my observations (if contact was made in person during a Writers Club session) or in my journal (if contact

was made by phone). Dana also initiated interactions with me by phone or email with her own questions or other information she thought I should know. I recorded these in my journal. Email served as its own source of documentation.

I used a general interview guide in semi-structured interviews with five child participants and five adult participants of Writers Club. Consistent with the purpose of a general interview guide, the focus of these interviews was predetermined to best use the time in the interview situation (Patton, 2002). I used child and adult interview guides for consistency of themes across informants but with enough latitude to allow exploration of individual issues and opinions. All individual interviews were audio taped. I wrote a reflection of each interview in my journal within one day. I transcribed all interviews and listened to them again as I worked on data analysis.

Interviews-Selecting Leader Informants. From the pool of participants, I reviewed adult consent forms to ascertain the eligible pool of participants for individual interviews. For this study, I took a proactive method when I sought out the informants from among the leaders. On their IRB forms, all of the Writers Club leaders agreed to participate in individual and/or focus group interviews. Therefore, I approached the leaders I selected for individual interviews in person with this verbal script:

I want to thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for my research. I would like to interview you to get your perspective on Writers Club. It should take about one hour. Would it work better for me to interview you in February or March?

I selected leader informants carefully to provide a range of perspectives and experiences with Writers Club. I selected this purposive sample to be informants: the librarian who had been an active part of Writers Club since 2002; a first grade teacher who had participated for four years; an art teacher who had been a leader for seven years; a volunteer from BPS, the school's business partner, who was a leader for the first time in 2008; and a high school student and former Writers Club member who was in her second year as a leader. I chose this group to get a range of perspectives.

I chose to interview Tim, the school librarian, because of his strong presence whenever Writers Club was in session. Many of the Writers Club leaders and kids appeared to view him almost as a co-leader with Dana. Gloria, the ESOL teacher,

referred to Tim as “second-in-command” during the adult focus group interview. The other leaders present either nodded or voiced their agreement with Gloria’s assessment of his role. Tim often approached me before or after Writers Club sessions to share his opinions and observations concerning Writers Club. He was a small group leader for five of the last seven years and was instrumental in assisting Shelley in reestablishing it as an after school opportunity in 2002. He was also one of the three leaders who shared a spark of his own choosing in 2008. Because the spark was one focus of my research, I considered interviewing Tim to be an opportunity to better understand the spark from an insider’s perspective. I believed that Tim’s history with Writers Club made him a good choice to interview.

Six of the 13 small group leaders were classroom teachers. Although I felt it was essential to interview at least one classroom teacher individually, I recognized that each classroom teacher would have her own unique experience with Writers Club and that any given teacher’s perspective would not be representative of teachers in general. However, I determined that Megan’s story would be illuminating for this study. Megan’s determination to wait until she could track down a particular poem to use as her spark made her a person of interest for my research. Further, as one of the classroom teachers who “opened” Seaside Elementary School in 1986, Megan experienced both the historical and present day Writers Club.

On my own, I would have selected a second classroom teacher to interview, but Dana wanted to understand why Maureen, the art teacher, a typically “reclusive” colleague, continued to volunteer for Writers Club each year. Dana asked me specifically if I would interview Maureen and I felt it was important that I honor her request. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Maureen was “delighted” that I asked her and willingly set time aside to meet with me. She was a seasoned Writers Club leader who had never known Seaside Elementary School without a Writers Club.

I intended to interview Kimberly, the BPS volunteer who co-led a group with the ESOL teacher. She was a first time leader who had no other previous connections with Seaside Elementary School. I thought it would be informative to hear from a leader who had not experienced Writers Club in previous years. Kimberly was not available for the Celebration, the day of her previously scheduled interview. She notified me by email

shortly before I left to go to Seaside Elementary School on the Celebration Day, saying that she “regretted” that she was unable to attend and that she would be “out of the area” for an extended period of time due to job responsibilities.

I decided to see if Lynette, the only other first time Writers Club leader in 2008, was available for an interview that afternoon. I saw her towards the end of the Celebration in the cafeteria and asked if she would be willing to share her experiences with me as a first time Writers Club leader. She agreed, and I conducted the interview in the library. In addition to being a first time leader, Lynette also brought her perspective of being the parent of five children who had participated in Writers Club over multiple years.

I chose to interview Lily, the high school student who was returning for her second year as a Writers Club leader, because she was unique as a leader. At fifteen years old, she was not much older than the sixth grader in her group, but she managed a focused and engaged group. Their conversations and discussions were often animated. Lily was the only Writers Club member who brought her own Writers Notebook each week. I wondered why she chose to bring it, especially since she did not always choose to write in it. Lily was the only Writers Club member who had experienced the club both as a Writers Club kid and as a leader.

Interviews-Selecting Child Informants. From the available pool of children with affirmative parent consent and child assent forms, I made deliberate choices about whom to interview in order to glean information from a purposive sample of Writers Club participants that considered gender, grade level, linguistic experience, and experience with Writers Club. [2 boys, 3 girls; 2 primary, 3 upper elementary children; 2 ESOL (English Speakers of Other Languages), 3 non-ESOL; range of experience with Writers Club]. My informants were: a sixth grade girl in her sixth year of Writers Club; a fifth grade girl in her third, non-consecutive year of Writers Club; a fourth grade boy in his second year of Writers Club; a second grade girl in her second year of Writers Club; and a second grade boy in his first year of Writers Club.

To accommodate the principal’s concern about not interfering with instructional time, I held three of the children’s interviews before school and the other two children’s

interviews at the end of the school day. All of individual children's interviews took place in the story pit area of the library. The library was open for book returns and check-out, but library use was minimal during the time periods I conducted interviews and did not prove to be a distraction for the children.

I chose to interview Jill, the sixth grader, for several reasons. First, she was usually the first child in the library on Writers Club days. I was interested in her apparent eagerness. Second, she had attended Star Elementary School since kindergarten and had participated in Writers Club every year since first grade. Finally, and probably most compellingly, she wanted to be interviewed. On January 30, Jill came over to the desk where I was setting up my laptop and asked, "Why didn't you interview me last year? I volunteered but you never called." I explained that I was only able to interview a few of the children. She replied, "Well, this is my sixth year in Writers Club so if you want to find out a lot about it, I think you should interview me."

The fifth grade girl I interviewed was an ESOL child who attended Seaside Elementary School from first grade on. She participated in Writers Club in first, third, and fifth grades. I was interested in why Anya chose to participate in Writers Club some years, but not in other years.

I chose to interview Wills, a fourth grade boy and second year Writers Club kid, because I often observed his group during the Writers Club sessions. He appeared to take his writing seriously. He seemed unusually focused on his own writing and avoided being drawn into interactions with other members of his group. I noticed that his leader often had to coax him to share his writing. I wondered about this hesitation and his reasons for participating in Writers Club.

I decided to interview Penny after she participated in one of the children's focus groups. As a second grader, she was the youngest member of the group, which included one girl from third and fourth grades, and two fifth grade girls. Penny was not intimidated by the other group members. She held strong opinions on everything related to Writers Club. I wanted to give her the opportunity to expand on her views and clarify several statements she made during the focus group interview.

Dana could not understand why I wanted to interview Peter. He was one of the children she thought should not even be in Writers Club. Peter was a second grader in the

classroom next door to hers and Dana reported to me, “I know **he** doesn’t write!” Dana’s reluctance to see Peter as a child who ought to be in Writers Club, made him a person of interest to me. In addition, he was a child who often drew my attention during observations. He appeared to take a lot of attention, both from the leader and from the other group members. After interviewing his group leader, I realized that the leader had chosen that group specifically because Peter, who had been identified as a “struggling” learner was in it. I decided that it would be illuminating to include an individual interview with a child who faced challenges with writing.

Focus Groups-Selecting Child Participants. A focus group is a formal, taped interview led by an impartial moderator” (Belli, 1999). Focus group interviews are appropriate for this research because they “provide opportunities for members of a group to interact with each other and stimulate each other’s thinking” (Lichtman, 2006). Another reason they are useful for this type of research is that they may offer a less intimidating format for participants than individual interviews (Madriz, 2000).

I began the groundwork to assemble my children’s focus group interviews in early February. I decided to hold two of the focus group interviews while Writers Club was still in session to avoid the possibility of having the Celebration overshadow the discussion. I planned to hold one focus group after the Celebration. I selected four possible dates for the focus group interviews and created an “invitation to participate” to send to parents and children.

I reviewed child IRB assent and consent forms carefully and determined who was eligible to participate in the focus group interviews. Of the 72 participants, 52 had returned their child assent and parent consent forms indicating that they were willing to participate in the research. In selecting among the 31 who had indicated they were willing to participate in individual and/or focus group interviews, I looked at the balance of gender and grade representation. In Writers Club as a whole, there were approximately three boys for every four girls. In the pool of potential informants, there was only one boy for every two girls. I wanted the focus groups to approximate the actual demographics of Writers Club so I made preliminary decisions on who to include based on that goal. I sent

the list of names and my “invitation to participate” to Dana. She reviewed the list and together we determined which children to invite first.

Because I was planning to have a total of three children’s focus group interviews, I knew that 15 children could participate altogether. I chose to limit my initial invitation to fifteen children so that I could accommodate all of them if all responded affirmatively. I knew that meant that I would most likely have to go through another round of invitations if not all fifteen were available on the dates I offered.

Dana sent out the invitations to the parents of nine girls and six boys via email because she had access to their email addresses. She included my email address so that parents could either respond to me directly or go through her. Nine of the parents responded to me within three days. Two other sets of parents responded to Dana. We did not hear back from the other parents initially.

Based on the responses, I created a matrix to determine which children were available on which dates. Ideally, I wanted to balance the ages and gender for the focus groups. However, because all nine of the girls I invited to participate agreed to be in a focus group interview and only three of the six boys agreed, I had the problem of either having one boy in a group with four girls or one group of all girls. I decided to include the three boys in one group and have one all girl group.

All of the children’s focus group interviews were audio taped to increase accuracy in capturing participant’s responses. To familiarize children with the tape recorder, I turned it on when children first sat down and let each of them say their name and one sentence. I then played the short recording back to them. This approach served the additional purpose of allowing me to check my equipment one last time before we began. Two of the groups asked me to play back a short segment at the end of the session and I obliged. The children giggled as they recognized themselves, apparently ending the session on a happy note.

I read the script I had prepared for the children’s focus group (see Appendix K) aloud at the beginning of the session at each of the children’s focus groups. The script explained the purpose of the focus group, established ground rules and etiquette, explained the initial writing exercise, and thanked the children for being willing to

participate. I also used a list of questions to guide me in working with each group (see Appendices I & J).

My first focus group consisted of one second grade boy, two third grade boys, one fourth grade girl, and one sixth grade girl. The second focus group consisted of one girl from second through fourth grade and two fifth grade girls. I compiled the third focus group after the first two focus groups met. Dana sent a new invitation to the three boys who did not respond to the initial invitation as well as sending the new invitation to two more boys and two more girls with several date choices. Availability determined both the date and the composition of the third focus group. It was composed of upper grade children with one fourth grade girl, two fifth grade girls, one sixth grade girl, and one sixth grade boy.

I arranged to conduct the children's focus group interviews in the library. I sent reminder email to all of the participants and their classroom teachers to help ensure children would remember they were staying after school. When I arrived at Seaside Elementary School on the Monday of my first focus group interview, the library was already in use for a retirement luncheon Dana was planning to attend. I checked with Dana and quickly received permission to use her room instead. I provided cookies and bottled water for the participants to snack on before the focus groups began. Only four of the five children who were supposed to attend the first focus group interview reported to Dana's room. I began the focus group interview on time with the four children who were there.

I originally planned to ask all focus group participants to respond in writing to an initial question before responding to oral questions in the group at large (see Appendix L). This plan was intended to ensure that all members of the group had ideas to share and ameliorate the potential problem of domination of the conversation by a few members (Belli, 1999). The fourth grade girl was the only one in the first group who wrote more than a sentence. She wrote a full page and it appeared that she could have kept on writing for several more pages when I stopped her so that the interview could commence.

All three of the boys appeared uncomfortable with the task even though I assured them that it was just a way for them to help organize their thoughts. Two of the boys doodled for most of the five minutes I allotted for the activity. The other one tapped his

pencil for most of the time and shook his head repeatedly. They spent a lot of that time watching the girl write. The boys immediately became attentive and engaged when the oral questioning began. They appeared happy and comfortable and remained so for the remainder of the session. None of the children referred to the paper during the interview.

The fifth child, Diya, a sixth-grade girl apparently “forgot” about the focus group interview and went home by mistake. Her mother returned her to school about 20 minutes into the interview. Two of the children recognized her and helped welcome her into the group. Her mother agreed to allow her to stay a few minutes after the rest of the children left so that she could have a chance to respond to the earlier questions. I gave Diya a copy of the question the other children had responded to and suggested that she complete it to help get her thoughts in order. She wrote for a minute or two and then joined in the conversations. Diya was buoyant and talkative during the focus group and during the 20 minute individual interview we did at the end.

When using the library for the Wednesday afternoon focus group proved problematic on the second focus group, Dana again generously offered her classroom. I decided then to use her classroom for all three of the children’s focus group interviews for consistency. Dana indicated that would be “no problem.”

Using Dana’s workspace worked well for the first focus group interview. However, I felt that sitting in the “teacher spot” of the kidney shaped table clearly identified me as the leader in a position of power, a position I did not want as the focus group facilitator. For the second and third focus group interviews, I sat with the children at a six-desk cluster in the front corner of Dana’s room as far away from her workspace as possible. This arrangement allowed Dana to use her work area and gave me a more neutral placement among the group. I positioned myself so that I faced Dana’s workspace and could see the doorway. Two of the children also faced Dana’s workspace; the other three had their backs to her workspace.

I distributed the written response page to the children at the beginning of the second focus group. Two of the girls sighed deeply when they looked at the page and a third asked if they could just talk about it instead. After my experience with the group earlier in the week, I suggested that everyone take a minute to read and think about the question and Writers Club this year instead of writing their responses. They

enthusiastically agreed with a chorus of “yees” and “okays!” We began the interview with the question I asked them to use as their thinking prompt. The change seemed to work well with this group of spirited and expressive children. I used the script with the questions to reign in the group when needed and redirect the discussion when it digressed in ways not apparently relevant to my study.

Dana was in and out of the classroom during the second focus group session. She was doing final edits on all of the Writers Club kids’ stories for the Celebration Book. Her body language and occasional eye contact with me suggested that she was listening to the children’s comments. She looked incredulous when the children began complaining about the music and spread her hands out in a gesture that clearly indicated, “What are they thinking?” It was when the children expressed sorrow at not being with their writing groups for the Celebration, however, that she actually intervened and explained her rationale behind that decision. The children listened to what she said, but reiterated their desire to remain as intact groupings for the Celebration. Dana agreed to see if she could work it out. Although Dana later revealed that it was “difficult” for her to remain silent, she did not break into the conversation again.

Dana was not in the room for the final children’s focus group because she was attending a staff meeting. Because the third focus group consisted of all upper grade children, I did ask them to write a written response to the initial question as planned. The task did not overwhelm them, and in fact, gave each of them a starting point in the interview as indicated by the fact that they each held the paper in their hands and referred to the page as they gave their first response. This group was composed and serious throughout the session. The lone boy, a sixth grader, did not appear discomfited or bothered by the fact that the rest of the focus group members were girls.

The children’s focus group interviews were semi-structured insofar as I used a pre-developed list of questions to guide discussion for all three groups. As the moderator, I modified the guide as seemed appropriate to allow the individual groups to lead the direction of the discussion. I returned to the guide deliberately at suitable junctures to ensure that each group had the opportunity to address similar aspects of Writers Club within the hour allotted for each focus group interview.

Focus Groups-Selecting Adult Participants. Arranging the Writers Club leader focus group proved to be extremely challenging. Writers Club sessions for 2008 ended near the end of the third grading period. That meant that teachers were wrestling with deadlines for progress reports and had very little available time.

After several unsuccessful attempts to schedule this group interview, I considered eliminating the adult focus group from my study. However, careful reading of my journal and transcripts of the children's focus group interviews, led me to believe that my research would benefit from the interplay among the adult participants during the focus group interviews. I decided that if possible, I would conduct a focus group with the leaders.

I chose to have the leader focus group consist of teachers I did not interview individually for two reasons. First, I wanted my research to reflect a wide range of leader perspectives. Second, the individual interviews I conducted with leaders were so detailed and rich that I felt that I already captured their perspectives. Although Dana, the Writers Club organizer, offered to participate in the focus group "if I needed her," I thought that her presence might influence the responses of the other participants. I made the decision not to have Dana participate.

After several failed attempts at scheduling the focus group session, on April 1, I made a last ditch effort by sending out the following email offering seven choices for meeting times and subversively putting "Baklava Anyone?" instead of "Focus Group Interview" in the subject line. The baklava was a gift from Susan, a friend of mine, and a person well known to the teachers at Seaside Elementary School both as a former staff member and her expertise as a chef. She was aware of my difficulty in gaining teachers' cooperation and agreed to supply an incentive.

Subject: Baklava Anyone?

Hello, everyone. I am reaching the end of the data collection phase for my dissertation. I have completed three focus group interviews with students that have given me insight into the student perspective on Writers Club. I would like to schedule a focus group interview with the Writers Club leaders to provide a balance to my data. Without the leaders, Writers Club would not exist. I know that this (and all parts) of the year are extremely full for teachers. The focus group will take approximately one hour. I realize that that is a lot to ask from people

who have already given so generously of their time so I am trying to sweeten the deal with Susan's baklava (and more-moussaka, spanikopita, and koshary are also at stake!).

Please consider participating. I would appreciate it greatly. Here are five possible dates and times. Please let me know which ones might work for you. I will look at the results and get back to everyone with the date and time that works for the most people.

Monday, April 7	2:30 - 3:30 or 3:30 - 4:30
Monday, April 14	2:30 - 3:30 or 3:30 - 4:30
Tuesday, April 15	3:00 - 4:00
Tuesday, April 22	3:00 - 4:00
Wednesday, April 23	3:00 - 4:00

Thank you very much for considering and checking your calendars. I can guarantee sharing of great ideas and delicious food. Carol

Unlike my earlier invitation which resulted in a zero response, seven of the nine leaders read the note and four responded within an hour of my sending it out indicating dates they could attend. The library assistant, one of the instructional assistants and a second grade teacher were available on April 15th. I decided that if I got a fourth person able to come on that day, I would go ahead with that date for the focus group.

I resent the email to the four leaders who had not emailed me back. I heard back from the two 20-plus year veteran teachers that they were "too swamped" to participate and "could not put another thing on their plates." The following day I heard from another second grade teacher saying that she would attend on the 15th.

I decided that April 15 was the day for the leader focus group and sent a confirmation email to the four who indicated that day would work for them and to Georgia, the one leader who had yet to respond. I included a sentence in the body of the message with a special invitation to her indicating that I hoped she would be able to be our fifth participant to complete the group. I also reminded everyone to come hungry. Georgia quickly wrote back and said, "Okay, I cave. I guess since it was a personal invitation I'll be there."

I contacted Susan and made the necessary arrangements to ensure that I could make good on my promise to the teachers. I picked up the ready-to-bake food and the baklava the night before the scheduled focus group interview. I left work early enough to bake the

meal and get set up at Seaside Elementary for the 3:00 pm – 4:00 pm focus group interview. I had reserved the conference room at the school for our meeting, but when I arrived, it was already occupied and likely to remain so for quite a while. We met instead in the teachers' lunchroom where there was a wonderful serving counter. An announcement over the loudspeakers notified the leaders of the location change and alerted other staff that the teachers' lunchroom would be in use. All of the leaders served themselves from the buffet and we were able to begin by 3:05 pm.

As with two of the children's focus groups, I asked the leaders to respond in writing to an initial question before responding to questions in the group at large (see Appendix M). I did not read the script I had prepared about purpose and protocol to the leaders (see Appendix K), but chose instead to speak more informally, referring to the script to ensure I covered all of the major points. We began the semi-structured interview at 3:10 pm with a pre-developed list of questions to use as a guide (see Appendix J). I adapted the guide as we progressed to allow the group to influence the direction of the discussion. We ended the focus group interview promptly at 4:00 pm. When I include the five leaders who were interviewed individually with the leaders in the focus group, a total of ten of the thirteen leaders actively participated in this research.

Transcribing Interviews. The focus group interviews were audio taped for accuracy in capturing participants' responses. I transcribed all of the tapes within two weeks of the initial taping. As the moderator, I took notes during the focus group interviews to capture data to augment the audiotapes. In addition, after each focus group session ended, I wrote down details and reflections on the session in my reflective journal to include as part of the data for analysis.

When possible, I scheduled focus group interviews and individual interviews so that I had time to transcribe them before I conducted the next one. I did this to maximize quality data (Wolcott, 1994). Transcribing the tapes was extremely time-consuming due to the number of interviews. That is, I had conducted five audio taped child interviews, five audio taped leader interviews, three children's focus group interviews, and one adult focus group interview. Originally my intention had been to do selective transcription, as was appropriate to the data, especially with the focus group interviews. However, I

discovered that for myself as a researcher, I needed to see informants' words printed out in context to maintain accuracy and be true to their meaning. Although I purchased a digital recorder specifically to use with this study, I found that in practice it was easier for me to use a simple 4" by 5" tape recorder that I could stop and start with one hand as I listened and typed. After I completed each transcription with all of the starting and stopping required to capture all of the words, I played each tape through at least two more times comparing what was said to the written transcript, stopping to make corrections as needed and inserting notes about non-verbal details such as expression, emphasis, pauses, and giggles.

I had anticipated that I would have difficulty identifying the speaker accurately during transcription of the focus group interviews and was pleasantly surprised that this did not turn out to be the case. It is possible that there are occasional utterances ascribed to the wrong individual, but I believe those to be quite limited. I attribute this accuracy to several things. First, during the focus group interviews, I often deliberately inserted a person's name when I phrased my questions. Second, because I completed the transcriptions within days of the focus group interviews, I often remembered the dialogue and could identify who said what. Finally, participants' voices were distinct enough to minimize confusion.

Documents

Written documents are another form of observational data. These documents may already exist, be written by the researcher, or written by others (Lichtman, 2006). These can range from formal, official documents, to newspaper accounts, journals, field notes, memos, or email. In my research of Writers Club, I made extensive use of my research journal, field notes, and email. Dana, the Writers Club organizer, had kept detailed records of Writers Club participants and many supporting documents such as planning forms, directions for leaders, and organizational papers from 2002 forward. With the permission of my sponsor, the school principal, and Dana, these archival records were available for my use in this research.

Children's Writers Club booklets, the children's questionnaire (see Appendix N) and the Celebration Book are among the documents I collected during this study. Other

written sources of documentation include materials provided to families and adult leaders during preparation for and throughout the Writers Club sessions and the Celebration. These include email, letters, guidelines for leaders, and schedules.

Data Management

Data management in qualitative research is of utmost importance because of the vast quantities of raw data it generates. I kept files with documents relating to Writers Club 2008 with categories such as “Emails to and from Staff,” “Emails to and from the Business Partner,” “Emails from Parents of Writers Club Children,” and “Paper Documents to Parents of Writers Club Children”. Because I was not sure what would prove to be important to my research, I tracked any documentation that might prove relevant. I created new categories as they appeared. These included the following categories: transcripts of children’s focus group interviews; transcripts of adult focus group interview; transcripts of child interviews; transcripts of adult interviews; researcher journal; elaborated observations; unelaborated observations; and fliers.

Patton (2002) identified the time after an interview or observation as a critical time of reflection and elaboration. He cautioned researchers to have the discipline to follow through with this crucial step and avoid the temptation to postpone it due to fatigue or time constraints. Wolcott (1994) cautioned that the researcher must elaborate field notes before returning to field site again. Otherwise, the elaborated notes will be muddied by additional observations.

In order to keep abreast of the incoming data and keep it of the highest quality possible I reserved Writers Club Wednesday afternoons and evenings to elaborate my field note observations immediately after each Writers Club session. As the weeks progressed, I reread all of my observations chronologically each week to look for patterns and to help guide my future observations. I wrote in my reflective journal on Wednesdays commenting on my thoughts about the observations. I also wrote in my journal at least two other times during the week, especially when I had conversations with Dana or email related to Writers Club.

Ethnographic research builds a reservoir of data that aims to illuminate the breadth and depth of the lived experiences of the informants (Ball & Omerod, 2000). Research for this dissertation was no exception. I generated 302 single spaced pages of data; 70 pages of journal, 40 pages of observations, 58 pages of adult interviews, 37 pages of child interviews, and 97 pages of focus group interviews. In addition, Dana included me as a recipient on more than 350 Writers Club emails and I initiated close to 200 emails related to Writers Club. The 51 child participants wrote approximately 700 pages in their weekly Writers Club booklets and completed a Writers Club questionnaire. The 85 page Celebration Book was another data source. Dana created 15 paper documents that were distributed to either Writers Club leaders or parents of children in Writers Club and five iterations of Writers Club 2008 Excel spreadsheets.

Data Analysis

Qualitative researchers seem to agree that the data analysis phase of qualitative research is complex, challenging, and recursive (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Patton, 2002; Tedlock, 2000; Thorne, 2000; Wolcott, 1994). Qualitative research produces vast quantities of relatively unstructured data that must be systematically examined and presented in a manner that conveys meaning. Mertler and Charles (2005) suggest a systematic procedure in data analysis that “involves (1) identification of topics, (2) clustering of those topics into categories, (3) forming the categories into patterns, and (4) making explanations from what the patterns suggest” (p. 173). The quality of the analysis is heavily dependent upon the accuracy of data related to both the overall picture and significant details.

In my initial work with data analysis, I adopted Mertler and Charles’s (2005) systematic procedure. I worked through the four steps as I wrote the first two stories, but by the time I was about one third of the way through Dana’s story, I found the framework too rigid and began to shift my approach in a manner that more closely mirrors Wolcott’s (1994) model. I continued to refine the process as I wrote and made sense of my data.

Wolcott (1994) refers to process of data analysis in research as data transformation. Data transformation occurs when the researcher “does something” with the previously

collected data (p. 4). Wolcott makes a distinction among three analytical processes: description, analysis, and interpretation. According to Wolcott, *description* asks, “What is going on here?” and refers to observations made by the researcher or reported to the researcher; *analysis* identifies essential features of the data and considers the interrelationships between and amongst them and asks, “How things work?”; and *interpretation* asks, “What is to be made of it all?” or “How does it all mean?” (p. 12). He suggests a guide for data analysis that has description encompassing the largest portion of data transformation (two thirds) with the remaining third divided between interpretation and analysis depending on the researcher’s purposes and capabilities.

Descriptive transformation of data, according to Wolcott (1994), is both an art and a science. The researcher at both the data collection and the data transformation phases makes choices that influence the outcome of the research. What the researcher chooses to attend to and record or explain as well as what the researcher does not report represents the art of transforming data. It is incumbent upon the researcher to keep perspective and balance between what is emphasized and what is not. The precision and accuracy inherent in the work of the researcher reflects the science aspect.

I chose to develop descriptive transformation of my data in the form of stories of the lived experiences of selected participants of Writers Club. A story in this context is an “unfolding of a lived life” (Coles, 1989, p. 22). While not claiming to unveil the complete story of Writers Club, these stories reveal the perspectives of multiple participants and address Wolcott’s (1994) question—What is going on here? True to Wolcott’s guidelines, the stories are primarily descriptive. The process of writing itself was a significant part of the development of my description (Alvermann, O’Brien, & Dillon, 1996). Writing often led me to know what was needed next to convey each story with depth and integrity.

The goal of data transformation in the analysis phase is to make sense of the data and provide answers to the research question(s). This includes amongst others: coding, categorizing, processing, summarizing, and highlighting patterns, themes, relationships and/or regularities.

As I wrote (and rewrote) each of the stories, I engaged in a recursive process of data analysis to answer Wolcott’s (1994) question—How things work? I sought traces of connecting threads within each informant’s data for Chapter IV and wrote each story

carefully to summarize and reveal patterns, themes, and relationships as they appeared to each informant. In Chapter V, I applied data analysis practices across the stories to examine broader commonalities and differences amongst and between the informants.

Data transformation in the interpretation phase is a meaning making process where the researcher draws conclusions and may state implications from the findings. Again, I engaged in interpretation within each story as it appears in Chapter IV and across the stories in Chapter V. I followed Wolcott's (1994) questions for interpretation—"What is to be made of it all?" and "How does it all mean?" as my framework for Chapter V.

I used triangulation of methods and sources to help strengthen this study. Triangulation is a strategy designed to overcome intrinsic bias that results from a single-methods, single-observer, or single-theory study (Denzin, 1989). Methods triangulation enables you to check out the consistency of findings generated by different data collection methods (Patton, 2002). I used observations, group and individual interviews, and document analysis to ensure multiple perspectives were included. Triangulation of sources examines the consistency of different data sources within the same method (Patton). I examined perspectives of multiple informants through using a general interview guide in individual and focus group interviews, which allowed me to consider multiple responses to similar inquiries.

Although I analyzed all data collected during the course of this study, I was selective in the data that I explicitly cited in this dissertation. Only data highly relevant to the research questions were explicitly addressed. Even so, the entire corpus of data was analyzed to inform the transformation process.

Writing up the Research—Chapter IV. I decided that to achieve my goal of revealing Writers Club through the lived experiences of its participants, which I needed to share them as a series of separate, parallel stories to preserve their views and experience of Writers Club. I carefully considered all of the data available and made decisions about which stories to share. I wanted to include a wide range of perspectives while at the same time avoiding unnecessary repetition or data that was not rich in detail.

I felt it was essential to share Dana's story to understand the framework of Writers Club. Dana held a unique role in Writers Club. She was responsible for its overall

functioning, and served as a sparker twice in 2008, but she was not a **writing** member of Writers Club as all the leaders and children were.

Of the five adult leaders I conducted individual interviews with; I decided to share the stories of the art teacher, Maureen, of the first time group leader, Lynette, of the classroom teacher, Megan, and of the librarian, Tim. While the high school student's story was equally important, Lynette (her mother) shared parts of Lily's story in her interview and there was not enough additional information in Lily's interview to warrant a complete telling.

I selected two of the most revealing of the individual children's interviews to write as separate stories. Jill, the sixth grade girl, had even more experience with Writers Club than most of the adult leaders (Maureen was the only exception). Jill offered many unique perspectives and experiences with Writers Club over time that I felt would inform readers of this study. In contrast, I selected Peter, a second grade boy experiencing his first year of Writers Club. He did not choose to participate the first year he was eligible, but waited to join in 2008. His story brought fresh eyes to the experience and gave voice to children Dana would choose to eliminate as Writers Club kids. I believe his story helps to reveal an important perspective. Two of the remaining individual child interviews I conducted repeated information disclosed by other informants and so I did not write their stories.

I selected one children's focus group to tell as a single story, mingling the voices of the five participating children. One of those children, second grade Penny, was another child I interviewed individually after she participated in the focus group interview. I wanted to delve deeper into many of her comments in the group interview. When I was writing the stories, I chose to include her elaborated comments from her individual interview as part of the focus group story. Topics of discussion with this group of children were representative of ideas expressed in the other two child focus groups. It also had the advantage of having a range of ages of the Writers Club kids while one of the other groups was composed mostly of primary age children and the last group had only upper elementary children.

I believe that the stories I chose to tell preserve a balance between leaders' and children's experiences with Writers Club and reveal multiple perspectives with honesty

and integrity. Dana's story was central and could stand alone, but I believe her story is enhanced and further illuminated by the voices of the leaders and the children. Her story also frames and scaffolds the stories of the Writers Club participants. Taken together, readers have sufficient background to draw their own conclusions from these data.

To begin creating each story, I prepared the materials I thought I needed in order to begin writing. I culled through email and made ten copies each of my journal, observations, and transcripts. I considered these documents the primary data sources for the story of Writers Club 2008. I read this data set in its entirety once a week for six weeks, making notes and identifying categories and themes in the margins before I even began to write. I used different color highlighters to block out sets of related data. I continued that practice during the initial writing phase.

When I began to write the stories, I decided to start with an informant other than Dana because Dana's story was both lengthy and complex. I started with Jill, one of the children, and the first person I interviewed. I knew I wanted to include her story because she was passionate both about Writers Club and about having her voice heard. Because the children's interviews tended to be shorter and less detailed than those of the adults, I also thought it might be simpler to write.

I selected the documents I thought might have references to Jill. These included the transcript of her interview, my journal, the observations, and email related to her. I read the transcript of her interview multiple times making notes in the margins about important and recurring categories such as Jill's view of herself as a writer, what she liked about Writers Club, social structure among Writers Club kids, and Jill's history with Writers Club. I decided to begin her story with her declaration, "I'm a writer because of Writers Club." Jill identified herself as a writer and attributed that part of her identity to her experiences with Writers Club. I believe that was important information for the reader to know as they read her story. I chose to end it with her nod to the spark, "Well, unlike our spark yesterday which was all about 'and that's all I'll say,' I'd say, 'You really should give it a shot!'" because it showed that even though she indicated in her interview that she objected to the "babyish" nature of several of the sparks, it struck enough of a cord for her to remember its essence and use it to indicate her opinion that children should consider becoming Writers Club kids.

After I identified the initial categories, I assigned a different color to data pertinent to each and used color-coded highlighters to mark text within the transcript that I thought supported each category. Some other categories I identified for Jill's story included: views on writing, changes in Writers Club over time, the spark, and sharing. Next, I used the same color-coded highlighting to mark references to Jill that surfaced in the observations. When I began this process with my 70-page journal, I decided to pull up the journal on my computer and use the "Find" feature under the Edit menu and typed in "Jill." In this way, I quickly located the 22 references to her and zeroed in on them rather than tediously going through the journal page by page. I pulled those pages from one of the paper copies of the journal and color-coded the appropriate passages. When I completed the highlighting, I spread all of the pages out on a large table. I reviewed the categories I had created and decided the order in which to write about each. Then I pulled all of the color-coded pages for the first category together and wrote that paragraph. As I proceeded through the other categories, I regrouped the pages each time according to the category I was writing. I used a pencil to mark through the highlighted words as I used them. When I crossed off the last set of highlighted words on a page, I placed the page in a "completed" pile.

The categories I identified before I began writing were not stagnant. As Jill's story emerged, I created some new categories and had others morph in an effort to reveal Jill's Writers Club experience accurately, comprehensively, coherently and compellingly. As I began each new paragraph, I reread the story from the beginning to ensure that it followed what went before and contributed to understanding Jill's experience of Writers Club. Therefore, I was constantly adjusting and revising the story as it grew.

As I wrote Jill's story, I replayed her taped interview to listen to nuances in her language for clues I might have missed that would inform her story and extract categories (Lichtman, 2006). I reread the story as I listened, stopping the tape to make occasional changes or additions to her story. For example, when Jill was describing how the younger children did not sit in a particular part of the story pit, Jill said, "They **know**. That's where **we** are." I added bolding to "know" and "we" to match Jill's emphasis on her taped interview. Returning to the tapes often helped take me back to the moments I was

describing in my writing and helped keep me close to the data, something for which qualitative researchers should strive (Wolcott, 1994).

When I was satisfied that Jill's story reflected the totality of her data effectively, I decided to begin data work on one of the leader's stories. I chose to analyze data concerning Maureen, the art teacher because she was the first leader I interviewed and because her story was such a surprise to me. Unlike Dana, Tim, and Megan, I had never met Maureen prior to my early fieldwork in 2007. I also wanted to write her story early in my analysis because I knew that Dana was particularly interested in Maureen's reasons for participating in Writers Club.

To do the analysis, I again pulled all of the paper copies I had made of my data that had references to Maureen and read and reread those making notes and highlighting common categories with like colors. I considered all the relevant data and decided where to begin and end Maureen's story in order to reveal her lived experiences with Writers Club before I commenced writing (it took multiple readings of the data each time before I felt I understood the totality of each informant's experience before I identified a place to begin and end each story that honored each person's Writers Club experience).

For Maureen's story, as I wrote from the paper copies, I began to use the highlight feature on *Microsoft Word* to highlight the portions of text from my journal, observations, or transcripts that were included in Maureen's story. I kept those documents open on my desktop as I wrote. I highlighted all of the data I used in Maureen's story in blue. This allowed me to monitor my data use and avoid unnecessary repetition.

In developing Maureen's story, I became facile at having multiple documents open on my desktop and was able to navigate through them much more quickly than I could shuffle through the parallel stacks of paper data. I abandoned the paper copies altogether after I completed Maureen's story. As I continued to write, when I incorporated data into a story, I highlighted it with a different color for each informant. This strategy allowed me to recognize not only what data had already been included in my writing, but also which story contained the data.

I often created new working documents for each informant by using the 'copy and paste' feature of the word processing program to group data related to categories such as "the spark" or "sharing" from multiple sources. This helped me consolidate data on a

particular category and allowed me to consider the categorized data as a whole before I began writing.

After completing both Jill's and Maureen's stories, I decided to begin work on Dana's story. I knew that her story would be both complex and lengthy. I re-submerged myself in the entire data set reading with Dana's lived experience of Writers Club as my lens. It was a challenging task. I waited until July 2008 to begin writing when I could dedicate long blocks of time to the undertaking. I decided to frame Dana's story chronologically, beginning with her involvement in early fall of 2007. I worked on her story exclusively for about four weeks. I called or emailed her frequently to broach questions I had, or to ask for clarifications, a process known as member checking and one encouraged by methodologists of qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Dana always took time to answer my questions and share her perspectives or opinions. For example, I asked her to share her reasons for not including certain children in Writers Club. Another clarification I asked for was why she did not have a schedule for leaders to do the spark. I worked exclusively on Dana's story and had brought her story to the point of the first Writers Club session when I called her on the phone and said, "No wonder you're exhausted! I get tired just reading everything you had to do to get ready for Writers Club to begin!"

Dana suggested, "Why don't you just go ahead and send me a copy so I can read it and remind myself why I'm not going to let them talk me into doing it again... While you're at it, send me the rest of it too. I want to see what you're writing about us." I emailed my first three chapters to her as well as the 20+ pages I had written of her story. I began working on a different story for a change of pace and because I felt certain I would receive feedback from Dana that I might need to consider before continuing her story.

By the time I began writing my fourth story, I did all of the organizing and coding of each data set on the computer as I wrote. The process was recursive and often required me to return to 'completed' stories to add information as work on one informant's story brought new insight to another. An example of this is when I was writing Megan's story; I found data related to Luke, one of the children I had written about in Maureen's story. I returned to Maureen's story and worked in the newly uncovered information about Luke before continuing with Megan's story.

I continued to listen to relevant portions of the tapes as I wrote sections of each informant's story and listened to the complete interviews again as part of my editing process for the completed stories. With all of the leader's stories, I felt compelled to contact the informant by email at least one time to clarify or deepen my understanding of the data. For example, while I knew that Megan went to great lengths to obtain a copy of a particular poem to share when it was her turn to give the spark, I realized after scouring my data that I had never asked her why that poem was so important to her. I emailed her to ask why she wanted to use that poem so much. She replied by return email the next day. All of leaders responded graciously and quickly to my queries and, I believe their responses allowed me to represent their perspectives more accurately.

To extend my use of member checking, I offered the group leaders the opportunity to read what I had written. Thus far, none have expressed interest in reviewing any portion of the dissertation.

Dana, on the other hand, not only read everything I sent her, but returned them electronically with edits, comments, and annotated changes from Webster's Dictionary (1968) such as when to use 'role' versus 'roll.' She wrote, "You know me. I can't help it. I've highlighted the parts I think need changing in yellow. And I've highlighted in purple where your writing kind of corroborates my suggestions."

I appreciated Dana's willingness to give such detailed feedback. I gave her suggestions careful consideration, but I did not necessarily make changes except when the change related to actions or thoughts I attributed to Dana. For example, at one point in my draft I referred to a specific child Dana had prior experience with as "challenging." Dana wrote back saying, "Why don't you just say I was fed up with him?" I made the change. When Dana read my final draft she responded, "Glad you got it right this time. I'm still fed up with him."

I shared with Dana that I had completed Jill's and Maureen's stories and she asked if I would send those to her. Dana was recovering from surgery and uncharacteristically had time on her hands. "It would give me something to do, and who knows, it might even be helpful to you." I continued to send Dana stories as I completed them, and she always returned them with comments within a few days. Dana said that reading the stories was "very enjoyable." She said that the "energy and personality of

each person rang true” to her as she read them. Her response was a welcome affirmation for me. I strove to do justice to each of their experiences and Dana’s remarks represented one kind of validation of my goal.

Dana was particularly moved by Maureen’s story. When we discussed it later, she said shaking her head, “Who would have thought Writers Club could mean that much to her? I mean...she is just so quiet all of the time. I’d never have called her an enthusiastic leader, but she has been there year after year.”

One thing Dana definitely did not like was the working pseudonym I created for her school. “It jars me every time I see it. I just can’t picture myself working at a school called Star Elementary School.” I asked her if she had a better name in mind. “Nothing that pops right up. I just know I don’t like that one.” Dana and I auditioned multiple names over the next few months, but she was not satisfied until I came up with the name Seaside Elementary School. “That one I can live with,” she granted.

Writing the stories was a lengthy process and took almost a year to complete to the satisfaction of my chair. When I shared with Dana that it had taken me nearly 70 hours of work to implement my chair’s suggested revisions for Chapter IV, Dana asked if she could see the types of recommended changes. She came over to my house and systematically read through my chair’s notes on all 100 pages, cheering when she came across pages with no notes and holding up pages peppered with suggested changes saying, “Oh, my gawd!...I thought I was a tough critic!”

Writing up the Research—Chapter V. The body of data I collected and analyzed during this research revealed far more than the research questions I identified at the onset. While I may choose to examine additional aspects of this research in other venues, for the purposes of this dissertation, I limited my assertions and implications in Chapter V to those that relate to research questions I identified in Chapter I. These questions divided themselves into two major categories: those related to the broader culture of Writers Club, and those related to the read aloud events embedded within Writers Club.

Initially, I decided address each of these categories in separate sections and answer each question within each category. However, as I worked through that process, I noted that there were many areas of overlap; the questions were not mutually exclusive. I

also noted that I tended to write in greater detail than was needed considering the body of this work.

I looked again at Wolcott's (1994) broad questions for interpretation in data analysis ["What is to be made of it all?" and "How does it all mean?"] and began again. This approach allowed me to provide the reader with a thorough, yet compact assessment of what these data mean within the 2008 Writers Club and what implications these data suggest for readers who choose to emulate this type of pedagogy. In addition, utilizing Wolcott's framework, I identified and considered possible areas that warranted additional research.

Summary

I designed this research to examine the use of the event known as read aloud in a school setting. This research may serve to inform other educators and policymakers who may be interested in learning more about this type of pedagogy.

In this chapter, I identified and explained the methods that I used to collect, manage, and analyze the data. I explained my choices of informants and shared my experiences of trying to make sense of it all. I believe I have shared the experiences I encountered during the course of this research in sufficient detail for readers to understand the processes that support these data.

CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSIS

As an ethnographer, I have chosen to reveal my findings through the voices and lived experiences of the participants. Consequently, this chapter is a series of the stories of the Writers Club organizer, four of the Writers Club group leaders, two individual children and one focus group of five children. It is not my intention to give a general sense of Writers Club through these stories; rather, they provide a sense of Writers Club as viewed through a prism, each story looking at Writers Club from the informant's own point of view; each view a different facet of the prism.

To construct the stories, I drew from a variety of data sources including my observations of Writers Club sessions, informal conversations with participants, individual interviews with children and adults, focus group interviews with children and adults, my reflective journal, archival records, and written documents. Each story is unique and determined its own combination of these data.

As in any ethnography, the volume of data I collected was extensive. I was deliberate in my selections of informants for this chapter with the end purpose being to provide the reader an expansive view of the Writers Club experience through multiple perspectives. At the macro level, I aimed to show the breadth of Writers Club. I chose to include the stories of the Writers Club organizer, the librarian, the art teacher, a classroom teacher, an Instructional Assistant in her first year as a leader, a sixth grade girl in her sixth year as a Writers Club kid, a second grade boy in his first year of Writers Club, and a children's focus group that included one girl from second, third, and fourth grade, and two fifth grade girls. At the micro level, I intended to share enough detail so that the informants reveal the depths of their experience with Writers Club.

The Writers Club Coordinator

Dana's Story of Writers Club

Decisions. It was only October, but talk about Writers Club, due to start again in January, had begun amongst the staff at Seaside Elementary School. Dana, the second

grade teacher who had spearheaded the popular afterschool activity for the past four years, had the responsibility of recruiting adult leaders to support the number of children who wanted to participate in Writers Club. “I can’t believe I’m doing this again,” said Dana in a phone call to me. “I’ve just gotten my classroom up and running and now I’ve got to get this going too. I’ve told Karen [the principal] that this is the last year I am going to head up Writers Club.”

In 1995, Writers Club began with two teachers and 18 children. In 2002 when it began again after a brief hiatus, there were 45 children, nine staff members, and three other volunteers. Since 2005, more than 80 students and 15 adults have participated each year. Eighty-three children from first through sixth grades were Writers Club members in 2007. “That meant we needed to have 15 groups of children and more than half of them had to have six children each,” said Dana.

Last year I had ten staff members with a group every week, four leaders from BPS [Seaside Elementary School’s business partnership company] who shared three groups, and two other volunteers from the community who headed the last two groups. I even had four staff members who volunteered to substitute when needed and it seemed like we always needed them. Halfway through, two of the BPS leaders had to drop out because of work and it got very difficult to cover all of the groups each week. Sometimes we had to double up. Tim [the school librarian and Writers Club group leader] even tried having the sixth grader in his group take over so he could work with a leaderless group. (Journal, phone conversation, October 17, 2007)

Writers Club has historically had a group of teachers who repeatedly step up to the plate to help make it a reality, but with the continually growing demands on teacher’s time and other staff members not stepping forward, Dana was quite concerned about being able to provide enough leaders for all of the groups in 2008. In 2007, for the first time, she turned some children away, mostly because they did not get their applications turned in on time. Both children and parents protested, but Dana held firm with the principal’s support.

In the past, I would have given in. But we don’t have any place to put them! They’ve had plenty of notice and lots of reminders. I just can’t let myself feel bad about it anymore. If I had let them in, some of the groups would have had seven children and that is just too much. (Journal, phone conversation, October 23, 2007)

Dana was looking for a way to avoid a similar scenario in 2008. Because I did early fieldwork in Writers Club and attended all of the sessions in 2007, Dana called me to ask my opinion about opening Writers Club only to children in second through sixth grade. We had previously talked about how the leaders needed to spend a lot of time with their first grade writers. I read my field notes from 2007 again and confirmed frequent behavior of first graders during the writing segment such as being out of their seats, looking at books or magazines on the library shelves, kicking the table leg, and hanging upside down on their chairs. I shared my observations with Dana who discussed her concerns with Karen. Together they made the decision to offer Writers Club as an option for children in second through sixth grade.

Another decision that needed addressing was more controversial and a source of debate amongst Dana and some of the small group leaders, particularly as the number of Writers Club kids [term used by children in Writers Club to describe themselves] increased. Dana felt strongly that Writers Club participants should already love to write. “We’ve got parents out there signing their kids up for babysitting service! I have one in my room that never writes anything and his parents are already talking about signing him up!” Dana did not believe that it was “fair” to the leaders or to the other group members to have children who did not like to write in Writers Club.

Most of the other leaders agreed with her. One of the leaders had this to say: “... many times you might have a group of six or seven and maybe only half of them wanted to be there and participate and the rest were really only there for like daycare. I mean it was frustrating.”

However, there were voices of dissension. Tim was probably the most vocal and the most concerning to Dana because, next to her, Tim was one who took the most initiative and stepped in to help when problems arose. Everyone gathered in the library at the start of each Writers Club session. Because Tim was the school librarian, events that took place in the library took place in his realm. Some of the children were not sure who was in charge. “I think it’s Mrs. Hawley, or maybe Mr. Massey is the leader of Writers Club,” one fourth grader told me during one of the sessions. I heard variations of this throughout the Writers Club sessions and interviews I did with children.

For Dana, Writers Club was more challenging because of the large number of children who wanted to participate.

You lose something when it gets too big. We can only fit eight groups in the library. We should probably limit it to that. Last year we had to spread out all over the school. I felt like I was running everywhere trying to make sure that things were running smoothly. These legs just don't move that fast! I think you lose the sense of community [when it gets too big], but Tim disagrees with me. He wants it to be inclusive. 'The more the merrier' is his way of thinking. He thinks anyone who wants to be in should be in whatever their reason. (Journal, conversation, November 2, 2007)

Several teachers expressed concern that excluding children who did not like to write was an opportunity missed for giving their attitude towards writing a positive push. Dana was firm in her viewpoint. "That's not what Writers Club is about."

This issue was not completely resolved. Dana took two measures to help nudge participation in Writers Club towards her vision. First, on the interest survey due to go out on November 14, the invitation clearly stated in bold print, "**Writers Club is an enrichment program for students who like to write and share what they have written.**" The other thing Dana decided to do was to use email to run the list of applicants by all of the teachers at Seaside Elementary School prior to sending out acceptance letters with the instruction "If you see names of children here who you have reservations about having them participate in Writers Club, please let me know." Quite a few teachers did let her know of concerns they had with some of the applicants. Dana hoped "that just sending a nicely worded letter" saying that they were not accepted into Writers Club in 2008 would "suffice" and that she would not need to contact any of the families directly.

Dana had two other procedural decisions to make before seeking volunteers and opening up registration. Historically, Writers Club ran for 10 sessions (barring snow days—always a risk for a January to March activity in this part of the country). The first eight sessions were writing sessions. The ninth and tenth sessions were always reserved for editing and the Celebration. Dana allowed an extra week between the editing session and the Celebration to allow time to type, copy, and assemble a book of children's work. Writers Club began on Wednesdays in January and concluded before spring break. Usually spring break occurred in late March or April. In 2008, Dana had two unusual

calendar issues to address. Spring break began March 15 and the first Wednesday back after winter break was January 2nd. Beginning on January 2nd was not a good option because it was the first day of school after the winter break. Even starting the second week in January made it challenging because it takes teachers and children time to settle back into the rhythm of school after a break. Dana always sent reminders home the day before Writers Club began so that children would remember to come and their parents would remember to pick them up at the end of the session. That meant that the earliest Writers Club could start was January 9th. If Writers Club were to run ten weeks and end before spring break, they would forfeit the extra week to assemble the Celebration Book.

Dana polled the staff via email listing three possible options: (1) Writers Club begins January 9 and ends on March 12 with no week between the editing session and the Celebration; (2) Writers Club begins on January 9 and ends on March 26 with the Celebration after spring break; or (3) Writers Club begins on January 9 and ends on March 12 with the week of March 5 reserved for assembling the Celebration Book. In this scenario, Writers Club would have one less session than usual. Dana really hoped that people would not choose the first option. “We’ve got to have that week. It practically kills me already getting it done even with that week!” I asked her why she included that as an option when she felt that strongly about it. “Just because we’ve always had ten sessions and I didn’t want to break with tradition.”

The staff members who weighed in with an opinion, favored option three as did Dana. “I just hope we don’t get too many Wednesday snow days! We usually get a couple in there.”

Another scheduling change Dana had to address was shortening each session from one hour and five minutes to one hour. Seaside Elementary School had a start and stop time that were ten minutes earlier for the 2007-2008 school year. School was officially over at 2:45 pm instead of 2:40 pm, however, the office staff was continuing with their stop time as 4:00 pm. That meant that they locked the office at 4:00 pm restricting access to phones and emergency information. Prior experience led Dana to believe that 3:45 pm was as late as Writers Club could run and be reasonably sure that parents would pick children up by 4:00 pm. “I want to be able to send kids to the office to call home if they haven’t been picked up by 3:55 pm. There’s usually a couple of them every week.”

Dana worked out the daily schedule for Writers Club this way: begin congregating in the library at 2:45 pm, begin the spark by 2:55 pm, gather in small groups by 3:05 pm, write until 3:35 pm, and share until 3:45 pm. “The five minutes had to come off of the writing time. There isn’t any other place to shave even a minute off.”

The Leaders. In early November, Dana sent out her email to the staff at Seaside Elementary School and to the contact person at BPS seeking recruits for Writers Club. “Sending it out to the staff is really just a formality,” said Dana. “I already pretty much know who is going to do it, but you never know—I might get a surprise or two in there!” Dana’s email played up the fact that it only takes one hour a week. “All you have to do is show up, no homework, no planning; just serve as a small group leader. Let me know if you want to be a sparker” (term understood by the staff to refer to the person who shares a piece of literature at the beginning of each Writers Club session). Dana felt “guilty” even asking the teachers to put something else on their plates, but she knew that without leaders, Writers Club would not happen. “I think a lot of them do it out of loyalty to me now. I’m not sure they’d volunteer if I wasn’t running Writers Club.”

There were no surprises for Dana concerning staff volunteers in 2008 either. The volunteers were two kindergarten teachers, two second grade teachers, two fifth grade teachers, the art teacher, the English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher, the librarian, an instructional assistant (IA) from second grade and an IA from the pre-school program. Three other staff members agreed to serve as substitute leaders. Maura, the library assistant, had been a substitute leader for the past three years. “I don’t think there were more than three times when Dana didn’t need me to take a group for a leader who was absent.”

The second grade teachers and one of the IAs were all grade level colleagues with Dana. They corroborated Dana’s suspicion about people agreeing to participate in Writers Club out of loyalty to her. Lucy, one of the second grade teachers who had been a Writers Club leader for four years said, “...because Dana is my friend, I felt like I should help her out with it.”

Stacy, the other second grade teacher did not remember how many years she participated in Writers Club, but it was somewhere between two and four. In 2007, she

served as a substitute group leader and, by self-report, did so 77% of the time. She indicated that she probably would not volunteer if Dana were not her teammate and friend. Wanda, the IA assigned to a special needs child in Dana's classroom, reported that watching Dana juggle classroom responsibilities with Writers Club duties was enough to "make anyone" sign up to be a leader and ask what else they could do to help.

Both fifth grade teachers, one of the kindergarten teachers, and the ESOL teacher had worked with Dana at Seaside Elementary School for nearly twenty years. Tim and Maureen, the art teacher, had led groups almost every year since 2001. Dana felt "grateful" for their continued presence in Writers Club.

There's the group of old-timers who are still doing it for Shelley or for the school or just because they believe in Writers Club. I feel guilty that they do it every year, but I don't know what I'd do without them. (Journal, phone conversation, November 9, 2007)

Lily, a tenth grader and former Seaside Elementary School child and Writers Club kid served as a leader for Writers Club for the first time in 2007. She notified Dana that she was willing to be a leader again in 2008. Dana was thrilled she was returning. "Hooray! Lily is coming back. She did a great job last year and this year her mom can help too!"

Altogether at this point, Dana had leaders for twelve small writing groups. "I used to take a group on my own too, but I found out that was just too much. I'm always running around trying to solve one problem or another. I'm too burnt out to take a group too!" She still hoped that Seaside Elementary School's business partner (BPS) would come through with several other leaders, but surprisingly, unlike in prior years with BPS, there was no response.

Interest Survey. Seaside Elementary School had multiple methods in place to notify parents, children, and the community about school news and events. These included a monthly school newsletter, a monthly newsletter from the parent/teacher association (PTA), a brick marquee on the street with Seaside Elementary School and room for short messages to be posted below the school name, a school home page, individual classroom Blackboard sites (an internet-based website teachers maintained to provide information to children and parents), classroom newsletters, an in-school, closed

circuit morning news program anchored by children that was viewed in every classroom, and a systematic day and method for sending information and children's work to parents. Dana explained her responsibility for all of these methods to communicate information about Writers Club to the school and the community. "I've got to make sure everything's covered." She reacted strongly to my suggestion that she ask for some help.

Are you kidding? It's all I can do to get them to commit to the one hour a week. I can't get enough of them to commit to that much less add anything else. I'm no good at delegating. Besides, they're all too busy too. You know what it is like for teachers. (Journal, phone conversation, November 8, 2007)

November marked the formal reintroduction of Writers Club. Dana prepared a flyer to send home in Wednesday Folders the first Wednesday of November with the dates and times for Writers Club 2008 so that "families can check their schedules" before they sign up. She included information stating, "Carol DeFilippo will be continuing her research on Writers Club this year" as a "heads-up" for parents. School and PTA newsletters carried information about Writers Club as well. Many teachers included information about Writers Club on their Blackboard sites. Writers Club was "covered" by the morning news team. Children and their parents were primed to look for the "Interest Survey" that went home in Wednesday Folders on November 14 to all second through sixth graders. I asked Dana why she called it an interest survey rather than a registration form. "If I called it a registration form, they'd assume they were in. I want to be able to screen them before sending acceptance letters."

The interest survey had places for parents to indicate ways they were willing to help with Writers Club. These were typing finished stories for the Celebration Book, providing snacks for the celebration, and serving as a substitute small group leader. Dana found that she was more likely to get the help she needed from parents when later in the year she sent home reminder forms saying, 'Thank you for volunteering to _____'. We appreciate your help' than she was if she waited until the last few weeks of Writers Club to request help.

It works better to get them to volunteer when they're trying to get their kids in. Of course, I ask everyone to bring snacks for the Celebration whether they volunteer or not! Remember, the teachers used to provide this... I think we provide enough, let each family contribute! (Journal, phone conversation, November 11, 2007)

Dana's hope that by eliminating first graders from the 2008 pool of Writers Club applicants she would avoid the possibility of needing to turn children away was short-lived. By November 15th Dana had more than fifty interest surveys indicating children would like to participate. On Tuesday, November 20th, Dana wrote to me saying: "Good grief...Look at the numbers! I'm still sitting here with 79 kids and trying to figure out how to make it less. Perhaps we should do two sessions. But where would we ever get the man power?" Dana marked the five interest surveys received after the deadline as late. However, she still had more children than could work effectively with the number of leaders who had committed to Writers Club. On the Friday before notification letters were due to go out she wrote, "Still not sure if I'm taking all 84. Never heard from BPS come to think about it. Pain in the neck!"

With only twelve confirmed leaders, Dana knew that 84 children were more than Writers Club could effectively handle.

Five children is the ideal for a group. That gives enough to have different ideas but not too many to share their writing at the end. Six students will work, but most leaders say with six students, they often need to rush the sharing and don't have time to give the authors feedback. (Journal, phone conversation, December 4, 2007)

Group size became even more of an issue with the time for Writers Club compressed to one hour. Dana still expected to receive assistance from BPS, but she could not count on it. She sent a follow-up email to the BPS volunteer coordinator requesting help that included the following appeal:

The letter to announce Writers Club goes home this week. I will need to have my final number of adult helpers preferably by December 20th, but definitely by January 3rd. Anyone who has participated can tell you how awesome it is. If you have anyone who is interested, please let me know. If anyone needs more information, I'll be happy to either email or speak to them by phone.

Dana told me about her plea when she called on the evening she sent the email. "We really need their help. Maybe this will jump start them."

To have groups with six or fewer students, she would need to reduce the number of participants to no more than 72. If BPS ended up having people to send, that would reduce the sizes of the groups. Again, for the second year in a row and even without the

first graders, Dana believed she had to eliminate some of the children who signed up for Writers Club.

Four children turned in their interest surveys after the cut-off date and their applications were automatically rejected. One family was out of the country on the due date. Dana said:

I felt a little bit guilty about that one, but then one of the other teachers pointed out that especially since they are a returning Writers Club family, they could have made arrangements to get it in. I thought, 'you're right' and I cut that child too. (Journal, conversation, July 30, 2008)

One of the children who was turned down was a first grader whose brother had been in Writers Club the previous year as a first grader and was applying this year as a second grader. His mother copied the form and sent it in for the first grader. "I suppose she didn't read the letter carefully and assumed her daughter had just missed getting an application." Dana wrote to her and said, "Try again next year when you are in second grade." A parent withdrew a fourth grade girl before Writers Club began. The other seven children who were not accepted into Writers Club were rejected "because they don't like writing! They don't do their work in school and don't sit still." Four of these children were second graders—Dana's grade. "I know they don't belong in Writers Club." Two others were third graders Dana knew well from the previous year. The last one was a fifth grade boy Dana was "fed up" with.

That kid has been disruptive in Writers Club for too many years. His parents don't even pick him up on time. I let his sister in this year and they didn't pick her up either. She's the one I was still waiting with on the first day way past 4 o'clock! (Journal, conversation, July 30, 2008)

Notification Letters. "Congratulations! You have been accepted to participate in Writers Club 2008!" The seventy-one children accepted into Writers Club received notification letters and school permission forms in their Wednesday Folders the first week in December. Dana included a brief explanation of my research with my home phone number and email address to allow parents to contact me if they wished to do so. In her note, Dana gave parents a "heads-up" about the 3:30 pm meeting to share information about the study and give parents an opportunity to ask questions and complete IRB forms the afternoon of the first Writers Club session.

The thirteen children who were not accepted into Writers Club received a letter Dana wrote that simply stated:

We are sorry to inform you that your name was not selected to be in Writers Club this year. Although, we would like to have you, we are limited in the number of students we can include. We appreciate your interest and enthusiasm. We hope to have Writers Club again next year, so keep writing!

We can all write – all the time - and everyone can keep their own personal writer’s notebook whenever and however they want. If you write something really special and want to share it with the Writers Club, your teacher will see that we get a copy of it to share at our meetings. (Parent letter, December 2007)

Dana was somewhat apprehensive about sending the notification letters so early. “Can’t wait until January like we usually do because we have to start so early. That’s going to give the ones who didn’t get in a lot of time to complain.”

Some of the families were not happy that their children were not included and questioned the decision.

I had one mother who called and pleaded with me. Her child used a second language at home and she saw this as an opportunity for him to get better with English. I also got ‘He didn’t understand that he had to turn it in.’ ‘It will be so good for my child because she is new to the school and it will help her meet other people and make friends.’ And my favorite, ‘We want her to learn how to be a better writer.’ Another parent didn’t say anything to me, but complained to Lucy, her child’s teacher. When the parent questioned the decision, she wanted to know if I had made it on my own. Lucy told her that she couldn’t support recommending her [the child] when she struggled through class all day. She [Lucy] felt it would not be a positive thing for her to have her day extended. (Email, 12/8/07)

Groupings. In early January, Dana finally heard through the BPS volunteer coordinator that two of their employees had committed to serve as Writers Club leaders. Dana never heard from any of the leaders who participated in 2007. Both of the volunteers were first time leaders for Writers Club. Dave would be able to take a group of his own. Kimberly already had conflicts on her schedule for three of the dates, but really wanted to participate.

Gloria, the ESOL teacher, had also informed Dana that she had several prior commitments on Writers Club Wednesdays. Rather than planning to obtain substitutes for

the dates Gloria and Kimberly would be gone, Dana decided to have the pair share a group and ran the idea by them. Both agreed that it was a good solution.

Finally, Dana knew the number of groups she had. She needed to divide the 71 children into 13 groups. “In the old days, we’d put every kid on a card and sort the groups out by hand. Now I just plug all the information in on a spreadsheet and do it that way. Then I make adjustments.” The goal was to balance the groups by grade level and gender, and to have siblings in different groups. Dana sorted her list first by grade level, then by gender, and then went straight down the list assigning each child a number one through thirteen as a new category. She then resorted the list by number so that the ones, twos, threes ... etc. were together and examined the groupings, rebalancing when necessary. As a primary teacher at Seaside Elementary School for 18 years, Dana knew most of the children who applied to Writers Club. She made a few adjustments based on personality characteristics. “I also sent the grouping lists to all the Seaside Elementary School staff Writers Club leaders to ask them if I have any unsuitable pairings. None of them saw any conflicts.”

With the lists intact, Dana emailed the groupings to the Seaside Elementary School leaders and invited them to select a group if they wished. Several leaders did request specific groups. Megan, one of the kindergarten teachers, requested a group that had four of her former students in it. “It was so fun to work with them again and to see how much they’ve grown.”

Maureen, a long-term Writers Club leader, liked to ensure that she had “different kids” every year. “It let’s me see them in a different light. I get to teach them all, but it is special working with them in Writers Club.”

Tim carefully selected a group with a child recently received the label ‘learning disabled.’ “I thought it would give me the opportunity to really work with him and help him realize that he could be a writer too.”

Dana assigned groups to leaders who did not request a specific group. “It really doesn’t matter who goes where since I’ve got the groups pretty even. Sometimes it makes a difference to the leaders though, and anything that makes them happy is all right by me!”

Final Reminders. Dana sent a reminder about Writers Club home with children the day before Writers Club began. Because Writers Club met on Wednesdays, the reminder could not be sent home in Wednesday Folders so Dana wanted it to be eye catching. She designed it as a ‘Ticket to Writers Club’ on bright yellow paper so that it would stand out. In addition to information regarding details about Writers Club, the ticket reminded parents to come to the cafeteria early the first day to meet with me. Children did not need to return the ticket.

From the time Writers Club kids for 2008 were identified, all information regarding Writers Club needed to be targeted just to those children. “I’m so glad I finally learned how to use mail merge! It sure makes getting them to the right kids easier.” Dana included categories on her spreadsheet for any contingency and added new categories as needed. To prepare the tickets expediently, Dana sorted first by name, then by classroom teacher. That way she could get the “right invites to the right teacher” without having to look that information up separately. Dana distributed the tickets to the four Writers Club kids in her class on Tuesday. Other classroom teachers got the tickets in their mailboxes and were to do the same.

Announcements on the morning news show and afternoon loudspeaker reminded children and leaders that the start of Writers Club was imminent. On each Writers Club day, these messages continued.

Behind the Scenes. Dana handled all of the administrative details connected with Writers Club, but she also had people she counted on for some of the more mundane aspects. Carolyn, an instructional assistant who was not a Writers Club leader or substitute, worked in Seaside Elementary School’s ‘Production Center.’ Her task was primarily to support teachers by copying and preparing materials. Carolyn took responsibility for production of the Writers Club booklets used by children and leaders to write in during the weekly sessions. These twenty page booklets had a decorated cover with the words ‘Writers Club 2008’. All of the books had the same cover but inside they either had single spaced lines for participants in third grade and up, or primary paper with wider lines and a dashed line down the middle for second graders. Prior to 2008, the booklets were stapled together in the middle. “They were really hot off the presses this

time,” said Dana. “We didn’t even get them stapled. Hope we don’t regret that later on!” Carolyn also copied and distributed all school wide Writers Club notices.

Maura, the library aide, made sure that pencils were sharpened and materials for the groups were organized and ready for each session. “That might seem like a little thing, but it sure made it easier on me knowing that Maura got everything set-up each week, especially since I’m with my kids in my classroom until dismissal.” Maura got the booklets Wednesday afternoon and barely had time to get them separated into thirteen stacks and rubber-banded together according to Dana’s directions. Each stack had two of the primary lined booklets and six of the single lined booklets. It was almost time for Writers Club to begin.

Decisions Again. As the organizer of Writers Club, Dana had two more procedural decisions to make. I asked Dana if she talked with the other leaders before she made changes or decisions about Writers Club, but she said that she did not, other than in casual conversation, possibly because she is such a “last minute operator”. She checked out the spaces Writers Club was going to use on the Tuesday afternoon before Writers Club started. When she realized she could accommodate eight of the groups at the tables in the library, leaving her with just five more groups, she went to the next largest space Writers Club used in prior years, the theater. There were no tables in the theater and although it was physically close to the library, a plus, it could only fit four groups, a minus. Dana thought that finding a third space for one or two groups was “counterproductive” to the club atmosphere. She went to Karen, the principal, and asked her if it would be all right to utilize the cafeteria so that the other five groups could be together. Karen agreed.

Dana needed to assign each of the groups either to the library or the cafeteria so that she could keep track of where everyone was supposed to be and to help the groups make a smooth transition from the story pit to their writing location. Dana decided to have the cafeteria groups led by experienced classroom teachers who were also experienced Writers Club group leaders. The only non-experienced, non-teacher leader Dana assigned to work in the cafeteria was Kimberly, the BPS volunteer who shared leadership of a group with Gloria, the ESOL teacher. Both of them were supposed to

attend the first session. Dana clustered the groups led by the two IAs, the high school student, and the other BPS volunteer in the library along with four other experienced teacher leaders. “I thought it’d be easier to help the ones who might need help in the library since they’re close.”

Another planning piece Dana liked to have taken care of before Writers Club began did not fall into place. When it came time to solicit staff to help with Writers Club, Dana included a request for sparkers in the initial email asking for Writers Club volunteers. “It is hard to get people to volunteer for that. I usually had to send out an email for sparkers more than once. Again, it’s just another thing that takes time and energy.” No one contacted Dana volunteering to be a sparker.

With everything else Dana was doing to get ready for Writers Club, she did not get around to recruiting any volunteers for the spark. “I guess that means it’s me tomorrow!” She had a book on pirates she was planning to use, but she was not too keen on it. She called me and asked if I could bring a couple of books I had used with Writers Club that she could keep on hand. “It’s easier if I can just hand them [the sparkers] a book. I might choose one of yours myself. I don’t really like the one I have. The only thing is they’ve got to be short. We don’t have much time this year.”

I offered some suggestions I thought Dana might be familiar with but she was too frazzled to care. “You choose. You know what works. My brain can’t decide on anything right now. I can always use the pirate one if I have to. Just drop them off when you get here.” I selected eight titles from my collection and brought them to Dana’s classroom when I arrived at Seaside Elementary School the next day.

Writers Club January 9, 2008. Dana sent an email to all of the Writers Club leaders at 1:10 pm to let them know the location for their writing group and to solicit last minute help, “Tim, is there still a boom box in the library? Brenda, can you bring yours [boom box for the cafeteria]? Any instrumental tapes or CDs or ‘writing’ music would also be appreciated if you can bring it down.”

Dana’s class was engaged in a social studies activity when I arrived at her classroom. She came over and looked through the titles I brought, selecting one we had

discussed the night before based on a simple concept. She read it quickly and said, “Thanks, this will do.” Then she returned to her class and I headed out to set up.

Afternoon announcements came on over the loudspeaker right at 2:45 pm. “Writers Club students in grades two and three are dismissed to go to the library at this time.” Within minutes, children were swarming into the library and congregating at the circulation desk near the stacks of booklets. Dana was close behind having “farmed out” her non-Writers Club children to other teachers in her pod so that she could supervise the children in the library.

She had printed out fifteen copies of the Writers Club groupings with leaders and group locations highlighted. Dana came up behind the group crowding the circulation desk and announced, “Writers Club members, please put your coats and backpacks along this wall, [she indicated the far left wall as you enter the library] and get your snacks. Move over to the story area so we’ll be able to get started.” She shooed the children away and began inserting the grouping page under the rubber band on the top of each stack of booklets. I took over with this task so she could focus on the children. She kept a copy for herself and gave one to me. Dana took time to fill me in briefly on a location switch for the parent meeting.

Children began placing their backpacks and coats on the floor along the book stacks in the non-fiction section. “Remember backpacks can only be one layer deep. We want it to be easy for everyone to find theirs when Writers Club is over,” Dana reminded them. Children who brought snacks pulled them out of their backpacks before heading to the story area. Five little girls scurried to get the spots on the first row of steps. As Dana made her way down to the story pit, she spoke to a group of fifth and sixth grade boys who had pulled out chairs and placed them in a row behind the top step. “All students need to sit on the floor. Only grownups get to sit on the chairs for this first part.” Amongst some grumblings, the boys returned the chairs and made their way over to the juncture of the steps and the wall on the right hand side. A buzz of children’s quiet voices began to fill the room.

Shortly thereafter leaders began to make their ways into the library. By 2:50 pm all the leaders were sitting at tables, the children were gathered in and around the story pit, and Dana was ready with her introductory monologue:

I'm going to get going right away because school gets started a little bit later this year. You might not remember since it is now January, but that means that school ends a little later this year but we have to end Writers Club at the same time. We want to have plenty of time for the writing, after all this is Writers Club—so we all need to get where we need to be quickly and be ready. We'll meet nine times this year if Mother Nature cooperates. It can snow, but we don't want it to snow on Writers Club days!

How many people are new to Writers Club this year?—Wow! Well, for those of you who are new, let me tell you what you can expect to happen. First, we gather in the library like we did today and you can use that time to eat your snack and visit quietly with your friends. Remember that snack is supposed to be a non-messy variety. Take a moment and look around you. If you see crumbs or trash, that isn't a good type of snack to bring. Tell mom to plan differently next week. We'll start every day with a story that an author has written so you can hold it in your mind as you go off to write. We call that story the spark so that it can spark your imagination and help you with ideas for your writing. After the spark, you and your writing group will either stay in the library or go to the cafeteria. We have a Writers Club booklet for each of you and for your leaders. You'll write in it each time and then have it to help you remember Writers Club. We'll play music during the writing time and then, at the end of each Writers Club day, you will get to share what you wrote with the other people in your group.

At our eighth session, you'll choose one of your writings to finish and edit. We skip a week so that we can get the Celebration Books made. Then on March 12, we'll have our great big Celebration where we will have all of your families come in to hear your stories and see what you have done.

Next I want to introduce the other people who are here who are helping make Writers Club possible. If teachers and others weren't here, we wouldn't be able to do this. Back at the library desk we've got one of the two people who actually started Writers Club in 1995. Her name is Ms. DeFilippo and she is studying Writers Club again this year so feel free to talk to her about Writers Club and give your opinions. There were only 18 writers that first year. Look at how many writers we have now! We have classroom teachers from Seaside Elementary, our art teacher, our librarian, and several of our aides. We have Lily Greer who is in high school now, but she used to come to Seaside Elementary and she always did Writers Club. Now she comes back to be a leader. This is her second year with us as a leader. You know her mom, Mrs. Greer. She works here too! We have two leaders here from BPS, our business partner. So there are a lot of people who think it is important to have a time to share stories and write together.

Now listen carefully because I'm going to tell you what group you are in and where your group will meet each week after we share the spark. (Observation, January 9, 2008)

Dana asked each leader to stand while she read out the groupings so that the children would know what they looked like. The children were extremely alert, listening hard for their own name. Dana's delivery was rapid-fire with little time for either bemoaning or celebrating the groupings. "I've never been in a group with any of my friends!" groused one sixth grade boy. "Me neither," said a fourth grader, "but that's okay 'cause you'll make new ones."

As soon as Dana finished reading off the last names, some of the children got up to head out with the leaders. "Wait—I know you are anxious to write, but we are going to read the story first!" Children settled back down, and prepared to listen to the first spark of the year. Dana introduced a picture book by William Steig called *Grown-ups Get to do All the Driving*. "Does this sound like it is written by a grown-up?" Dana then proceeded to lead an interactive read aloud with the children where she deliberately engaged the children in conversation as she read the book.

"Look at the picture [pointing out a portrait hanging on the wall]—they were once children. Can you believe it?" the children shook their heads. "Grown-ups are mean and want to be kissed."

"Eehew," rose up from the children. "My grandma always kisses me," said one. "Mine too," echoed another.

"Grown-ups look in the mirror a lot and weigh themselves all the time." Lots of laughs from the children and the adult listeners. "Grownups can't run." The children giggled and look around at each other, some whispering. Several mimed running in place clumsily.

A couple of the older boys had quietly moved back up to the chairs Dana made them move out of earlier. Dana did not miss this and interjected, "All students on floor!" The boys looked surprised, but slid off the chairs onto the floor at the top of the story pit. Dana turned the page but before she read it said, "I bet there are some kids who like to sleep late... Who are they? Where are they? Is it you?" She pointed to a girl on the back row near the two boys who were now settled on the floor. "How about you?" she said as she lunged towards a little boy in the front.

He recoiled slightly but replied, "My brother likes to sleep late."

“Well, grown-ups like to sleep late too.” Dana showed the pictures carefully, moving the book in an arc so that everyone had a chance to see. “Grown-ups hate to pay taxes.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” echoed several of the children. Most of the grown-ups nodded in agreement.

Dana finished the spark at 3:06 pm, four minutes after she started. Then she began giving instructions to everyone.

When you get ready to write today I want you to think about what may have come into your mind when you were listening. Maybe you’ll want to write about kids get to do all of the...you fill in the ideas. Maybe you’ll decide to make it a comparison—kids get to do..., grown-ups get to do.... If it were me I’d say grown-ups get to do all the cooking and kids get to do all the eating. (This brought groans from the children and laughs from the adults.) You’ve got lots of choices to try as writers today. Now, let’s try standing up and heading out. (Observation, January 9, 2008)

Suddenly the library was a bustle of controlled activity. Leaders who were going to the cafeteria gathered near the door on the right side of the library. Leaders who were staying in the library moved to different tables and gathered their groups there. Dana moved up to the circulation desk and fielded questions from leaders and children alike.

By 3:09 pm, all of the library groups were settled at tables. Leaders were double-checking children’s names against their lists, marking roll on the page Dana provided, and distributing Writers Club booklets. One of the library tables was empty—and it should not have been. Dana headed to the cafeteria to check on the number of groups there. She also grabbed a CD from the selection at the circ desk in case they did not have music in there.

For the next 15 minutes, Dana went from group to group, double checking roll and problem solving as necessary [such as getting the children to the correct groups and supplying extra pencils for those that broke]. Dana asked the leaders to take roll on their grouping sheet each week. When children were absent, Dana checked with the office or other children from their class to see if the missing child was in school that day or left early for an appointment. Dana double-checked the roll each week because “I’m the one who is ultimately responsible. I was making certain that if a parent thought their child

was in our care for that hour, that we had them. If not, I needed to find out why they weren't present."

Dana whirled back into the library and stopped briefly to talk to me. She sensed that the changes she made in Writers Club were positive. "You can tell it [Writers Club] has a different atmosphere already just having the groups in only two places and having fewer kids. Lucy went to the cafeteria instead of the library. I will have her change next week."

At 3:25 pm, I headed out to the lobby to meet with parents. Dana was there ahead of me welcoming parents and speaking with children who came along, mostly siblings of children in Writers Club. Dana knew just about everyone who came in, greeted them heartily, and ushered them towards the table with the IRB forms as she turned to the next group. Dana stayed in the lobby throughout the parent meeting and during the signing of the parent consent and child assent forms. Writers Club kids joined their parents in the lobby at 3:45 pm. I was really surprised that even Tim commented that having less children made sharing the spark more effective. He even agreed that not having the first graders was a huge improvement because they took up so much of the leaders' time and were often "done" in two minutes or so. (Journal, phone conversation, January 13, 2008)

Even with the large number of people coming and going in the lobby, Dana ascertained that three of the Writers Club kids did not have an adult connected with them. She accompanied those children to the office at 3:55 pm and had them call home. One child's parent was already on the way, but the other two had "forgotten" to pick their children up. Dana and I waited in the lobby until the last parent finally picked up their child at 4:15 pm.

Forty parents and children signed the forms that afternoon. Dana and I gathered up the remaining 21 sets of forms. "I'll put a note on those and give them to teachers to send home with the kids tomorrow." We headed back into the library where several of the Writers Club leaders were still gathered and talking about the first session.

Dana's second grade colleagues could not get over how much more "open" the library seemed with thirteen less children. Stacy was bubbling over with enthusiasm. "This [Writers Club] was like the old days when you had time for students to do what you know is good teaching, but don't have time for any more. We are always rushing them in school."

I called Dana later that week to ask how the leaders perceived the first Writers Club session. She said that most of them commented on how “smoothly” it went and echoed Stacy’s appreciation of having fewer children. Dana was especially pleased that even Tim seemed to approve of the changes.

Dana had intended to talk with Lucy about meeting with her group at the eighth table in the library. “I meant for Lucy to end up at the last table in the library, but she must have read it [my directions] wrong. I was going to have her shift back, but I realized it doesn’t really make a difference.”

Dana did have to concern herself with another group issue. Tara [a fifth grade teacher] ended up with a brother-sister pair in her group, which she did not think was going to be good for the little brother, a second grader. Tara reported to Dana that his fourth grade sister was “mothering” him and spoke for her brother at every opportunity. [Later, during focus group interviews I ended up with the same pair in my focus group and quickly realized that Tara was right!] Tara asked Dana if she could separate them, not because she “minded” having them together, but that she felt it would be a better experience for the second grader if he was not in the same group as his sister.

Dana told me, “I usually color code for siblings on my spreadsheet so that I don’t put them in the same group, but for some reason I didn’t do it this year—do you think maybe I’ve got too much on my mind?” She said she was going to have to “study” the groupings before she made the switch. “If I try and switch them willy-nilly it will goof something else up somewhere!”

Four children who were accepted as Writers Club kids were in school on the ninth, but did not come to the first session. Three of those children were in Tara’s and Stacy’s groups. Tara and Stacy expressed their frustration to Dana about having missing children when there were other children who could have taken those slots. Dana followed up and “touched base” with all of the missing children before the next Writers Club session. A pair of siblings was at their last taekwon do class. Another child went home with a friend after school and the fourth child “just shrugged” when Dana asked him why he was not there. All four children attended the next session.

When I spoke with Dana by phone that evening, she acknowledged that she was “exhausted” and was very glad that the “hardest” part of Writers Club for her was over.

“I don’t mind it [being the head of Writers Club] once it is up and running. It’s like clockwork—wind it up and it goes by itself as long as there are no glitches. But getting to that point takes way more time and energy than anyone realizes.” She said that she kept giving Karen the “heads-up” that she was not going to be the “coordinator” next year, but “isn’t sure” if the principal really took her seriously. Dana met with Karen two days after the first Writers Club meeting to discuss further changes Dana felt were important for Writers Club. “Direct instruction on writing is not a part of the club, except perhaps for the editing session.” Dana wanted to make that more evident in the future. She believed that Writers Club should be limited to children who already like to write. One means she has considered to realize that limit is to create a parent/teacher survey about children’s writing habits. Another method she thinks might be beneficial would be to have children complete one or more 25 minute writing prompts done at school that would then be used to “screen applicants.”

A lot of the students just want to be part of a club, any club. This club should be filled with people who love to write. I would love to see the school offering other opportunities throughout the year that would also run for a series of weeks like math club, and readers club that would get other students’ strengths. (Journal, phone conversation, January 13, 2008)

At their meeting, Karen listened to Dana, but did not make any commitments. Dana thought that Karen was “open” to the changes she believed were needed for Writers Club to become what Dana thought it ought to be. What concerned Dana the most was the “quality of writing” done in Writers Club. At the first session when she was moving around from group to group Dana overheard one little boy saying he wanted to write about transformers. “Nothing whatsoever to do with the prompt! Why come [to Writers Club] if you’re not going to follow the spark? Quality matters!”

I asked Dana whom she had lined up to do the spark next week, but she said, “I haven’t gotten there yet! Usually I send out a congratulatory email after the first meeting and ask if anyone feels like sparking, but I haven’t gotten to that and I’m afraid Wanda will be the first to volunteer.” Wanda was the IA for a “special needs” child in Dana’s classroom. Dana did not want Wanda to feel badly, but she vividly remembers sitting through a “painful” rendition of a great story when Wanda was the sparker in a previous year. “I know she means well and wants to help me out, but her delivery doesn’t inspire writing... I’m going to have to recruit sparkers in person to avoid having to hurt Wanda’s feelings or having her lead a session again.”

Megan, a kindergarten teacher, volunteered for the second spark. Megan wanted to use a specific poem, “What’s the Funniest Thing?” by Beatrice Schenk de Regniers as part of her sharing, but she was unable to locate it. Dana sent an email to the school librarian, a librarian she knew at another elementary school, and me asking if any of us could find a copy of the poem. None of us was able to come up with the poem before the next session. Brenda, Megan’s kindergarten teammate “came to the rescue” and offered to do the second spark.

The night before the second Writers Club session, Dana called me to let me know that “a few more [IRB] forms trickled in.” She also found several more in her dining room and promised to give them to me the next day. Dana planned to be at Writers Club the next day for the beginning, the spark, and through the settling down into writing groups. “After I take roll, I’ll work in my room until it’s time for Writers Club dismissal—that always takes at least fifteen minutes. I’ve got too much to do [as a classroom teacher] to hang around when I’m not needed.”

Writers Club January 16, 2008. By the time I arrived at Seaside Elementary School on the sixteenth, Dana was “pulling her hair out! I’ve got two groups without leaders! I’ve sent out a school-wide email asking for help, but there’s been no takers.” Dave, one of the BPS volunteers, had to back out of his commitment to Writers Club because of a change in weekly meetings. His January 16 email to Dana read, “I’m afraid I cannot support the Writers Club. My Wednesday afternoons are no longer free. I truly enjoyed the session last week – the kids were truly creative thinkers and a real breath of fresh air.”

Dana sent an email to the staff seeking a replacement for Dave. “If anyone would find it in their heart to step in and fill this slot, I have 5 nice writers for you.” No one responded to the email. Dana was “greatly relieved” when Maura [one of the three people who signed up to be substitute leaders] agreed to take over the group after Dana stopped by the library to talk to her in person.

Unfortunately, things did not improve once Writers Club actually began. Except for Kimberly, Dana and Tim were the only adults in the library for the first ten minutes of Writers Club. Many of the leaders were late in arriving, creating an apparent feeling of

unrest among the waiting children. Children kept turning around to look for leaders and asking each other if they had seen Writers Club leaders at school that day. Dana walked down and amongst the children, which appeared to settle things temporarily. She motioned four sixth graders to move from chairs to the floor and assured the group that they would be starting soon. She spoke to the two children who would be switching groups (to resolve Tara's sibling dilemma) and then went up to switch their booklets to their new leaders' piles. Dana wrote notes to each of the leaders about the change on the attendance sheets.

By this time, Tim turned on the music that usually just played during the writing time to help quiet the group of waiting children. Dana walked back down to the story pit, but the atmosphere of calm Dana's presence demanded did not last when she left the area to try to figure out which leaders were still missing (including the sparker). When Brenda finally entered the library at 2:54 pm, she came up behind Dana at the circulation desk and tapped her on the shoulder whispering, "Let me know when you want me to start."

"Right now!" was Dana's emphatic retort and Brenda hurried down to the story pit. She began her spark, *What a Bad Dream* by Mercer Mayer. Dana saw that three leaders had yet to pick up their pile of booklets and asked me if I had seen them. I told her that I had not. Dana went to see if she could find any of them.

Brenda was already through with the spark when Tara arrived. Wanda's group and Megan's group were still leaderless when Brenda dismissed the children to join their leaders at 2:59 pm. Tara had no sooner gathered her group at their table and begun distributing their Writers Club booklets when the third grader at her table developed a nosebleed. Tara jumped up, handed the child a Kleenex, and escorted her to the clinic, leaving her group unattended.

Dana was back in the library at 3:00 pm. She collected Megan's group and had them clustered near the circ desk. Megan finally rushed in at 3:02 pm apologizing profusely. "I'm so sorry. We had a major issue." Dana was just "grateful" that she made it. Megan gathered up her visibly relieved group of writers and scurried them off to the cafeteria.

Dana then got Wanda's group settled at their table in the library and asked me to keep an eye on them as she went around taking role "and making sure there weren't any

more crises on the horizon.” I told her that Tara had taken a child to the clinic. “Good Lord! What a start! I can’t believe I volunteered for this again!”

When the leaders were not in place when they need to be there, Dana immediately began to “worry about how I’m going to get things on track.” She was so busy with the task of making things run smoothly that she did not have time to “check out” what happened with the leaders. “I’m lucky when they [the leaders] email me before dismissal. After that I don’t have time to check.” Dana was back in the library at 3:08 pm to work with Wanda’s group, but only stayed a few minutes because she needed to check on the child in the clinic. She asked me to oversee them from my place at the circulation desk while she was gone.

Dana returned the clinic child to Tara’s group at 3:12 pm and rejoined Wanda’s group. Dana asked to read Melanie’s [her former student] booklet and said, “Wow! I’m impressed that you have written so much.” Immediately, the other three in the group began to write. Dana and Melanie quietly conferenced for a few minutes before both of them burst into giggles. At 3:35 pm, Dana turned off the music and all of the groups in the library began reading their stories to each other.

Most parents were there to pick up their children by the time Writers Club ended at 3:45 pm. Dana escorted the three children who were still there at 4:00 pm to the office to call their parents. The Parent/Teacher Association (PTA) president arrived to get her daughter at 4:05 pm. “My son told me it was over at 4:00 pm.” The PTA president wanted to take one of the other children home with her, but Dana checked the child’s emergency form and informed her that she could not do so without written permission from the other parent. That parent finally arrived at 4:10 pm without an apology or an excuse.

I waited with Dana until the last parent finally showed up at 4:35 pm. On non-Writers Club days, this child was a walker because he lived very close to the school. Parents were required to pick walkers up from school when it was not the normal dismissal time because there were no adults, patrols, or crossing guards to help ensure safety after hours. The parent came in far enough to bow to Dana, but said nothing and hurried away with his son.

You know, I just don't get it. I mean we're doing something special for their kids and they [parents] don't even make the effort to pick-up their children on time? I understand emergencies, but it seems like it is always the same people.
(Observation, January 16, 2008)

Writers Club grew by one child after this session. After taking over Dave's group, Maura realized that her daughter's best friend was one of the children in her group. Maura asked Dana if her fifth grade daughter could reconsider joining Writers Club. Lacey originally decided not to participate in Writers Club, but when she found out that her best friend was in her mother's group, she wanted to join the group too. Dana did not hesitate. "If adding a leader's kid gets me the leader I need, I'm all for it. Leaders ought to get some perks."

Dana commented that it seemed to her like "a lot" of the children were not sharing their stories. She asked me if I had noticed that during my observations. I corroborated her concerns with several specific examples from my field notes. "I want everyone to be sharing, at least most of the time" Dana remarked. "Sharing is an important part of Writers Club. It says so right on the application."

Writers Club January 23, 2008. Dana continued to search for the poem Megan needed hoping that she would "track it down" in time for Megan to do the spark on the 23rd. Dana widened her net and asked Tim to put the request out to all of the elementary school librarians. By lunchtime on the 23rd, Dana knew she needed another plan. She asked Lucy, one of her teammates, if she would do the spark that afternoon. "I told her all she needed to do was read the book. I'd provide her with the book and the writing hints at the end." Dana let Lucy look through the stack of books I left in her classroom as potential Writers Club sparks. Lucy chose *Just Awful* by Alma Whitney, a story about a child's first visit to the school clinic. Dana emailed me to ask if I would bring a list of possible writing topics for the book when I came to give to Lucy. When I brought the list to her at 2:30 pm that day, Dana took it and said, "Thanks. I'm just dodging bullets here!"

Dana arranged to have a first grade teacher in her pod be responsible for dismissal of her children on Writers Club days. That allowed her to send all of her non-Writers Club children to another classroom at dismissal so that she could head to the library at 2:45 pm with the Writers Club kids from her room. Even though she knew that Maura

would have the stacks of Writers Club booklets out and the pencils sharpened and ready, Dana always checked to be sure these materials were in order before she began directing children to stow their backpacks, get their snacks, and move to the story pit. Dana moved through the children, praising or chiding as she deemed needed to get things settled quickly and quietly. She sat on the sparker's chair in the story pit and spoke to the group of children assembled there about an issue that concerned her.

How is Writers Club going so far? Good? [many nods and yeses from the children]. You can help us make Writers Club even better. That's why your leaders and I will sometimes ask your opinions. One thing that I'm hearing from some of the leaders is that they say they have kids who don't want to share their writing at the end. You know that on the sign-up sheet for Writers Club it said that Writers Club was for kids who like to write. Writing is meant to be shared. I want to encourage everyone to share in your small groups. Find something to share, even if it is just a little bit. (Observation, January 23, 2008)

Dana saw Lucy approaching and relinquished the chair to her at 2:54 pm. Dana joined me where I was sitting at the circulation desk and whispered anxiously, "I hope our leaders show up. Nobody wrote me that they wouldn't be here today!" At that point, only Tim, Maura, Lily, and Lucy were in the library. "This makes me nervous." Leaders continued to trickle in throughout the sharing of the spark with the last one, Kimberly from BPS, arriving just as the spark ended. "Phew," Dana breathed a sigh of relief.

Lucy shared *Just Awful* and a number of possible writing topics the writers might choose including writing about a visit to the school nurse or a time you were afraid. Dana walked back down to the story pit and added two more ideas, "You could also write about a time when you had an injury or you might have a story to tell about how you got hurt." Dana dismissed children to join their writing groups. They turned their attention from Dana and quickly scanned the room for their leaders who were already standing. As the children recognized their leaders, they called out to other children in their writing groups and moved quickly to join their leaders. Children and leaders chattered animatedly with each other as they convened and moved towards their destination. Those in the library settled at their tables and those in the cafeteria headed out in clusters.

When almost everyone was in their designated places, Dana noticed that Brenda's stack of Writers Club booklets was still on the counter and a somewhat bereft group of children was waiting just outside the library door. "I know she's here today. I saw her!"

Dana picked up the stack of booklets, got some pencils, gathered the group and took them to the cafeteria. At 3:10 pm, Brenda hurriedly made her way to the table where Dana had settled with Brenda's children. Brenda spoke briefly to Dana and then took over the group. Dana then made the rounds of all of the tables in the cafeteria and library taking roll before going to her classroom to prepare for a four o'clock parent conference.

Dana returned to the lobby at dismissal time. The lobby was swarming with both children and parents. Dana stood by the doors "mentally checking off kids with the right parents." Ten children were still in the lobby at 3:55 pm, but seven of them were with their parents who were chatting and visiting. At 3:58 pm the last child saw that her father was sitting out front in his car. Dana was especially frustrated when the child told her, "He won't come in. He knows he's supposed to come inside to get me but he won't." Dana gratefully accepted another parent's offer to take responsibility for walking the child out. "I don't have time for this," she lamented before hurrying off to her parent conference.

A few days later Dana called and again asked if I had observed any issues with the sharing time at the end. "Several" leaders had come to her during the week and said they were "having trouble" getting their children to share their writing. Dana asked me for some suggestions for her to pass on to the group leaders to help with the issue of sharing. "A lot of the kids aren't sharing their stories and it seems that not sharing is becoming acceptable! Sharing is supposed to be a big part of Writers Club. How can I get the leaders to get them [the children] to share?"

I offered Dana several suggestions that might help. These included: reminding children that sharing what they wrote was part of being in Writers Club; having children who did not share the previous week share first; offering to read the writing for reluctant children; asking children to pick their two best sentences to share; and having the leader share their writing last. "That helps," said Dana. "I'll see what I can do." Dana sent this email based on our conversation out to all of the leaders on January 29:

Hi everyone. We will be having our 4th meeting today...just about ½ way through. Thanks so much for making this possible.

The observation has been made that some students are not sharing any of their writing. Please remind them that this is part of Writers Club and this is what their invitation to WC said: This group is open to students who **enjoy writing, listening**

to other writers, and sharing their own writing. The expectation is that everyone will share at least two sentences of their writing every time.

Leaders need to share a portion of their writing as well, preferably sharing last. Students are sometimes reluctant to share their piece after hearing one they think “sounds” a lot better.

Leaders can offer to read the writing for the student. Begin with the ones who did not share the week before. Establish that as a ground rule.

Guide students to write things that are appropriate to share with their “school audience.” If they share things that are inappropriate, let them know.

Dana did not get any verbal or email feedback from any of the Writers Club leaders about her recommendations to increase sharing.

Writers Club January 31, 2008. No one had been able to locate the poem Megan needed yet, so Dana asked Stacy, her other second grade colleague to give the spark. “Megan says she’ll go ahead and just do the spark if we don’t find it soon, but she’s not ready to give up yet.” Dana met the children in the story pit and began her directions for the day:

Please scoot on over and make room for everyone. This group has passed some kind of record! This is the 4th time in a row we have met! Usually we would have had at least one snow day by now and right now it looks like next week will be safe [from snow] too! Today Mrs. Bossee is going to share her favorite book with you. It is written by Jerry Palotta and is called *Dory Story*. If you’ve had Mrs. Bossee you’ll probably recognize it because she likes it so much that she always shares it every year in her classroom. When she shared it with me, I knew it would be a great story for Writers Club. (Observation, January 30, 2008)

After children and leaders joined their groups, Dana made the rounds checking attendance. She actually got to work in her classroom from 3:15 pm to 3:45 pm. Dismissal was uneventful with all of the children picked up by four o’clock. Dana asked me, “How’d it go with the sharing? Did you notice any difference today?” Dana was “pleased” when I related that I had overheard at least five of the group leaders specifically talking to their children about the importance of sharing in Writers Club. “Maybe we can make a difference,” Dana mused.

When it came time for me to schedule children’s interviews, I realized that I had not requested any parent contact information. I received permission from the school principal

to use the school directory published by the Parent/Teacher Association (PTA). I emailed Dana to see if she could get me a copy of the directory and explained why I needed it.

She replied,

You could compose an email and as the ‘head’ of WC, I could send it. Most people provided email addresses on their registration form for WC. I could direct them to reply to you. I personally find it [email] a less intrusive means of communication.

Dana sent emails to the parents of three children I identified for individual interviews and included my email address. “Why did you pick those three? I can understand choosing Jill because she has been in Writers Club for so long, but the other two?” Dana questioned the two second graders I’d selected because Peter was one of the children who “never wrote anything in class” and Penny was so “flighty” she “never got any of her work done” either. “Maybe you see something in them I don’t.”

Dana and I also discussed the leaders I was going to interview individually. Dana specifically requested that I interview Maureen, the art teacher. Dana was puzzled by Maureen’s participation in Writers Club. “She has been doing it year after year and it’s hard [for me] to figure out why. She is so quiet! I mean we [the staff] hardly ever even see her except at Writers Club.”

Writers Club February 6, 2008. Dana knew on Tuesday that two of the Writers Club leaders were not available this week. By lunchtime on Wednesday, two substitute leaders, a member of the office staff and a third grade teacher had responded to her email requesting help.

That sure takes the pressure off...This is the way it ought to work. When I need help and get it without having to run people down, running Writers Club once its going isn’t that big of a deal. Most of the time it seems like people just ignore my emails asking for help. (Journal, conversation, February 6, 2008)

Tim gave the spark this day. He shared *Zen Shorts* by John Muth. Dana “didn’t even remember I didn’t have a sparker until today.” I asked her what she would have done if Tim had not been willing or able to do it.

I guess I would have tried to find somebody else and if all else failed, I’d just do it myself. Time just got away from me. Thank goodness he said yes. I didn’t even ask him if he’d be sparker until after lunch and even better—he already had his

story! Kind of a new age philosophy book. It was a bit out there, but at least I didn't have to come up with it! (Journal, phone conversation, February 6, 2008)

Tim was already in the library when the first children and Dana arrived. She sat at a table near the circulation desk directing or redirecting children as needed. Dana put labels on the two stacks of booklets for writing groups that would have substitutes. Tim was in the story pit chatting with children so Dana did not speak to the group of children as a whole as she usually did. Dana was “grateful” that Tim was ready on such short notice.

After the spark, Dana checked in with all the groups, taking attendance, and clarifying procedures with the two substitutes. “I make sure I tell them how much I appreciate them.” Dana then worked in her room until just before Writers Club’s dismissal time. She returned to the lobby area at 3:40 pm and spent time visiting with parents who were waiting to pick up their children.

As children began to pour out of the library and cafeteria, a cacophony of voices were directed towards Dana. “Have you seen my grandmother?” “Is my mom here yet?” “Guess what I wrote about today?” “Bye, Mrs. Hawley!” Dana bantered with parents and children as dismissal proceeded.

Some of the leaders stopped for several minutes to speak with parents as they entered the lobby. Leaders from the cafeteria had no choice but to traverse the lobby to reach their classrooms. Leaders from the library had more options because they could take the elevator to the second floor without coming into the lobby. Some leaders came out into the lobby with their heads down and made a beeline to the office. Their message was obvious—“I’ve got too much to do and not enough time. I don’t have time for an impromptu chat.”

By 3:48 pm, Dana was the only Writers Club adult remaining in the lobby. She was chatting with two of the seven remaining parents. The other parents were talking amongst themselves while their children ran up and down the ramps to the small stage in the center of the lobby. At 3:55 pm, Dana was sitting in the vestibule looking out towards the front of the school with no children or parents in sight. When I went over to sit with her she was grumbling about people being late every single week. I finally noticed one child in the office waiting to use the phone. “I’m always here till at least 4:00 pm. You’d

think they'd have figured out pick up time by now!" I waited with Dana until the child's parent finally arrived at 4:10 pm. He did not come all the way to the door, but motioned to his daughter to come to him. "Remind him he is supposed to pick you up at 3:45 pm," Dana called after her. "This is the stuff that really irritates me and makes me want to back away from Writers Club. Otherwise, today was great!"

Writers Club February 13, 2008.

Finally! I'd given up [on ever finding Megan's poem] but this week we heard from a librarian on the other side of the county who found one anthology with the poem we've had everyone looking for. Megan was going to go ahead and be the sparker even if we couldn't find the poem, but I know she is a lot happier that we did. I told her she had better put a copy of it in a vault! (Journal, conversation, February 13, 2008)

An ice storm on the 12th almost broke the "good luck" weather string Writers Club enjoyed in 2008. School opened after a two-hour delay so everything was running on compressed time at Seaside Elementary School. Even at 2:30 pm in the afternoon the roads and parking lots were icy.

Megan was sitting in the story pit with an elaborate set-up of poetry books while Dana was directing and redirecting children so Writers Club could get underway. A group of five or six sixth grade girls clustered on the outskirts of the group. Dana wanted them to move closer in. "Ladies, can I get you all to move over here? It's really better if you spread out." None of the girls moved. Dana insisted they do so. "You may not think it, but it is difficult for the person who is sharing when you aren't spread out evenly. Come on over this way. Thank you." Then she addressed the whole group:

Not only has Writers Club been lucky with the weather, we're especially lucky today because through the efforts of lots of teachers and librarians all over the county we were finally able to track down a special poem that Mrs. Flowers really wanted to share with all of you. We've been trying to find it for almost a month and were about to give up when a librarian way on the other side of the county found it and sent it to us. Mrs. Flowers was real happy about that and I am too. (Observation, February 13, 2008)

While Megan shared the spark, Dana made copies of the elusive poem to distribute to everyone. As she checked attendance with each group, Dana also distributed copies of the poem "What's the Funniest Thing?" to all of the children and leaders. Then

she went to work in her room. Lucy needed to leave early that day and arranged for Dana to take over her group at 3:30 pm. At that time, Dana returned to the cafeteria and sat down with Lucy's children. She spoke quietly with one child who was not writing and had both hands on the sides of her head. After listening to Dana, the child picked up her pencil and began writing. She kept on writing until the music ended several minutes later.

Dana led the children in Lucy's group through the sharing. Most of the children had written poetry. One child's work was a tongue twister of rhyming words. Dana's response was, "I think Dr. Seuss has possessed your writing!" At the end of Writers Club, Dana pulled that child aside to talk with her further about her writing. "You do know that you are a very good writer, don't you?" The child was a former student of Dana's and appeared to be enjoying the extra attention. By the time Dana made it out to the lobby at 3:50 pm it was nearly empty. By 3:55 pm, everyone was gone.

Dana and I went to her classroom to review the list of 30 children who had agreed to participate in focus group interviews. The first possible date was a little less than two weeks away so invitations to participate needed to go out. As we had for the individual interviews, Dana and I decided that she would initiate the email invitations. The email invitation asked parents to indicate which dates could work for their children. Because I was scheduling three focus group interviews with five children each, we decided initially to select fifteen children who represented a cross section of Writers Club based on age, gender, and experience with Writers Club.

Dana wanted to wait until the weekend to send the invitation email to families and really study the list of children "because I'm too busy to really look at it until then. I'll get back to finishing the email thingy after I catch up with papers for tomorrow's folders and commentary for GT [Gifted and Talented] screening." Although I had already sent her a prototype email with the requested information clearly stated, Dana wanted time to think it through and determine if she could make it "better." I wanted to get things moving, but I also knew from experience with Dana as a colleague that her need to "Dana-size" and add her "touch" was very strong. She also wanted to seek input from some of the other classroom teachers about which children should be included "when I see them at our staff meeting on Monday." I received an email from Dana the next Tuesday saying, "I'm attaching an Excel sheet with the 15 names I would suggest. Let

me know if this looks correct to you and I'll try to get the email out before the day is over.”

Six email exchanges later with 40 words and some graphics added to my draft, Dana sent the email invitation out on February 19. Parent responses began to come in the next day. Most parents responded to both of us. Some only sent responses to me; others only sent responses to Dana.

Dana was concerned that she did not have enough parent volunteers to type all of the children's stories for the Celebration Book. Volunteers would have only one week from the time they received the children's stories to type until they were due back to Dana on March 5. She contacted the PTA volunteer coordinator seeking her help in recruiting more volunteers to type, hoping that leaders would not need to assume this task. Through the PTA volunteer coordinator, Dana sent out the following message:

February 27th is the last writing session for Writers Club. Everyone chooses their favorite writing to finalize. We edit the story and prepare it for typing to be included in the 2008 Writers Club collection.

If you are able to assist by typing a few stories, please email me and I'll send typing guidelines (simple!) and the writing home with your child next week. Please email the copy either as the body of an email or as an attachment to Dana.Hawley@ncps.edu . Please try to have stories emailed by the end of the day Wednesday, March 5th . The books can come in after you finish. Thank you everyone! Dana Hawley and the Writers Club staff.

Response: ___ Yes, I can type up to 6 stories. ___ Yes, I can type 2 or 3 stories.

Dana did not have a volunteer for sparker for the 20th, the last actual writing session for 2008. She decided to give the spark herself rather than try to recruit someone else. Initially she considered using Margaret Wise Brown's *The Important Book* for the spark, but ultimately decided against it because “it seems too formula, cut and dry. I've used it for curriculum stuff. I think I'd like to use something with more possibilities . . . but haven't decided what yet!”

Writers Club February 20, 2008. Energy and excitement seemed to pulsate in the library on the last writing session for Writers Club in 2008. Apparently very eager for the sessions to begin, twenty children gathered in the library before 2:45 pm with more

coming in all the time. The front row of the story pit was already full with second and third grade girls before end-of-school dismissal actually began. Smells of snacks flooded the area—bananas, crackers, pretzels, cookies. Within minutes, children filled all of the steps.

Dana arrived and paused at the circulation desk to put pencils on top of the rubber-banded packets of booklets and to speak briefly with one of the substitute leaders. She then wove her way down to the story pit, talking to children as she went. Then she turned to face the entire group.

We got lucky again! This is definitely our record in Writers Club. We didn't miss a day because of weather even though it did try and get us with those icy Wednesdays. This is our last regular Writers Club meeting this year. Next week we will be choosing and editing the stories that you want to share at our Writers Celebration. Some of your parents have volunteered to type up your stories for our Celebration Book. Our PTA helped us get even more parents to help. That is wonderful! It takes everybody to make Writers Club work. I'll be passing out notes to those of you who have parents who said they will be able to help us. Remember to give it to them right away so your parents will remember to plan time for it.

For our last spark, I decided to share one of my favorite stories about teeth. You may not know it, but this is National Dental Health Month. I don't know anyone who doesn't have a good 'teeth' story. When I'm reading today, I want you to think about the teeth stories you have to tell. The book I'm going to share is called *Mrs. Watson Wants Your Teeth* by Alison McGhee. (Observation, February 20, 2008)

Mrs. Watson Wants Your Teeth is a story about a first grade teacher with a legendary reputation among the children. Second graders regale new first graders with hints about the terrors that await them as students in Mrs. Watson's class.

Dana assumed an interactive stance between the book and her audience, stopping frequently to ask the children questions or notice details in the illustrations. She pointed out that the speech bubbles form a story line of their own and asked questions such as, "Who's doing that talking?" and "What is she trying to show that the necklace is made of?" Dana alternated between sitting and standing, walking the perimeter of the bottom level of the story pit, engaging children in speculation and consternation. Dana became the obnoxious second grader tormenting the little first grader, crossing her arms and ending her warnings with the ominous repeated line, "and that's all I'm going to say."

I don't think any of you will have problems coming up with ideas to write about today. I can think of two types of stories you could write that would go along with

this story. The first type would be a tooth story. You might have had something unusual happen when you lost one of your teeth. Or you might know a story that happened to someone else.

The other kind of a story that you might be inspired to write could be about things older kids say to you to scare you. Remember how the second grader was trying to scare the first grader? Has anything like that ever happened to you...and then you find out that what you were scared of wasn't even true? (Observation, February 20, 2008)

Dana began to tell about an incident from her own childhood when bigger kids in her neighborhood told her that she had better keep her mouth closed whenever she was around spiders or the spiders would try to write their names on her teeth! "That scared me for a very long time," she told the children,

...and I still think about it when I see a spider! Now, what I want you to do, is close your eyes for a moment and picture the story you are going to write about today. When you have your story in your mind, open your eyes and join your group. (Observation, February 20, 2008)

Because Dana was the sparker, one of the other leaders filled in the two substitute leaders that day on procedures, while also making sure they got their stack of booklets and found their group's location. Dana came up to the circulation desk and picked up her stack of purple parent reminder notes she printed earlier that day. "Mail merge [from her Excel spreadsheet of participating Writers Club families] is a wonderful thing," she quipped as she began to deliver the notes to the right children. "I used to have the group leaders do the typing, but this year I actually have enough parent volunteers to relieve the leaders of this burden." After delivering the notes, Dana left and did not return to Writers Club until dismissal. Parents picked up children at the designated time. Only one was late, arriving shortly after four o'clock, out of breath and with apologies for Dana.

That afternoon I conducted my first interview with Lily, the high school student who returned to serve as a leader for her second year. I interviewed my first child, a sixth grader, before school the following morning. Dana was very curious to know how the interviews went. She called me the following evening to ask if I found out anything "interesting" in the interviews. Dana was "shocked" by how important Writers Club appeared to be to both of the people I had interviewed. I shared with Dana that both Lily and Jill felt strongly that Writers Club helped them develop their love of writing and

encouraged them to think of themselves as writers. Dana was particularly surprised by this.

Maybe I'll have to rethink my idea of weeding out kids who don't like to write... You know, you get so wrapped up in the details and making it all happen that all you can think about is how much work it all is. It [Writers Club] doesn't look [to me] like it is doing what I think it ought to, but maybe it is. (Journal, phone conversation, February 22, 2008)

Dana continued to receive and forward email responses from parents concerning the focus group interviews. Although my contact information was prominently placed on all of the emails related to scheduling focus group interviews, many parents chose to use Dana as a liaison and communicated with me through her. By February 25, eleven of the first fifteen children we invited to participate in focus groups had responded with dates that would work for them.

I created a questionnaire for Writers Club kids to complete. Although all of the children had an opportunity to complete one, I needed to be able to distinguish the questionnaires of children who had completed IRB forms from those who had not. Dana suggested that we make a small mark on the back of questionnaires for those children without IRB forms and place a copy of the questionnaire inside the front cover of each child's Writers Club booklet. Children could complete them at the beginning of the editing session and their leaders could collect them. I planned to go to Seaside Elementary on Monday or Tuesday to get the questionnaires run off, marked, and inserted, but when I became quite ill, Dana asked me to send the questionnaire to her electronically. She ran them off, marked them, and inserted them in all of the booklets before Writers Club began on the 27th.

Responses to the request sent out by the PTA volunteer coordinator for more typists provided Dana with enough typists to take care of all the children's stories. "I'm glad they came through." In the last couple of years in order to get enough leaders, Dana "has advertised it [Writers Club] as a 'just show up for this one hour meeting. No need to prepare, nothing to take away. I didn't want to have to ask them [the leaders] to type up the stories.'"

Writers Club February 27, 2008. Dana sent the following instructions to Writers Club leaders to help them plan and organize for editing day. She also printed out a customized copy with specific instructions for the leaders telling them which child (children) they were to send their groups' bundled Writers Club booklets home with for typing.

Each student is to pick their favorite writing for the Celebration Book. During this session, they will edit and revise to produce a finished piece. Students may work together to help each other as they do this. Encourage students to pick a story suitable for our finished book and for reading aloud at the celebration. i.e. non-violent, not too long.

Some students may need to finish their story. Others may need to choose a catchy title. Encourage adding more descriptive words or details as time permits. Words need to be written clearly enough for the typists to read.

Each writer will practice reading their story aloud to their group. Explain that for the celebration we will divide into 4 groups. They will get up in front of their big group to read. They will need to use a nice loud voice for people to hear.

If students finish and have time, they may draw a small picture to illustrate their story on the paper provided. This can be cut and pasted on the final document providing there is room. Anyone who doesn't have time to do this today may take the paper and return it by Friday to their teacher. They must be sure to write their complete name lightly on the back of the picture. Drawings need to be black and white.

If anyone still has time, you might encourage them to use a page in their booklet to write what they enjoyed about Writers Club. Ask them to tear it out and place it on the table by the door as they leave.

Dana came bustling into the library at 2:40 pm with the customized instructions for group leaders and stacks of papers she needed to distribute to children about the Writers Celebration. Dana placed the printed instructions for leaders under the rubber band on top of the stacks of booklets for each group. Two of the leader substitutes met her with questions on procedures. Dana quickly reviewed the directions with the subs and thanked them profusely for being there. She explained which groups they would be working with and where they should meet their groups.

Dana looked unusually frazzled as she hurried out of the library muttering to herself. One of the subs explained that Dana had sent several emails to the staff that day

“begging” for help including a last minute appeal sent to all staff at 2:25 pm. Later Dana told me that four leaders canceled, three of them that day, but that only two staff members had agreed to serve as substitutes. Dana was extremely frustrated.

I’m pulling my hair out! On today of all days! The leaders ought to know how important this day is. We **can’t** double up groups for this one! You’d think they’d [the leaders] understand that. Wouldn’t you think that in this whole school there ought to be people who could manage to put themselves out and help once? (Journal, conversation, February 27, 2008)

The children arrived a little later today than they had been in previous weeks, but by 2:50 pm, the story pit was packed. Because Dana was still out of the room, Tim took it upon himself to review for the children and the leaders what they needed to accomplish that day. At one point, he noticed that Dana had returned and asked if she wanted to take over, but she replied, “No, keep going. You’re doing just fine.” Tim continued until he completed giving instructions for selecting their stories, editing them, and creating a small illustration to accompany the stories.

Dana joined Tim in the story pit and shared the next round of information with the children and leaders.

Everyone is going to be taking home an invitation to the Writers Celebration. That won’t be next week—we **won’t** be having Writers Club next week. Remember that. On the Writers Celebration day, we’ll be breaking up into four small groups to share everyone’s writing. Can you imagine how long it would take if we had everyone listen to everyone’s writing? We’d be here until after dinner! So we will be sharing in four small groups. Everyone is going to be asked to bring in some food. It depends what letter of the alphabet your last name begins with what you bring. Some of you will bring drinks; some of you will bring cookies. It tells your families what to bring on your invitation. Be sure you give these to your parents so they will be able to join us the week after next on March 12th.

Whatever story you pick today, you must be sure to mark it with a star at the top of the page so that your editor will know the right one to type up. You need to be clear and you need to be sure that your story says what you want it to say because you won’t be there for your editor to ask you questions about what you meant. Some of you will be getting a second very important piece of paper to give to your parents. Some of your parents have very graciously volunteered to be editors and type up your stories for our book. I want you to tell them how much we appreciate them. You will also be taking home a stack of booklets today with the stories for your parents to type.

Does everybody know what you are going to do today? What do you put on the top? That's right—a star! Remember to choose a piece of your writing that has appropriate content. Pick carefully. Don't pick your longest piece just because it is long, pick your best one. When you are reading yours, practice sending your voice out there like your playground voice. (Observation, February 27, 2008)

Dana dropped her voice to show that if the children read their stories the way they read when they were sharing in their writing groups, that they would not be heard. When Dana switched back to her “teacher voice” to release the children to their groups, several jumped and appeared quite startled.

Leaders gathered their groups quickly and proceeded to their tables. The two groups of children without leaders were milling around looking lost. Dana was trying to make her way up from the story pit to get to those two groups, but other children and several leaders kept asking her questions. The oldest boy from one of the groups and the second grade boy from the other group acted as impromptu leaders raising their arms and calling out, “Mrs. _____’s group over here!” By the time Dana reached them, each had their group clustered around them near the library exit.

Dana shepherded the twelve children to the cafeteria and got them situated at two tables. There were only four leaders for the six groups in the cafeteria. Dana instructed the children in both leaderless groups to read through the stories in their books to select the one they wanted and to share them with each other until she got back. She asked two of the leaders in the cafeteria to keep an eye on the groups for her while she ran to take roll and double-check that each leader knew what to do with their children's stories and illustrations at the end of the session.

When Dana returned to the cafeteria a few minutes later, she checked in with both groups to make sure each child had made a selection. She subdivided one of the groups and sent two extra children to each of the other leaders in the cafeteria, then began working one-on-one with the remaining children. Dana asked each of these children to practice reading his/her selection aloud on the small stage area at the side of the cafeteria. “I'm your audience. Read it loud and clear so I can hear every word.” Dana still had two children to work with when it was dismissal time. By the time both children had their turn to practice on stage, most of the other children and parents had left the lobby. By 4:00 pm, all the children were met by a parent and had left the building.

Leaders came up to Dana in the lobby and handed her their stacks of the children's illustrations and their group's questionnaires. One leader asked Dana what she should do about her child who was absent. "Give his book to his teacher so he can choose and edit his story tomorrow." Dana was "glad" his classroom teacher was one of the Writers Club leaders. "She'll know what needs to be done and that will save me some run around time."

Celebration Book Assembly. Dana orchestrated all of the work required to put together the Celebration Book and took responsibility for the lion's share of it herself. Having recruited fifteen parent editors for the children's stories, Dana sent home detailed instructions for them to follow with the children's booklets on the editing day.

Typing Stories for Book

1 inch margins all around.

Center the title on top.

Do not underline.

Center the child's name on the **bottom**.

Do **not** put "By:" or "The End"

The story to be typed is marked with a star. If a story is long, it is okay for it to be more than one page-but hopefully no more than two pages. A single spaced line with an extra line between paragraphs is good. Use your own discretion as to font and size but use at least size 14. A short story by a younger child can be done in the larger size fonts. Go ahead and correct any minor errors you may find. The children are doing small illustrations which we will cut and paste or scan onto their story.

Please email the story either as the body of an email or as an attachment to Dana.Hawley@ncps.edu . If you are unsure how to best format the story, it will be done for you. Please try to have stories returned by the end of the day Wednesday, March 5th. Booklets can be returned as you finish. Thank you everyone!

Dana began working on the Celebration Book even before parents began to send in the typed stories. Rather than asking the art teacher to draw a new cover for 2008, Dana pulled one from her files that Maureen had drawn several years before. Dana checked with Carolyn in the production center to be sure that they had the card stock, binding materials, extra paper, and time that it would take in order to have the books ready for distribution at the Celebration.

Dana decided to include a list of the books and poems used as sparks. She sent me an email on March 7 saying, “Help! Here’s what I remember...can you fill in the gaps?” The page she created for the Celebration Book included the titles and authors of the seven sparks and included the following information for the reader: “Each week we begin by reading a story or poem that serves as a spark for our writing. The following books were the inspiration for the stories that follow.”

Dana created four other pages to be included in the Celebration Book. These included a title page, a page dedicated to the Writers Club leaders, a page listing all of the children in the 2008 Writers Club, and a thank you page recognizing the office staff, the substitutes, the parents who typed the stories, and the person who assembled all of the Writers Club booklets and the Celebration Book itself.

Completed stories began arriving three days after Dana sent them home with children on February 27. Two of the stories “raised flags” for Dana because of their content. One story, typed by the third grade boy’s mother, contained graphic references to people “blowing up” and others drinking their “blood.” Dana first “ran it [her concerns] past several staff members” and then sent the following note to the parent:

Thank you so much for getting me the stories. I am uncomfortable with the end of Grayson’s story. We encourage students to pick a story suitable for our finished book and for reading aloud at the Celebration. i.e. non-violent, not too long.

I need him to pick another story or to rework the ending of his current story. I can pull him aside at school and talk to him about this unless you feel comfortable talking with him. That would certainly be the most expedient path, but let me know if you prefer me talking to him. (Email, March 5, 2008)

As it turned out, the parent was glad Dana contacted her. Grayson’s mother was not pleased with the story her son chose for the Celebration Book, however, she assumed that his Writers Club leader had approved it. She thought it would provoke a “futile battle” if she asked Grayson to select a different story. Grayson read Dana’s email and willingly chose another story to share.

The sixth grade daughter of a staff member wrote the second story that concerned Dana. Dana went to the staff member and expressed her concerns. The staff member did not have a “problem” with the content herself, but agreed to have her daughter change it.

Dana “wondered” why the Writers Club leaders who helped the children on editing day had not considered these entries problematic for a “public audience. We have to be careful with the [Celebration] book. I don’t want anyone complaining about the content. What’s in it is out there for anyone to read.”

Dana sent an email to the Writers Club leaders soliciting their own writing for the Celebration Book.

I don’t think I remembered to say that we love to have stories from our leaders also included in the Celebration Book. So, type up one of your best and send it to me. The kids love to see your writing too. (Anyone on the evaluation cycle?!)

Two of the leaders, Wanda and Lucy, submitted stories for inclusion in the Celebration Book. Dana “hoped” that other leaders would follow suit, but she did not “pressure” anyone. She explained, “Some of the others [other leaders] told me they meant to, but didn’t get around to it in time. I can relate to that!”

By March 5th, one week before the Celebration, Dana received typed stories from all but one of the parent editors. Dana checked with that parent to see if she needed help with the typing. The parent was able to finish the stories on her own and emailed them to Dana on March 7th.

As stories arrived, Dana copied and placed them in a folder labeled “Writers Celebration Stories” on the server for easy access and asked the leaders to “look at the stories for your kids. Let me know if I need to make any changes.” Lily and Kimberly did not have access to the server so Dana copied and emailed their typed stories to them.

Dana estimated that it took her at least fifteen hours to get all of the stories ready to turn over to the school’s “production center.” In addition to the final editing, this process necessitated connecting the children’s drawings with their stories. Although this was time consuming and exacting, Dana reveled in this work. Dana approached document transformation both as a challenge and with a sense of play. “Maybe when I retire the county can hire me to do this to all the stuff they send out!”

Dana was very excited to show me how technology made formatting the Celebration Book so much easier than in the past. “I used to have to print out their stories, cut their illustrations to fit, tape or glue them on, and then recopy the page with the illustration on it.” Now, with scanning capabilities on the school’s copying machine

and linking ability to the school's server, creating the Celebration Book was much less time consuming. Dana scanned the 4"x 5" papers the children did their artwork on and saved them to a "Writers Club Illustrations" folder she created on the server. Once she had all of the artwork and stories saved to the server, Dana copied them and saved the files on her computer. Then she completed her transformations on her own laptop.

For each story, Dana opened the picture document, selected and copied the part she wanted, then opened the child's story and pasted the illustration onto the document. Dana took time to "play" with each piece and manipulate the artwork to enhance the children's writing. For example, one child wrote a poem about a dog. Dana copied the dog in three sizes and used all three to illustrate the page. Some children created borders that Dana expanded to frame their work. As she completed formatting the text and illustrations, Dana saved each completed page to the "Writers Club Stories 2008" folder on the server. She completed the task on March 7th after she received the last group of children's stories from the parent typist. Dana gave a print copy of the completed Celebration Book to Carolyn, the Instructional Assistant who staffed the production center, that afternoon.

Dana checked with Carolyn frequently during the next few days to track progress on the Celebration Books. To assemble the books, Carolyn ran the cover on cardstock, duplicated the 45-page book on the copier, and used the binding machine to put each book together. By noon on the Celebration day, 90 copies of the Writers Club 2008 Celebration Book were complete and ready to go. This allowed enough copies for each Writers Club child and leader to have their own copy plus a few extra for the library and office.

Setting the Stage for the Celebration. Dana determined that the Writers Celebration would take place in four locations: the library, the 2nd grade pod, theatre 1, and the cafeteria. Doing so kept all of the participants on the main level of the school and made the groups small enough to keep the sharing time at or under one half hour. In previous years, Dana divided the sharing groups alphabetically to ensure that families would be together. However, after overhearing one of the focus groups bemoaning the fact that they would not be together at the celebration, Dana checked with several of the

leaders and “discovered that they would rather be with their own writing groups too.” She was determined to find a solution and ultimately was able to resolve the logistics. “It was a pain in the neck and took quite a lot of doing, but I figured it out. Who’d have thought that would have mattered to them?”

Dana emailed the leaders to request volunteers to take the lead in each of the four locations for sharing on the Writers Celebration day. “Let me know if you want to volunteer for this duty before I just up and volunteer you anyway!” Tim, Maureen, Megan, and Ann [a Writers Club leader for many years] agreed to serve as hosts for their locations. Dana prepared printed lists of the leaders and children who would be in each of the four areas. She made enlargements of the lists of leaders and children for each of the four locations and mounted them on poster-board for display in the lobby on the Writers Celebration day so that parents could determine where their children would be.

Dana prepared timelines and directions for the leaders and hosts. Children would gather in the library at 2:45 pm as usual and meet with their group briefly to get their Celebration Books before going to their sharing location at 3:00 pm. Dana projected that all groups would finish sharing by 3:30 pm and move to the cafeteria for refreshments and celebrating at that time. Dana purposely scheduled the smallest group to share in the cafeteria so that they would be the first ones finished.

Dana revised a Celebration flyer she had used in previous years inviting parents to arrive at 3:00 pm and check the posted lists to determine their child’s (children’s) sharing location. It also reminded them to send in “cookies or other finger food” if their last name began with A – M, and “juice or soda” if their last names began with N – Z. She asked parents to send in the food and drinks “prior to Wednesday afternoon to allow time for preparation.” Dana arranged for these flyers to be printed and distributed to Writers Club families in Wednesday folders on March 5 and again as a reminder on Tuesday, March 11.

Dana decided to write a letter to Lily’s high school counselor commending her for her work with Writers Club. “I thought they ought to recognize her at the high school,” Dana explained to me. “This is her second year and she has done a fantastic job.”

Throughout Writers Club, but even more intensely leading up to the Celebration and children’s individual and focus group interviews, Dana responded daily to multiple

emails from parents and staff members about logistics, concerns, and questions. Dana kept the office staff and administrators apprised of the upcoming Writers Celebration and alerted the custodial staff about what to expect on the 12th. “I’ll be glad when this is all over. Maybe I can get my head on straight again then!”

Writers Celebration, March 12, 2008. The day of the Writers Club Celebration was like any other Writers Club day for Dana. She had only her 25-minute lunchtime and the 35-minutes her students were in music class for any “last minute” arrangements. I arrived at 2:30 pm, in time to help Maura, a parent, and a member of the office staff, wheel the cart of treats and drinks into the cafeteria. The custodian had already placed tables near the window on the far side of the cafeteria so we spread tablecloths and set out the food, drinks, plates and napkins.

By the time I made it back into the library at 2:45 pm, Dana was already there inserting lists and directions for leaders under the rubber banded book stacks. Tim had the story pit area set up with a music stand to hold the children’s Celebration Books with the school’s single microphone plugged in and resting on its tray. Dana hurried away to set up the signs in the lobby directing parents to the correct locations. Some parents were already arriving.

When she returned to the library, Dana wove her way through the excited group of children to join Tim in the story pit. She carried one of the Celebration Books and her master list of which child went where. “Does everybody know where they are going?” she asked the group and received a chorus of “not me” and “no” in return.

Listen carefully then because I am only going to read this once. If you have brothers or sisters in Writers Club you may be going with a different leader this time. Your leader will give you your copy of the Celebration Book. The stories are in it in alphabetical order. Leaders—have your children write their names on the covers first thing. Writers—after you have written your name on your book, find your story and leave the book open to that page so that you will be ready to read it when it is your turn. (Observation, March 12, 2008)

Dana read off the lists of leaders and their children. When they were released, children tumbled up and over to their leaders. They rushed to get their books and immediately opened them. A jumble of words filled the air. Cries of “My book! My Book!” and

“Where’s my story?” arose as children flipped through the pages and began to read. “Look! It’s got the same cover!” one of the children pointed out.

Two of the groups did not have leaders for the Celebration day. Rather than attempt to get substitutes for them, Dana distributed the books to their children and then escorted the two groups to their sharing locations, one in the cafeteria and one in the theater. She asked the host in each location to monitor the “orphan” group and call on the children when it was their turn to share.

After she got all of the children situated, Dana went back to the cafeteria to check on the refreshment set-up. She stayed to listen to the stories in the cafeteria for about five minutes before moving on to listen in at each of the other locations. “I like for them to at least see me for a few minutes in each place. It seems like I ought to do that.”

The group in the library was the last group to finish sharing. By the time I joined them in the cafeteria at 3:35 pm, 20 of the 24 tables were filled with groups of six to 10 people each. I went over to help at the refreshment tables but I kept watching Dana “work the room.” She went from group to group and table to table stopping to comment and speak to just about everyone. She carried a camera and kept taking pictures. Quite often, Dana posed with a child or group of children and parents took photos of them.

Laughter and a general buzz of conversations permeated the room. Children ran back and forth between tables, visiting with each other and their families. It appeared that friends and families sat together with most of the adults engaged in conversations. There were plenty of refreshments for seconds and even thirds if desired. Dana detoured by the refreshment table a couple of times to grab “something wet.” She looked exhausted and walked with a limp. “Are we done yet?” she asked me and the other leaders at the serving table as she whirled back around to greet a parent who came looking for her.

Most of the families began leaving at 3:45 pm, the scheduled ending time. Dana kept nudging groups towards the lobby. She escorted the last few out of the cafeteria at 3:55 pm, then came back to where two of the leaders and I were packaging up the leftovers to transport to the teachers’ lounge.

Dana said that everything she heard from parents was positive except for one parent who kept complaining loudly to other parents because her daughter’s story did not have a title. The parent followed up by sending Dana a pointed email about the missing

title. Dana “stewed” about it for a couple of days, but before she got around to responding, she received a second email from the mother apologizing for “complaining so much.” The mother wrote: “Writers Club was a wonderful opportunity for Stacia. She doesn’t like writing and this helped her a great deal. I need to thank you and the other teachers for doing this for all of our kids.”

“Cripes,” said Dana, not at all sure she was glad to have heard from the parent again. “That’s the kind of kid that I want out of Writers Club! Am I going to have to rethink this? Maybe Writers Club is good for those kids too.”

The Adult Leaders

Maureen’s Story

Maureen is the art teacher at Seaside Elementary School. She works with all of the children in kindergarten through sixth grade. Classes come to her room for art instruction once a week. Maureen began her teaching career in 2000-2001 at Seaside Elementary School right out of college. She remembers talk amongst the staff about reestablishing Writers Club as an after school opportunity for children.

It was about my third or fourth year here and then Shelley Warren, a sixth grade teacher started it [Writers Club] up again. It was here before I came here and she thought it should come back... She said that a lot of the work had sort of been done because there was a basic template [for Writers Club] lined up. (Transcript, February 20, 2008)

I interviewed Maureen one morning before school in her classroom at the end of February. I deliberately chose a seat where she could sit next to me, but she walked around the table and sat facing me. I asked her why she chose to be a part of Writers Club each year. As the only art teacher at Seaside Elementary School, she is somewhat isolated from her teaching colleagues. She views Writers Club as an opportunity to “connect” with others in the school. She spoke quietly at first, without making much eye contact but quickly warmed to the subject. As we talked, Maureen became more and more animated. She spoke with a strong voice and with passion about writing. “And I love writing! So I thought ‘Writers Club? That’s not something I’m terrified to do,’ so I thought, ‘how

about that?” Maureen appreciates having a designated time to write. She saves her own Writers Club booklets every year and rereads them occasionally.

I have all of my booklets from all of the past years. I’ve taken them [the stories I wrote] and changed them to a different type of story or a poem. I’ve entered a couple of book contests; graphic novel contests. I’ve taken four of the stories I wrote and turned them into graphic novels and submitted them. (Transcript, February 20, 2008)

Maureen has yet to win a contest, but plans to continue entering her work. “I was really happy when *Bone* [a graphic novel by Jeff Smith] started getting accepted at the elementary school level.”

Another reason Maureen continues her work with Writers Club is the difference she sees it making for children.

A lot of it is I can see the kids getting stuff out of it. I can see them getting into writing as a hobby and a passion rather than as just schoolwork. Because they see it [writing] so much in school that they associate it with just work and it’s nice to see them in school enjoying it because it is just fun...It’s nice to see the kids outside of the setting I always see them in, doing the things I never get to see them do. It’s... just watching their personalities at work. (Transcript, February 20, 2008)

Maureen finds that working with the children in her Writers Club groups engenders a “special connection” between her and the children. The small group interactions allow a different type of relationship to develop than Maureen typically experienced in her whole group art lessons. Especially satisfying for Maureen was that the “special connections” forged in Writers Club extends across those children’s elementary school years.

We continue to talk about it [Writers Club] and even if we never talk about it again I have connected with them in a way that I haven’t connected with another person in that person’s class. It’s easier for us to hold a dialogue. (Transcript, February 20, 2008)

Maureen’s groups have varied in size from three children to “about eight or nine. The average has been about five or six.” She thinks that having five or six children in a group is “best... because it’s not so big that the kids seem to get intimidated by the sharing. It’s not so small that everyone’s so shy that they’re waiting for one of the other one or two people to go first.”

Over the years, Maureen's groups have had "different personalities." She distinctly remembers one year when she had three girls who were "very chatty, which was very strange." With that group she "ended up having to separate them" in order for them to write. Maureen attributes the issues with that group to the fact that the three girls were the "same age...or close enough [in age to compound the problem]...During Writers Club I don't usually have to do any classroom maintenance, management types of things." Maureen likes the fact that Dana "tries to make sure that there's at least one fifth or sixth grader in each group. Kind of a role model and a 'what's ahead of you' sort of thing." Maureen strongly prefers the multi-age groups and believes they are better for the children.

They get a chance to connect with other people in the school and a lot of them really look up to the fifth and sixth graders. And they are really excited to see what type of writing those kids come up with. And of course, a lot of them really like the opportunity to help. The third and fourth graders like the opportunity to help the younger children in the group, right before the writing starts and right afterwards, coming up with their ideas and then seeing what they've got in their books...I think if it were separated by grade level, I don't think it would be as successful a program, really...because they'd be among the same peers they always are and the opportunity to 'drop the mask' would be lessened because they'd see the same kids in class tomorrow and there'd be a danger there.
(Transcript, February 20, 2008)

Maureen's group was one of the six groups that met in the cafeteria for their small group writing time in 2008. "This is the first year it has been in the cafeteria at all." In the cafeteria, each group sat at a circular table with ten attached stools for seats. The previous year, Maureen's group met in the theater, which "seemed to inspire just a tad more restlessness because the positions you could choose to write in were a tad more uncomfortable. There weren't any tables or chairs in there."

"Dana usually lets me pick my group," Maureen shared. "In fact, she usually sends me the lists before they go out and says, 'You teach everybody in the school, are any of these kids bad together?'" Maureen carefully selects her groups to ensure she gets to "connect" with new children each year. "I am somewhat in charge of the fact that I haven't seen the same person twice [in one of my groups]." This way she continues to expand the number of "special connections" she makes with children.

A second reason that I chose to interview Maureen was that when I observed in the cafeteria, her group often drew my attention because of the unbridled enthusiasm of two of her group members in particular. Maureen had six children in her small writing group in 2008. She had a second grade boy, a third grade girl, a third grade boy, fourth and fifth grade girls, and a sixth grade boy. Sharing time during the third Writers Club session was wildly entertaining for the second and third grade boys in Maureen's group. Written in response to the spark by Alma Whitney's *Just Awful* about a little boy who was afraid to go to the school nurse when he cut his finger on the playground, Luke, the second grader, giggled his way through his story about Boppy Stoppy having to go to the doctor because "he broke his butt bone!" Luke's glasses slipped down his nose every time he laughed. He had to stop writing to push his glasses back up from time to time before he could continue. He wrote a few words, his nose four inches or less from his paper, then reared his head back before settling in close to write some more. He appeared terribly amused by his own writing, sometimes smiling while he was writing. He was so anxious to share that he practically leapt off his chair when the music stopped playing, indicating that it was time to share. Maureen called on him first. He read in a sing song voice, rocking back and forth as he read. His face was animated. He included sound effects. He paused from time to time to look around at his audience. Finally he said, "Okay. I'm done. I tried to make it as fun as possible."

Maureen's response to his story sent him into loud peals of laughter. "I'm glad that wasn't my doctor!" she said.

The crew cut, red-headed third grade boy in the group could hardly wait for Luke to finish so that he could have his turn. "My turn, my turn, my turn," he called out as soon as Luke was finished. Mike sat up on the stool on both knees and wiggled from side to side while he was reading. Although I could not hear what he was sharing, it was obvious from Luke's antics that he considered Mike's story hilarious. Maureen covered her face with both her hands and the three girls in the group glanced sideways at each other repeatedly as if to see if they should laugh or hide their eyes. Mike completed his turn by saying, "These stories are getting funnier and funnier every time!"

Luke laughed so loudly that it did draw attention from other groups. Maureen stepped in saying, "You need to calm down now." Luke and Mike dominated the

conversation at Maureen's group that day. It seemed to be a contest of the sillies between the two boys even after their turns to share were through. They began exchanging comments about their self-perceived talents. "I can do level fifteen on [the computer game] Mario!" "I can do that with one hand!" "I have a talent of using an eraser on my head..."

Maureen attempted to get the other four children to share their writing but they declined. "Does anyone want to share what their story is about even if you don't want to read it?" She was able to coax the third grade girl into revealing that her story was about horses, but was not able to convince the three older children in the group to share anything that day. Maureen also chose not to share her own story that day. "I didn't get far enough this time. I'll tell you the title. It is called *Uberville*."

Maureen began wrapping up the group at 3:40 by collecting the pencils and the children's Writers Club booklets. The last words I heard from Maureen's group that day were snippets from Mike and Luke as they headed out the door still trying to outdo the other. "He's a moron!" "A **naked** moron!" "That's disgusting!..."

Maureen was both "amused and amazed" by Luke's enthusiasm, especially since he was the youngest member in her group.

I have one real firecracker who is always ready to express himself. My firecracker is really into his writing. Like everyday, he comes in there with an idea. And I mean he is excited about it and focused on it, and it's great! Sometimes he knows what he is going to write, or sometimes he like has an idea, but then he hears the spark and he puts it in there somehow. I mean sometimes he comes in to me and says 'I've been thinking about this all day and this is what I'm going to write!' O...kay! Once [at the end of a session when we still had a little extra time] he said 'I've got an idea. Why don't we let the other people at the table tell us what they think about our writing?' He is really into Writers Club! (Transcript, February 20, 2008)

I asked Maureen if Luke was as anxious to hear the other group member's stories as he was to share his own.

He actually yesterday insisted that I share mine too because, we were running out of time at the end because everybody read theirs. There were some long stories ... so we were at the time for us to be dismissed and he was like 'I want to hear it! I want to hear it!' So he does the same thing to the other kids' stuff. He loves to hear it. He likes hearing everybody's. (Transcript, February 20, 2008)

Ultimately, Maureen was able to get all of the group members to share routinely even though she had at least two very “quiet” ones. She thinks that the “rambunctious” nature of Mike and Luke probably affected the group interactions. “I’ve got one [group member] that I suspect wouldn’t be as quiet if they were with their own age group or were a little less shy.” Maureen appreciated the directive from Dana a few weeks into the sessions suggesting strongly that all writers share at least two sentences from their writing each week.

The two sentence rule this year seems to have been good because that got one of my girls who didn’t want to share to open up and she shared two sentences twice and then the last two times she shared the whole story. (Transcript, February 20, 2008)

Maureen believes that for some children “how much they write each week and how successful they think they were” influence their desire to share. She notes that their willingness to write and share “varies from week to week.”

Maureen acknowledges the experience of writer’s block as one possibility for club members. Two other times when I observed in the cafeteria I noticed that Mike was not writing at all. “I’ve had one of mine get Writers block twice this year and really not produce anything in two of the sessions.” After she started her own writing those days, Maureen did not stop and try to reengage Mike as a writer. He spent one entire writing session playing with and eating the grapes he brought for snack. He did join in during the sharing time and made comments about his group members’ stories.

Maureen believes that Writers Club nurtures children’s enjoyment of writing by offering them a “safe” venue in which to write and share.

If they didn’t already like it [writing] they seem to like it more afterwards. They are not so much bogged down in the technical aspects of it. You know, [in school] we tell them ‘In your sentence we expect that you will have great punctuation, that you will capitalize everything. But here [in Writers Club] we’re looking for your ideas, so you don’t have to worry so much about it.’ And if they struggle with that in their regular classes, they can really appreciate it because they can just write it down on paper and they get to read it so they don’t have to worry about us not getting what they meant....So if they didn’t get any joy in writing previously, I think they get joy in writing during Writers Club... (Transcript, February 20, 2008)

The shortened sessions in 2008 did not bother Maureen. “Each time is a little bit less [than in previous years]. I haven’t noticed much as I thought I would...We still get 25 or 30 minutes to write and that seems to be fine. Most of my kids finish.” Those that do not finish sometimes choose “to finish it the next time. Otherwise, they don’t finish it until they want to finish it. Some do it during the editing session.”

Maureen does not believe that most of the children go back to reread what they have written during the previous weeks during Writers Club sessions.

That tends to be only a certain kind of kid who does that. Like my little firecracker. I don’t often expect that he’ll go back and read the thing he wrote the week before. He might a couple of years from now [laugh] but he’s the type who’s always ready for the next thing. But it’s the different type, the more contemplative who will go back and say ‘What did I do last time?’ You know, ‘is it what I remember it being? Is it as good or as bad as I remember it being?’ (Transcript, February 20, 2008)

Maureen did not share a spark this year but would have done so if Dana had asked. “Usually she sends out an email like, if you want to do one of the sparks, please let me [Dana] know. I never saw that email this year. Usually it’s a volunteer thing.” Maureen speculated that Dana either “had so many people volunteer this year” or that “she didn’t need to send the email because there were so few sessions this time.” Maureen recalls, “the first year I did one [the spark] there were so many sessions that you were kind of required to do one.” Sharing the spark was somewhat intimidating for Maureen. “It is a lot of people! And at that point I was maybe in my third year of teaching so I was even more terrified.”

Maureen asked if I knew “*The Mysteries of Harris Burdock* by Chris Van Allsberg of *The Polar Express*.” She seemed surprised that I knew both books but added that they were not surprising favorites for her “given my specialty as an art teacher.” Both books rely heavily on the richly detailed artwork to help convey the story and the mood. Maureen became very animated as she shared her time as the sparker.

So I brought in those. I also brought in my other favorite book, which is *The Eleventh Hour* [by Grahame Base], and we talked about mysteries. I said, ‘Each of these pictures contains a mystery and it’s your job to figure out what it is.’ It was more than that, but I gave one copy of each of the pictures to the team leader [Writers Club small group leader] and then the kids on the team picked one and wrote about it. (Transcript, February 20, 2008)

Maureen gave credit for the success of her spark to the author/illustrators, “I piggy backed on the heels of someone else who had pretty much done most of the work,” and to the Writers Club kids.

...most of the credit goes to them [the children] because they took it and ran with it. I mean, you see in Chris Van Allsburg’s; he writes about some of the mail he’s gotten from kids from those pictures and about how amazing they are, but you don’t really know how amazing they are until you get to see the amazing things the kids do yourself. (Transcript, February 20, 2008)

I asked Maureen what it was like having the children write in response to a spark she shared. “I think you take a little more personal pride in it. You know, they wouldn’t have done this or that if it weren’t for me! ... It turned out to be really successful.” The librarian helped validate her success. “Tim told me he pretty much couldn’t keep *The Eleventh Hour* on the shelf for the rest of the year.”

Maureen observed, “Writers Club just couldn’t get here fast enough” for some of the children. For

the kids who **really** enjoyed it last year, it lives on. They’ll ask like, ‘When’s Writer’s Club this year? When’s Writers Club this year?’ But for the most part it is a pretty isolated thing. The kids talk about it once the letter goes home that says it’s coming. They talk about it when it’s happening. They talk about it for a little bit afterwards, but, you know, then it sort of fades out of consciousness as [laughs] it gets further into the past. (Transcript, February 20, 2008)

Maureen has a shelf in her classroom where she keeps the previously published Writers Club Celebration books. The Celebration books “includes one story from every child and also one from the leaders if they want to include one of theirs too.” Maureen has not chosen to include one of her stories in any of the compilations although her artwork does grace the cover each year.

I actually keep all or most of the previous years’ booklets and I keep one or two of them on my shelf and sometimes the kids will go over and pull them out and say, ‘Oh, I was in this one year! I wonder if this has one of mine. Oh, here’s one by X! What grade were they in?’ (Transcript, February 20, 2008)

Maureen credits Dana for keeping Writers Club moving smoothly and recognizes the magnitude of her role.

Dana does a great job setting the tone at the beginning, that this is not a place to fool around, or chat with your friends. She makes sure that they’ve got their attention focused on the front and [laughs] every year she gives her speech about

greasy snacks and bags that crinkle—all of those kinds of things. She just gives off a calming effect so that everybody begins to get soothed. So it [calm behavior] does begin before we split into small groups for reading, before we even get the spark.

I mean, she's like the hub of a wheel. The spokes wouldn't stay on without the central, organizing force. Because the people in the groups from Writers Club come from everywhere. Not just from every part of the school, but from the BPS. One of them is the daughter of one of the people who works here. And [laughs] they just come from everywhere! If she [Dana] wasn't there to organize those people, find out when they're going to be absent, find someone to sub for them, get in touch with the parents, get the booklets to Carolyn on time and so on and so forth, it would just fall apart. (Transcript, February 20, 2008)

Writers Club days are personally rewarding for Maureen. She looks forward to each meeting and finds it rejuvenating rather than a burden.

I also get things out of it, like, every time, every time I go to Writers Club I, I end up feeling more energetic than when I went in because they [the children] have brought a lot of passion and creativity there. It kinds of leaves me feeling more invigorated for the rest of the day. It's kind of therapeutic! And it's also, you know, writing! Journalists will always tell you—people who keep journals will tell you, that writing down what is on your mind is just [whispered] relaxing! (Transcript, February 20, 2008)

Maureen closed her eyes and let out a long sigh as she shared this. It is apparent that she thrives as a member of Writers Club.

Maureen was “not sure” what makes Writers Club so important to the people who participate, but she suggested:

Maybe it's just because of the way I feel about it. I've always felt there is an unspoken agreement among the people who come to Writers Club that it's going to be a sanctuary. A place where we don't fight, where we don't kick each other under the table, we don't make fun of each other because we're smart, or we like to write, or because we do these things. Its just that all of these, you know, those masks that being among your peers requires are dropped, and you get to go somewhere and be **that** person, the sort of person who writes and you get your stuff down on paper and you know you can share it without people judging you for it. I think that it is sort of an unspoken thing that when you come [to Writers Club], if you don't understand it at the beginning, that you catch onto it pretty quick by the way that people **act** and therefore, in just the way they are treated.... I think that's one of my favorite things about it. (Transcript, February 20, 2008)

Maureen hopes that Writers Club will continue to be part of Seaside Elementary School. “I enjoy it the way it is. I hope it doesn’t undergo any changes or disappear or anything. I hope it continues for years and years and years and years.”

Lynette’s Story

Lynette is an Instructional Assistant (IA) in the preschool special education non-categorical program at Seaside Elementary School. Prior to 2008, Lynette worked in the preschool autism program, which did not conform to the same time schedule as the rest of the school. She transferred to the preschool special education program because she was “ready for a change.” Lynette received Dana’s email request for volunteers for Writers Club leaders in 2007. “I really wanted to help Dana out. I knew that Dana had trouble getting enough leaders because I saw all the emails every year and I felt bad that my schedule wouldn’t let me be a part of it.” When Lynette shared this at the family’s dinner table, Lily, Lynette’s daughter and a former Writers Club kid, said she would be happy to serve as a leader if they would let her. “I was so proud of her for offering to do that. Lily and I were both so happy when Dana got permission for Lily to do it!” In 2008, Lynette became an IA in a program that followed the same schedule as the majority of the school. She was able to leave the classroom at 2:45 and become a leader herself. “I was thrilled to have the chance to give back to the program because all five of my children were in it. Lily was the one most enamored with it though.” Like Lily, Lynette loves to write. “I even thought about making my living as a writer at one time. I’ve never told that to Lily though. I think that is a dream that Lily has herself.” As a parent, Lynette appreciated the opportunity Writers Club offered her children. “I knew it was a good thing for them but I never forced them to go. All of them signed up for it at least once. Lily signed up every single year and always looked forward to it.” One year all four of her elementary children joined Writers Club. “The kids would talk about it at home and say ‘Guess what I wrote (or this kid wrote) about today.’ They would talk about the spark and comment on whether they liked it or not.”

Lynette always liked to hear about the spark. That really did not surprise her because one of the “highlights” of her week with her preschoolers is when she takes the kids to the library to hear Tim share a story. “I just can’t get too much of that! Listening

to the spark is one of my favorite things about Writers Club.” Unlike many of the other leaders, Lynette never arrived late for Writers Club. “I didn’t want to miss any of the stories.” As an IA supporting another teacher in the same room, it was also easier for her to leave the classroom than it was for classroom teachers.

The night before Writers Club started, Lynette became apprehensive about her ability to lead the group. “I had to ask Lily what I was supposed to do and I got real nervous. Lily told me, ‘If I can do it, you can do it.’ I didn’t sleep too well the night before.” On the first day of Writers Club, Lynette arrived with the first children and sat at a table off to the side. When Lily arrived, she picked up her stack of Writers Club booklets and went to sit at her mother’s table. Lily saw that her mother did not have her stack of booklets yet and retrieved them for her. “It was nice having Lily show me the ropes. And I guess I was able to do it all right. My kids all enjoyed it, they all wrote and they all shared. I guess that is a success.”

I asked Lynette if she would consider doing one of the sparks herself but she explained that she did not think she was good enough compared to the ones she heard.

I shouldn’t have been as surprised as I was by how good the sparks were. I never realized how theatrical all the teachers were with their sharing. I knew Tim was great. But Dana, and Lucy, and Megan, and Brenda were fantastic! If I’d thought about it a while I guess I would have figured out that they would really be good. It was such a fun surprise to hear those great stories each time. I don’t think I would be nearly as good, but I guess if Dana needed me to do one, I would give it a try. I don’t remember Dana asking for volunteers to be a sparker this year. I’ve seen her emails about it in other years though. (Transcript, March 12, 2008)

Lynette was amazed at how much she loved having her own group of children, particularly “regular” children since her day-to-day work is with children with “developmental delays.” “These kids were all so responsive! They looked forward to seeing me on Writers Club days. If I saw them in the halls or in the cafeteria during the week they would wave to me!” Being part of Writers Club made Lynette feel like she was more part of the school professional staff. While both of the preschool programs she has worked in are technically part of Seaside Elementary School, opportunities for collaboration are rare.

Lynette’s youngest son was a sixth grader at Seaside Elementary School for the school year 2007-2008. He did not choose to participate in Writers Club as a sixth grader

although he did join in the family discussions about Writers Club. Lynette and Lily usually discussed the spark and what they wrote that day but they did not actually read what each other had written. They debated whether they would include one of their stories in the Celebration book, but neither of them did.

Lynette had a great time with the students in her group every week. They were always “enthusiastic participants” and she had “very little disciplining” to do. The kids wrote and imagined and shared and appreciated each other’s work. “It was like we had our own little club inside a bigger club!” Lynette thought that being in the library where they could see other groups working was an advantage for her children. She was surprised by how much she appreciated the opportunity to write herself. “I used to love it—but I never take the time to do it for myself anymore.” She was also surprised that the children always wanted to hear what she wrote and that they “laughed at the right places.”

Lynette’s interview took place on the last day of Writers Club after the Celebration. Lynette was “sorry” Writers Club was over and expected to “miss” her group “...terribly. It was so easy to get attached to them. I gave them all Valentines on February 14th and I really wanted to take them all out for ice cream or something special as a good-bye.” She determined that would not be appropriate. “The Celebration is the formal good-bye for everyone. It wouldn’t be fair for me to do something else special with my group even though I wanted to.”

Lynette is in awe about the amount of work that goes into making Writers Club a reality.

I mean, I knew it took a lot of work, just from all the emails that I saw going back and forth every year, but that is just the tip of the iceberg! I don’t know how Dana does it. And I’ve heard that she isn’t going to be heading it up again. I mean, I’m willing to step in and do whatever is necessary to keep it going, but I don’t know how good I’d be at it. Dana is such a perfectionist and she does everything so well. I don’t know if anyone could do it as well as she does. You know, when I was a parent I always felt grateful that the teachers were willing to stay after school and give all that time to our children. But I didn’t realize how much more there was to it than just the actual time they stayed late! From organizing it, getting enough volunteers, getting the booklets made for the kids to write in—I mean just sharpening the pencils each week is a chore! Getting the stories typed up, the pictures put in and the final books made. I don’t think even the people in Writers Club know how much time Dana puts in on this. And there are a lot of

people who step up. Carolyn makes the books. Maura takes care of organizing everything so it's ready each week. Billy [the custodian] set up the cafeteria for us today. I never thought about any of that when I was a parent. It makes me appreciate them even more. I feel like I ought to be telling the other parents—Do you know how lucky we are that our teachers do this for us? But now that I'm in Writers Club, it would seem like I was looking for compliments. (Transcript, March 12, 2008)

I asked Lynette if she got much feedback from the parents. One of the girls in her group was actually the daughter of one of Lynette's friends. The child kept going home and trying to explain who her leader was. "You know her!" the child said week after week. But it wasn't until Lynette ran into the girl and her mother at the grocery store that the connection was made. Lynette reported that the mom said, "She's just bubbling over with Writers Club and talks about it all through dinner." Other than that, Lynette had no feedback until the celebration when other parents of her kids came over and introduced themselves to her. "A couple of them said thanks, and that was plenty, but I wanted to say, 'Do you know how much goes into this?' I guess I'm really not over that. I thought I was aware, but I wasn't."

Participating in Writers Club as a leader gave Lynette a new perspective on Writers Club and new respect for the leaders, especially Dana. "Just watching Dana run around each week trying to make sure it runs smoothly tires me out!" I asked Lynette if she would consider being a leader again next year.

Yes, I definitely would. And like I said before, I am willing to do even more to take some of the burden off Dana. I know I could do some of the things that need doing. I just can't imagine Seaside Elementary School without a Writers Club. I don't know how many other schools do this, or if they even do. But I do know that it is special and important for our kids. We have to do what is necessary for it to stay. Lily is willing to come back and I think some of the other teachers might be able to do more too. (Transcript, March 12, 2008)

Megan's Story

A bastion in first grade for most of her 22 years at Seaside Elementary School, the principal asked Megan to move to kindergarten for the 2007-2008 school year. Megan completed her post-graduate degree in reading in the spring of 2008 and her heart is

“firmly planted in first grade with beginning readers,” but because the principal asked her to move, Megan “reluctantly” agreed.

Megan’s own two children are now in college themselves, but they participated in Writers Club when it originated “way back” at Seaside Elementary in 1997 and 1998.

I was so busy being a mom that I wasn’t able to help [with Writers Club] back then. And I wasn’t really able to help until my daughter left for college a couple of years ago, but now I feel that I can give back a little so I’ve been doing it [being a leader] for three or four years now. (Transcript, March 31, 2008)

Megan “did not mind” that first graders were ineligible to participate in Writers Club in 2008. “I think it helps to have them a little bit farther along in their writing.” When Dana sent around the grouping lists, Megan noticed that in one of the groups four of the five children were ones she had taught as first graders. She responded to Dana’s email requesting that group and was delighted to work with them.

I think that at first one or two of them might have looked at me and said, ‘Wait a minute, this is my first grade teacher and I’m in fifth grade now.’ But I think that really changed. And their perspective with me as their little group leader might have been at first—oh no. But we really had very good rapport... you know working with their first grade teacher when they’re older and realizing that I could still have good ideas. (Transcript, March 31, 2008)

Megan did not feel that the school put “pressure” on teachers to participate in Writers Club although she admitted that there were

many after school things that we are expected to participate in. Writers Club is one where teachers who really are interested in writing and language arts, they’re the ones that are tempted to go for it and volunteer. That was my drive. I really just love reading and writing, just any opportunity to work with children and use good literature. Again, that is really one of the most important parts of the writing too—sharing good literature. (Transcript, March 31, 2008)

Megan “worried” about how difficult it was for Dana to recruit leaders each year. She “wished” that it was easier to convince other teachers that being a Writers Club leader was “rewarding and good” on multiple levels.

I think if more teachers in the building knew how enjoyable it could be that more of them would participate [in Writers Club]. It is kind of difficult, because of so many other things I think it is difficult to get enough teachers. We could actually have more children if we could get more teachers. I really wish that other teachers knew how much fun it could be, how exciting it is, and how great it is for the

children. I think we could make it even a bigger thing here [if getting enough leaders was not a problem].

I think it is really great that we have the BPS involved because children realize that it is not just teachers who like to write or think it is important, but there are other people in the community who like to write too or are interested and think this is a great thing. (Transcript, March 31, 2008)

Megan liked the multiage groups and believed they helped to “add a sense of community” to Seaside Elementary School

from everyone, all of the different ages working together... You see those children sometimes during the day and its nice because you can tell they are looking forward to it [Writers Club] because they’ll wave and say like, ‘Hello, hello Mrs. Flowers!’ ... I think you really do...gain a sense of comfort, knowing that whatever you write is going to be accepted. I do think you gain that in a group with just five children and a teacher. I think it makes for a very good time of reading and sharing. (Transcript, March 31, 2008)

Megan found that the older children help to serve as “role models” and that the younger children helped the group “think more creatively and openly.”

Even though Writers Club had ended more than two weeks before I interviewed Megan, she “missed” her group of children and still felt “connected” to them.

One of the things I want to do, I’ve thought about it, but I haven’t done it yet; I’d really like to write a note to them you know, telling them how I enjoyed working with them. There’s [still] a lot of time before the end of the year I could talk with them. Unfortunately, I was out of town the week of the editing and Brenda worked with my group. So I feel like I kind of missed out a little bit. I would have liked to have had more time to really encourage them and talk more to them about writing and their final piece and I didn’t have a chance to do that. So I really want to get a little more closure and I want to write each one of them a note. So I will add that to my list... and I know I’ll continue to see them in the school. I’m glad I had the opportunity to work with them [my old students] again. (Transcript, March 31, 2008)

Megan was unable to stay long after the sharing part of the Celebration because of “another commitment” but she thought that it went “great.” Missing the editing session and the informal part of the Celebration left Megan with a disquieting feeling that her work with her writing group was “unfinished.”

For Megan, the “best part about Writers Club” is that it offers a place “where children can really share their writing and discuss their writing. It really gives kids an

opportunity for that.” She laments that “time for sharing” is now often missing in the regular classroom day. “In the classroom it is so hard with a large group of children. What you miss out on is the sharing because as much as you try, there is never as much time for that as you would like.”

If she could change anything about Writers Club it would be to increase the time allotted for sharing and discussing the children’s stories to “slow” the sharing down a bit because even in Writers Club “you had to just keep moving on.”

They were all in a hurry to share! Sometimes the older boy would know that the younger one really needed to share and he would say let him go first. He [the younger boy] would take a long time to read and share. The older ones were patient, very patient. They were just all anxious to share. They were so respectful of each other... (Transcript, March 31, 2008)

Megan thought it was “important” for “every child to have a turn to share” but she did not force the issue if a child chose not to do so.

At most there might be one child who said ‘I really don’t feel like sharing today.’ Because it was something private and that was fine, that’s fine. Sometimes you don’t want to share your writing. Sometimes it is just for you and that is fine too. (Transcript, March 31, 2008)

If her group did not have quite enough time to finish sharing before Writers Club was technically over, “the parents would wait in the lobby and you could take a few minutes longer.” Megan was glad that the ending time was “flexible” enough so they “did get everyone to share, and that is what is most important.”

As soon as the spark was finished and the children had settled at their table in the library, Megan’s group was ready to write. Megan was “surprised” by how “ready” the children were to write each week.

They were very interested in getting right to the writing after the spark. We’d talk a little bit [about the spark], but they were pretty motivated to do the writing. And you could see they were making connections. Lots of connections. And they would even talk about that. Text to text connections, text to self connections. They just made them on their own which was awfully great to see. (Transcript, March 31, 2008)

Although Megan began each session with her writing group by “talking about the spark,” she believed that each writer should be allowed to choose what to write about each day.

And then we'd talk about...like what do you think you are going to be writing? Sometimes a child might say 'I really want to write about baseball' and it didn't really have anything to do with the story [spark], but they'd been thinking about that, they might have had a game that night, so I was like 'Go for it!' And they would write about baseball...That was absolutely alright. (Transcript, March 31, 2008)

Megan experienced the children in her 2008 writing group as being “really interested in writing. Even the little second grader.” Megan had worked with less enthusiastic writers during past years and enjoyed the change.

And some years I've had kids who weren't as interested in writing. We tried to make that a little bit better this year. I know Dana was trying to do that because some years there would be a few children there that you thought were maybe there because of day care purposes? And they weren't interested in writing at all... and it does make a difference and take away from it, you know. (Transcript, March 31, 2008)

Even so, Megan has reservations about excluding less enthusiastic writers. She paused reflectively and added:

On the other hand, part of me wonders, maybe we [Writers Club] could inspire. Maybe we could get someone interested in writing. So it is kind of a shame. If we did have more teachers, maybe we could spread them [more reluctant writers] out more a little bit so there's only one in each group because you still wonder. And I think that the chance to work in a small group with a teacher, it gives them the chance to have a more positive experience [with writing]. (Transcript, March 31, 2008)

Megan often arrived at Writers Club feeling exhausted. “Some days I was just so tired [when I got to Writers Club] that I didn't even write—I was just helping the little second grader a little bit, things like that, and I answered a few questions.” Even though she was often “exhausted” when she went to Writers Club, “I looked forward to it. I looked forward to seeing those children and I really enjoy Writers Club.” For Megan, every time she went she found that “you do get into what they are writing and sharing and just the connection that you have with them... and you are really glad that you are there.”

Megan shared what she wrote with the children “from time to time” and sometimes she even “surprised” herself by what she wrote.

I, sort of, like the one little poem that I wrote. You know, I hadn't written poetry in a long time and I was happy that it turned out and that the children enjoyed it.

One thing, I took a writing class once where I was writing for the other adults to read. This one, I'm writing things that children would want to hear. I'll write things from my own childhood like [about] a puppy we had and I'll write a story that had to do with him. (Transcript, March 31, 2008)

While Megan sometimes chose not to share her writing with the children when time ran short, she believes her sharing was an important part of the process. Megan thought the children were “eager” to hear her stories but not because what she wrote was particularly “good.”

I think it was more like an element of surprise because the teacher actually wrote something too. And I think that is a good thing because you are not just asking them to do something, but you show them that you are writing because you enjoy writing. (Transcript, March 31, 2008)

Megan had planned on submitting one of her pieces to be included in the Celebration Book, but “I just didn't get it there on time. In fact, I told Carolyn the Friday before [it was due] that I had something but I didn't get it up to her Monday morning. I had a poem I was going to submit.”

The children in her group often “amazed” Megan by the amount and the quality of their writing. She was impressed by the structure of the stories they wrote and by their speed at composing stories.

I've noticed that a lot of the older ones, when they write a story you really can see a beginning, middle, and end. I remember one little boy last year, he had such a great story... it was everything you would want in a story. It had all the story elements...

[It] really surprises me how much children can write in a small amount of time. 'Cause I'm slow. I love to write, but I am really slow at it. To write, and to come up with these ideas! I was really surprised to see some of these younger children write pages! Like 3 – 5 full pages in just a matter of fifteen minutes. I mean, I think that is really great because they don't have to stop to edit and revise. (Transcript, March 31, 2008)

Megan attributed the children's idea generation to the approach leaders used in supporting writers at Writers Club.

We encourage them to express their ideas... You know they're not spending their time figuring out every word they are using or how they are phrasing it, or the spelling and so forth, they are just thinking about their ideas so I think that is a really good thing. (Transcript, March 31, 2008)

Megan considered the spark to be an influential scaffold for the children's writing.

...They were always motivated to write and most of the time it did spring from the spark. A lot of children picked up on the sparks that we did and you could see that when you look at their booklets. I haven't seen the writing that all of the children did, but I noticed that they picked up on the ideas; authors that were shared. (Transcript, March 31, 2008)

Megan was the only leader this year who volunteered to give the spark without Dana having to ask her first. Right after the first session she went to Dana and told her that she was willing to be the sparker for the next week. Megan knew that she wanted to use poetry as her spark.

The last couple of years when I have done it [been the sparker], I have chosen poetry because it seems like a lot of the leaders don't choose poetry and I love poetry. I think a lot of children start not liking it. Especially as they get older. I really would like to inspire children to, you know, enjoy poetry... I think there is such value in reading poetry aloud. And that's why I thought it was a good idea to share poems with them and show that you can enjoy poetry and also how much fun it is to write poetry. A lot of children think poetry has to rhyme and it doesn't all have to rhyme. (Transcript, March 31, 2008)

Megan had a particular poem in mind that set off a massive search through the county's public and school library systems and ultimately took five weeks to locate. Megan hoped that she would find her own copy of the poem in some of the piles in her room on the teacher workdays but that did not happen. She had to change classrooms when she switched to kindergarten and she still did not have her room as "well organized" as it was when she was a first grade teacher. She was "glad" that her kindergarten teammate offered to be the sparker for the second Writers Club session because she felt "bad" that she was not ready. Dana spearheaded the search for Beatrice Schenk de Regniers's "What's the Funniest Thing?" and encouraged Megan to wait until it was found instead of just going ahead with other poems as the spark.

Due to the difficulty in locating the poem she wanted to read, Megan was not ready to give the spark until February 13, the sixth Writers Club session. She arranged for her teammates and her aide to handle dismissal of her class and was already set up in the story pit when I arrived at 2:45 pm. Megan was sitting in a small rocker at the front of the story pit with her hands in her lap talking quietly with the children who had already arrived. The picture book display shelf, which was usually located at the back of the story pit, had been pulled up so that it sat to her left and displayed 20 or more poetry books. To

her right, on a small table she had covered with a cloth, Megan had six more poetry books standing. At 2:50, Dana moved down next to Megan and shared with the children a little bit about the hunt for her special poem. Finally it was time for Megan to take her turn as sparker.

Boys and girls you know what? I love to read poetry. How many of you love poetry? [13 of the 67 children raised their hands]. When I was growing up my family had a big old book that was filled with poems of all kinds. It was so old and used that the cover was off of it. I loved to take that book and read all types of poems. I would go in my parent's basement with it and read the poems out loud to myself! Some of my favorite poems today are the ones that I first read in that book.

There are a lot of modern poets too. How many of you have heard of the poet Jack Prelutsky? [At least 1/3 raised their hands]. He has an anthology. An anthology is a book made up of a collection of poems. It can be poems all by the same person like some of the ones on this shelf [she indicated the shelf to her left], or it can be a collection of poems by a lot of different poets like the old book of poetry that I loved when I was growing up. Here on this table I've got several other anthologies—a collection by Caroline Kennedy called *A Family of Poems: My Favorite Poetry for Children*. Caroline Kennedy is the daughter of one of our presidents and her book is a collection of poems by different poets that she remembered her parents reading to her or that she chose to read to her own children. I've also got *Sing a Song of Popcorn*, by Eva Moore which has a lot of the poems I like to use in my classroom every year. And I know that a lot of you are familiar with the poet who wrote *Where the Sidewalk Ends* [murmurs of recognition and the name Shel Silverstein escape from the children]. That's right! Shel Silverstein writes lots of poems for children.

You can see that there are a lot of different poetry books right here in our library. All of these [she gestured to the books on the table and the picture book display shelf] are in our Seaside Elementary School library. When you come to the library to check out books with your class, you might want to check out a poetry book for a change. They can be lots of fun to read. (Observation, February 13, 2008)

Children began pointing to the different poetry books Megan had on display and began talking quietly to each other. Megan picked up Jack Prelutsky's anthology, *The 20th Century Children's Poetry Treasury*, and said:

I'm going to start with a poem in Jack Prelutsky's anthology called "Some People." The poet was writing about people in this poem. He might have gotten that idea just from walking down the street. I read an interview that someone had with him—Jack Prelutsky suggested that if you were a writer, it was a good idea to keep a notebook with you at all times so you could jot down ideas about things that would be good to write about. You never know where your good ideas are going to come

from. He says that you should write about stuff you know like your sister or your dog. Writing about things that are familiar to you makes them more real. (Observation, February 13, 2008)

Megan shared “Some People” with a tone of surprise in her voice as she read. Then she pulled out a folded piece of paper from her right hand pocket and said, “‘Keep a Poem in your Pocket’ was one of my favorite poems when I was growing up so that’s just what I did today!”

There were many ‘oohs’ and ‘ahs’ of recognition from students. “I know that one!” “My teacher told me that one before!”

Megan nodded and went on. “I know if you were one of my students you have heard it for sure. The name of the poet is Beatrice Schenk de Regniers. She has written many, many poems.” Megan read the poem, patting her pocket as she did so. “I do like that poem,” she said with a satisfied smile. Then she patted her other pocket. “I happen to have another poem by her in my other pocket today.” Megan took out a second folded up piece of paper from her left hand pocket.

This was hard to find. I had teachers and librarians looking for a copy of this for a long time for me to share with you. A librarian finally found it in one anthology, and she made a copy of it and sent it to me. It is the only book left in the county that still had it because it was from an old book. So I have made copies for all of you so you will be able to take a poem in your pockets when you leave Writers Club today. This is one I especially like to read out loud—some poems are especially meant to be read out loud. Let’s just listen to this for a moment:

Megan shared “What’s the Funniest Thing?” with the group. It featured one verse each about the funniest, saddest, noisiest, and quietest things Schenk de Regniers could think of. Megan continued:

What **is** the funniest thing? I loved this poem when I was a little girl. When you write today, you can think about something funny, something sad, maybe something quiet, or something loud. I’m anxious to see what you come up with. Some of you may even want to try writing your own poetry. Okay, its time for you to go with your groups. (Observation, February 13, 2008)

With that, Megan dismissed all of the children to go with their groups. Her own group of children gathered around her rocking chair. She swept them along with her and joined the exodus to the cafeteria.

In the cafeteria, I decided to stay near Megan's group for the day. The other five leaders and their groups tended to choose tables in the front half of the cafeteria closest to the exit door to the lobby. Megan always took her group to the farthest table away from the doors and windows in the left hand corner of the cafeteria. I later asked her why she chose to be so far away from the others. "Hmm. I'm not sure exactly. I think I wanted to be sure that we didn't bother anyone because I really like my children to talk about their writing."

Megan and her group settled in at their usual table. The second grade boy sat on Megan's right, facing the windows. The third grade girl sat one seat away from him. The other three children, one boy and two girls chose seats to her left with their backs towards me. Megan leaned in towards the center of the table and said:

Boys and girls, do you know what I get on my face when I think about Writers Club? A big smile. You are all such tremendous writers and I get to hear what you have to say. And I love the poem and when I think about what you will write about it, it makes me really smile. We've got a copy of the poem for each of you. Let's reread it to see what kinds of ideas you can have. (Observation, February, 13, 2008)

Megan distributed a copy of the poem to each of the children and they began to read it aloud quietly as a group. The second grader said, "You can tell it's a poem because it rhymes. All poems rhyme."

Megan responded gently, "Well, this poem rhymes, but poems don't have to rhyme. It can be called free verse and not rhyme. We're just used to a lot of poems that rhyme. It's time for writing now. Let's be quiet." All of her children and Megan were writing by 3:07 pm. About fifteen minutes later, the older boy handed his booklet to Megan with a satisfied smile and she read what he showed her, nodding and smiling before she handed it back to him saying, "You've done something interesting here with the lines." He took the book back and appeared to read it again before he picked up his pencil and began writing some more. Megan noticed that the second grader was not writing, but was sitting with his head down on the table. She began rubbing his back lightly, looking over his shoulder at what he had written. "You still have a couple of minutes, why don't you tell about...?"

The child responded, “Yeah, I still have to write that part.” He picked up his pencil and began writing laboriously with the pencil slanting away from him as he hunched over his booklet.

When the music ended signaling the start of sharing time, Megan called on the Melanie, the quiet third grade girl who had been feverishly writing for the entire time. Hers was a long piece using many words that rhymed with “at.” Some of it included, “The fat cat sat on the mat...the fat rat caught Matt who was taking a nap.”

Megan followed what she read with an intent look on her face. “I like how Melanie did a lot of plays on words. Would any of you (her eyes swept the group) like to comment on it?”

“I like how she did lots of words,” said the second grader.

“You really had to listen hard to keep it straight,” said the older boy. He shared his story about a dog next. “It’s not a poem, but I thought having a dog would be the funnest [*sic*] thing.”

Megan responded, “It sounds like you are pretty excited about getting a dog!” Another girl chimed in, “I have something to say. I remember when I got my dog.”

“You made a connection,” Megan pointed out. “Remember at the beginning when I said something about writing about things you know about? Kavonte [author of the story about the dog] did that, didn’t he?” Each of the other children shared their stories and poems. Megan reminded another quiet girl, “Remember, read it loud enough so we can hear.” The last child shared a poem with repeated lines similar to the way Beatrice Schenk de Regniers repeated lines in ‘What’s the Funniest Thing?’ “Did you notice the repetition she [de Regniers] put in hers?” Megan asked the child. “You have one with lots of repetitions too.” Because the time for Writers Club ended when the children finished commenting on the last child’s story, Megan did not share her own writing that week. When Megan read the stories and poems in the Celebration Book she was “really happy because I love that poem...I searched for [that poem] everywhere” and “a lot of kids really picked up on that” and chose to include the writing they did from Megan’s day as sparker.

Megan felt a little more invested in what the children wrote in response to her spark but as a Writers Club participant, she said she was just as interested in the spark on

other days. “I’m usually out there listening to the spark myself...It’s just as exciting, you know, and I’m thinking about getting ideas for writing.”

Really, though, all kinds of ideas came from stories that were read [as the spark]. They [the children] would take off on their own and maybe find one thing from the story [spark] that reminded them of something and gave them an idea. I mean I never had one child who was unable to come up with something to write about. They all decided on things to write about. (Transcript, March 3, 2008)

Even so, Megan was often late arriving at Writers Club and missed all or part of the spark herself. “Hopefully I didn’t get stuck with a lost child or something like that. But then, usually I’m familiar with the book the teacher is presenting.”

Megan “hopes” that Writers Club continues at Seaside Elementary school for a long time to come.

I really hope it continues. I think it is something we should really strive to keep. In fact, I had mentioned it to another reading teacher who was in my cohort program [for reading] when I was looking for that one poem. She said ‘tell me about this Writers Club.’ And I wanted to tell her about it because she would be interested in doing something like that in her school. I think it’s a great idea to share with other teachers at other schools, other reading teachers, librarians, because it is such a great thing to start. It doesn’t take a lot of...I mean it’s a lot of work with planning, but it doesn’t involve money or funding. Its something you can just start and not worry about the budget crunch or anything like that... I think that there have been a lot of changes [in Writers Club] over the years and that is why it works so well now. (Transcript, March 31, 2008)

Megan credited Dana for the success of Writers Club. “Dana has worked so hard. She deserves so much credit for keeping this going.”

Tim’s Story

Tim was the librarian at Seaside Elementary School for several years prior to 1997 and then left the school for a position at another county school. He returned in 1999, again as librarian, and said,

I’ve done it [Writers Club] pretty much since then. I don’t know what it was that got me to do Writers Club the first time. Probably I was asked; at least I think I was asked...My role was essentially just to take a group. (Transcript, March 3, 2008)

He recognized that children often see him as the one who was “in charge” but he “chalks that up” to the fact that Writers Club always began in the library for everyone and the children saw the library as “his territory.”

Tim and his assistant ensured that the library was physically set up for Writers Club each Wednesday. Ordinarily, the library tables had four chairs around them. For Writers Club, Tim and Maura placed six chairs at each table. It “works better” to have them at tables rather than “sprawled around the library.” Maura made sure the stacks of booklets and pencils were ready and waiting for leaders. Tim set up the CD player and selected the background music. Tim acknowledged, “They [other leaders] always look to me to pick up something if it needs to be picked up...if I see Dana just needs somebody to go up front [in the story pit] and get it started [pre-spark time in Writers Club], I don’t ask. I just go.”

The second week of Writers Club, the sparker was late and the children were becoming restless. Tim immediately stepped in, turned on the music, and as the children quieted down said, “Thank you boys and girls, we will be starting soon.”

On the editing day, Dana scurried around trying to find substitute leaders and was not able to stop and talk to the children as she usually did before the spark. While the noise level of the children in the story pit was nowhere near the level it reached in the cafeteria at lunchtime, it was substantially louder than on any of the other Writers Club days.

Tim moved decisively down to the story pit, snapped his fingers, and began giving detailed instructions to children and leaders. The children (and leaders) quieted down immediately and looked towards him prepared to listen. When Dana finally made it into the library, Tim could “sense” she was “busy” and asked if she wanted to take over. “She said, ‘no, just keep going’...and I did, no problem.”

Tim decided when to play the background music. During the editing session although he set out the CD player as he usually did on Writers Club days, Tim made “a conscious decision” not to play music

because I knew there was going to be noise in the room. On that last session there was no question. We knew what the task was and what we had to do. Normally what the music does is tell the kids without saying it, that it is time to write. I stop the discussion about the prompt [for all the groups in the library when I put the

music on] and we start writing. But with the editing session it was—we've got a task to do, let's get to it. (Transcript, March 3, 2008)

Tim liked the multi-age groupings and believed that having children of different ages in each group allowed them to express themselves more freely without having to worry about being compared to one another. He thought that was beneficial for children.

It's good to see the different age groups, especially when they share out. I think it makes it easier. It's another boundary removed. I mean if you don't have another child of your age, well, it's okay [for their writing] to be better because they're older. They don't have to worry so much about competing. It removes some of that competition. (Transcript, March 3, 2008)

Tim thought that Dana's email directing leaders to have everyone share at least two sentences of their writing each week was "helpful." It also served to "remind" leaders of the importance of sharing.

I'm glad it is mandatory that they share out [this year] because it removes that little barrier. One of the blocks to writing is that fear of performance... Basically every week, everybody shared out. Everybody got the chance and that was something that was different this year. Often in previous years, we didn't always have time for everyone to share out. I don't know how we did it this year. I think we were more careful with the schedule. (Transcript, March 3, 2008)

Tim saw his 2008 group as composed of a "mixed bag" of writers. One boy, a second grader was "struggling" with writing. "But he is struggling in class too, so what can you expect?" A third grade boy who was a "pretty average" writer, "always" turned the spark into a "boy story" so that he

gets it to be about a football game and the injuries there... One girl just blows me away. She always says, 'I can't think of anything, I can't think of anything.' And stares at the ceiling for forever, but when it is time to share, her's show real originality and zing. (Observation, January 23, 2008)

Tim considered it important to write with the children. "Typically I will write to model the behavior." He was "able to write a story on all but one week" when he worked with a particular child throughout the writing portion of the session. Tim considered it important to "always [stay] conscious during the sharing part...I always share last. But I do wait to see if they want me to share because I don't want them to be comparing their writing to my writing."

Tim believed that his role as a group leader was both to be a “role model” and as “supporting” children

with the exchange of ideas when they come to the group. I’ll let them talk about the spark. And sometimes I’ll say, ‘you know, I missed some of that. What was the spark about today?’ And they always knew what it was about, and then the next question is always, ‘Do you know what you are going to write about today?’ And if they have decided that they are going to write about something that has nothing to do with the spark, that is your chance to say, ‘Have you thought about...? Or, maybe you could...Or, you know...’ And so you can guide them. About half of the kids are ready to write on the spark right away or they might continue writing [from the previous week’s spark]...or they may just write two stories, one on the spark and the other one on a different topic. And it is amazing how much some of these kids can generate in that short amount of time. (Transcript, March 3, 2008)

Tim liked to encourage his group to run the session without him by having one of the older children take over the secretarial aspects of Writers Club group leadership.

During one of the sessions Tim explained,

You might have noticed I do things a little different in my group [from the other leaders]. Each year I select a student who is really capable and train her to be the leader. She takes the attendance, distributes the materials. I really take a back seat. That way, if I am out or Dana happens to be short a leader, I can leave my group and they can run it all by themselves. (Observation, January 23, 2008)

Twice in 2008, Tim left his group “on their own” for the writing part and once for the sharing portion. “They said it went great!” he reported enthusiastically.

When Dana sent the grouping lists out for teachers and leaders before Writers Club began, Tim wrote back to her asking to have the group with the second grade boy (Peter) he described as

struggling... I specifically took that group because that child was in that group to be sure that he had a successful time of it... I don’t look at labels. They don’t exist for me. I work with kids, any kids. But it is especially rewarding to show kids they can believe in themselves. (Transcript, March 3, 2008)

Tim took an active interest in Peter and frequently worked with him one-on-one. Tim patiently spelled words as Peter wrote them letter by letter. The other children in the group took their cue from Tim, and spelled words for Peter when he asked for help. Tim wondered why Peter persisted at writing. “Why would a child who struggles to write

want to be a part of it [Writers Club] ?” Tim thought that “part of the reason” was that Peter had older siblings who were also in Writers Club.

Tim’s work with Peter was inspired by his earlier experience. Tim had worked with a child in 2007 who had a

physical disability and couldn’t [physically] write and [his] mom came in to be his scribe. I told her that we could provide someone for him [to help during Writers Club]. It didn’t have to be a mother/son team. We would find someone to give him the level of support he needed...I took that strategy and applied it to this child (Peter) and gave him the support he needed. He has great thoughts, but he just couldn’t get them down on paper. (Transcript, March 3, 2008)

Tim’s support went beyond spelling help and included helping Peter select a story for the Celebration, a task that was not easy for Peter. “We actually read every story in his book and then he was okay with the one he wanted to do, which was fine.” Tim appeared very pleased that Peter chose to share the story inspired by the spark Tim shared, *Zen Shorts*, by Jon J. Muth. Tim took extra time to help Peter practice reading his story aloud. “I’d heard that that was an issue too, but even with his creative spellings every week he was able to read them back.” Tim helped Peter outside the Writers Club timeframe as well by working with him before school began. On Celebration Day, Tim reported happily, “He did well.”

Tim was the sparkler the first Wednesday in February. He chose *Zen Shorts*, a story in which three children meet a very special panda named Stillwater, who told them stories from Zen Buddhist literature and from Taoism.

I just kind of marked that book when it came in as for the upper grades. I pulled that book out one day and they just loved it. And then Dana needed somebody spur of the moment to do the spark. I wasn’t supposed to do it. But I had that one shelved in the back of my mind, so that day, I just pulled that one out to read it again because it was enjoyable and I thought it would be fine for the fourth graders to hear it again. I thought they [everyone] could make a connection to it, even it was a stretch...I tend to challenge them. I find that if you make it challenging that it gives them something to reach for and although not all of them will reach it, a lot will give it a try...I think that I will go a little bit harder than other people when they do the spark. I try to find something that I know the kids will identify with and like. And then I talk about it after the fact to show them examples that may tie in with their own life. (Transcript, March 3, 2008)

Tim began his spark by showing the cover of the book and exploring the idea of meditation with the children.

We begin on time and we end on time. Today's book is called *Zen Shorts* by Jon J. Muth. Zen is a Japanese word for meditation. I think you need to do this [meditate] sometimes when you are writing. If you look into a pool of water, can you see the moon's true reflection? [Some nodding of heads from the children and two of the leaders.] Yes, if it is still. Not, if it is agitated. When we come to school every day we need to let our minds be clear, not agitated. That way we can do our best. This is a long story so we'd best get started. (Observation, February 6, 2008)

When some children became distracted by Dana's efforts to move them to a better vantage point, Tim redirected them with a finger snap and had all eyes riveted on him. He explained to everyone that *Zen Shorts* was a story-within-a story tale. "Now this book, in fact, has three stories in it [plus the main one]. This is the first one, 'Uncle Ry and the Moon'. See what you think of it." Tim held the book open and slowly swept it in an arc in front of him so that everyone had a chance to see each page. He gestured with his hand to indicate a long, long path and stepped in place ever more slowly to show fatigue and weariness.

At the end of the first tale, which was about a robber being given a bathrobe by Uncle Ry (one of the few items Uncle Ry owned), Tim asked the children, "How would you feel if something like this happened to you? Would you give the robber something of yours?" Then Tim related a personal anecdote about how his own tools were once stolen. "Can you understand that Uncle Ry wished he had something even better to give to the robber?"

Tim introduced the next story. "Stillwater [the panda] is going to tell Michael a story called 'The Farmer's Crops.' Fourth graders, you'll remember this one."

'The Farmer's Crops' was a cautionary tale about luck. What appeared to be good luck may in fact, turn out to bring great troubles. At the same time, what seemed at first to be very bad luck may, instead, end up being the best thing that could ever happen. "Maybe good luck and bad luck are all mixed up," Tim suggested to the children. "Think about that for a moment."

After a few moments, Tim began again. "Okay, last story—it's called 'A Heavy Load.' And Stillwater is telling it to Karl to help him see that he should not waste time being angry at his brother."

In 'A Heavy Load' a spoiled young woman had a problem because the road she needed to cross was flooded. If she did, she would ruin her silken robes. A pair of monks

happened by and heard the woman complaining loudly at her servants who had their arms full of packages and were unable to help her. The older monk picked her up without saying a word and carried her across the road. The woman gave him no thanks; instead, she just went on her way. This infuriated the younger monk and he complained about her for the rest of the afternoon. Tim turned from the book to look directly at the children with a puzzled look on his face. “Is that [grumbling about having to carry the woman] respectful or showing kindness?”

“No,” they answered almost as one.

“Listen to the rest,” Tim’s voice conveyed an expectant atmosphere.

Finally, his companion, Stillwater, comments, ‘I set the woman down hours ago. Why are you still carrying her?’ Why are you **still** carrying her? Did you guys get that? [Tim paused for a long moment while his eyes roamed over all of the children.] I once saw a student get very upset and stay mad for a long time. Staying mad is ‘still carrying it’. How many of you have carried something for a long time that you should have let go? Does carrying it mean that you have to carry something physical? (Observation, February 6, 2008)

“No,” said the children.

“No,” echoed Tim.

The second monk was carrying anger **and** he didn’t even carry the woman. This book tells us how we are in life, how we can live our lives. One possibility for your writing today is writing about a time when somebody learned a lesson, or when someone got angry and may have stayed angry for too long. When you stay angry, who does it hurt? (Observation, February 6, 2008)

“Yourself,” said the child in the third row Tim pointed to.

“That’s right. Raise your hand if you have heard of the word ‘stress’.” Just about all of the children raised their hands.

We all have stress in our lives. Are you going to let that stress get to you all day long and carry it with you or are you going to let it go? This is like the concept of turning the other cheek. How many of you have heard of that? (Observation, February 6, 2008)

A few kids nodded in response. Tim chose not to extend this thought. “Any questions? There are a lot of things you could talk about when you get in your small groups. Raise your hand if you already have an idea of what to write about.” Only

seventeen hands went up. “Okay then,” said Tim, “you guys have a lot of work to do in your small groups.”

It was 3:10 pm before writers moved to join their group leaders. One child commented to her leader, “This one [the spark] almost sounds like non-fiction.” Tim’s group began without him. Three girls twirled and tapped their own and each other’s pencils while they talked back and forth in low voices. One bounced her pencil off the tabletop. The third grade boy looked like he was trying to write. He focused on his paper and wrote a few words, but appeared distracted by the girls. He looked up at the girls when they giggled and shook his head as if he were giving up. Finally he put his pencil behind his right ear, put both hands on the sides of his head and just stared at his paper. Tim snapped his finger and the three girls started writing. The boy’s face brightened. He straightened up, took his pencil out from behind his ear and began writing furiously. Tim had pulled Peter, the second grader, away from the group and was writing down words as Peter dictated.

We did things different [that week] where I actually had him tell me his story and I wrote it down word for word. That week he had a longer story because he wasn’t spending his time trying to get his thoughts down. (Transcript, March 3, 2008)

Tim was “very pleased” with how his group handled themselves that day while he worked with Peter.

Tim was interested to learn that many of the children appreciated the complexity of the spark he chose to share. “Most of the books [sparks] are too low,” offered one sixth grade girl. One of the leaders disagreed with the children I interviewed. “That was way out there and...I just had a lot of kids with cartoony type eyes trying to figure out that one.”

Tim acknowledged differences in others’ assessment of the spark he shared with a shrug. “You know, you never know” how the spark will be received.

Well, it’s never been a part [of Writers Club] that they have to write to the spark... Originally it was meant to be free writing...you do try to steer them more towards the spark, and I do think that is important and the job of the group leader to do that... you can sort of lead them without them even knowing you are doing that. (Transcript, March 3, 2008)

Tim also explained that children had individual preferences and goals. According to Tim, the third grade boy in his group was a prolific writer. That child's suggestion [in the questionnaire] was "longer books because he filled his in right away." He can "just write on and on and on with no real purpose but he is writing! It's another page!...It was quantity, and for him that was important."

More than anything, Tim was "surprised by the turnout" for Writers Club although he was sure that the benefits of "Writers Club is a no-brainer. It is so universal. I'm sure parents think it is a great thing for their kids to be part of." Tim questioned whether his own sixth grade son would "sign up for something like this. I mean it is popular. I don't know if that would be enough to drag him in. But we have tons of boys who sign up here." Seaside Elementary School had approximately three boys for every four girls in Writers Club in 2008. Tim explained that boys are naturally "more reluctant writers" although he had not seen any "empirical evidence" to support that claim.

Tim expressed genuine perplexity over the continued and sustained popularity of Writers Club.

I mean the amount of kids who want to come out and do it [is surprising] because in the end, it **is** work. Hanging around for that writing is work, more work and I mean for some of these kids when they hear that prompt [spark] it is work to figure out what they are going to put down on that piece of paper and get it written in time and then share it. These kids would do it [Writers Club] for the whole year if they had the opportunity available. I guess that surprises me, I'm thinking about my own son; that after they've been here all day, they come here, sit down, and work hard. And I don't know why, but I've seen it, it seems that they are willing to work harder and more intensely for an hour after school than I've seen them work during the instructional day. So I guess that is a big surprise to me. I've never had a kid whose mom signed them up and they didn't want to be there and just wanted to be done. (Transcript, March 3, 2008)

Tim worried that some teachers might have felt "pressured" to serve as Writers Club leaders and hoped that the leaders volunteered because they wanted to and felt it was valuable.

I would feel bad if there was a member on staff who felt that this was something they were compelled to do. If they did it [Writers Club], it's because it is something they think is worthwhile...if it went the other way [and they were leaders because they felt pressured to do so], I would just rather do it myself. (Transcript, March 3, 2008)

Tim felt a deep-rooted respect for teachers and had personal knowledge of the time commitments they face.

My mom is a teacher and I know what these teachers go through. I feel for them...When they spend that hour here, there are some jobs where you put in your eight hours and then you go home; I know that if they spent that hour here that it's an hour later that they are going to be upstairs [in their classrooms]. There's no way around that, you can't make that hour go away. (Transcript, March 3, 2008)

Although he had been a leader most years, Tim did not always volunteer to be a Writers Club leader. "You do have to pick and choose and you can't do it all. There are plenty of things I have not helped with. Science Club after school, I didn't do that." He volunteered for Homework Club one year and did not participate in Writers Club, but he returned to Writers Club the following year.

Writers Club is good in a lot of ways. A small part of it is the instructional component. There are a lot of elements of Writers Workshop that take place in Writers Club, even though you don't point them out like you would in a Writers Workshop. At the same time it is more of that club thing, it's a feel good, it's a good public relations thing... It creates a nice extra for the kids and there is some instruction that goes with that as well. It's a nice extra piece. (Transcript, March 3, 2008)

The biggest change Tim noted over the years was "growth, growth, growth." When Writers Club started, it was "self-contained in the library. And then we started getting bigger and I was one of the forces that was all for getting bigger. That's where I was different from Shelley [teacher who reinstated Writers Club in 2002] on that and also different from Dana." Tim was probably the most vocal about his difference of opinion. "I would rather have it be inclusive, not exclusive and that means anyone who wants in should be in." Tim attributed his sensitivity and his desire to be inclusive to the fact that his "wife is a special education teacher and I was dating her when she went through that program."

Even with his strong conviction that Writers Club should ideally be as "inclusive" as possible, Tim conceded that Dana and Shelley had valid concerns. "It's not the same club when it grows outside the walls of the library...There's something about the library environment."

Tim also noted the difficulty that a large size placed on the Writers Club organizer, “I know it’s hard for the leader... because she’s got to be sure that she has enough people [to lead small groups].”

Tim saw Writers Club as fulfilling a vital goal at Seaside Elementary School by offering children a chance to develop as writers and connect with the school.

I think it is important, for these ten weeks [of Writers Club] it gives them some other reason to come to school. It gives them a reason to want to come here. They need a reason because in other parts of the school day, they [may] struggle and they need something. They don’t always fit in socially and it gives them something they can latch onto. Writers Club has such an individual component and for some kids, maybe this is it. This is why they get excited about coming to school. (Transcript, March 3, 2008)

At the end of the Writers Celebration, Tim returned to the library and began to set it up properly for the next school day. He literally shouted out to me from across the room when I entered the library to collect my belongings:

You want to know why we [teachers] do Writers Club? ...This is what education is supposed to be about. All of these people are here to celebrate their children’s accomplishments. A lot of learning happened and will stay with them. Those kids got a chance to get up in front of an audience and read something they wrote themselves. What a powerful way to boost their self-confidence! They [the kids] hate it that it’s done. They’d come [to Writers Club] every week if we’d let them.” (Observation, March 12, 2008)

“On the other hand,” Tim mused, “if you want to ruin Writers Club just put a grade on the paper at the end of the day. I think that would do it.”

The Children

Peter’s Story

Peter, a quiet dark-eyed second grader and first time Writers Club kid in 2008 did not attend the opening session although his fourth and sixth grade brothers did. “I went to a friend’s house on the first day of Writers Club.” That was the only time he did not look forward to going to Writers Club. Faced with a dilemma that popped up unexpectedly, Peter had to choose between the two activities. Jonathan, a friend from his class, asked

Peter that Monday if he could play after school on Wednesday. “My friend had invited me over and I had never been to his house before and I wanted to go.”

Peter caught my eye often during Writers Club sessions. His group met at a table to the right of where I often sat when I was observing in the library. He was the youngest of the group of three girls and two boys. Typically, he seemed to me to be very earnest and focused on his writing. He was usually writing and often appeared to be reading what he had already written as he mouthed words quietly while running his finger along a line of print. His writing was large—he rarely fit more than three words on a line. The letters were laboriously and firmly printed, often with Peter’s tongue out of his mouth, his head bent towards his left shoulder, and his body bent in towards his booklet. He usually sat with one leg bent underneath him. Often, Peter was engaged in quiet conversation with someone in his group. Several times over the course of the Writers Club sessions, his leader pulled Peter away from the group to work at a counter that was up against the wall near his group’s table.

Peter’s brothers, Patrick and Jason, were seasoned Writers Club kids and did attend the first session in 2008. Patrick “...is in sixth grade. He’s been in it six times!” Jason “...has done it three times. He says it’s great and he is nine.” Peter nodded his head ‘yes’ when I asked him if he remembered his brothers talking about Writers Club at home when he was too little to participate, but when I probed further to understand whether or not that had any influence over his deciding to join Writers Club he responded, “I don’t know.” Patrick and Jason have been Writers Club kids “every year” but Peter did not participate in 2007 as a first grader even though first graders could join then. “I don’t know why.”

Patrick and Jason told Peter about the first meeting that evening. “The time that I missed was when they made the groups and that is when I skipped it.” Peter’s first time at Writers Club was actually the second meeting of the year. On his first day, Peter was surprised that “it was crowded! And Mr. Massey [Tim] was my group leader.” Peter was the only second grader in his group of five children. He knew “all of them except one. One of them was in sixth grade.” Peter was not worried about having different age children in his group. “They kind of helped me too.”

Peter liked listening to the stories [sparks] at the beginning of the Writers Club sessions. His favorite one was *Mrs. Watson Wants Your Teeth* by Alison McGhee. He grinned when he said that and pointed out that he was missing two teeth. Peter said that the sparks helped him “get ideas” for his writing. He claimed that it was easy for him to get ideas. Without the spark, Peter thought Writers Club would be “hard. Because the stories give you ideas and you might not have ideas when you come here for Writers Club.” Peter thought about what to write while he listened to the spark. He also indicated that writers who did not have an idea of their own had a second chance to come up with an idea when they met with their writing group because “then they [group members] help you.”

When the groups first got together at the end of the spark, Peter’s group had a routine. First, “We tell him [Mr. Massey] what we are going to write about and stuff.” Then they helped each other out by sharing ideas as they “talked about” the spark. Peter did not have trouble coming up with ideas for his own writing. “It was easy! ‘Cause [sic] I knew those books that they read.” After everyone had written, “We read our stories to the kids. **Our** group.”

Peter liked Writers Club because “it was fun and it helped me with my writing a lot too.” Peter shared that it helped him “to spell words. ...It’s hard writing some words for me and stuff.” While agreeing that Writers Club was hard work he nodded and emphatically added, “I like doing it.” Writing in school was a less pleasurable experience for Peter than writing in Writers Club. “In my classroom my teacher makes me write about my weekend and in Writers Club we write about things I like.” Peter noticed improvement in his writing after being in Writers Club.

I write bigger words because... Mr. Massey helps me spell the big words so when I write about my weekend [in my classroom] I write big words like—fantastic!... One time Mr. Massey wrote one whole page because I didn’t know how to write them and I told him what to write and he wrote it down. (Transcript, April 11, 2008)

Peter thought dictating his story to Mr. Massey was a “fun” way to write. He liked that the leaders “always write” and was a little surprised that “they make funny stories too.”

In addition to the support Mr. Massey provided for Peter, listening to the stories the other children in his group wrote also “helped” Peter. He looked forward to hearing

them. Peter believed that listening to their stories “helps” him “because they use big words sometimes... When I listen to their stories I learn more words that are big.”

Peter thought that reading his stories to the others in his group was “fine, because my stories are good.” He did not have a favorite among all the stories he wrote for Writers Club; he always liked what he wrote. When it came time to select a story for the Celebration Book Peter “tried to think of a good one and I picked ‘Stress Relief’. It’s about stuff that I do when I get stressed out. And my relief is to play, or sleep.” (‘Stress Relief’ was the story that Mr. Massey scribed for Peter written in response to *Zen Shorts*.) For Peter, the Celebration was very “crowded. Lots of my friends, teachers, parents, and grandparents” came. “My mom and my dad” came too. Although he was not nervous about sharing in front of such a large group, Peter preferred sharing “at my group because there weren’t that much people.” Mr. Massey had helped him practice reading his story aloud so Peter “knew” he could do it. He wanted to be “done” so he asked Mr. Massey “if I could be the first one. And I was the first one!” There were fourteen adults, two school age children, and five preschoolers in the audience for his group’s sharing. In addition, there were three leaders and fourteen Writers Club kids. Peter and his brothers were among the children who did their Celebration sharing in the library with a microphone and a music stand to hold the Celebration Book.

Mr. Massey welcomed everyone in the library to the Celebration and introduced Peter as the first author. Peter was wearing khaki colored pants with a belt and a long sleeved, royal blue shirt. The Writers Club kids sat on the steps in the story pit. Their families clustered together and sat at tables that ringed the story area. When Mr. Massey introduced Peter, Peter stood up and walked to the mike, placed his Celebration Book on the music stand, took a deep breath and looked up towards the table where his parents were, and gave a very slight nod. Then he looked at his book and read his story clearly and carefully, looking up at the audience from time to time. The audience clapped loudly when he was through. Remembering this Peter admitted, “I was glad that people were clapping, not laughing.” Peter returned to his seat smiling broadly. Peter thought he would miss “the writing” the most now that Writers Club was over for the year. Peter knew what he would say to someone who was curious about Writers Club.

I'd tell them that Writers Club is today and I'm doing it. It helps your writing. They read books to you, **good** stories, and you get to write. And at the end you have a big party. And then Writers Club is over. (Transcript, April 11, 2008)

The only thing Peter thought should be changed about Writers Club was the lack of a reward for writing. "They should give snacks at the end of it [each day]. Candy. You should have candy at the end for good writing. The rest of it is pretty good the way it is." Peter was "glad" he was part of Writers Club in 2008 and plans to do it again next year. Peter thought that Writers Club was an important part of Seaside Elementary School. "It helps you learn other things about the school and it helps you make other friends too that you don't know."

Jill's Story

"I'm a writer because of Writers Club." Jill, a sixth grader had no doubt about how she developed her love of writing. "I started to come to Writers Club because I liked listening to stories when I was little, of course, and I wrote a 20 page [story], you know, two sentences per page. Some of my friends signed up too." As a first grader, Jill always "rushed" to get a seat on the step closest to the leader sharing the spark. She has not noticed too many changes over the years except in the number of participants. "I mean, it just keeps going up. I remember in first grade, there was room. There was even empty spaces up at the top step and now we're like overflowing!"

On January 30, Jill came over to the desk where I was setting up my laptop and asked, "Why didn't you interview me last year? I volunteered but you never called." I explained that I was only able to interview a few of the students. She replied, "Well, this is my sixth year in Writers Club so if you want to find out a lot about it, I think you should interview me."

Jill liked just about everything in Writers Club with the exception of the spark. She did not enjoy the spark as much as she had in previous years.

I like Writers Club the way it is. Except for the stories because I kind of get bored. As soon as you hear those first couple of sentences, you know what's going to happen. The stories this year didn't seem as good. That may be because I am older. Probably is. Sometimes, now that I'm older, the plots don't sound that wonderful 'cause [sic] I'm in sixth grade and they're more like first grade through third. I'll be listening to my friend's conversations [during the spark] and when

they're supposed to answer something that is in the book, I'll hear them shout and then I'll look over to see what's going on. (Transcript, February, 20, 2008)

If Jill were selecting the spark, she would choose mysteries, fantasies, and historical fiction because that is what she likes to write. "Historical fiction is what I **really** like because along with the story it shows a little bit of truth."

For three of the Writers Club sessions Jill brought an MP3 player with her. She connected the earphones and put them in when the music began during the writing time. Jill explained,

When I listen to music, I can actually write better because I'll go in there and it will kind of inspire me almost. I listen to gospel or country; things with a little more meaning [than the Writers Club background music] and I'll incorporate it. I'll just bring my MP3 player to Writers Club if I have no idea of what I'm going to write about. (Transcript, February 20, 2008)

The sixth graders typically gathered on the right hand side of the story pit where a four-foot high stuffed Arthur bear [from the *Arthur* series by Marc Brown] sat by the top step. "Sixth grade goes there, and they [younger kids] know its sixth grade on that corner. They'll go there [Jill pointed towards a spot just a little to the right of the center top step], but they won't go any closer. They **know**. That's where **we** are."

Jill seemed unaware that first graders were not participating in Writers Club in 2008. "First and second graders get here first [the library] because the other grades have to come from upstairs. First graders probably sit on the first step like I did. And as they get older they probably move toward the back." As a safety patrol, Jill left her classroom before dismissal so that she could bring her things to the gym before she picked up her kindergarten charges to take them to their buses. "I'm the first person to get to Writers Club because I just come in here and it saves me time from going upstairs and back. And I sometimes get to see what the spark is going to be."

In her six years as a Writers Club kid, Jill has never had the same leader twice. Switching leaders was

pretty good, except when I really liked my leader and I didn't get her, I was, of course, disappointed but...I always liked my leader...I think it's very, very important [for the leader to write with the children]...because you hear different words and stuff. I can use bigger words because I hear them in the adults' writing. And I can hear how they're used and then I can use them. (Transcript, February, 20, 2008)

The best thing about Writers Club for Jill was when group members shared their writing with each other. She liked both sharing her own stories with her group and hearing those shared by others in her group.

Me, I like sharing my stories because most of them are comedy-ish and I like put on all these voices and I jump around while I do it. I enjoy telling stories just as much as I enjoy writing them. I love putting on the whole act with the voices and dancing—I'll be jumping all over...I like to hear what other kids are thinking. And what's funny is...some of the things I like to put into mine, one about my guinea pigs, well one of them had died and she was looking around, like wondering where it [the other guinea pig] was and she was like 'My guinea pig, my friend. She's gone. Like not gone to the bathroom, but gone—gone.' And then like the little kids in my group have used 'gone—gone' in their stuff too. So it's neat to see how they incorporate it into their writing. And they say, 'Oh, we copied you!' I'm like, 'okay.' I think it's kind of neat. (Transcript, February, 20, 2008)

Jill was also enthusiastic about sharing her writing with at the Celebration. "I love the sharing and I get to be **very** [her emphasis] dramatic!"

Jill talked about Writers Club with her friends who participate in Writers Club. Prime times for them to talk included the time right at the end of Writers Club when they are "hanging around waiting to be picked up" or at the sixth grade's gathering place while they were eating snack and waiting for Writers Club to start. Jill's mother provided after school care for several Writers Club kids so they talked about it a little bit when they got to Jill's house. "I don't talk about it with my parents though. I don't really know why. I just don't. It would be a little bit weird to go over to them and say, 'Listen to my story.'"

Jill has shared her writing with her 24-year-old autistic brother. He has lived in a group home for a number of years so she saw him infrequently. "He's severe. You do know if he's angry because he'll go around pinching everyone." She explained that she was "too dramatic" in her reading the last time she shared with him.

I get to acting it out, although I try not to, I just automatically do, I don't know why. If I do the wrong tone of voice, he'll just come up to me and pinch me, I don't know why. (Transcript, February, 20, 2008)

Jill has not tried sharing her writing with him since then.

Jill kept all of the Writers Club booklets that she has written each year in a box in her closet.

I look at them every once in a while, especially in the summer 'cause [*sic*] I have nothing to do. I'll be laying on my bed and I'll be reading [an old one] and I'll think, whoa! What was that? I mean it is kind of strange because my story plots are kind of the same, it's just that they are more complex now. (Transcript, February, 20, 2008)

She usually had a "hard time" picking one of her stories for the yearly Writers Celebration book. To decide

...most of the time I usually just go eeny, meeny, miny, moe. I don't know. I always pick something my mom wouldn't go, like, that's kind of weird, you know. She is such a critic. That's why I don't share with her or my dad. But it's not like she even writes stuff. No one in my family even does. (Transcript, February, 20, 2008)

Overall, Writers Club was fun for Jill. She appreciated the opportunity to write without being forced to constantly edit her stories.

It's fun! Because it's a chance for kids to just write stuff. And you've got someone to hear your stories...at Writers Club it's just kind of expected to share. You can just share whatever you want and you can write whatever you want to. And there's no teacher there to tell you, 'Now that's so long, or that's too... whatever,' except for editing day, but that's okay. Every time we write something in school we have to edit it **every single time** and that just takes up so much more time than just writing it. So we get to write more at Writers Club. (Transcript, February, 20, 2008)

In contrast, for Jill [and other children], writing in school was more restrictive and far less appealing.

In school there's usually a theme that we have to do, like write to the prompt for the SOLs [Virginia's Standards of Learning assessment] or our 'journals' where we 'write whatever we want.' You can't really write whatever you want. You have to write journals and tell whatever you're doing. It's kind of more like a diary. It doesn't appeal to me. I mean I like writing in diaries, but if your teacher is going to read it, you don't really want to write everything you do. It's kind of creepy. (Transcript, February, 20, 2008)

Jill knows she will be "sad" when it is time for Writers Club next year when she is in seventh grade at a different school. "I have a couple of friends in fifth grade who will be telling me all about it...That will get on my nerves." In seventh grade she does not expect she will "get to do anything connected with writing except for journals or

newspaper articles and that isn't very exciting." She lamented the fact that she will not be able to participate in Writers Club as a seventh grader but held out hope for a future with Writers Club.

Maybe I'll be able to do what Lily did and come back as a leader when I get to high school. Lily was my leader last year. She was great. We talked about all sorts of stuff. It was cool. I'd be a cool leader too. (Transcript, February, 20, 2008)

Jill referred to herself and other children in Writers Club as "Writers Club kids." She attributed her love of writing to being a "Writers Club kid." She reiterated, "I'm a writer **because** [her emphasis] of Writers Club." She intended to keep writing as an important part of her life and hoped that she can make a living at it some day. "I kind of want to be an author because of Writers Club."

She thought that Writers Club should substitute for English at Seaside Elementary School. "It would be really fun if it were during school...why go to English when you could go to Writers Club? You'd learn just as much and you would have a better time." The last spark of the year was *Mrs. Watson Wants Your Teeth* by Alison McGhee. In this story, the second graders terrorized the rising first graders by dropping frightening hints about what Mrs. Watson would do to the first graders when they ended up in her class. The second graders completed each description of what awaited the younger ones with these ominous words, "and that's all I'll say." At the end of her interview, I asked Jill what she would say to other kids about Writers Club. She replied, "Well, unlike our spark yesterday which was all about 'and that's all I'll say,' I'd say, 'You really should give it a shot!'"

Children's Focus Group, March 5

Wednesday, March 5, 2008 was an "off" week for Writers Club. The editing session took place the last week of February and the Writers Celebration was still one week away. Five children (all girls) met with me after school for a focus group on Writers Club. We met at a cluster of desks in the front left corner of Dana's room because most of the public areas of the school were in use with one group or another. Dana was in and out of the room during our one-hour session, sometimes staying long enough to sit and work at her kidney table on the other side of the room.

Penny, a bubbly, bouncy seven year old, was the first child to arrive when children were dismissed for the day because her second grade room was next door to Dana's classroom. She danced and twirled her way in and checked out the room thoroughly before she helped herself to the snacks I had brought. Penny did not remain seated, but periodically jumped up off her chair and hopped from foot to foot with apparent excitement while she waited for her turn to speak. Even though she was the youngest child in the focus group, she did not demure to the others. Instead, she frequently volunteered her opinions and experiences.

Penny had "done it [Writers Club] for two years, last year and this year." The children in her class began to talk about Writers Club "when it is about to start." She thinks that the types of kids who will like Writers Club are "the ones who like writing and reading and listening." For Penny, "all the writing is fun" and "listening to the stories is fun too." In fact, Penny liked "everything" in Writers Club including "getting to see your friends" and the fact that "you get to talk." She suggested, "that you should try to make new friends" [at Writers Club]. Penny appreciated what the leaders did for the children of Writers Club. "I think they should have a party for themselves [when Writers Club is over] because they worked really hard to make it so we could do it."

Melanie followed a minute or two after Penny. As a third grader, her classroom was located in the pod above Dana's room so she just needed to come down the stairs and back into her old second grade classroom. Dana, her classroom teacher in 2006-2007, greeted her heartily when she arrived. Melanie smiled and nodded slightly to acknowledge Dana's booming greeting, but went straight to the cluster of desks I had put chairs around for our meeting, chose the first spot she came to and sat down.

According to Melanie, third graders started talking about Writers Club "before it begins." She had been in Writers Club every year since first grade and "joined [this year] because I enjoy writing." Melanie thought it was important that people who were considering whether to join Writers Club should know "that when you go to Writers Club, you are supposed to be writing and sharing... You do a lot of writing... and [people] should be prepared to share [their writing]." Particularly during her first year as a Writers Club kid, Melanie found it difficult to share her own writing but "it just got easier" and "isn't a problem now."

Melanie was the quietest member of the focus group. She always responded when I specifically directed a question to her, but rarely initiated a comment on her own. Not surprisingly, she did not report participating in what the other members of this focus group referred to as the “social part of Writers Club” but instead explained that “when I’m in my [Writers Club] group, I don’t talk. I just write. I just write and write.”

Sonya, an exuberant fourth grader who claimed, “I know every single person in this school and they know me too,” arrived in a cluster with Jewel and Lola, the fifth graders who rounded out the remainder of this focus group. Sonya had been part of Writers Club for four years. According to Sonya,

There’s a lot of kids who like to write in my class. We started talking about it [Writers Club] pretty early. We started around in October. And the kids keep saying, Are you going to be in Writers Club? Are you going to be in Writers Club? Are you going to be in Writers Club? (Transcript, March 5, 2008)

Not surprisingly, Sonya thrived on the social aspects of Writers Club. She “loves to talk... Its my gift! If I have people around me, I just naturally talk.” Sonya liked the socializing “at the beginning” when everyone is gathering in the library,” and found opportunities to socialize “when we talk about the spark” when the small writing groups meet. Sonya also appreciated getting to talk “when you share your story... You get to share your own ideas that you’ve never shared with anybody else before. I mean they could be crazy sparks that you’d never come up with in your life!”

Sonya’s group included a “complete mixture” of personalities. “We had a shy one, an energetic one, and a funny one.” When I observed the writing groups that met in the library, Sonya’s group was located centrally, right in front of the circulation desk station where I frequently sat. While she did write every week, I also noticed that Sonya often finished her writing for the day in ten or fifteen minutes. She would close her book and attempt to engage one or more of the other children in her group in some kind of communication by nudging them with her arm, tapping them on the shoulder, kicking them lightly under the table, or tapping her pencil on their booklets. When Sonya succeeded in getting their attention, she would smile broadly, giggle or whisper, and try to get them to continue the interaction. Remarkably, I never saw her group leader attempt to redirect her. Rather, her group leader appeared to be deeply engaged in her own writing.

Sonya thought that someone who was interested in Writers Club should know that “you have to write! And you have to be like, polite [because if you were not polite] it would be disrespectful.” She noticed that Writers Club did not feel as crowded in 2008. “This year for some reason it doesn’t feel as if there were as many kids as last year ‘cause [sic] there were a lot last year.” She also reported that the amount of time for “the writing part [of Writers Club] was shorter.” For Sonya, Writers Club “went by really fast this year.”

Unlike in Sonya’s classroom, Writers Club was not a topic of conversation in Lola’s classroom. “No one in my class [this year] does Writers Club except for me so no one ever talks about it.” She had been a Writers Club kid for four years. Lola loved the “social hour” at the very beginning each week’s meeting. “Before we start the story, we all talk.” Lola is the first one to admit, “I just like to talk... I talk a lot! I talk and talk because it is so much fun! ”

Lola explained that the fifth graders have an unofficial gathering place. “We always go to the corner. Me and Jewel and a couple of others go to the left corner” where “it [the story pit] kind of has a wing thing.” Although the children acknowledged that there were no formal rules about who was supposed to sit where in Writers Club, Lola stated that the sixth graders “are on the other side” and the “little kids are in the first row.”

Lola had the somewhat unusual experience of having her small group leader also be her classroom teacher. “I didn’t like that very much because it was still like, ‘Hi!...Back to school!’” Lola did not know any of the children in her group, “but I’ve seen them around.” In 2007, Lily, the volunteer from high school, was her leader. “I liked my group last year because I was with my brother’s girlfriend... I got to tell him about what she wrote and stuff.”

Lola professed, “I don’t like to read.” But she “loves” writing. Lola commented on the shortened time for writing. “I think they [the leaders] should have a longer time [for us] to write. Because by the time they did the spark and they talked, then there was only like twenty minutes to write.” Other than that, she thought Writers Club was “awesomely awesome” just the way it was.

New to Seaside Elementary School in 2008, as a first year Writers Club kid, Jewel did not have as much history with Writers Club as did the other children in this focus group. She was unsure of what the Writers Celebration entailed but she guessed, “It was some kind of a party.” This may have added to her apparent reluctance to join in the conversations unless I specifically directed questions to her, especially during the first half of the focus group interview. When she did have something to add, she shared confidently and with poise.

Jewel decided to join Writers Club because “I like writing.” Jewel usually arrived in the library amidst a group of fifth grade girls and sat with them until it was time to separate into writing groups. A side benefit of Writers Club for Jewel was that it helped her to feel more like a part of the school. “You meet other people in the school so it kind of helps make the school smaller and you are more connected.” She “definitely” planned to be part of Writers Club again.

All of the children in the group animatedly talked about the day the interest survey came out. Penny was excited about her second year as a Writers Club kid.

I know my family really likes it [Writers Club] because they sign me up. I made sure I got my form back in right away! My mom always asks me if I want to do Writers Club and I always say, ‘Sign me up! Sign me up! Sign, sign, sign!’... I **beg** her to sign me up for Writers Club. (Transcript, March 5, 2008)

Melanie, Lola, and Sonia also reported that their mom’s “ask” them if they “want to join Writers Club” before completing the interest survey. Sonia echoed Penny, “I’m like ‘yes, yes, yes!’” She also mused, “If they did just sign you up it would kind of be unfair.”

Among the questions on the survey was one that worried some Writers Club veterans, including Sonia and Lola. They were particularly apprehensive about the question that asked, ‘How many years have you been in Writers Club?’ Sonia was concerned because “this year is my fourth year I’ve done it and I thought maybe they’d decide to give other people a chance.” She was aware that some children “were turned away” from Writers Club in 2007.

“Yes,” Lola chimed in, “because it asks how many years have you done it? So it’s right there [on the form] and you worry.”

For Sonia, “it was a challenge to decide how to answer because you **really** want to be in it again.”

Lola picked up the thread of concern, “Because I was thinking, ‘How do I get in? What should I write?’”

Penny suggested they could have said they had been in Writers Club “zero years” as a way to boost their chances of getting in.

“But then they’d say, ‘Wait a minute! You’re in all the books!’” [meaning the Celebration Books of student work that were published every year],” said Lola. Ultimately, both girls completed the application honestly and were very “relieved” when they were accepted.

All of the children in this group liked listening to the spark at the beginning of each Writers Club session and then talking about them in their writing groups. Sonia recognized that “Writers Club gives us the spark to get us started.” She also liked discussing the spark in her writing group. The focus group agreed the spark should “definitely” stay.

Penny liked sharing her “ideas [about the spark] out loud” in her writing group although she did not think she needed help with her own writing. She usually had a topic in mind when she got to her group. “I already know titles when I go [to my group] because I think about it during the story.”

Melanie did not count on the spark to give her ideas but admitted that it “helps [her out] sometimes.” Although she “liked to listen” to the spark, she viewed it almost as if it was peripheral to the writing “because you don’t have to do the spark. It’s just there, in case you want to use it.”

Sonia agreed with her. “You can just enjoy the spark and not write about it if you don’t want to.”

When Jewel came across a spark that she “did not like,” she took the opportunity to go back in her booklet to add on to earlier stories or “to correct stuff.”

In their discussion about the sparks during the focus group, the children specifically mentioned five of their favorite sparks by name. These were: *Zen Shorts* by Jon Muth, *What a Bad Dream* by Mercer Mayer, *Grownups Get to do All of the Driving*

by William Steig, and the poems, “Put a Poem in Your Pocket,” and “What’s the Funniest Thing?,” by Beatrice Schenk de Regniers.

As much as they liked the sparks, this group of children did not like having music played softly in the background while they were writing. Lola stated flatly, “I don’t like the music... [it] distracts me.” Except for Melanie, who remained quiet, the rest rushed in to agree.

Sonia commented that the distraction caused by the music was “like [distractions caused by] snowflakes and stars... I try to pay attention to it [the music], but then I’m like... oh! I need to get back to my writing.” One of the things she liked about the editing session was that Mr. Massey did not play music that day. “I tend to like it [Writers Club] that day. You can actually think better that way.”

Penny suggested that rather than use music to signify that it is time to write, “You could just say, ‘Okay, time to start, and then ‘Okay, time to stop.’”

Sharing both their ideas and their writing with their groups was something all of the children looked forward to each week. Sonia thought Writers Club needed more “sharing, definitely more sharing. All people should share” their writing and everyone should participate during the “brainstorming” when the groups talked about the spark.

Lola admitted that she did not share as much this year as she had in previous years. “For some reason I read them [the stories she write in Writers Club in 2007] all [aloud] and this year I only read three of them.” She was reluctant to read all of her stories during the sharing time this year because she did not always like what she wrote. “I just wrote bad stories.” This elicited many giggles from the girls, including Lola. Laughingly she continued, “I only liked three of my stories... I read just a sentence of the other ones.”

Sonia was selective about what she shared with her group too. She did not share much of the ones she did not like. “Yeah,” she commiserated with Lola, “I would only read like two paragraphs of some of the ones I did this year.”

In Penny’s group, “Everybody loved to read their parts... Sometimes I’m shy, but then Whitney would say something nice [about what I wrote]. She wasn’t just nice to me. She would congratulate everybody. And our leader would too.” That made “everybody feel good” about what they did in Writers Club. Penny loved listening when her group

members “read out loud during the sharing” almost as much as she liked reading her writing aloud.

Children who did not participate in the small group discussions and sharing times were an irritant to most of the girls in the focus group. Everyone except Melanie expressed some degree of resentment towards children they thought should not be part of Writers Club. I asked the girls what it was that led them to believe that certain children should not be there.

Lola said, “They don’t care.”

Sonia modified that to include “they wouldn’t care or share!... Normally you want to hear what other people thought.”

The three older girls were particularly irritated by a fifth grader they did not think belonged in Writers Club. Jewel complained that it made her “mad” that this boy was a Writers Club kid. Even before they said his name, I had a strong suspicion [from my observations of all of the Writers Club sessions] that I knew who they meant. I was not surprised that I was right.

Lola and Sonia wholeheartedly agreed with Jewel. “I mean you would have never suspected he would have joined,” protested Lola. “I don’t know [if it is good that he did]. I don’t think he really enjoys it. He’s just really goofing off.”

All five children liked it when their leaders shared their writing with them at the end of the sessions. Most of them indicated that their leaders usually shared something from what they wrote each week. Sonia’s leader always “wrote a lot!” She read about one page of it aloud and then told the group about the rest of the story.

In Lola’s group, her leader only shared her writing once. Lola’s group had six children who “loved” to write. Lola explained that the reason her leader did not share each week was probably “because usually we [the children] write a lot and we get to share ours and she doesn’t usually have time.”

Sonia shared an idea that brought an enthusiastic response from the others. “I think the teachers should share at the Celebration itself!”

Lola piggybacked on Sonia’s idea. “Like at the big Celebration! They [the teachers] should share so that everyone could hear it while we are eating or something!” According to Lola, the Celebration is “really fun because you get to share and you get to

hear other people's stories." She knew "the day I wrote it" that her poem about a dog was the one she would read at the Celebration. She thought it was her best writing this year. Sonia decided on her piece to share "three weeks before" the editing day. She looked forward to sharing her poem with a "new" audience. Another "good thing is that at the Celebration you get to hear everybody's stories, even the people's [stories] who didn't want to share before."

Jewel waited until the last week to decide what to share. She ended up sharing the first one she wrote, *Only Grown-ups Get to be President*. She said it was the "only one of mine [that] was good. The rest were horrible."

Dana was in the room while the girls were talking about the sharing at the Celebration. Penny explained that you "don't share their stories to the whole Writers Club or that would take too long." Melanie remembered that on the Celebration day, the Writers Club kids divided into four groups and went to different locations to share.

"It's like A—F go to one place, G—M go someplace else," clarified Lola. This meant that the writing groups were not together for the Celebration.

"But I'm kind of disappointed [about that]," lamented Sonia, "because I kind of want to hear the people in my group."

Dana broke in and explained the reason for dividing everyone up by alphabet was so that families would stay together. She told the girls that she would take their concerns "under consideration."

The children looked forward to getting their Celebration Book on the day of the Celebration. "It's a book with everyone's writing. They [the parents] make this book and they type all the stories out... the one that you picked," offered Lola. Sonia was a little confused about which book they read from at the Celebration. She thought she read out of her own booklet she wrote in each week. Lola straightened her out. "No, you don't... You read out of the book they made that had everyone's story in it." Melanie and Penny agreed that Lola was right.

Sonia explained that everyone actually ended up with two books from Writers Club each year, "the one you originally wrote in and then the one with everybody's stories." She kept all of them in the "tubs" her mom has for her to save all of her "important stuff." Periodically Sonia will "reread the stories of everyone [in the

Celebration Books], but I don't think I actually reread the one[s] I wrote in... Like during spring break or something, I'll read them all." She wished that the leaders included their writing in the Celebration Book and thought it was "kind of sad" that they do not. The other children agreed with her.

Melanie kept both books from each year, but she kept them in different places. "I usually save the one that I originally wrote in somewhere special. The other one I keep in my bookshelf." She rereads those "sometimes."

Penny treasured hers as well. "I'll open mine and just look at it all again."

Although "it would take me hours" to find the booklets she wrote in, Lola insisted she could find them. The Celebration Books were easier for her to locate because she kept them out on a bookshelf in her room.

What surprised this group the most about Writers Club was that they were having a good time even though they characterized writing as "actually working." Lola looked perplexed even as she posed this conundrum. "I'm surprised that it was so fun! Because you are really working, and working isn't fun."

Sonia looked equally puzzled. "It's kind of weird, but yes [it is fun to work at Writers Club]."

Jewel offered this explanation, "I think it's fun because they [the leaders] don't make you write a million paragraphs and make it perfect like. They don't like, **make** you do something. And you don't have to finish it that week." This unleashed a rant about the differences between writing in school and writing in Writers Club.

"In school, you have to finish it then... [and] they tell you what to write about. At Writers Club you can basically write about whatever you want," contributed Lola.

For Melanie, it was all about choice. Although the spark was there as a direction for writing in Writers Club, ultimately choice of topic resided with the writer. "[In school] they give you one subject and you generally have to do that subject and maybe two subjects every once in a while but usually it's just one."

Sonia relayed that school writing had "everything" to do with "deadlines" and Writers Club did not.

The good thing about writing in Writers Club is that you don't have to finish it. That you don't have to proofread it. You don't have to get the teacher to correct it.

You don't have to share it if you don't want. You don't **have** to get it done.
(Transcript, March 5, 2008)

Penny emphatically put in her two cents worth. "At work [school] you have to get [your writing] done right at that time! But at Writers Club you can say, 'Oh, I don't know what I'm going to write...'"

All five girls were insistent that having their leaders write with them was an "extremely important" aspect of Writers Club. Lola shared,

If they [the leaders] were just sitting there, I wouldn't feel like writing... If they were just staring at us, I'd be like, what is the point of writing? You're not writing. It would feel like there's no point. It would be just like school with them watching you. (Transcript, March 5, 2008)

Sonia was very dramatic, "Whatever you do, **don't** take their books [that the leaders write in] away!"

Penny mused that if her leader was not writing she would be tempted to think, "Okay... I don't feel like writing either." Seeing her leader writing, on the other hand, inspired her to keep writing. "Teachers should **love** writing," insisted Penny. However, they did not need to write non-stop. "When the teachers stop writing for a minute you can ask them a question. I whisper mine... because it is supposed to be a quiet time."

When I reminded the girls that the only Writers Club session left was the Celebration, I was immediately bombarded with choruses of "Don't remind me!" and "NO! Don't let it happen!" All of them looked forward to joining Writers Club again next year and planned on encouraging their friends to join. Penny did not hesitate to describe what she would say to others considering joining Writers Club.

Well, if they were littler kids than me, I would stretch down to their size and I would say, 'Hey, are you thinking about doing Writers Club?' and if they said yes, I would tell them all about it and tell them that teachers will read you stories and maybe even you'll have music.' (Transcript, March 5, 2008)

Penny concisely expressed the feelings of the group. "I would let them know that Writers Club is a fantastic place to learn. It is popular. And you will be able to write more stories than you usually write."

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I examine the data across the informant's stories. As I stated in Chapter III, I followed Wolcott's (1994) questions for interpretation in data analysis—"What is to be made of it all?" and "How does it all mean?" as my framework for this chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to draw conclusions from the data and state implications from the findings. As is often the case in ethnography, this research generated enormous quantities of data that I collected and analyzed. Although many areas of discussion could be pursued as a result of this research, for the purposes of this dissertation, I am going to limit the interpretation of the data to the discussion of the research questions delineated in Chapter I.

My research questions divide themselves into two major categories: those related to the broader culture of Writers Club, and those related to the read aloud events embedded within Writers Club. The issue of time was a concern throughout the study. I address each of these in separate sections. I conclude the chapter with implications stemming from this research.

The Culture of Writers Club

Writers Club is a subculture of the larger culture of Seaside Elementary School. It is not a stagnant community (although many club members choose to participate for multiple years), but one that changes each year amongst both the leaders and the children. In 2008, approximately one fourth of the leaders and one third of the Writers Club kids were new to Writers Club. As new members join, the pool of people at Seaside Elementary School with firsthand knowledge of Writers Club grows. One aspect of my research focused on the culture of Writers Club and the meanings its members made of their experiences.

Writers Club members chose to participate in Writers Club for multilayered reasons. While there was some overlap between the children's and the leaders' reasons

for joining Writers Club and the way they viewed it, each group also offered some reasons that were unique to themselves.

The leaders viewed Writers Club through many lenses and joined for multiple reasons. Most of the teacher leaders viewed Writers Club as a way to teach writing the way it “ought” to be done or “the way we used to do it when we had time to breathe.” For them, Writers Club brought a touch of nostalgia or a glimpse into a more idealized way of working with children as they develop as writers. Leaders whose own children participated in Writers Club in earlier years saw being a leader as a way to “pay forward” and demonstrate their appreciation.

It is doubtful that all of the leaders thought of themselves as *club members*, especially the classroom teachers. The classroom teachers appeared to give only the “one hour of their time each week” to Writers Club that Dana requested when she recruited them. Typically, they arrived late and left as soon as they dismissed the children each week. Rarely did they linger and talk with colleagues, children, or parents. Three did not attend the Celebration.

About half of the leaders mentioned that they enjoyed Writers Club because it gave them a dedicated time to write. They liked writing, but rarely made time for it in their hectic schedules. Only four viewed themselves as writers. It is interesting to note that the only leaders to include their work in the Celebration Book and read aloud at the Celebration were Instructional Assistants.

Leaders also “appreciated” the opportunity Writers Club gave them for ongoing interaction with children without the onus of grades or testing and the chance to work with children other than the ones in their usual daily spheres. Leaders additionally saw Writers Club as an obligation, a refuge, a tradition, and often, as a burden.

Dana took on the mantle of Writers Club organizer because she wanted it to continue. She joined Writers Club as a leader in 2001 because it was “good for kids.” She experienced first hand “how much the kids and families got out of it [Writers Club].” By the time the previous Writers Club organizer retired in 2005, Dana strongly believed that “Writers Club was an important part [of our school]. I couldn’t just let it disappear, and I didn’t see anyone else stepping up to the plate.”

Organizing Writers Club was often an overwhelming enterprise for Dana. Even though she had three previous years of experience as the organizer, and had many of the needed documents already on file, in 2008 Writers Club took over 50 hours of Dana's time to accomplish the administrative tasks, 13 hours for the actual sessions, and 15 hours to construct the Celebration Book. Dana said that she "didn't mind" running Writers Club once it started, but readily admitted that it took "a toll" getting it to that point.

Dana shouldered the bulk of responsibility for Writers Club herself because she did not want to ask anyone else to do more and because she wanted it to be done "right." An example of this is the care Dana took with any correspondence with parents concerning Writers Club. Dana was not satisfied to send out simply informative fliers to parents; in addition she took time to make them both professional and inviting. With the exception of Tim, the librarian, who "stepped in" on occasion when he sensed Dana needed help, the other leaders assumed that Dana had everything "under control" and would "ask" for help if she needed it.

Like the leaders, children viewed Writers Club through varied lenses and joined it for an array of reasons. Among their reasons were the following: either they enjoyed writing or while they did not enjoy it yet, they wanted to give it a try; they wanted to improve as writers; they liked having an audience for their writing; they liked being in the spotlight; they wanted the challenge Writers Club offered them; their friends or siblings joined; they liked the social opportunities it presented; it made them feel more "connected" to the school community. While it is possible that some children joined because their parents made them, none of the children I interviewed or spoke with informally indicated that was their case. Instead, many of them indicated that they made sure their parents signed the requisite permission forms. The very low absentee rate from the meetings seems to substantiate this—at most, two or three children were missing from each session and all but two were there for the Celebration.

Some of the children joined Writers Club because of the performance factor embedded in the weekly sharing and the Celebration. For the exuberant children, Writers Club offered a weekly stage with a known audience where they were able to be "very dramatic" as they shared their writing. For the quieter children, Writers Club offered a predictable format in which to practice and develop confidence. Leaders confirmed that

as time went on sharing each week took longer because more of the initially “shy” children voluntarily shared their writing. The “two sentence rule” leaders implemented three weeks into the sessions had the desired effect. By the last session, leaders unilaterally reported that “just about all” of their children shared their entire pieces each week, even those who were reluctant to share initially. Sharing their writing at the Celebration with an audience that extended beyond its members, while it was intimidating, was also a motivating factor for many children joining Writers Club.

Writers Club offered a social forum that children looked forward to. Visiting with friends while they were eating snack and waiting for the spark appeared to be a joyous time with an unspoken hierarchy with specific gathering zones for the different grades. All of the children I interviewed indicated that they really enjoyed talking to the other children in their small groups; these groupings rapidly became cohesive, supportive networks that augmented their circles of “known” faces in the school-at-large with ties that sometimes extended across years. Michael, one of the third graders said of a fifth grade boy, “Kwan was in my group [Writers Club group] last year and I hoped he’d be in my group again, but he wasn’t. I still get to say hi to him in the halls. It’s neat knowing the bigger kids.”

Writing in Writers Club was perceived by the children as being very different from writing in school. Children appreciated the greater latitude for choice of style and method. They appeared to take more ownership of the writing they did in Writers Club and liked the opportunity to write without “so many rules.” Writers Club writing released children from what they viewed as burdens: revisiting their writing to ensure it was “spelled right,” writing to be graded, writing to be finished. As Melanie, a third grader, concisely stated, “Writing in Writers Club is more fun because writing in school is for the teacher and writing in Writers Club is for me!”

Children appeared to treasure the writing they did in Writers Club. Most indicated that they saved the booklets they wrote in weekly, often in “school memory boxes” provided by their parents and brought them out to reread periodically. The Celebration Books were also highly prized. Most of the children I spoke with knew exactly where they kept them and indicated that they would pull them out when they “wanted something fun to read.”

The children strongly connected Writers Club and Seaside Elementary School. For Jo, in Louisa May Alcott's opening line from *Little Women*, "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents." To paraphrase Jo, for these Writers Club kids, "Seaside Elementary School wouldn't be Seaside Elementary School without any Writers Club." At the parent meeting on the first day of Writers Club a first grade girl with several older siblings who were Writers Club kids was not happy when Dana informed her that she would need to wait an additional year to become a Writers Club kid herself. "But I've waited all of my life already!"

All of the sixth graders I spoke with both in individual or focus group interviews lamented the fact that they would not be able to participate in Writers Club the following year. They discussed the possibility of starting a Writers Club at their middle school and took solace in the possibility that like Lily, they might be able to return as leaders in two years when they entered high school. At least for the 20% of the children at Seaside Elementary School who chose to participate in Writers Club, Writers Club was an important, integral part of the school culture.

Read Aloud Events

Writers Club included three distinct read aloud events. These were: the spark that began most meetings and served as a possible springboard to writers, the sharing of Writers work at the end of Writers Club sessions, and the more formal sharing that took place at the final Writers Club meeting of the year at the Celebration.

The Spark

The spark was the piece of literature shared by one of the Writers Club leaders at the beginning of the first seven Writers Club meetings in 2008. In 2008 the sparks were *Grownups Get to do All the Driving* by William Steig, *What a Bad Dream* by Mercer Mayer, *Just Awful* by Alma Whitney, *Dory Story* by Jerry Palotta, *Zen Shorts* by Jon Muth, poems by Jack Prelutsky and Beatrice Schenk de Regniers, and *Mrs. Watson Wants Your Teeth* by Alison McGhee.

Dana chose not to have a sign-up sheet for sparkers in 2008. This undoubtedly added to the “last minute” feeling that appeared to accompany the spark most weeks. Not having a sign-up sheet for sparkers may have had an unintended effect of discouraging potential sparkers from volunteering. Both Lynette and Maureen commented that they thought that the lack of a sign-up sheet meant that Dana had “plenty” of sparkers. Leaders in the adult focus group reinforced these impressions. With the exception of Maura, all of the adult leaders I spoke with indicated they would have been willing to give the spark if Dana had asked them.

Dana always chose to give the first spark herself, however, she was so overwhelmed by the administrative details in getting Writers Club up and running that she did not have the time to select a book that “inspired” her, although she did have one she could use “if worse came to worse.”

Other sparkers also commented that they made their choices rather quickly. This is likely because they became sparkers on short notice. With the exception of Megan who was the only sparker who volunteered to share and secured her own replacement for the second Writers Club meeting, Dana recruited each of the other sparkers on the day they needed to give the spark. One of the reasons for this last minute approach was the difficulty Megan had finding the copy of her elusive poem. Megan was slated to give the spark at the second Writers Club meeting. Because it took over a month to locate the poem, even though she always “hoped to be the next sparker,” Megan did not get her chance until the sixth Writers Club meeting. Thus, it was not necessarily a tendency to procrastination on Dana’s part, but rather the possibility that Megan might be able to be the sparker, that led to late identification of the sparkers and the spark.

Dana ended up selecting four of the seven sparks, the two that she gave and the two that she “just handed” to two of her recruits (*Just Awful* to Lucy and *Dory Story* to Stacy). One criteria Dana had for the spark was that it had to be “short” due to the shortened time for Writers Club in 2008.

The sparker is in the spotlight, sharing the selection and writing ideas with more than 70 listeners. Lynette, Lily, and Maura found the idea of being the sparker “scary” and questioned whether they would be able to do as good of a job as the sparkers they listened to each week. As it happened, Tim was the only leader other than her two grade

level colleagues that Dana asked to be sparkers. Like Dana, when Megan first needed to delay her turn as sparker, she also turned to her grade level colleague Brenda to ask if she would do it as a favor. It appears that both Dana and Megan felt more comfortable asking those teachers who worked most closely with them when they needed assistance. Dana chose to do the last spark of the year herself rather than asking one of the remaining leaders.

While some of the sparks were selected because the sparker quickly thought, “okay, this will work,” it is clear that other sparks were carefully considered. Megan’s elaborate display and unwavering allegiance to “The Funniest Thing” indicate a substantial investment in her time and energy. As the librarian, Tim shared *Zen Shorts*, a title he had “waiting on the shelf” when Dana asked him to be the sparker because he had already determined that it could be effectively used with children. Listening to these sparkers both as they read aloud to the children and shared their experiences with me gave testament to their passion for their choice of sparks and clearly demonstrated their commitment to the literature. Although Maureen was not a sparker in 2008, she spoke passionately about her carefully choreographed sharing of Chris Van Allsburg’s work in prior years and the resulting responses from the children.

All of the sparkers in 2008 were enthusiastic and thorough presenters, even if they did not have much lead-time. They shared information about the author(s) and interacted with the children as they read aloud. All six sparkers (Dana went twice) were veteran teachers with at least 15 years of experience who were accustomed to reading aloud with their children almost daily. They were adept at engaging and sustaining the attention of the Writers Club members. They brought these skills to Writers Club and worked to “sell” each spark to their audience.

All of the leaders appeared to consider the sparks to be important as the orienting read aloud event intended to inspire club members’ writing. Most leaders indicated that they thought they “ought” to encourage the children in their groups to write with the spark in mind, but they did not insist on it. All of the leaders began their small writing group time with a discussion about the spark.

The children recognized that the spark was there to “help” them think of something to write, but their commitment to it varied from “that is what you write about”

to “it’s there if you can’t think of something to write on your own.” A few children arrived at Writers Club each week already “knowing” what they were going to write. Michael, a third grader, reported “enjoy[ing] listening to the spark,” even when he “already knew” what he was going to write. At least one child “made the spark fit” their own idea each week. In Lily’s group, a fifth grade boy always slanted the spark so that “his goofy frog, Frogo, could be the star.”

Both children and leaders indicated that they did write about the spark “most of the time.” Examining the Celebration Book that contained writers’ self-selected favorite pieces seems to support this. Of the 70 child entries, 66 (or 94%) were easily connected to specific sparks. Both of the leader entries tied to specific sparks. All of the sparks shared in 2008 had at least three stories or poems they inspired included in the Celebration Book. See the following table for details. (See table 5.1).

Table 5. 1 Children’s Choice Writing for the Celebration Book

Title of Spark	# of stories or poems it inspired
<i>Grown-ups Get to do All the Driving</i>	11
<i>What a Bad Dream</i>	12
<i>Just Awful</i>	5
<i>Dory Story</i>	3 child, 1 leader
<i>Zen Shorts</i>	5
<i>What’s the Funniest Thing?</i>	11 child, 1 leader
<i>Mrs. Watson Wants Your Teeth</i>	9

Many leaders said that they appreciated the chance to see their colleagues “in action” as they took their turn as sparker. Viewing Writers Club sparkers deliver the spark and interact with the children allowed teachers a glimpse of their colleagues’ skills and styles. I noted in many of my observations that even when leaders did arrive late, they settled into the role of being an active listener and responded to the sparkers’ rendition in ways that mirrored the children’s responses. Often they made eye contact with the other leaders when the sparker was particularly expressive or humorous. Words

Writers Club leaders used to describe the sparkers' sharings were "theatrical," "funny," and "animated."

Several of the older children complained that many of the sparks were "too babyish" and it is true that four of the seven sparks did feature protagonists that appeared to be no more than six or seven years old. This may be because with the exception of Tim, the librarian, all of the sparkers in 2008 taught either kindergarten or second grade. One fourth grade girl who complained that the sparks "really didn't help" her with ideas for writing suggested, "I think maybe they should have two stories, like a picture book for the littler kids and a different book that might be more meaningful for the bigger kids."

Both children and leaders brought up specific sparks and the leaders who shared them during individual and focus group interviews. Multiple informants mentioned all seven sparks. Several even spoke about sparks they remembered from prior years of Writers Club. It is clear that the sparks are an integral part of Writers Club. Enjoyed for their entertainment value and often memorialized in both adult and children's writing, the sparks were very important read aloud events in Writers Club.

Sharing at Writers Club Sessions

In the sharing of their own writing at the end of each of the first seven Writers Club sessions, both the leaders and the children had the opportunity to read their work aloud. While I was not surprised that Writers Club members expressed almost universal enjoyment of the spark, I was taken aback when I realized that many Writers Club kids and some of the leaders regarded reading their own quickly written stories and listening to the stories of their group members with equal importance and pleasure. As I observed the sessions and began to speak with Writers Club members, I realized that oral sharing of their writing at the end of each session was a pivotal read aloud event that leaders and children eagerly anticipated each week. When the music stopped, signaling the end of the writing time, it was almost as if there was a collective intake of breath before the tumult of voices began. "Me first, me first!" "My story is **so** funny!" "Did you write about race cars again?" "I'm not done yet!" "Will you read yours this time Mrs. Rice?"

During the writing time each week, with sporadic exceptions, each writer was in their own little sphere, composing on their own. Although Writers Club members sat with their writing groups, there was usually a palpable distance amongst them. They were together, yet separate. The sense of individuals working changed dramatically once sharing began. When the signal for the end of writing occurred, everyone turned towards the center of the table and began to talk to each other about their writing. As if each group was its own hive, conversational buzzes arose and remained centered in clusters throughout the sharing session.

Often the sharing was quite animated, particularly when the children were reading aloud. Children like Jill, Sonia, Lola, and Luke were very dramatic as they read, incorporating wide arm gestures and voice changes. Sonia usually finished writing quickly and found it “difficult to wait for my turn to read!” Laughter often erupted from one group or another as club members read their pieces and occasionally there was spontaneous applause. These interruptions did not appear to disturb the other groups. Groups almost always appeared to maintain focus as a unit until the last person had finished reading.

Leaders always took time for the children to share but they took different tacks when it came to sharing their own work. Some chose not to share their own piece if they were running out of time. I observed a noteworthy difference in the manner sparkers read aloud their own writing in their small groups and the way they read the sparks. With the occasional exceptions of Wanda and Lucy, I never heard any of the leaders share their own writing with the zeal and passion that seemed to define sharing the sparks. Most of the time, leaders appeared to read aloud their stories or poems with expression, but quietly. I did not ask the sparkers about this anomaly, but I expect their toned down renditions are due to situational differences. Sparkers are sharing published works; selected because the sparks were pieces they thought would inspire writing. Reading the spark aloud was a performance piece, done for an audience. Writing done in Writers Club was rarely a completed piece.

Not all of the children “loved” reading their writing aloud initially as is evidenced by leaders’ concerned comments to Dana about difficulties they were having getting everyone to share. That brought about the infamous “two sentence rule” requiring

everyone to select at least two sentences to read aloud to their group. Leaders unilaterally reported improved participation. Stacy commented, “Once you broke the ice [by having them read at least two sentences] most of the children read all of theirs the next time.” However they felt about reading aloud to their group at the beginning of the Writers Club sessions, all of the children eventually shared their writing on a regular basis.

I observed one group where the child was still too uncomfortable to read her story aloud herself, but allowed the leader to share it with the group. Portia [the fourth grade child] listened with rapt expression and rigid posture, darted quick glances at the other children in the group as Tara, the group leader, read her story. Portia appeared to relax her shoulders when she saw that the other children were smiling or laughing at her story and was able to answer their questions at the end. “That was a good story!” said one of the boys in her group. “You should share next week too!” Portia beamed and, in fact, did share her own story the following week. The power of having her words read aloud by her leader appeared to have validated Portia enough as a writer, that it gave her the confidence to do her own sharing.

Sixteen of the 20 children who participated in individual or focus group interviews expressed annoyance with club members who did not want to share. Some of their comments were: “It [not sharing] messes it up for the others;” “sharing is important too and you just have to get comfortable with that;” and we “didn’t like the people [in our group] if [we] had ones who goofed off or wouldn’t share.” Even though the children complained about those who did not share, they recognized legitimate reasons for not sharing on occasion such as “not liking” what they wrote, or “not being finished” with a story.

Sharing at the Celebration

Reading aloud the stories within the small writing groups was an intimate setting, especially when compared with the Celebration that occurred on the last day of Writers Club when families and friends were invited to listen to children read the stories they published in the Celebration Book. Colin, a sixth grader, had this to say, “The Celebration can be a little bit stressful, but [on a positive note] you get to share your writing.”

The Celebration was a well attended event. In addition to the 70 Writers Club children (two children were unable to attend), 10 leaders, and Dana, there were 75 adults and 35 children in the four audience areas. In their small writing groups, club members were accustomed to reading their writing to no more than five other people. At the Celebration, up to 30 guests were in the audience in each of the four venues in addition to the 18 to 22 other Writers Club members. It is not surprising that many children felt slightly intimidated. I overheard children asking each other, “Are you scared?” and “Are you nervous?” as they went to their respective Celebration venues.

All but one of the Writers Club children [a fifth grade girl in the library crouched in the book stacks by her mother while other children were reading their pieces aloud and repeatedly resisted efforts to either read hers or have it read for her] were ultimately up to the challenge of reading their poems and stories in front of a large audience. Many admitted however, to both an excited feeling and apprehension leading up to this culminating event.

While many of the children may have felt some degree of intimidation because of the format, it was also clear that they [and their guests] were very proud of their ability to “rise to the occasion.” The readers loved when their audience “laughed at the right places” and “clapped at the end.” Most wore a delighted, “I did it!” look as they returned to their seats. One parent spoke to her child after he finished reading. “I think you looked like you were real nervous.”

“Yeah,” he replied. “I was shaking while I was up there.” Reading their pieces aloud to a large group was a substantial challenge met; a builder of self-efficacy.

As Sonia and Lola expressed in their focus group interview, many of the children mentioned that they “wished” more leaders would share at the Celebration and include their stories in the Celebration book. Almost unilaterally, the children appeared to identify their leaders as club members as well as leaders. “I mean it’s only fair,” bemoaned one sixth grader. “Everybody else [club members] puts one in.”

The Celebration provided an opportunity for a public performance of the fruits of Writers Club. Because it was held at 3:30 in the afternoon, most of the parents had to take time off from work to attend. That 75 adult guests [more than one per writer reading their work aloud at the event] made the time to support their children validates the importance

of Writers Club in Seaside Elementary School's community. There is power in reading aloud. Whether you are the reader, simultaneously reading and speaking, the listener, the writer, or any combination of these literacy cornerstones, reading aloud heightens the moment and creates a shared experience.

Time and Writers Club

Although there have been slight variances in the number of meetings for Writers Club over the years due to both scheduling and weather incidents, the basic timeframe of January through March for the meetings has remained the same. That cannot be said for the length of time of the individual meetings. At its inception, Writers Club sessions were 90 minutes long with at least 40 minutes reserved for writing. As school hours changed and different organizers made structural decisions about Writers Club, the overall length of the sessions dropped to 60 minutes with 30 minutes (according to the schedule distributed to leaders) reserved for writing. Writers Club sessions were tightly orchestrated to fit within a one hour framework. Dana stressed the need for "short" sparks in 2008 to help offset the compressed schedule, but admitted that most of the time came off of the slot set aside for writing.

None of the seven writing Writers Club sessions in 2008 had even the 30 scheduled minutes for writing. During one session writers had 25 minutes for writing, but most of the sessions averaged 22 minutes for writing. The shortened writing time did not bother the participants. Both the leaders and most Writers Club kids reported that the amount of time they had for writing each week was "just right."

For the most part, the children "loved" the time they spent in Writers Club. They were "sorry" and "sad" when Writers Club came to an end. As several leaders pointed out, most of the children would participate in Writers Club "all year" if that was a possibility.

For many of the leaders, the time Writers Club required was an apparent hardship for them as was indicated by the frequent late arrivals and quicksilver departures at the end of the sessions. It was "difficult" to recruit volunteers to be leaders and substitutes. Leaders also had noteworthy absentee rates from the Writers Club sessions. While

absenteeism each week was less than 4% for the children, it ranged from 15% to 38% for the leaders. Through leaders self-reports to Dana, the reasons for needing a substitute were primarily due to time conflicts.

For the Writers Club organizer, Writers Club took an “overwhelming” amount of time. Particularly because she was cognizant of the time issues teachers faced, Dana compounded the time demands Writers Club placed on her because of her reluctance to delegate or seek help. From the onset of Writers Club preparations for 2008, Dana intended for it to be her last year in that role. She made sure the principal was aware of her intentions. Dana was “worn out” and hoped that “someone else would step up to the plate” because she thought Writers Club was important to the children and to the school. The time Dana devoted to Writers Club impacted the amount of time she was able to give to her classroom and her family. It was entirely time “on top of” everything else she had to do.

Given the time challenges leaders and the organizer faced as a result of their participation in Writers Club, the big question about time and Writers Club— Was Writers Club worth the time put forth to make it happen?—is tantamount to its future. Individuals answer that question by stepping forward and giving even more than teaching itself demands. Will Writers Club continue at Seaside Elementary School? I think it best to hear from the people who plan, despite all the sacrifice, challenge, and expectations, to keep coming back for the good of the children...

Ann, a veteran fourth grade teacher and Writers Club leader who was one of the leaders that usually arrived just as the spark was finishing and was “too overwhelmed” to participate in a focus group or interview, was in charge of sharing that took place in the theater. The theater had a series of wide tiered steps that served as seating platforms. The audience sat in the upper tiers. The Writers Club kids sat on the first two tiers. After all of the children had finished reading their work aloud, Ann spoke to the audience.

I think that everyone would agree that all of the kids did an amazing job today and during all of the days of Writers Club. Every week we [the leaders] got to see how hard they were working and how much fun it was for them at the same time. Lots of good learning took place and the leaders are all very proud of them. There are lots of good interactions among the different age groups which doesn't get to happen very often in school, so a lot of new friends were made. Being able to

share their writing orally with an audience is a celebration in itself. Now it is time for us to go into the cafeteria to enjoy the snacks that parents have sent in. We need to be respectful, because there is a group sharing in the cafeteria. If they are not done yet, we will wait at the door before we go in. (Observation, March, 12, 2008)

As they exited the theater, different adults stopped to talk briefly with their child's group leader. A father came down and knelt beside his fourth grade son. "Jacob, that [listening to your story] was really cool. May I see your book?" Jacob stood up and handed his Celebration Book to his father who remained kneeling beside him so that they were at the same eye level. His father asked, "Where is your story?"

"It's by alphabetical order," Jacob replied and pointed to show the authors names at the end of each piece.

"Oh, I see it!" said his father as he came across it in the book. The theater was practically empty by now, but father and son did not appear to notice. The father began to read Jacob's story aloud with great expression and lots of humor. Jacob stood next to him with one hand on his father's shoulder. He stood on one foot, twisting the toe of his other shoe back and forth into the carpet. Jacob was absolutely focused, his facial expressions mirroring those of his father's. When his father read a funny part and looked up at Jacob, they both laughed. When he finished, his father looked Jacob straight in the eye and said, "That is a fantastic story, Jacob. I can't wait to share it with the people who couldn't come to the Celebration." Jacob beamed. "Where is your leader?" Jacob pointed to Ann who was still standing in the doorway.

Jacob's dad walked up to Ann with a camera in his hand, introduced himself, and asked if he could take a picture of her with Jacob. "So we can remember this special year." She agreed and Jacob moved to stand next to her. His father spoke to Ann.

Thank you so much for doing this for the kids. This is Jacob's second year of Writers Club and I know he enjoys it a lot. I support this program because I can see what it has done for my son. You [looking at Jacob] did a great job reading yours today. (Observation, March 12, 2008)

He and Jacob headed off to the cafeteria to continue their celebration with the rest of the Writers Club community.

Enthusiasm for everyone and everything ran high at the Celebration. Jacob's father was not the only parent who sought out their child's Writers Club leader to deliver

a personal expression of appreciation. Parents and leaders intermingled with the children until group by group and family by family they headed home.

The leaders were also an animated bunch at the Celebration, but none so pumped up as Tim, the librarian. When I walked into the library at the end of the Celebration to gather my things from the workroom, Tim was busy at the far end of the library straightening chairs and getting the space back in order. When he caught a glimpse of me he whirled around with both of his arms raised above his head to exclaim loudly:

You want to know why we [teachers] do Writers Club? You've asked us. You saw today. **This** is what education is supposed to be about. All of these people are here to celebrate their children's accomplishments. A lot of learning happened and will stay with them. Those kids got a chance to get up in front of an audience and read something they wrote themselves. What a powerful way to boost their self-confidence! They [the kids] hate it that it's done. They'd come [to Writers Club] every week if we'd let them." (Observation, March 12, 2008)

Suggestions for Practice

Returning to Wolcott's (1994) questions ["What is to be made of it all?" and "How does it all mean?"], I believe there are some important implications inherent in this research. These may need to be considered and addressed by educators, administrators, and policy makers who value the type of meaning-based pedagogy Writers Club represents and are considering implementing a similar literacy practice.

Literacy does develop within the context of social practice. In Writers Club, all members were accepted into a community of social practice; a community where writing and reading were shared events that bound the members together. As Maureen, the art teacher, so sincerely shared, there was an "unspoken agreement" among members that Writers Club was a "sanctuary...and you get to go somewhere and be **that** person, the sort of person who writes." She suggested that that these mores were evident and transferable to newcomers, "if you don't understand it at the beginning, that you catch onto it pretty quick by the way that people **act**...and are treated."

The value of Writers Club became most evident at the personal level. The passion of the leaders, the kids, and their families manifested itself in the commitment to Writers Club at Seaside Elementary School over the past twelve years. The children referred to

themselves as “Writers Club kids” and encouraged other children to join. The literacy practice of Writers Club and the literacy events within it were valuable and immersed children in a community where learning occurred in a natural setting.

Families chose to have their children participate in Writers Club and committed to support that participation by providing transportation, helping type the children’s stories, and attending the Celebration. Attending the Celebration had the possibility of being transformative for the parents because it invited them into a dynamic moment of Writers Club and allowed them temporary membership in the literate social community their children and the leaders ascribed to. Involving the families allowed them to see that participating in Writers Club was more than just having something for their children to do for an hour on winter Wednesday afternoons.

Because Writers Club had become important enough to be part of the school plan, and it was executed primarily by staff volunteers, it would be reasonable for the administrators to recognize this and provide more resources for the organizer and the leaders. One way to attempt this would be to off-set the time burden on leaders by providing release time or coverage of classes at dismissal so that leaders could arrive with the children and hear the spark. The role of the organizer could be recognized as a specific teacher/leader position. This would serve as justification to relieve her/him from other professional responsibilities, provide early release time on Writers Club days, and perhaps, as was suggested in the leader focus group and several individual interviews, provide several full substitute days [days when the teacher is released from classroom responsibilities] to address the administrative aspects of Writers Club. Unilaterally, leaders recognized how much work Dana put into Writers Club and wanted to make it easier for her but their suggestions to alleviate this revolved more around what the principal could do to relieve Dana of some classroom responsibilities than what they could do to support her.

Dana could have relieved some of the burden she felt as the Writers Club organizer by delegating responsibility to others and trusting them to do a good job. Dana could have asked for help; many of the leaders said that they “wanted to help Dana” and were willing to “do more”, but they did not know what would be helpful. While leaders referred to Dana alternately as the “hub,” “anchor,” and “heart” of Writers Club and said

that, “without Dana, Writers Club probably wouldn’t happen,” perhaps a more viable social structure for Writers Club would be to have it organized around a team of committed individuals to share the responsibilities.

It is also possible that Dana could have found more support for Writers Club in the greater Seaside Elementary School community. An example of this was Dana’s ongoing concern about who was going to give the next spark. Securing sparkers could easily have been delegated to another person and need not have been limited to Writers Club leaders; “guest sparkers” would greatly expand the pool of potential sparkers. Staff or community members who could not commit to participate for the full set of sessions might be more than willing to commit to one fifteen minute time frame to deliver the spark.

The leader pool could similarly be expanded by encouraging interested parent volunteers as Writers Club group leaders. Other high school children such as Lily might also serve as leaders. Retired teachers in the community are another potential resource for leaders.

A potential benefit to expanding the leader and sparker pools beyond the predominantly white faculty of this school (all of the group leaders in 2008 were white), would be the possibility of increasing the racial diversity of the leaders and sparkers within Writers Club. Another suggestion for practice would be to look for ways to increase the number of Hispanic child participants. While they make up 11% of the total school population, only 1% of the Writers Club kids in 2008 were Hispanic.

While leaders and children alike strongly believed that Writers Club members should “take it [writing and sharing] seriously,” it would be premature to exclude potential members because they do not already have a professed love of writing. Many of the Writers Club kids I spoke with echoed Jill’s declaration—“I’m a writer because of Writers Club” indicating that they ascribed their self-designations as writers to their inclusion in the writing community of practice known as Writers Club. Megan, the first grade teacher and Writers Club leader “worried” that limiting participation to children who already enjoyed writing might mean missing an opportunity to “inspire” novice writers.

Given the importance of the sparks as an integral part of Writers Club, it follows that they should be given careful consideration. For this to happen, it might be best for sparkers to have generous lead-time to prepare. This would be especially important for new or less experienced sparkers, and for those leaders who do not routinely read aloud to children.

Sparkers might be encouraged to select text for the spark that reflects the range of ages of the children in their audience. As one fourth grade boy suggested in his interview, sparks need to be both assessable and compelling for all ages. “I think that they should have stories that the little kids would enjoy but that would still be meaningful for the bigger kids.”

One way to support improved spark selection would be to create and maintain a collection of sparks in a central location accessible to potential sparkers. Perhaps a grant could be written to secure purchase of an initial core of “tried and true” sparks. Suggestions to expand the collection could come from teachers, school staff, parents, or even the children themselves. Criteria for potential sparks could be created keeping audience, purpose, and available time in mind. Spark contributors could complete a form saying something like, “I recommend this book as a possible spark for Writers Club because... . Ideas writers could pull from this story are (1) ..., (2) ..., and (3)... .”

Writers Club might benefit if all members participated fully in club activities. While child members of Writers Club universally appeared to consider themselves “members of the club,” the same could not be said of all the leaders. Some appeared to just “put in the time” for the club meetings. Dana was particularly distressed by the four leaders who did not attend on the editing day. “I mean, don’t they get that this is important? We can’t just double up groups today!”

Several of the children suggested that the leaders share their writing during the refreshment part of the Celebration. It was very important to the children that their leaders write. As Lola declared, otherwise “it would be just like school.” At the very least, leaders might be expected to include something in the Celebration Book and share their writing in the small venues on the Celebration Day. The adage, “actions speak louder than words,” is appropriate to consider here. The message inherent in having leaders’ writing included in the Celebration Book is “**all** of us are writers.” The message

conveyed by absence of many leaders' writing is "some of us are writers." For Writers Club to truly capitalize on all of the powerful messages it intends to convey to children, leaders might regard themselves as full Writers Club members who are willing to share in a variety of formats with the Writers Club kids.

Implications for Further Research

It would be interesting for future research to examine other instances where literacy learning is embedded within the context of social practice in other venues that take place during times children are not in school. These could include summer programs, after school programs, and Saturday programs. Many of the Writers Club kids commented positively on the differences between Writers Club and the writing that they did in school. These comments from the children lead to another very interesting question—can "school writing" be changed in such a way that children could view it more positively?

Another justifiable reason to focus future research on "school writing" is that school-based writing research would be able to address the writing experiences of a wider range of writers. For a variety of very legitimate reasons, not all children have the opportunity to participate in events that take place beyond the parameters of the normal school day. It would be very interesting to study a writing program similar to the tenets of Writers Club that was held during the school day.

For many children, participation in Writers Club and the textual practices within it appeared to have inculcated within themselves a sense of being a writer. Another avenue for further research then would be to investigate how long does the "euphoria" of being a Writers Club kid last? Does participation in Writers Club as elementary school children continue to sustain their sensibility as writers as they progress through middle school and high school? Is this a long range benefit or something that dissipates over time? A related question to consider would be to examine how related Writers Club, or other interventions like Writers Club are to an array of positive outcomes for children.

For teachers and other educational personnel, it could be interesting to investigate the professional development that occurs as a result of participating in a program such as

Writers Club. Does such participation impact classroom literacy practice? The role of school administrators in such programs also warrants investigation as does the role of related services personnel such as school counselors who might choose to connect bibliotherapy and writing to engage the children they support.

Relating to Writers Club itself, future research could consider the impact of training sessions for leaders and sparkers. Would training sessions encourage more people to volunteer? Would training improve the program in any way?

Summary

The evidence suggests that the read aloud events embedded within the social practice known as Writers Club positively impacted the children who chose to participate. Many viewed themselves as writers, and some even went so far as to attribute their development as writers and love of writing to their participation in Writers Club. The Writers Club kids chose to extend the time spent at school in order to be members of Writers Club. Their families supported that choice.

By making that choice, these children experienced read alouds in three distinct events. They experienced read alouds both as the listener, and as the person who was reading aloud to others in informal and formal settings. They learned that words they had written had the power to elicit a response from an audience. They learned that their stories continued to have an unseen audience in their written form as part of the Celebration Book. They learned that their own writing could be influenced by other authors. They learned, as Jill acknowledged, that writing was work that could be fun and that their work was valued by important adults in their lives. They learned to write with teachers instead of just writing for teachers.

The many teachers, staff, and community members who agreed to give the necessary time and expertise it takes to provide the Writers Club experience did so in spite of the extra time it demands and pressures it creates for them. They gave this gift of time because, when all is said and done, they believed that Writers Club is good for children.

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Appendices

Appendix A - IRB Form for Children

Informed Consent for Participants In Research Projects Involving Human Subjects (children)

Title of Project: Literacy Study of Read-Aloud in an After School Writing Program for Elementary Students

I. Purpose of this Research Project: You are invited to participate in a research project to study how “read alouds” help students become writers. You will be given the opportunity to complete a questionnaire about Writers Club and asked to share your Writers Club journal with Ms. DeFilippo.

II. Procedures: I will attend all Writers Club sessions to observe. I will take notes about the things I see and hear. I will audiotape the leader when the book is being shared and directions are given. I will visit with small groups when they are sharing their writing. I will read your writing in your Writers Club journals and may take notes on what I read. I will attend the Writers Celebration and take notes on what I see and hear there.

You will be asked if you and your parents are willing for you to be interviewed. I will select five volunteers to interview. The interviews will be audiotaped for research purposes if that is acceptable for you and your parents. The interviews will be about five to fifteen minutes long. The interview will be with Ms. DeFilippo at a time and place that is convenient for you and your parents. The interview questions will ask you how Writers Club helps you become a writer. The tapes will be destroyed at the end of the study.

You will be asked to allow the information in my notes about Writers Club, your Writers Club journal, and your questionnaire to be used in the study.

III. Risks: The amount of risks associated with this study will be very small.

IV. Benefits: This study will help teachers and other adults who are interested in children and their writing understand what is important to children as they are becoming writers. This will help teachers and other adults make better choices about the ways they work with young writers.

There is no promise that you will benefit from participating in this study. You may ask me to share the research results with you and /or your parents at a later time.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality: Your information will be identified by a code. Your name will be kept in a separate secured location from the data. The coded information will be kept in a locked file cabinet. Both your name and the name of your school will not be used in written materials or presentations that I may share about this study.

In order to be accurate and with your permission, if you are interviewed, the interviews will be taped. Tapes will be stored in a locked file cabinet. I am the only person who will use the tapes. I will write down what was said on the tapes to help with the study. The tapes will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

VI. Compensation: There will be no payments or rewards for participating in this project.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw: You may decide not to continue in this study at any time without penalty. You are free not to answer any question without penalty. You may choose not to complete a questionnaire. You may choose not to share your Writers Club journal with Ms. DeFilippo.

VIII. Subject's Responsibilities: I voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

IX. Subject's Permission: I have read the Informed Consent Form and understand what it means to be a part of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I agree to volunteer to participate and be interviewed. I understand my rights:

_____ Date _____
Subject signature

_____ Date _____
Witness signature

I have read the Informed Consent Form and understand what it means to be a part of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I agree to volunteer to participate, but I do not want to be interviewed. I understand my rights:

_____ Date _____
Subject signature

_____ Date _____
Witness signature

If I have questions about this research, the way the research is being done, my rights as a research subject, or and who I should contact if I have a research-related injury, I may contact:

Carol L. DeFilippo
Investigator(s)

703/830-4028 Carol.DeFilippo@ncps.edu
Telephone/e-mail

Rosary Lalik
Faculty Advisor

703/538-8493 rlalik@vt.edu
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Appendix B - IRB Form for Parents of Child Participants

Informed Consent for Participants in Research Project Involving Human Subjects (parents of students in Writers Club w/ or w/out questionnaire)

Title of Project: A Case Study of Read-Aloud in an After School Writing Program for Elementary Students

I. Purpose of this Research/Project: “Read alouds” are an important practice in literacy instruction. This study will conduct and report the use of “read aloud” within an after school program designed to help elementary-aged children develop as writers. For the purposes of this study “read aloud” will refer both to the purposeful oral sharing of children’s literature as the *spark* or prompt for writing at the beginning of each Writers Club session and the oral sharing of each writer’s piece in small groups at the close of each session. The objective of this research is to provide a model for one way to utilize “read aloud” as an integral part of a writing program.

II. Procedures: This study will be conducted for ten weeks during January, February, and March of 2007 on Wednesday afternoons from 2:40 – 4:00. I will attend all Writers Club meetings as an observer and will take field notes. The notes will be kept in field journals and used during later analysis. These notes will include pre and post reading discussion of the read aloud, observations of the small group leaders as they facilitate students’ writing, small group sharing, and informal conversations with group leaders after the children have left. The “read aloud” and subsequent directions of the leader will be audio recorded. I will elaborate my records by producing an audio recording of my observations and discussions with leaders immediately following each Writers Club meeting.

An in depth interview with the organizer of Writers Club and five leaders will be held at a time and place agreeable to the interviewees. Student participants will be given the opportunity to complete a short questionnaire about Writers Club. Interviews with five student participants will be held at a time and place agreeable to the interviewees and their parents. Data for my study will include: 1) field notes taken at each Writers Club meeting, 2) transcriptions of all elaborated field notes, 3) transcriptions of selected Writers Club “read alouds” and directions, 4) transcriptions of selected interviews with Writers Club leaders and student participants, 5) questionnaires completed by students, 6) selected writing from Writers Club journals.

III. Risks: The risks of this project will be minimal. Identity of the school and participants will be protected by assigning a coding number to any notes, transcripts of taped interviews, elaborated field notes, questionnaires, or Writers Club journals. Completed questionnaires will be anonymous. The list of names and code numbers will be stored separately from the field notes, tapes, and transcriptions in two separate locked file cabinets.

IV. Benefits: As a result of the study, I will contribute professional knowledge to the field that will result from my dissertation research. The benefits of the study will clearly outweigh the potential for minimal risks.

There is no promise or guarantee of benefits for your child by participating in this study. You may ask the researcher to share the results of the study with you at a later time.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality: Your child's information will be identified by a code. Names will be kept in a separate secured location from the data. Coded information will be kept in a locked file cabinet. The school will not be identified. Pseudonyms will be used in written materials and in any presentations that may occur as a result of this research.

For accuracy in analysis and with your permission and your child's permission, the interviews will be audiotaped. Audiotapes will be stored in a locked file cabinet. Access to the audiotapes will be limited to myself. I will transcribe the tapes. The audiotapes will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

VI. Compensation: There will be no compensation for participation in the study.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw: You have the freedom to withdraw your child from this study at any time without penalty. Your child is free not to answer any question(s) in the interview. You may choose not to have your child's written anecdotal records, questionnaire, or Writers Club journal included in the study.

VIII. Subject's Responsibilities: I voluntarily agree to allow my child to participate in the study.

IX. Subject's Permission

I have read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent for my child to participate in the study and for my child to be interviewed:

Subject Signature

Date

Witness (Optional except for certain classes of subjects)

Date

I have read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent for my child to participate in the study, but not for my child to be interviewed:

Subject Signature

Date

Witness (Optional except for certain classes of subjects)

Date

Should I have pertinent questions about this research or its conduct, and research subjects' rights, and whom to contact in the event of a research-related injury to the subject, I may contact:

Carol L. DeFilippo _____ 703/830-4028 Carol.DeFilippo@ncps.edu
Investigator(s) Telephone/e-mail

Rosary Lalik _____ 703/538-8493 rlalik@vt.edu
Faculty Advisor Telephone/e-mail

Appendix C - Introductory Letter to Families

November 27, 2007

Dear Students and Parents,

Last year I began a study of Writers Club. I will be continuing my study this year. As a former teacher at Seaside Elementary School, I am very interested in your after school Writers Club program and want to continue to study it. I will be attending the Writers Club sessions and the Writers Celebration to make notes and observations about the program. I will use the information that I gather to write a dissertation I am doing for the doctoral program I am enrolled in at Virginia Tech.

Writers Club will stay the same as it always was. Because I want to hear what the participants have to say about Writers Club, I will be interviewing the leaders and five of the students. This year I will also be conducting group interviews with students. Students who volunteer to be interviewed individually or as part of a focus group will need to have their parent's written permission. I will also ask permission to read and use parts of the Writers Club journals to help me understand Writers Club.

Parents and students will need to complete Informed Consent Forms in order to participate in this research. I will fully explain these at the January 9, 2008 parent meeting in the cafeteria at 2:30. In the meantime, anyone with questions is encouraged to contact me or Mrs. Hawley.

I am looking forward to joining you and your teachers when Writers Club begins in January. I know that it will be a wonderful experience for everyone.

Sincerely,

Carol L. DeFilippo

Carol.DeFilippo@ncps.edu

703-830-4028

Appendix D - Letter to Writers Club Families to Accompany "Ticket"

January 8, 2008

Dear Students and Parents,

Last year I began a study of Writers Club. I will be continuing my study this year. As a former teacher at Seaside Elementary School, I am very interested in your after school Writers Club program and want to continue to study it. I will be attending the Writers Club sessions and the Writers Celebration to make notes and observations about the program. I will use the information that I gather to write a dissertation I am doing for the doctoral program I am enrolled in at Virginia Tech.

Writers Club will stay the same as it always was. Because I want to hear what the participants have to say about Writers Club, I will be interviewing the leaders and five of the students. This year I will also be conducting group interviews with students. Students who volunteer to be interviewed individually or as part of a focus group will need to have their parent's written permission. I will also ask permission to read and use parts of the Writers Club journals to help me understand Writers Club.

I am including copies of the parent consent forms and the student assent forms with this letter so that you can become familiar with them before the first meeting. As I was last year, I will be available the afternoon of the first meeting to introduce myself, explain the process, and answer questions. The forms can be quite confusing so I am including instructions for completing them at the bottom of this letter. Please feel free to contact me by phone or email if you have any questions.

I am looking forward to joining you and your teachers when Writers Club begins tomorrow. I know that it will be a wonderful experience for everyone.

Sincerely,

Carol L. DeFilippo

Carol.DeFilippo@ncps.edu

703-830-4028

Instructions for completing Parent Consent and Student Assent forms:

1. Complete a separate Parent Consent and Student Assent form for each child participating in Writers Club.
2. Decide which option you and your child prefer.
3. Select and sign option A if your child is willing to participate in the research and possibly be interviewed or participate in a focus group interview.
4. Select and sign option B if your child is willing to participate in the research but would not like to be interviewed individually or in a group.
5. Be certain that the option indicated on the parent and student forms match.
6. Remember that you and your child do not need to complete the Parent Consent and Student Assent forms for your child to participate in Writers Club.

Appendix E – IRB Form for Leaders

Informed Consent for Participants in Research Project Involving Human Subjects (Writers Club leaders)

Title of Project: Literacy Study of Read-Aloud in an After School Writing Program for Elementary Students

I. Purpose of this Research/Project: “Read alouds” are an important practice in literacy instruction. This study will conduct and report the use of “read aloud” within an after school program designed to help elementary-aged children develop as writers. For the purposes of this study “read aloud” will refer both to the purposeful oral sharing of children’s literature as the *spark* or prompt for writing at the beginning of each Writers Club session and the oral sharing of each writer’s piece in small groups at the close of each session. The objective of this research is to provide a model for one way to utilize “read aloud” as an integral part of a writing program.

II. Procedures: This study will be conducted for ten weeks during January, February, and March of 2007 on Wednesday afternoons from 2:40 – 4:00. I will attend all Writers Club meetings as an observer and will take field notes. The notes will be kept in field journals and used during later analysis. These notes will include pre and post reading discussion of the read aloud, observations of the small group leaders as they facilitate students’ writing, small group sharing, and informal conversations with group leaders after the children have left. The “read aloud” and subsequent directions of the leader will be audio recorded. I will elaborate my records by producing an audio recording of my observations and discussions with leaders immediately following each Writers Club meeting.

An in depth interview with the organizer of Writers Club and five leaders will be held at a time and place agreeable to the interviewees. Student participants will be given the opportunity to complete a short questionnaire about Writers Club. Interviews with five student participants will be held at a time and place agreeable to the interviewees. Data for my study will include: 1) field notes taken at each Writers Club meeting, 2) transcriptions of all elaborated field notes, 3) transcriptions of selected Writers Club “read alouds” and directions, 4) transcriptions of selected interviews with Writers Club leaders and student participants, 5) questionnaires completed by students, 6) selected writing from Writers Club journals.

III. Risks: The risks of this project will be minimal. Identity of the school and participants will be protected by assigning a coding number to any notes or transcripts of taped interviews or elaborated field notes. Completed questionnaires will be anonymous. The list of names and code numbers will be stored separately from the field notes, tapes, and transcriptions in two separate locked file cabinets.

IV. Benefits: As a result of the study, I will contribute professional knowledge to the field that will result from my dissertation research. The benefits of the study will clearly

outweigh the potential for minimal risks. There is no promise or guarantee of benefits for individuals participating in this study.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality: Access to the identity of the school and subjects will be limited to myself. Other than a randomly assigned code number for each subject, no other identifiers will be used that could lead to their identification. I will be the sole transcriber of any audiotapes, and will use the transcriptions to assist in the accuracy of my analysis of the “read alouds” associated with Writers Club for my dissertation. Once the study is completed, all audiotapes will be destroyed. Pseudonyms will be used in written materials and in any presentations that may occur as a result of this research.

VI. Compensation: There will be no compensation for participation in the study.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw: You have the freedom to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. You have the freedom to decline to answer any question(s) in an interview or discuss elements of your experience without penalty.

VIII. Subject’s Responsibilities: I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the responsibility of working with Ms. DeFilippo in her role as recorder and observer of our school’s after school Writers Club. As I engage in the after school Writers Club program with other school personnel and students, I understand that Ms. DeFilippo will observe and record her observations. The recordings may be in the form of field notes or audiotapes.

IX. Subject’s Permission

I have read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

_____ Date

_____ Date

Should I have pertinent questions about this research or its conduct, and research subjects’ rights, and whom to contact in the event of a research-related injury to the subject, I may contact:

Carol L. DeFilippo 703/830-4028 Carol.DeFilippo@ncps.edu
Investigator(s) Telephone/e-mail

Rosary Lalik 703/538-8493 rlalik@vt.edu
Faculty Advisor Telephone/e-mail

Appendix F – Observation Instrument for Writers Club Meetings

Observation Instrument for Writers Club Meetings

Date:

Book:

Time

Activity

Observations

2:40

2:45

2:50

2:55

3:00

3:05

3:10

3:15

3:20

3:25

3:30

3:35

3:40

3:45

3:50

3:55

4:00

Appendix G – Sample Interview Questions for Leaders

Sample Interview Questions for Leaders

Tell me about Writers Club.

Potential follow up questions include

How many years have you participated in Writers Club?

When you are the leader, what things do you consider in your choice of the book to share?

When you are not the leader, what is it like for you at Writers Club?

Do you ever take what is done in Writers Club back to your own classroom?

What surprises you about Writers Club?

What feedback do you get about Writers Club from other teachers? From students? From parents?

Will you plan to participate next year?

Appendix H – Sample Interview Questions for Students

Sample Interview Questions for Students

Tell me about Writers Club?

Potential follow up questions include

Help me understand what is going on in Writers Club. What do you do in Writers Club? How is it for you to be there?

I notice that the teacher reads something to the whole group. What is that? Is it the same every week?

I notice that you move from one large group to many smaller groups. What do you do in your smaller groups when it is quiet? What is happening when the talking begins?

Tell me about the Writers Celebration. What is it like? Is it important?

How many years have you been doing Writers Club? Will you join next year?

What is important about Writers Club to you?

When it isn't going on, do you ever think about Writers Club?

Appendix I – Focus Group Interview Questions for Students

Focus Group Interview Questions for Students

How many years have you been in Writers Club and why you were in it this year? How is Writers Club important to Seaside Elementary School?

What should someone who is interested in Writers Club know about it?

Tell me about the “spark.” How does it fit into Writers Club? Is it important for you—why or why not?

What surprises you about Writers Club?

Tell me about the sharing at the end of Writers Club sessions and at the Writers Celebration.

What else should I know about Writers Club?

Appendix J – Focus Group Interview Questions for Adults

Focus Group Interview Questions for Adults

How many years have you been in Writers Club and why you were in it this year?

How is Writers Club important to Seaside Elementary School?

What should someone who is interested in Writers Club know about it?

Tell me about the “spark.” How does it fit into Writers Club? Is it important for you—why or why not? Have you ever been the “sparker”?

How important is the organizer to Writers Club?

What surprises you about Writers Club?

What do you see as the future of Writers Club at Seaside Elementary School?

What else should I know about Writers Club?

Appendix K – Script for Focus Groups

Script for Focus Groups

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group interview today. In a focus group interview, people who share a common experience or common knowledge come together to share that information with someone who wants to find out what they know. In this focus group interview, you will have a chance to share your opinions and experiences with Writers Club. I am very interested in Writers Club and how it works. I want to know what you think about being part of Writers Club. I will be tape recording the session so that I will be able to remember your words and thoughts accurately.

Everyone will have several opportunities to speak. Here is how the focus group interview will work. First, you will have five minutes to answer a question in writing. Remember there are no right or wrong answers. These notes may help you remember some of the important things you have to share when we begin the discussion in a few minutes.

I have prepared a list of questions to help me learn more about Writers Club. I will ask the first question and call on each of you in turn to share your thoughts. You may choose to pass instead of answering a question if you would like. If you have an idea to add when someone else is speaking, please raise your hand so that I can call on you. I will then ask the next question and follow the same procedure.

I appreciate the time that you are giving today. I want you to know that I am looking forward to learning from you. I expect that everyone here will listen and speak respectfully to each other even if you have different opinions. This focus group interview will last about one hour. Do you have any questions? (answer any questions)

To begin our session, we are going to take five minutes to have you write down a response to this question: What should someone who is interested in Writers Club know about it?

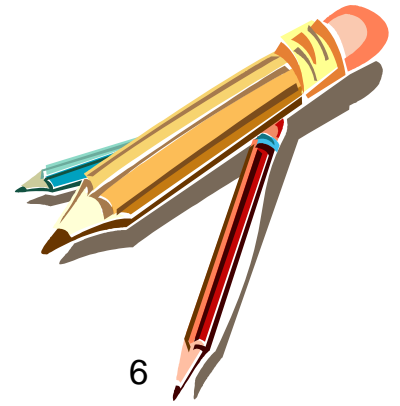
Appendix L – Orienting Focus Group Question for Children

Please take a few minutes to answer the following question:

What should someone who is interested in Writers Club know about it?

Appendix N - Questionnaire

Writers Club Questionnaire



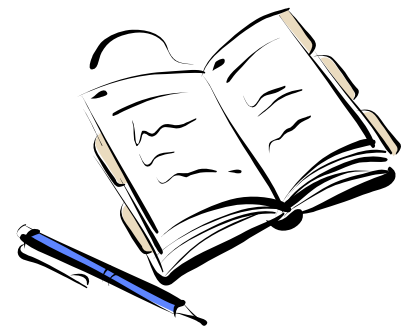
Please circle your grade.

1 2 3 4 5 6

Which are you? boy girl

Put a + by the ones you like about Writers Club. Put a - by the ones you don't like about Writers Club. Leave any you don't know blank.

- ___ Writing
- ___ Sharing my writing in our writing groups
- ___ Sharing my writing at the Writers Celebration
- ___ Listening to others share their writing
- ___ Listening to the story
- ___ Getting to stay after school
- ___ Writers Celebration
- ___ Writers Celebration book
- ___ _____ (other)



Circle the number of years you have you come to Writers Club.

1 2 3 4 5 6

Are you likely to come to Writers Club next year?

Yes Maybe No Don't Know

Do you talk about the writing that you do at Writers Club? Yes No

Do you talk about the story that was shared at the beginning of Writers Club? Yes