

# Literate Lives: The Goal of Educational Excellence

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*Editor's note: The following article is based on the keynote address delivered by Gay Su Pinnell at the 2012 National Reading Recovery & K-6 Classroom Literacy Conference.*

Today my topic is “thinking education” and its role in helping all children live the kind of life in school that will lead to lifelong literacy. Having for many years had the privilege of working with teachers and administrators involved in Reading Recovery, I saw firsthand what thinking people can achieve if they hold a common vision and work hard together to reach it. People involved in Reading Recovery convinced me that by collaboration, teachers, principals, and other leaders could make schools places where the greatest, most exciting learning happens.

Schools should be places where students and teachers live literate lives from the earliest possible experiences. Giving the gift of a literate life to our students is the goal of schooling; excellence can be achieved only if, in addition to that satisfying rise in test scores, we create places where language and literacy flourish and become so joyful that they last a lifetime.

First, I'll examine what a literate life means. Then, I have seven statements that describe schools as places where thinking literacy education thrives. These points don't cover everything

that we hope that a school will be, but together they form a foundation for creating literate lives.

## Examining the Literate Life

I have always lived a literate life. I don't remember when I didn't love books. I discovered I could read words at about age 4 through comic books, and I am happy to see the current appreciation for graphic texts. These “comics” today are seen

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as quality literature and have enormous potential for engaging readers.

The library was my second home; I loved just entering the door and finding riches there. In fact, I overdid it, according to my parents, and small-town libraries were limited — often having just one wall of children's books. So, I began to read adult books as well. Every once in a while I pick up one of those books and am amazed at how much better I comprehend it now.

At about age 8, I moved with my family to a large city with a large library and no limits on how many books you could check out. I knew no one but was quite happy reading most of the time. My parents worried that I was a little too literate. So, my mother took my library books away from me and put them on the highest shelf. I was told to “go out and make some friends.” She looked out a couple of hours later and noted that I had convened a gang of about five kids and we were taking turns using her enormous, expensive, prized, Farberware roaster as a sled to slide down a grassy hill in Austin, Texas. My father said something like, “Well, it was your idea!” That never happened again.

As literate people, texts—books and others—play a rich role in our lives. Some call on us to be more self-aware. Some offer problems to puzzle over, ideas that may at first be hard to understand. Some invite us to attend to the writing itself, to take pleasure in language that we linger over. And some lead us to find beauty and hold on to it for a lifetime. Through books we meet people we never forget — both real and imagined.

I have experienced what Elizabeth Maguire wrote in *The Open Door* (2008, p. 108): “Have you ever been heartbroken to finish a book? Has a writer kept whispering in your ear long after the last page is read?”

Maguire has captured in wonderful prose the idea that texts live in your mind even after the reading is long over.

In a letter to Oskar Pollak in 1904, Franz Kafka wrote: “We need the book that affects us like a disaster that grieves us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the ax for the frozen sea inside us.”

Books can change your life or not have much impact, but they all live in our subconscious minds. You may read something and never think of it again but something in it echoes through your lifetime. It doesn’t have to be fiction. Some are stirred by biography, like the one about Alice, daughter of Theodore Roosevelt). The President is reported to have said, “I can be President of the United States, or I can attend to Alice. I cannot possibly do both” (Cordery, 2008, p. 79)! I’d like to have known her. Many readers are captivated by images and ideas from long ago. Or by scientific discovery. The love affair with reading can be fiction or nonfiction.

Many great writers write about the place literacy has occupied in their own lives. One of my favorite writers, Anna Quindlin who wrote *One True Thing* said, “We read in bed because reading is halfway between life and dreams” (1998, p. 20). Pat Conroy, author of *The Lords of Discipline* and *Beach Music*, has written a memoir called *My Reading Life* (2010). His mother, he says, was a reader.

She read so many books that she was famous among the librarians in every town she entered. Since she did not attend college, she

looked to librarians as her magic carpet into a serious intellectual life. Books contained powerful amulets that could lead to paths of certain wisdom. Novels taught her everything she needed to know about the mysteries and uncertainties of being human. (pp. 4–5)

Conroy also says: “I trust the great novelists to teach me how to live, how to feel, how to love and hate. I trust them to show me the dangers I will encounter on the road as I

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stagger on my own troubled passage through a complicated life of books that try to teach me how to die” (2010, pp. 10–11). This juxtaposition of fiction and truth is what draws many of us to novel reading.

Nonfiction, too, engages us. I recently read a fascinating memoir called *Tolstoy and the Purple Chair: My Year of Magical Reading* (Sankovitch, 2012). The year after her sister Anne Marie died, Nina Sankovitch set out to read a book a day for an entire year. Her four children pitched in more on chores and made book recommendations. After a while, everyone was making suggestions, and she took them.

Sometimes she reread old books that took her back in time. Reading had permeated the fabric of Nina’s immigrant family; it was in her family memory. In her year of magical reading, she read books that others in her family loved, that her sister read; she reread old books and took on new ones that she would never have expected to read. She read fiction and nonfiction, classics and lighter fare. She read in memory of her sister who loved mysteries: “Mysteries were her candy, her vodka tonic, her bubble bath. She loved mysteries rich in detail, deep with atmosphere, and dark in motive” (p. 6). Of her year of magical reading, Nina says, “Books were my time machine, my vehicles of recovery, and reignited bliss from childhood and beyond” (p. 181).

Reading my book a day this year was clearing my brain the way my hard work had cleared the mess in my backyard. I had been caught in a bramble patch of sorrow and fear. My reading, sometimes painful and often exhausting, was pulling me out of the shadows and into the light. And I am not the only one clearing out weeds and poison ivy, or planting beauty, perennial flowers of hope. The world is full of us, digging and scraping, working for the day when the flowers come back like they are supposed to, blooming year after year. (2012, p. 181)

Nina examined her own life and the place of literacy in it. Today we are talking about school, curriculum, and teaching. But as teachers and administrators, many of us feel we are clearing out weeds, digging and scraping, and working for the day when things bloom. We want to create schools where literate lives bloom.

## Describing the Schools We Need and Want

I'd like to move now to my seven points, which describe the schools we need and want. If these statements describe your school, work hard to keep it so, treasure and help your colleagues, support new teachers, and bring everyone into the conversation. If they do not, work with your colleagues to determine your strengths and what you want to achieve.

### *1. Schools are places where a wide variety of books and other materials suffuse the classrooms.*

Here, in these schools, everyone has access to rich, wonderful language, plots, and well-organized informational and fiction texts. Students read in many ways and for different purposes, encountering the full range of genre available to them as literate human beings. Students are engaged with texts with age-appropriate content, themes and ideas through interactive read-aloud and book club discussion.

We want students to experience three kinds of books: (a) age-appropriate texts that will offer topics and stories that will engage them; (b) the best-quality leveled texts that allow them to read with proficiency every day and increase their strength as readers; and (c) books they choose for themselves and that they can read independently. In school, they have the opportunity to spend their time thinking, talking, reading, and writing about content that is relevant and meaningful to their lives and to their world.

There are so many wonderful books. The beautiful picture biography of Marian Anderson tells in emotional detail the story of Eleanor Roosevelt's

courageous stand to have Marian sing at the Lincoln Memorial (Ryan & Selznick, 2002). They shouldn't miss it. The drama of the informational text, *Bodies from the Ash* (Deem, 2005) can absorb them, and they shouldn't miss it. Readers can enter a fantasy world with Harry Potter or the Hunger Games series, and they shouldn't miss it. So, students need many opportunities to engage with texts — those they can read and those that they can understand and talk about but not yet process independently. We need many levels of skilled instruction — but all with a coherent message. And that teaching rests on the assumption that real reading is processing meaningful language with deep understanding.

### *2. Schools are places where learning is rigorous.*

Students are engaged in intellectual inquiry. Learning empowers them with what they need to know and be able to do as successful readers, writers, learners, and world citizens. Irene Fountas and I have been working on the process of genre study (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Over the last decade, our research and reading has indicated the centrality of genre. We are fascinated with the idea that knowledge of genre can be a roadmap to comprehension. As we begin to read, we unconsciously access a deep knowledge of the characteristics of different fiction and nonfiction genres. We know what to expect; we know how to find information. For fantasy, we know to suspend disbelief; for mysteries, we know to look for clues; for expository nonfiction, we see relationships between ideas and information. The best way to acquire knowledge of genre is through exposure to a large number

of texts; through inquiry, we accumulate the characteristics that distinguish the genres.

Studying the wonderful variety of texts, through an inquiry process, allows for students to become immersed in wonderful examples, to draw out their own "noticings," to share wonderings with others, and create definitions. They learn by exploration; the learning is rigorous.

A wonderful resource for this work has been *Study Driven* by Katie Wood Ray (2006). Ray takes us to the process of using study, or inquiry, to learn about writing. Ray says:

We love study because it allows us to ask very big questions about writing, questions that never feel finished, such as, 'How do people write poetry really, really well? Where do they get their ideas? What's their process like, from ideas to finished poems?' We love study because it expands curricular possibilities. Who knows what we might learn in five days, locked in a room full of wonderful poetry. (p. xii)

In reading, we also love study, or inquiry. We immerse ourselves and our students in many wonderful examples of biography, of fantasy, of realistic fiction, of historical fiction.

- Why do people write biographies?
- Why do they choose their subjects?
- What's true about almost all biographies and what's true of only a few?
- How does a biographer show readers what a person was really like?

- Can you write a biography about someone you don't admire? Why would you?

The inquiry process can be seen as a sequence of activities, but these are applied with flexibility. You start this general process over each time you begin to study a genre.

1. Collect a set of wonderful examples of the genre, mostly picture books that can be suitable to the age group.
2. Immerse students in them through interactive read-aloud, independent reading, book clubs, and guided reading.
3. Study the characteristics of the genre—what students notice—gradually separating out those “noticings” that distinguish the genre from all others.
4. Construct a definition that is tentatively held and sometimes revised.
5. Teach by coming back to the noticings in an explicit way through reading workshop minilessons.
6. Read further and revise the definition and noticings.

This process is systematically implemented in schools; but, in fact, avid readers actually engage in it informally throughout their lives. Often, great learning takes place when we encounter an unusual example of a genre. The inquiry process is the essence of “thinking education.” Without rigorous inquiry, the intellect cannot be built.

### ***3. Schools are places where teachers know their students.***

In these schools, teachers use authentic assessment. This means actually observing and assessing the reading of books and the writing of language. Teachers are able to analyze and interpret reading and writing behaviors. They have ways to assess the reading of continuous text and the ability to notice evidence of comprehension in what students say and what they write. They know how to observe and assess their students reading behaviors and their understanding — not just the reading accuracy or the rate.

In these schools, teachers are thinking people who base their decisions on their observations and understanding of children and the learning process. They observe and can articulate the behavioral evidence that drives instruction, the precise language, reading and writing behaviors of each of their students. They assess the effects of their teaching on student learning moment-by-moment, day-by-day, week-by-week across the school year.

And, knowing students means that we know when and how to intervene if something is going wrong. We have long known—and I know that the readers of this journal are highly aware—that we need layers of intervention that give the support each student needs.

### ***4. Schools are places where students have powerful whole-group and small-group instruction that allows them to read, think, and talk with each other about books and about life.***

In these schools, students engage with texts through interactive read-aloud, book clubs for literature

discussion, and independent individual reading. Student choice is valued and taught.

Irene Fountas and I recently wrote an article about what we have learned from 20 years of work with guided reading — differentiated reading instruction through the use of small groups and leveled texts (Fountas & Pinnell, in press). One of the points we made is that literacy is learned across many contexts. Guided reading, although important, is only one. It is essential to differentiate reading instruction; and the only efficient way to do it is to select books at the appropriate instructional level and provide the support and intensive teaching that will lift students up the ladder that we call a gradient of text.

But we need to be careful in the use of text levels. They are complex, not simple. And what does *level* really mean? It's not just a score or grade. The level of a text is not just a house-keeping detail. It has everything to do with successful processing and the growth of readers' systems for strategic actions. Simply moving “up a level” is not a goal that fits into the making of a reader. We have never recommended that levels be used to label students; they have no place on a report card.

We do not level all the books in the classroom or school library; we recommend teaching students to choose books the way you do in the bookstore or library — by interest, favorite author, reading a bit to try it out, or thinking about the content or the theme.

We have spent years creating detailed descriptions of what is demanded of readers—how they build strategic actions—over each level of text. So a level M or P doesn't just stand for

a score; it means a huge range of cognitive actions, working smoothly together to process print and construct meaning.

All of the instruction in these schools is infused with text-based talk — talk that supports students intellectually, broadens their thinking, increases their control, and enriches the repertoires they can use for writing or talking. Let's look at some instructional contexts.

Nina Sankovitch (2012) says she thought it would be enough to read books. But during her year of magical reading, she found herself longing to talk with others about them. Powerful instruction involves powerful talk — and teaching reading means getting kids to talk about books. Powerful instruction involves exciting ideas and rich language. Children make books an important part of their lives. From kindergarten through the higher grades, students love talking with each other about books. They are a literate community where people care about what others think and say. Books matter. Children do not wait to live literate lives when they grow up. They live them now.

##### ***5. Schools are places where students and teachers reflect on and think deeply about texts.***

They know what happens right there in the text; that is, they can think within the text, and express a literal understanding. They also think beyond the text. They can make inferences, synthesize new knowledge, make predictions. They can analyze and critique. And all of this thinking is reflected in the classroom talk.

We are talking about comprehension here — the goal of all reading. And

fluency is related to comprehension, because the reader's expression reflects the deep meanings the writer has mapped out in written language. Because of some confusion in the field, I wish to make the point, that neither comprehension nor fluency is synonymous with speed.

Our educational community—or parts of it—seems to have become obsessed with speed. As a person who has done research on fluency for years (see Pinnell, Pikulski, Wixson, Campbell, Gough, & Beatty, 1995), Irene Fountas and I emphasize pausing, phrasing, word stress,

have not been matched by improvement in comprehension. The way reading fluency has been measured has influenced practice, and in some places, it had a devastating effect on reading itself. Have you seen students who read rapidly, robotically, skipping without working on every word not instantly recognized? Now think about practicing that kind of reading every day, all day.

Tom Newkirk, the author of *Misreading Masculinity*, has a new book titled *The Art of Slow Reading* (2011). He hastens to explain that he does not mean the laborious, word-to-

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and intonation far more than rate. We recognize that good readers are fluent, but we cannot measure fluency simply by measuring rate — certainly not by measuring word list rates. Reading fluency means the efficient and effective processing of meaningful, connected, communicative language.

According to Newkirk (2011), the fluent reader is demonstrating comprehension, taking cues from the text, and taking pleasure in finding the right tempo for the text. That is why goals for reading rate must be so wide. The norms for reading speed have gone up, but these increases

word struggle to read something that is clearly too hard. Instead, he means the thoughtful consideration of the text. And, he says there is no ideal speed. The speed, for Newkirk, has to do with the relationship we have with what we read. Newkirk describes his own entry to a book.

I enter a book carefully, trying to get a feel for this writer/narrator/teller that I will spend time with. I hear the language, feel the movement of sentences, pay attention to punctuation, sense pauses, feel the writer's energy (or lack of it), and construct the voice and temperament of the

writer. Even as I read ‘silently,’ I am still in a world of sound. My connection to writers, my pleasure in reading, even my capacity for comprehension depends on this sound, on the voiced quality of print. (pp. 1–2)

He goes on to say that he doesn’t hear this voice all the time — not when skimming the Internet or reading interminable lengthy letters from university administrators. But the reading that truly matters asks him to be continuously present.

I am thrown off my reading game when I am forced to go too fast. I can feel the connection slipping away. I lose this vital sense of language and rhythm. I am forced to skip, scan and sample when I feel myself on the clock ... and one of my favorite and most pleasurable activities becomes suddenly unpleasant. (p. 2)

Readers are responsible. They need deep understanding and an intimate relationship with the text; otherwise, comprehension is undermined. That means that everyone is thinking about the meaning of texts. Students approach them thoughtfully and read for deep comprehension — not just to “get through them.”

**6. Schools are learning communities where students and teachers are collaborative and highly engaged.** Creating a community takes time and work. Mehta, Gomez, and Bryk (2011) have written a book, *Schooling as a Knowledge Profession*:

Our thesis is straightforward: schools need to transition from the bureaucratic industrial-age structures in which they were

created a hundred years ago into modern learning and improvement organizations that are suitable to the needs of today. To do so will be excruciatingly difficult, because it will require a change in mind-set, creation of new infrastructure, and changing patterns of authority and power. But this change is what is required if we truly seek to achieve our goal of educating all students to high levels. (p. 36)

These researchers are saying that we need to move from the factory model. Attached to the model in the

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20th Century was the notion that university researchers would identify good practices, policymakers would mandate these practices at scale, and again teachers would implement them. This is rational and logical, but it has proved to be flawed at each link of the chain. “University-based research is more suited to advance disciplinary understanding than to solving problems of practice; policymakers are too removed from schools to know what practitioners need; and teachers have been highly resis-

tant, since the early 20th Century, to imposition from above” (Mehta, Gomez, & Bryk, p. 36).

The truth is that the work of teaching is complex and requires significant skill and discretion. Mehta, Gomez, and Bryk cite data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reporting international research on the performance of high-scoring nations on the Program for International Student Assessment. Countries like Singapore, South Korea, Canada, and Finland

- draw teachers from the top third of their college test-score distributions;
- train them extensively; this means excellent and ongoing professional development; and most important
- enable them to work with one another on problems of practice within schools to develop better pedagogical practices and deeper content knowledge.

I sometimes think that educational change is pretty much like my approach to glitches in my new complex television. I am a person who dreads the word “update.” So coping with three remotes, cable boxes, DVR, DVD, DVD-HD and a couple of others (for which I don’t even know the device) is challenging. When something goes wrong (like “no picture”), I have a primitive strategy. I take the remotes and just start clicking. Sometimes it works and my picture magically appears. But that random approach works only about 10 percent of the time and I never know what I did to make it happen. I recently listened while some top educators in a large school

system listed with some irony all of the programs used in the system — including one that offered to solve reading problems in 6 minutes. We may be randomly pushing buttons by grasping first at one thing and then another. We need a coherent plan.

Bryk and others (Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010) completed a very large research project. They studied 18 Literacy Collaborative schools (see [literacycollaborative.org](http://literacycollaborative.org)) with over 10,000 subjects, for 4 years. The measures were standardized tests. For 4 years, these schools participated in the Literacy Collaborative — they had a highly trained literacy coach. The average rate of student learning increased by 16% in Year 1. In the second year, it increased by 28%; and during the third year, scores increased by 32%. But, even more interesting, was the change in the pattern of communication within schools (Atteberry & Bryk, 2010). Teachers were asked to name the people they talked with about literacy learning. Look at the communication patterns in this school in Year 1 (Figure 1).

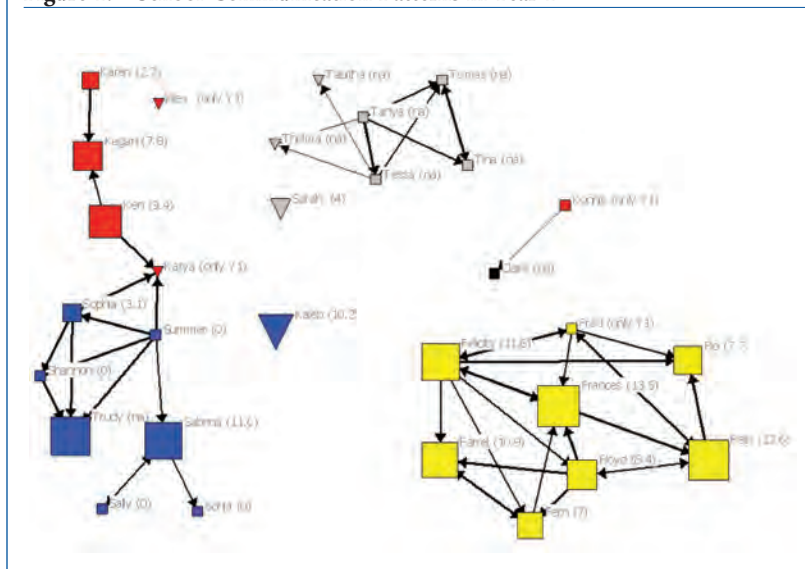
Communication was fragmented; groups were insular. Grade-level groups talked only to each other. Across the 4 years of the project, each school worked towards achieving a common vision and implemented a set of common practices. Every school had challenges and problems. They responded again in Year 4 (Figure 2).

The school had become a community. It happened in every school. What made it happen? These teachers, with the support of the literacy coach and the administrators, learned a language to talk with each other.

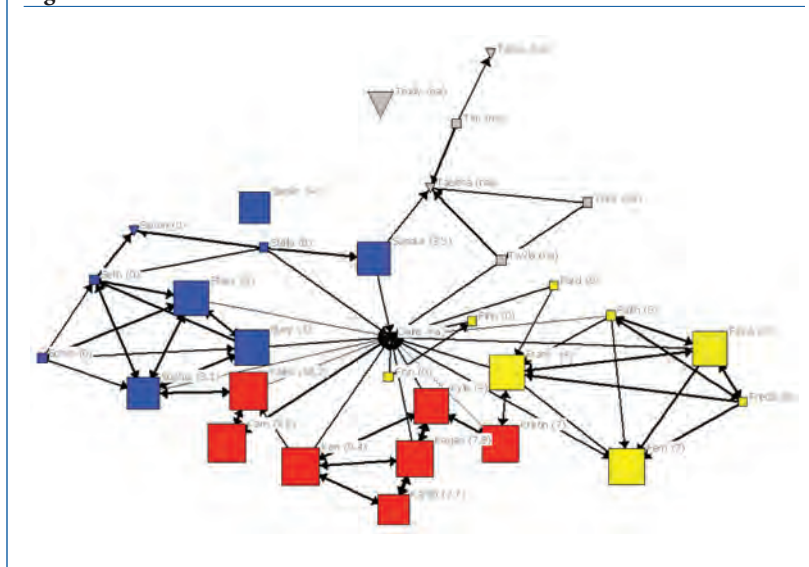
*7. Schools are happy places where students and teachers are highly engaged and highly collaborative.* I'd like to mention the work of a Czechoslovakian scientist named Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced MEE-hy CHEEK-sent-mu-

HY-ee). Wikipedia says that he is noted for both his work in the study of happiness and creativity and for his notoriously difficult name (Wikipedia, 2012). His seminal work, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1991), proposes

**Figure 1. School Communication Patterns in Year 1**



**Figure 2. School Communication Patterns in Year 4**



the theory that people are most happy when they are in a state of *flow* — a state of concentration or complete absorption with the activity at hand and the situation. At the moment, you are so involved that nothing else seems to matter. In the 1970s—most of you cannot remember this period but I assure you that many of us enjoyed every moment of it—we had other names for it like “in the groove” or “feeling groovy.”

Flow means that you are fully immersed in what you are doing — it’s the optimum state of intrinsic motivation. Think of a time when you were so greatly absorbed and fulfilled; you felt that you were greatly skilled, so much so that you ignored temporal concerns (ego-self). Have you ever felt flow when reading something wonderful? Have you observed evidence of flow in your students? How about while teaching? Does it ever click in so that the minutes fly by and you are thrilled with the results you see?

Often, in a state of flow, we are not consciously aware of exactly what our brains are doing. According to Timothy D. Wilson of the University of Virginia, any human mind can take in 11 million pieces of information at any given moment. The most-generous estimate is that people can be consciously aware of 40 of these. Some researchers have suggested, “the unconscious mind does virtually all the work and that conscious will may be an illusion. The conscious mind merely confabulates stories that try to make sense of what the unconscious mind is doing of its own accord” (2002, p. 5).

## Moving Forward with Vision

We have learned from Marie Clay the importance of complex, in-the-head systems (Clay, 1991). We can bring something to conscious attention for learning but, ultimately, it must work unconsciously. Making schools into the places I have described can mean changing almost everything. Many of you are well on the way; some are just getting started. Some are start-

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Too often, we treat the educational process as if it’s a factory producing identical objects through identical processes. But education is messy. Just when you think you have something strong and good, it falls apart.

So, go in search of the people who can be good colleagues in this remaking — in this hard work that takes so long.

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ing over, because human systems are fragile. They can fall apart with the loss of key individuals, with atrophy, with political power moves, and with wrongheaded policy.

I’m afraid that I’ve learned that educational change usually doesn’t last. It is ephemeral. It has to be remade again and again. But this should not make us despair or give up. Indeed, I am more optimistic

today than I have been for the last two decades. In education, we cannot simply “get there” and expect to “stay there” without constant efforts. And the unfortunate or perhaps fortunate reason is that education is all about people — developing people, communicating with people, making people happy, and giving them agency. Too often, we treat the educational process as if it’s a factory producing identical objects through identical processes. But education is messy. Just when you think you have something strong and good, it falls apart.

So, go in search of the people who can be good colleagues in this remaking — in this hard work that takes so long. Find them and work with them. Join an organization like the Reading Recovery Council of North America, the publisher of this journal. For a few dollars a year, membership puts you into a lifeline of professional knowledge.

Over the last three decades, I have been very fortunate to have colleagues who have argued with me, been willing to have “hang down” sessions, but never deserted me. We have traveled the road together throughout a wonderful journey — one that is worth taking. What does last is the influence you have on a child this year, or on your colleagues and through them on children. Do what you can today, and build for tomorrow.

I started by talking about how texts remain in our brains and can echo through a lifetime. I remember a book — one of those adult books that I read when I was about 11 or 12, called *Dr. Hudson’s Secret Journal* (Douglas, 1939). I hadn’t thought

of it for years but it popped into my mind when I was reading *Tolstoy and the Purple Chair*. I don't know if it is good literature; what kind of judge was I then? Remember my passion for comic books! Nevertheless, my 12-year-old soul took something from it. This book is so far out of print that it is impossible to get, so you'll have to take the quote as I remember it. I'll tell a bit of the story.

Dr. Hudson, a rural practitioner, had developed a habit of secretly giving financially to people who needed it. His benefactors never knew where the money came from because Dr. Hudson believed that the benefit to him was more than the bounty he dispersed. He said to a younger colleague: "Once you find the way, it will begin to obsess you. But it will be a magnificent obsession." So find your obsession. Find what nourishes your intellect and your spirit. I hope it is within the realm of education, because we need those passionate spirits. Find good friends who respect that and can travel the journey with you.

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### About the Author



Gay Su Pinnell is professor emerita in the School of Teaching and Learning at The Ohio State University. She has extensive experience in classroom teaching and field-based research, and has developed and implemented comprehensive approaches to literacy education. She has worked extensively in clinical tutoring and early intervention for young struggling readers. She has been principle investigator for two large-scale research projects. She has received numerous awards recognizing her contributions to early literacy and is a member of the Reading Hall of Fame. Dr. Pinnell has published extensively in books and journals.