

# Inventing Literate Identities: The Influence of Texts and Contexts

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## Abstract

This study investigated the influence of different (and sometimes conflicting) literacy contexts on the literate identities of “struggling” beginning readers. The participants were five first graders from three different classrooms in a school in a large Midwestern city. The children met with the researchers in a Reading Club twice weekly throughout the school year to explore reading and writing strategies that focused on predicting and constructing meaning. The classroom instruction of the two children reported here focused them on accuracy in reading and writing. The findings reveal that supplementary programs may not be able to overcome classroom experiences that focus on accuracy and skills.

In the picture storybook *Falling Through the Cracks* (Sollman, 1994), children who feel bored, fearful, or silenced for different reasons literally shrink and fall through the floorboards of the classrooms. Underneath, while the feet and legs of others who are beginning to slip are dangling precariously above them, two of the “fallen” children contemplate their predicament and that of the others. They wonder “why a kindergartner [is] already waist-deep on his first day of school.” Indeed, why would a kindergartner be waist-deep on his first day of school?

Our purpose in this article is to share what struggling first-grade readers taught us about being “waist-deep” when the school year begins. We began our study intent on understanding and creating strategies we believed would prevent them from “falling through the

cracks.” The study that ultimately developed, however, explored a complexity of literacy learning we hadn’t seriously considered, namely, the influence of different (and sometimes conflicting) literacy contexts on beginning readers. How do beginning struggling readers “adapt” to and make sense of different literacy contexts that are both intent on preventing children from falling through the cracks, but that also provide them with different kinds of literacy experiences? For example, in one context readers focus on constructing meaning while reading predictable books and writing with invented spellings, and in the other context they focus on decoding words accurately in books with highly controlled vocabularies and spelling correctly. How do the literacy experiences in these different contexts, grounded in different theoretical perspectives, influence the children? What effect do the experiences in these contexts have on the children as they invent their literate identities as readers and writers?

The lessons we learned in this study are humbling for us in that we did not leave this study feeling “successful” in helping children become “better” readers and writers. Instead, what the children taught us challenged our belief, held also by others, that supplementary programs can always compensate for curricula that cannot, for whatever reason, accommodate the needs of diverse learners. Currently, educational trends and policies are mandating a particular sequence of instruction and narrowly-defined performance objectives, intimidating teachers with test scores and discouraging them from exercising their professional judgments, and sorting children according to test scores and strict developmental standards. At a time when programs and test scores are overshadowing children’s real needs and teachers’ professional knowledge and experience, our experiences and the lessons we learned are compelling and important to understanding children’s literacy development, especially those who are waist-deep when the school year begins.

Our intention in this article is not to be critical of Miss L., the teacher in this study, or of other teachers in similar situations. We acknowledge that we enjoyed a pedagogical freedom; we were able to create a context that we believed supported most generously the children’s literacy learning and allowed them to join the “Literacy Club” (Smith, 1988). We were not encumbered or constrained, as Miss L. was, by such things as curriculum mandates and accountability dependent on test scores. We are well aware that the pressures she felt influenced the classroom and instructional decisions she made.

We will begin by sharing our theoretical stance and providing background on our study. Then we will introduce two of the children, Lillian

and Peter, and examine in depth their literacy development and the literate identities they invented. We will conclude by discussing the perplexing anomalies we discovered as Lillian and Peter worked to be readers in two very different and mostly conflicting contexts.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical perspective that shapes this study is grounded in transactional socio-psycholinguistic theory that views children as active constructors of knowledge and meaning in reading and writing and in their lives as they transact with others in their sociocultural communities. Ken Goodman's (1994) research in miscue analysis is foundational to this theory. His research reveals reading and writing (Goodman, 1994) as processes of constructing meaning in which readers actively integrate thought and language. This theory is also rooted in the work of other researchers, such as Piaget (1971), Vygotsky (1978), Halliday (1975), and Rosenblatt (1981). In this study we draw primarily on work in four areas: language learning as a process of invention, reading as a process of constructing meaning, the role of texts and contexts in reading, and the formation and role of readers' literate identities in their reading. Each will be described below.

### Language Learning: A Process of Invention

Invention is the process by which children, like all human beings, socially construct language in order to learn and think for themselves and to communicate socially and dialog with others for their own survival and development (Goodman, 1996). When children have a particular authentic function, purpose, or need for language in their sociocultural community (Halliday, 1975), they invent it, generating their best guesses, their theories or hypotheses, based on their perceptions and current understandings of the world and how it works (Ferreiro, 1990).

Language inventions are not random or capricious, however. They are influenced and constrained by the common but ever-changing social conventions children naturally experience daily in their interactions with knowledgeable others who support them in exploring language in meaningful contexts (Dyson, 1993; Goodman, 1986; Vygotsky, 1962). When children use and share their inventions with their family and community and discover their inventions do not "match" others' language or literacy, they often experience a tension or disequilibrium (Piaget, 1970) that pulls and pushes them in different directions. Children relieve these tensions by revising and inventing again.

Children's language inventions reveal the experiences, knowledge, and beliefs the children have about literacy and the world. Through their inventions children work to make sense with intentionality and purposefulness (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984). By inventing language at the point of need, drawing on what they know from past experiences in a variety of literacy contexts, children take language and make it their own. They figure out how it "works" and how it relates to them personally. Inventions are always new, meaningful, and powerful for the inventor, regardless of if or when they were previously invented by others. Eleanor Duckworth (1987), a Piagetian scholar, states:

I see no difference in kind between wonderful ideas that many other people have already had, and wonderful ideas that nobody has yet happened upon. That is, the nature of creative intellectual acts remains the same, whether it is an infant who for the first time makes the connection between seeing things and reaching for them...or an astronomer who develops a new theory of the creation of the universe. In each case, new connections are being made among things already mastered.  
(p. 14)

Inventions are natural and necessary to all language learning, both oral and written (Goodman, 1993). They are natural because of our creative nature and need for sense and order in our world, and necessary because they require us to take risks and without the willingness to take risks, learning is greatly impeded. Only when language users take risks do they outgrow their current selves to learn and grow (Piaget, 1973; Vygotsky, 1978). Without risk, their learning is seriously curtailed.

### Reading and Learning to Read: A Process of Constructing Meaning

Over thirty years of reading research documents reading as a dynamic, transactional, socio-psycholinguistic process of constructing meaning and making sense of print (see studies in Brown, Goodman, & Marek, 1996; Clay, 1998; Goodman, 1994; Rosenblatt, 1994). This research reveals that to construct meaning readers integrate three language cueing systems—the semantic system (meaning), the syntactic system (grammar), and the graphophonic system (print)—with their knowledge of the world to infer and predict meaning, making corrections when necessary (Goodman, 1996). What distinguishes proficient and less proficient readers is not the reading process itself but the read-

ers' experience with reading and how flexibly and proficiently they control the process (Goodman, 1994).

Children beginning to read, then, use the same reading process of more experienced readers and work to learn how to control it (Goodman, 1994). As with all language learning, they invent how they think the reading process works, just as they invented oral language when they were learning how to speak. Drawing on knowledge from the variety of social contexts in their experience, they create hypotheses for how to make what they see in print match what they already have experience with in oral language (Goodman, 1996). When they read, they test their invented hypotheses, reflect on the experience and what they continue to observe and hear from other readers, revise their hypotheses, and invent again. Gradually, they move their inventions of how reading "works" within the boundaries of "conventional" reading. Literacy research has documented for decades how children invent written language and revise their inventions until they correspond with the social conventions of written language (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Goodman & Altwerger, 1981; Martens, 1996).

### Texts and Contexts

Language learning, whether in learning to speak, read, or write, never occurs in a "vacuum." Learners are immersed in the rich authentic functional language of their world and this language provides the "text" that they draw on for their inventions (Dyson, 1999). Texts, in this sense, are more than print on paper; they are any language meanings, oral or written, playing a role in the context of a situation (Halliday & Hasan, 1985).

All texts are inherently intertextual in that they draw and depend on meanings in other texts (Bloome & Dail, 1997). It is inevitable that we bring the oral or written texts of our previous experiences in other contexts to our new contexts. We perpetually interweave these texts and contexts into the emerging tapestry of our current experience. Hartman (1992) states that any text is composed of previous texts and resources that are interwoven with "threads all anchored elsewhere," (p. 297) giving the current text a particular texture and pile. He further suggests that a text is a "complex dialogue" resembling a collage of others' voices rather than an "isolated monologue" (Hartman, 1992, p. 297). Texts and contexts then are aspects of the same process: new texts are created and interpreted in the context of other texts in the total environment (Halliday & Hasan, 1985).

## Literate Identities and Reading Proficiency

Literate identities are children's perceptions of themselves in relation to literacy. These identities are not "fixed;" they are shaped and invented as children draw on their experiences in different literacy events with the texts they read and write (Bloome & Dail, 1997; Harste et al., 1984; Martens, Flurkey, Meyer, & Udell, 1999). As children operate within various cultural and social contexts, literate identities also reflect the influence of particular cultural practices (Gee, 1990) and social practices (Luke & Freebody, 1997; Taylor, 1983). In the act of engaging in literacy events, children interpret themselves in relationship to their world, locating themselves both in view of the experiences they have had and the experiences they imagine (Sumara, 1996).

Studies demonstrate that readers' literate identities influence how the student reads. For example, readers who identify themselves as capable and "successful" readers engage more readily in literacy activities (Guice & Johnston, 1994; Young & Beach, 1997).

Research in retrospective miscue analysis (RMA) provides powerful evidence of the relationship between readers' identities and their reading proficiency. Numerous studies (see Goodman & Marek, 1996) reveal that when readers reflect on reading and their strengths and strategies as readers and are supported to develop an appreciation of those, they revalue reading and themselves as readers and, as a result, read and control the reading process more proficiently.

Studies such as these demonstrate the influence learners' theories and beliefs about literacy and themselves as literacy learners have on the literacy process. As we examine Lillian's and Peter's reading, learning, and inventions and the different "texts" they "read" in different contexts, we are cognizant of Dyson's (1995) notion that the purpose of a case study is not to generalize findings, but to offer insight into the extraordinarily complex process of literacy learning. These cases are proof of that. They challenge us to create literacy learning contexts that keep students like Lillian and Peter from falling through the cracks.

## Method

### Participants and Site

The site for our study was an elementary school in a large Midwestern city. The school was funded well enough to have a large library, staffed with a full-time librarian, and numerous teacher and student supports, including resource teachers, classroom paraprofessionals, and at least five computers per classroom in addition to a computer lab.

The participants in the study were five first-grade children from three different classrooms. At our request the three first-grade teachers each selected one or two students whom they perceived as having difficulty with literacy, based on the children's classroom performance (e.g., writing tasks, testing, reading evaluation, etc.), and in need of additional time for reading and writing. With these children we formed a Reading Club. Lillian and Peter, the two children we will focus on here, were both in Miss L.'s classroom.

### The Classroom Context

Miss L. had been teaching for approximately 17 years. Based on Miss L.'s comments and our observations, it seemed to us that Miss L. diligently followed the prescribed textbooks and basal materials adopted by the school. For example, based on the associated test scores, half of her 21 students, including Peter and Lillian, were in her lowest reading group. Realizing this group was very large, she considered dividing it so half of the children could work with the paraprofessional. She thought about these logistics aloud and once resolved said, "Oh, that won't work. I only have one teacher's manual." The pressure of accountability and test scores compelled Miss L. to follow closely the curriculum detailed in the textbook materials. Miss L. was a highly experienced teacher who worked hard and cared about her students. But rather than trust her own professional knowledge and informed insights to make instructional decisions, she relied on the "authority" (Peirce, in Buchler, 1955) of published materials to assure her students' success as readers.

For classroom reading instruction, the children drilled vocabulary and phonics, completed workbook pages and worksheets on skills, and read short predictable books from the basal publisher, with a focus on accuracy in word recognition. The children wrote in journals several times a week, often in response to a prompt. While Miss L. allowed invented spelling, she emphasized correctness. In addition to the Word Wall, each child collected "personal" words with accurate spellings written on note cards and kept together on a ring. In October, a month after the start of the school year, Miss L. was worried that she might have to retain both Lillian and Peter because they were not succeeding in their classroom work or on the tests included in the text materials.

### The Reading Club Context

Our Reading Club met in a private area outside of the three classrooms for 30 minutes twice a week from September to April. Because of our theoretical beliefs regarding reading and learning to read, we

immersed the children in reading and writing predictable books. Since these texts highlight the predictable nature of language, we knew they would support the children's reading inventions as they practiced how to integrate efficiently and effectively multiple language cues with a focus on constructing meaning (Smith & Elley, 1997) and to help the children perceive themselves as readers and writers. The literacy experiences of our sessions included activities such as: reading to the children, modeling writing for them, having them read predictable books to us, drawing, and writing. The writing was sometimes done in journals in response to a book we had read, and sometimes was a drafted story that we would later publish. Usually we all worked as a group, weaving our individual interactions with each child into the group time. On occasion, though, one of us would take a child aside and work one-on-one with him or her.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The data were gathered through field notes, audio-tape transcriptions of group and one-on-one experiences, video tapes and transcriptions of one-on-one experiences, classroom visits, teacher interviews, parent interviews, observations of Peter and Lillian in settings outside the classroom, writing samples, reading samples, and retrospective miscue analyses (RMA).

To analyze the data we used constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and thematic analysis (Spradley, 1980) and entered the themes on a meta-matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994) for further analyses. Themes were interpreted and qualitatively aggregated (Stake, 1995) across students' experiences. Readings were analyzed following standard miscue analysis procedures (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 1987).

We now invite you to meet Lillian and Peter.

## Lillian

Lillian is a healthy, happy six-year-old, African American girl. She is kind and gentle with her peers, and always respectful of adults. Although shy, she makes eye contact easily and smiles sweetly when you talk with her. At the time of our study, she lived with both of her parents in a house in a nearby neighborhood. While her parents were not 'visible' participants in Lillian's education (e.g., serving as parent volunteers), most likely because they both worked, they did attend the parent conferences and seemed to support her learning at home. Lillian told us that she liked to draw and drew often at home. She also said that



she liked to read and that her mother read to her. Though quite reticent at first, Lillian appeared to us to be a competent language learner. In the classroom, however, in addition to being in the “lowest” reading group, she scored poorly on class tests and benchmark measurements, and was pulled out of class for tutoring in math. Lillian tended to use mostly conventional spelling in her classroom journal but generally wrote little or not at all. On one occasion, Miss L. confided she thought this was because Lillian was lazy.

We found that Lillian was orchestrating proficiently the language cueing systems. When she spoke, or wrote, or listened, or read, she understood that language was a sense-making process. She used her knowledge of language to make sense of what she saw in print and heard in books. This knowledge also informed her writing and speaking. Even from a cognitive skills view Lillian seemed to fulfill what some theorists propose (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Stanovich, 1994; Yopp, 1995) and the National Reading Panel Report (Langenberg et al., 2000) constitutes as “prerequisite” to reading acquisition. Lillian demonstrated both “phonological awareness” and “alphabetic coding” in reading, writing, and speech. Lillian also performed “phonemic segmentation” (Yopp, 1995) which we observed when she was writing.

Early evidence of Lillian’s knowledge about how language and in particular how reading works can be found in Figure 1. During this reading, Lillian was “coached” (e.g., to look at the picture and initial letters, and to make predictions about what will happen next) to help her realize the pattern of the story. She caught on quickly and tracked with her finger as she read. In *All Fall Down* (Wildsmith, 1985), Lillian read “bird” instead of “butterfly” but corrected when she came to “bird” later in the line (line 1). She understood that the order of the words corresponded to how the animals were stacked in the picture,

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**From *All Fall Down* (Wildsmith, 1985)**

(1) <sup>©</sup>I see a bee and a <sup>bird</sup>butterfly and a bird and a rabbit and a seal  
and a ball.

(2) All fall down.

**From *One Bee Got on the Bus* (Dennis, 1996)**

(3) Four butterflies got on the bus.

(4) Three bats got on the bus.

(5) Two <sup>turtles</sup>ladybugs got on the bus.

Figure 1. Samples of Lillian’s Reading in the Fall of First Grade

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where she checked to make her correction. In *One Bee Got on the Bus* (Dennis, 1996), she made a meaningful substitution that had little graphophonic similarity (line 5). The picture, however, is somewhat misleading as these anthropomorphic ladybugs do indeed look like turtles getting on a bus. She had no reason to correct this miscue, as her substitution was acceptable both semantically and syntactically.

In our first session with the children, we read the book *Dog Breath* (Pilkey, 1994) and asked them to respond by sketching something from the story. Lillian engaged easily in the story, participating openly, and making thoughtful predictions. Her drawing conveyed her favorite part of the story but she struggled to draw it to her satisfaction, erasing and starting again on the other side of the paper. We persuaded her to write something about what she drew and when asked to read what she wrote (a string of letters that included letters from her name) she said, "It doesn't say anything, I bet you. I can't write." This response was fairly typical of her initially and suggests a rather fragile literate identity manifested as a lack of self-confidence. This may have been because what she knew and the way she knew it did not seem to her to be valued by others. And as we resembled the "teachers" she has encountered in her experience, she responded as she would have to any teacher. She was tentative about most of the initial literacy engagements she had with us and as such: drew laboriously and usually did not finish, regularly responded by saying "I can't do it," didn't share the work from our sessions with her classroom teacher, erased many of her writing and drawing attempts, and asked to copy from the book. While Lillian shared *verbally* many of her ideas for drawing, she knew we would ask her to write something about it, and so she said she only wanted to draw pictures for words she could spell.

Before too long, though, we began to see evidence that Lillian was trusting her knowledge, revaluing herself and feeling more confident. The following is an excerpt from our third session that took place in early October. At the time, we were doing an author study of Eric Carle and had just finished reading *The Very Busy Spider* (Carle, 1984). The students constructed a web and then made a 3-D spider for it. (Note: // indicates the sound and < > indicates the name of the letter specified.)

Susan: Now, can you write something?

Lillian: I can't.

Susan: I know you can write something.

Lillian: I can't.

Prisca: What does s-s-spider start with?

Lillian: (Lillian writes an <s> on her paper) Give me that book (so she can copy the word "spider").

- Prisca: No, see if you can figure it out.  
 Susan: How about this sound? /p/  
 Lillian: (she writes <P>)  
 Susan: /i/  
 Lillian: (she writes <I>, and this kind of exchange continues until she has written both spider [SPIDR] and web [WEB])

Lillian's engagement here is notably different. Just three sessions ago she was uncertain about writing her own name. We were very encouraged by her willingness to take a risk but also realized her need to take these risks in a context that was highly supportive.

Some of what we discovered eventually about Lillian came from the knowledge that she shared with her peers. For instance, in one session, Lillian supplied the letters for another child writing "Happy Birthday" and then asked if she could "put the next letter in for her." Just before it was time for her to go, Lillian wrote "HA BrFDAY to U." on her own paper. We noticed this kind of intertextual connection regularly. Access to predictable books, supported writing, social and meaningful literacy engagements, practice with an array of literacy strategies, and celebration of her knowledge via the Reading Club setting seemed to foster Lillian's literacy development. Her experience in the Reading Club was contributing in some very positive ways to her literate identity and we believed that valuing or perhaps revaluing her "self" would sustain her in the context of the classroom as well. We assessed her knowledge of language by observing her engaging in literacy in the following ways. We found that she:

- Recognized words in context
- Used conventional spelling to convey an idea (e.g., "HANNA LILLIAN PLAY")
- Made connections across texts from the author study
- Read the books we wrote together in our sessions
- Made predictions while reading and integrated picture clues
- Took risks to invent words to convey meaning (e.g., "HA BrFDAY to U." for "Happy Birthday to you.")
- Used a variety of orthographic conventions such as spacing and punctuation
- Proofread her writing and made corrections
- Articulated reading strategies (e.g., using picture clues, letter cues, and making sense)
- Drew detailed and connected pictures for the books she authored
- Used humor and symbols (e.g., ZZZ for sleeping) in writing and drawing

- Heard and represented separate sounds in her writing (e.g., /r/-/o/-/l/ and /h/-/o/-/p/)
- Monitored for meaning (e.g., “That doesn’t make sense.”)
- Made meaningful substitutions while she read

Lillian flourished in the first part of the year as successful literacy encounters enhanced her self-worth and nurtured her literate identity. She expressed enthusiasm for reading and relished illustrations that made rich and gratifying texts for her. She also clearly enjoyed the process of creating her own texts and drawings. On one occasion we had the students write and illustrate a book modeled after *Cookie’s Week* (Ward, 1988). Hers was about her pet goldfish named Goldie. On each page, she drew a fish bowl full of water. By the last page, she had tired of coloring in all that water and announced that she’s “not putting any more water in (the fish bowl). He’s poor.” Here, she not only demonstrates a keen sense of humor, but also uses a sophisticated literary tool, the metaphor, to convey knowledge about an issue of equity and social justice. Gradually, she began to share the books we made in our sessions with her classmates and teacher. She talked openly and giggled with her friends in the group. She wrote independently, finished her work *to her satisfaction*, asked to do more author studies, ably assisted her peers in their literacy attempts, and expressed pride in her work. Naturally, we were very pleased with her growth and especially that she appeared to be more self-assured. But, we were uneasy about the contradicting reports we were getting from her classroom teacher. The language proficiencies and self-confidence that Lillian now demonstrated so readily in the context of the Reading Club did not seem to be evident to Miss L. in the context of the classroom.

Quite unexpectedly, in February, Lillian’s self-confidence, enthusiasm, and willingness to take risks began to diminish. She appeared tired and remote. At times, she did not participate. She responded regularly to the question “What would make sense?” with, “I don’t know.” She chose books that she had already read instead of new ones; she counted the pages of a book before reading it; and, once again she needed reassurance that what she was reading or writing was “right.” Disturbing, too, was the fact that her attendance at school became very sporadic throughout the remainder of the school year. Her absences led Miss L. to believe that Lillian had moved when, in fact, she hadn’t.

Despite these affective changes, we continued to observe Lillian learning and growing with numerous strengths. Figure 2 presents an example of her reading in April that was taken from a miscue analysis session where she read without any assistance, following standard mis-

cue analysis procedures (Goodman et al., 1987). Lillian's high quality substitutions demonstrate efficient reading and her focus on constructing meaning (lines 5, 6, and 8). In a subsequent RMA session, she read each of these lines without miscuing, revealing that she "knew" the words. Lillian also showed that she tracked her reading for meaning on line 7. Her prediction, which followed the previous pattern, resulted in an omission. When that didn't make sense to her, however, she worked to self-correct it before continuing. There is no question that Lillian experienced considerable growth in literacy learning during this school year. But the literate identity of this child in December is disturbingly different from the literate identity of this same child in April.

Reluctantly, Miss L. decided to promote Lillian to second grade. Miss L. said she knew Lillian was "low" but felt she could not retain "too many" children. Lillian has since left this school, apparently moved away as Miss L. had predicted.

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#### From *My Friends* (Gomi, 1990)

- (1) <sup>R</sup>I learned to walk from my friend the cat.
- (2) <sup>R</sup>I learned to jump from my friend the dog.
- (3) I learned to climb from my friend the monkey.
- (4) I learned to run from my friend the horse.
- (5) I learned to march from my friend the <sup>hen</sup>rooster.
- (6) I learned to nap from my friend the <sup>alligator</sup>crocodile.
- (7) <sup>C UC</sup>I learned to smell the flowers from my friend the butterfly.
- (8) I learned to <sup>hop</sup>hide from my friend the rabbit.

Figure 2. Samples of Lillian's Reading in April of First Grade

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## Peter

Peter is an out-going, cooperative, Caucasian boy with a sense of humor and direct way of sharing his thoughts and feelings. He lives with his parents, older sister who was in the school's gifted program, and younger brother. Peter's brother has a medical condition that has required several extended hospital stays and close constant monitoring

by Peter's parents. Peter's parents are concerned with and actively involved in their children's learning and education. They read regularly to the children and Peter's mother helps frequently with such things as holiday parties at school. In kindergarten, Peter had some difficulties, his mother stated, such as remembering letters and sounds. His kindergarten teacher had wanted to retain him but his parents were unwilling to consider that. From our initial experiences with Peter, we noted that he demonstrated knowledge of language and proficiently orchestrated the language cueing systems. Like Lillian, Peter too revealed "phonological awareness," "alphabetic coding" in reading, writing, and speech, and "phonemic segmentation," which some researchers believe are prerequisites to reading (Snow et al., 1998; Stanovich, 1994; Yopp, 1995).

When we began working with Peter, he was highly motivated and eager to be a reader and writer, but convinced and certain he was not one yet. As we walked from his classroom to our first meeting and he learned we were forming a Reading Club, he promptly responded, "But I don't know how to read!" and reminded us of that numerous times that session and over the next several weeks. His lack of confidence and perception of himself as not being literate revealed his literate identity was tenuous. Peter was reluctant to take risks, but with support and encouragement he could usually be convinced to try.

After hearing *Dog Breath* (Pilkey, 1994) in our first session, for example, Peter drew a colorful and detailed picture of the robbers in the house. When asked to write something about his picture, he replied, "What do you mean write? I told you I don't know how to read." Eventually, after much reassurance, he invented a spelling for "robbers" as "CABC." When we complimented him on his writing, he replied, "I spelled robbers? I just wrote robbers? I tried. I really did!" While our first session was an opportunity for Peter to gain confidence and strengthen his literate identity as a reader and writer, the experience did not instantly transform him and his perceptions of himself.

In the weeks to come, Peter's concern with knowing the "right" word or letter and how to read or spell "correctly" was evident in frequent comments such as "I don't know how to read" or "I can't" or "Just tell me." Nevertheless, he continued to talk openly about his intense desire to be a reader and writer and participated fully and cooperatively in the sessions. Evidence of Peter's strengths and knowledge about language, reading, and writing appeared immediately and continuously. We found that he:

- Read environmental print and used it to compose his own "I Can Read" book

- Pointed out specific words in texts, such as “day” and “web” as he listened to *The Very Busy Spider* (Carle, 1984)
- Used picture cues while reading
- Integrated language cues and reading strategies in building on the pattern of a predictable book to make appropriate predictions as he read
- Used words he knew and his knowledge and experience with the pattern to begin coordinating his voice and the print while reading, sometimes rereading to practice this tracking
- Used invented spelling (e.g., “MI” for “my”; “sPidr yB” for “spider web”)
- Heard similarities in the sounds of words (e.g., “Hey, Kory [another child in the Reading Club] and hungry sound the same!”)
- Noticed the length of words (e.g., “Boy, ‘purple’ is a long word!”)
- Used visual cues he remembered in his writing (e.g., “How do you make a <z>? Oh, yeah, it’s a zigzag.”)
- Made intercontextual connections by, for example, getting excited when he realized the “Happy” he was writing for “Happy Meal” was the same as that in the familiar “Happy Birthday.”

Statements such as “I think I can read,” “I did it all by myself,” “I’ll help you,” and “I just learned” began replacing his earlier less confident statements and were evidence that his literate identity was growing.

Examples of Peter’s reading in the fall are in Figure 3. Peter was inventing and learning to integrate graphophonic cues with his knowledge of syntax and semantics. The miscues he made reveal his concern for constructing meaning and having his reading sound like language

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**From *One Bee Got on the Bus* (Dennis, 1996)**

- (1) Four butterflies <sup>are</sup> <sup>going</sup> ~~got~~ on the bus.
- (2) Three bats <sup>are</sup> <sup>going</sup> ~~got~~ on the bus.

**From *Rain* (Kalan, 1978)**

- (3) Rain <sup>is</sup> ~~on~~ the purple flowers
- (4) Rain <sup>is</sup> ~~on~~ the white house
- (5) Rain <sup>is</sup> ~~on~~ the green trees

Figure 3. Samples of Peter’s Reading in the Fall of First Grade

and make sense. He shifted from past tense to present (lines 1 & 2) and made phrases into sentences (lines 3, 4, and 5). His omission of “green” on line 5 did not have a major effect on the meaning. When we discussed Peter and his reading, writing, and strengths with Miss L., however, we often felt like we were discussing two different children with her. Her comments consistently focused on what Peter did not know that she thought he should and how he wasn’t “retaining” much from his work in the classroom.

By January, Peter’s confidence, knowledge, and strengths had grown and, while shades of doubt and an overfocus on print (e.g., reading “the” then changing the pronunciation to “t-uh”) occasionally appeared, his literate identity as a reader and writer was evident. He was self-assured and proud of himself and the reader and writer he was becoming. Immersing Peter in predictable books, writing his own books, listening to and discussing stories read to him, etc., was helping him to refine his reading and writing inventions, and confidently to perceive and identify himself as the reader and writer he was.

In mid-January, as Peter was heading back to his classroom after reading *Cookie’s Week* (Ward, 1988) and eagerly drafting his own story following that book’s pattern (“My Cats’ Week”), we called him over and asked:

Prisca: Peter, do you remember what you told me the first time you came here?

Peter: (giggling) Yes, that I couldn’t read.

Prisca: Yes, and I said, “Yes, you can” and look at this! Look at how well you do!

Peter grinned and called out “See you later, Alligator” as he re-entered his classroom.

Moments later, we observed Peter reading a book to the paraprofessional at a table outside the classroom while she listened and took a running record on his reading. Peter stumbled over words and painfully and laboriously worked to sound out what he did not know. When he finished the book, he hung his head and mumbled that he could not read. The paraprofessional pointed out to him the words he missed and reassured him that he could read.

By the end of January, Peter’s behavior, enthusiasm, and confidence revealed his literate identity as a reader and writer was changing in dramatic ways. He generally completed his classroom work, sometimes successfully as with studying spelling words, but at home, in the classroom, and in the Reading Club he became easily and gradually more frustrated and overwhelmed by the print on the page of a book. During



our sessions he made disruptive noises, did not pay attention, disturbed others, and made numerous comments like “I’m stupid,” “I suck,” “I’m too tired,” “I goofed up,” “I’m a dumb-dumb,” and “I don’t want to do this.” As he read, he often over-focused on print at the expense of meaning (e.g., reading “yellow” for “yelled” or “not” for “no”). When he did correct, we pointed out the knowledge, strengths, and strategies he was demonstrating, but he dismissed us with statements like “But I skipped these two [words],” “I goofed up,” “I read bad because I didn’t sound them out and I wasn’t thinking!” or “I’m not a good reader because I can only read when I’m woke up.”

Despite these changes, we continued to see Peter’s strengths grow throughout the spring: he used more conventional spellings when he wrote, refined his invented spellings, integrated his background knowledge and experience into his reading, tracked while he read, and discussed aspects of writing such as spacing and quotation marks. However, he seemed unable to see, appreciate, and value his strengths himself.

Figure 4 provides a sample of Peter’s reading in April. Following standard miscue analysis procedures (Goodman et al., 1987), Peter read the story without assistance so we could examine his strategies. He predicted and self-corrected (lines 2, 4, and 8) to make meaning. He also

**From *The Ball Game* (Packard, 1993)**

Figure 4. Samples from Peter’s Reading in April of First Grade

drew on his own knowledge of language and baseball to comment on how he thought the text should read (line 7). Peter's focus on words and sounding out, though, was evident. Numerous attempts to sound out and continuing when his reading didn't make sense (lines 1, 3, 5, and 6) as well as his "whatever" attitude (lines 1 and 5) revealed the limited strategies he had for solving difficulties and a lack of investment in and concern for meaning. His reading here stands in stark contrast to his reading, use of strategies, focus on meaning, enthusiasm, and confidence in the fall.

Miss L. wanted to retain Peter in first grade but his parents would not agree. His difficulties continued in second grade and he was recommended for testing.

## Discussion

As we reflect on our year with Lillian and Peter, we find ourselves pondering the anomalies of our encounters with them and their literacy development. The experience gave us a much deeper understanding of the role of context in literacy events as it contributes to a reader's literate identity. This insight leaves us feeling a little like we were misguided missionaries, with very simplistic and naïve notions about our potential to keep children like Lillian and Peter from falling through the cracks. Readers invent themselves and their literate identities as they invent reading, in the contexts of the literacy events in which they participate. And even though different contexts rooted in different theoretical perspectives have the identical goal of empowering children to become confident and proficient readers and writers, the readers must negotiate and make sense of all these contexts and underlying "texts" to invent their literate identities.

Studies of the contexts in which children read usually examine social, affective, cognitive, and physical factors (McIntyre, 1992) and those factors represented our initial perceptions and understandings of context, the Reading Club and the classroom existing as two separate and distinct contexts. The Reading Club was in an area outside the classroom, where Lillian and Peter interacted not only with each other but also with children in the Club from other first grade classrooms as well as with us. The expectations in the Reading Club were quite different from those in the classroom. In the classroom, instruction and independent work focused on accuracy, words, letters, and sounds; children completed worksheets on skills and raised their hands to speak. In contrast, the Reading Club focused on integrating a variety of language

cues and cognitive strategies for making literacy meaningful. The children wrote and published their own stories, were supported in reading predictable books, and spoke freely to each other and to us about books, their stories, and their lives. They were encouraged to take risks, regarded as successful readers and writers, and praised for their performance.

When Lillian and Peter physically left their classroom to come to the Reading Club, we thought they could disconnect from their classroom context that positioned them as unsuccessful readers and writers. We knew they would “bring with them” their classroom understandings of reading but believed that experiences with meaning making strategies and their sense of self-efficacy in our context would allow them to become successful readers in the classroom context as well. We have come to appreciate, however, that context issues are not that neat and tidy. Supplementary programs, such as the Reading Club, that provide opportunities for children to be readers and writers who integrate strategies to predict and construct meaning may not be able to compensate for classroom experiences that focus the children on accuracy and skills.

Recent research (Martens et al., 1999) on intercontextuality is documenting the critical role of “texts” and contexts in literacy development. Lillian and Peter taught us, in a very real way, how powerful, implicit, and “unavoidable” the connections between texts and contexts are. We see now, the children did not come to the Reading Club “context-free” of classroom “texts.” McIntyre (1992) suggests that reading is context-specific, that is, what children learn in one context does not necessarily “transfer” to another context. In the fall, that may have been true for Lillian and Peter, allowing them to experience success in the Reading Club even though they were struggling in the classroom. But the evidence they were gathering from the classroom texts and context after January became the scripts they brought, “read,” and followed in the Reading Club context.

Halliday & Hasan (1985) state that the previous texts of language users are mistakenly taken for granted.

School provides very clear examples. Every lesson is built on the assumption of earlier lessons in which topics have been explored, concepts agreed upon and defined; but beyond this there is a great deal of unspoken cross-reference of which everyone is largely unaware. This kind of intertextuality includes not only the more obviously experiential features that make up the context of the lesson but also other aspects of meaning. (p. 47)

Lillian and Peter drew on all of these “texts” to invent their literate identities through their personal and social experiences and relationships. There was tension, however, in the mixed messages they received across these texts and contexts, messages that positioned them alternately as successful readers or failing readers. And ultimately, while surely unintended by Miss L, whose authority Lillian and Peter regarded most, their sense of failure prevailed.

Knowing this now, we wonder what we could have done differently to better support Lillian and Peter. We are not sure, except to think we might have worked more closely with Miss L. While we had the luxury of providing literacy experiences we believed supported these struggling readers without feeling the pressure of test scores and mandates, Miss L. did not. We wonder if we could have helped to free her from a curriculum that disadvantaged at least two of her students, and disempowered her as a teacher. We see that, not only do “texts teach” (Meek, 1988), but that transactions with texts teach across texts and contexts (Martens et al., 1999). The need for contexts in which young children can be successful as readers, contexts in which they are supported in constructing meaning as they invent reading, is critical, as children also invent their literate identities. It is from these fragile identities that a reader is made and, sadly, sometimes broken.

## Notes

Following are miscue analysis markings used in the text excerpts: substitutions are written above the text; omissions are circled; insertions are indicated with a caret; \$ indicates a non-word; P indicates at least a five-second pause; a circle connected to a line(s) under a portion of the text marks a regression and the letter(s) in the circle indicates what occurred; C indicates the miscue was corrected; R indicates a straight repetition of the text; UC means an unsuccessful attempt was made to correct the miscue.

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